

# Contesting Multiple Borders: Bricolage Thinking and Matua Narratives on the Andaman Islands

Carola Erika Lorea\*

In the liquid borderlands between South and Southeast Asia, where refugees from East Bengal were resettled after the massive Partition-induced displacement, the god Ram is narrated as a great model of filial piety but also as the murderer of a low-caste ascetic. The Vaishnava saint Chaitanya is a divine character but also a reproachable renunciate who abandoned his mother and forced her to beg from door to door. The crocodile is an ideal devotee who caught fish to bring as offering for the religious congregation, justifying the introduction of an otherwise forbidden substance on the altar. Drawing on both ethnographic and literary sources, I use recurrent “bundles of stories” such as these, transmitted and performed by the Matua community on the Andaman Islands, to discuss narratives as a way of knowing and to describe “bricolage thinking” in borderland selves. I interpret the aesthetics and the literary devices used in these narratives as strategies to shape borderland community values. These rely upon past memories and provide for present articulations of resistance. This article suggests that Matua narratives contest political borders by traveling between and connecting fragmented sections of the displaced community through the voices of itinerant preachers, performers, and pilgrims. At the same time, they trespass onto other kinds of borderlands, such as those created by unequal positions of socioeconomic power and those marking the center and periphery of religious hegemony.

**Keywords:** Bengali, refugee, Dalit, Vaishnava, Chaitanya, avatar/incarnation, gender, resistance

## Introduction

The stories discussed in this article, which I collected during fieldwork in the Andaman Islands in early 2017 and December 2018–January 2019, derive from a community known as Matua (Matuṃyā) which originated in rural East Bengal (now Bangladesh) in the nine-

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\* Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, 10 Kent Ridge Crescent, Singapore 119260

e-mail: aricar@nus.edu.sg

teenth century. They are shared regularly as oral narratives among Bengali-speaking Matua communities in India and Bangladesh. They are also performed as sacred songs, recited during ritual gatherings, as well as printed in canonical scriptures and affordable vernacular magazines. They operate on both a religious and a social level, consolidating both a religious identity and a politically active caste-based movement.<sup>1)</sup> They represent a traveling archive of shared knowledge for a large part of the Bengali community of post-Partition settlers on the archipelago.

Located at the junction of the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea, in the eastern Indian Ocean, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands constitute a union territory under the Republic of India, although they are geographically much closer to Burma and Thailand.<sup>2)</sup> The capital city of Port Blair is separated from the Indian mainland by 1,300 kilometers of water. An oceanic borderland between South and Southeast Asia, in a crucial node of maritime trade (legal and illegal—see GOI 2011; Allana 2015) and transport, the Andamans are home to a mosaic of people occupying, with various degrees of legitimacy, spaces in and between towns, marketplaces, coasts, outskirts, and dense forests (Mukhopadhyay 2016). Descendants of convicts from different parts of the British Empire today live side by side with repatriated Sri Lankan Tamils, old communities of indentured and contract laborers from Burma and North India, indigenous people pushed increasingly to the margins of a shrinking forest, and post-Independence refugee settlers from East Bengal. This last group is the main repository of the stories across borders presented in this article.

After Independence and the Partition of India (1947), the Andamans were identified, together with other regions of the subcontinent, as a strategic location to rehabilitate a portion of the overwhelming and continuous flow of refugees from East Bengal (Basu Ray Chaudhury 2000; Biswas 2009; Sen 2011; 2018). Chosen mainly on the basis of their caste and traditional occupation, the agriculturist refugee families selected for resettlement on the Andamans were mostly Namashudra, a low caste that constitutes almost in

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1) Sekhar Bandyopadhyay has written on the early history and institutionalization of the Matua movement (Bandyopadhyay 1997). The caste-based religious movement formed an influential political entity—namely, the Matua Mahasangha—that has represented, particularly for the last 10 years, the strongest aspect of Dalit politics in West Bengal (Sinharay 2016). In the Bengali language, significant work has been authored by Manosanta Biswas (2016). Practitioners and participants refer to Matua as a religion (*dharma*), a sect or community (*sampradāy*), as well as a movement (*āndolan*). The term “Matua” (related to *matta* and *mātoyārā* in standard Bengali) means intoxicated, inebriated, beside oneself. Although it was once a derogatory name used by outsiders, practitioners have claimed this epithet and use it to define themselves as those drunk and maddened by divine love (*nāme preme mātoyārā*).

2) Two edited volumes on the history and society of the Andaman Islands have recently been published (Anderson *et al.* 2016; and Heidemann and Zehmisch 2016).

its entirety the social composition of the Matua religious movement. Namashudra refugees from East Bengal migrated to the Andamans bringing along Matua rituals, ethics, and myths. The Matua religion has enjoyed consistent and increasing popularity on the Andaman Islands—as well as in many other regions where low-caste refugees from East Bengal were rehabilitated. At the same time, Matua practitioners became borderland dwellers because of a long and often violent history of displacement, which compelled them to shift from the riverine plains of (present-day) southern Bangladesh to other regions of the neighboring, Hindu-majority, Republic of India. While these migrants constitute a gradually larger share of the Andaman population, their presence, after the end of the British colonial regime, has contributed to the demographic consolidation of the Andamans as an Indian territory.

Drawing on both ethnographic and literary sources, I use Matua stories to discuss narratives as a way of knowing and to envisage a process of “bricolage thinking” in borderland selves. Although the *longue durée* of the term “bricolage” in anthropological literature dates as far back as Claude Lévi-Strauss (1962), later critically revised by Jacques Derrida (1967), I build particularly on Jean Comaroff’s (1985) usage of the term in the anthropology of religion. In this context, the literal meaning of bricolage as a creation from a diverse range of available things, achieved by using whatever comes to hand, is applied to religious creativity during colonialism, in order to explain appropriation and subversion of cultural elements borrowed from the oppressors’ repertory of symbols. Hence, far from signifying something amateurish, playful, or half-baked, bricolage has come to represent ontologies and creative patterns which are critical of a dominant culture.<sup>3)</sup>

In this article, I use concepts and frameworks developed in the literature on South Asian borderlands (van Schendel 2005; Gellner 2013; de Maaker and van Schendel 2014; among others) and within narrative theory applied to social movements (Davis 2002; Selbin 2010). Drawing on the former, I contextualize the Andaman Islands as an epicenter of liquid borderlands, and I adopt a perspective privileging flows and exchanges of people and cultural expressions in a transnational manner to rethink the “local,” rather than sanctioning fixed geopolitical entities and the indisputability of the nation-state. Drawing on the latter, I interpret the aesthetics and the literary devices used in the narratives as strategies to shape borderland community values. These rely upon past memories and provide for present articulations of resistance.

I focus on oral narratives as richly complex, multivocal phenomena that are reflective of culture, adjustive responses, expressions of social needs and pressures within a social structure, as well as models for mediating unwelcome contradictions (Blackburn 1975,

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3) A theoretical analysis of the term and its usage can be found in Mary (2005, 284–286).

xx). Narratives, as Richard Bauman has pointed out, are doubly anchored in human experience: they are keyed both to the events that are told and to the events that they recount (Bauman 1986, 2). This enables them to be a privileged source allowing us to study the way in which people create alternative histories, as well as their politics of cultural representation. My interlocutors for the ethnographic material presented in this paper are mainly Matua practitioners and performers, village gurus—often seen as pivotal storytellers and human repositories of folk narratives in the Indian context (Narayan 1989)—and disciples. These are story-keepers “who know the local tales and memories and make it their task to remember and recite” (Singer 1997, xii).

Matua narratives reflect the community’s beliefs about the body, the family, a theology of salvation, and a social theology of liberation from oppression on the part of its low-caste members.<sup>4</sup> Matua stories from the Andaman Islands result from a tension between preserving unchanged stories perceived as coming from the ancestral homeland, from “back there” and “back then,” and adapting these stories to the requirements of a new society and a different environment. This article suggests that Matua narratives contest political borders by traveling between and connecting fragmented sections of the community through the voices of itinerant preachers, performers, and pilgrims. At the same time, they trespass onto other kinds of borderlands, such as those created by unequal positions of socioeconomic power and those marking the center and periphery of religious hegemony.

The ethnographic material used for this article is the result of two fieldwork periods (winter 2016–17 and winter 2018–19). Non-directive, unstructured interviews and group conversations were recorded on a voice recorder, on a sound recording device, or in fieldwork notes, depending on the sonic environment and the medium that would make my interlocutors most comfortable. My fieldwork area was predominantly North Andaman (especially the villages around Diglipur, Kalipur, Radhanagar, Ramnagar, Gandhinagar, and Paschim Sagar), which can be reached by a painfully bumpy 12-hour bus journey from the capital, Port Blair, or by ferry, with an 18-hour journey via Mayabunder. In South Andaman, I worked with Matua preachers and performers around Wandoor (Ghumai and Hasmatabad) and on Havelock Island. Apart from Havelock Island and Diglipur, which are fairly well equipped for tourists, accommodation facilities were not available. I stayed most of my time in the huts and homes of local Matua families, leaving donations for their annual festivals or sweets and food items as repayment, when this was considered acceptable, for their time and overwhelming hospitality.

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4) Little attention has been given by scholarly literature to the cultural productions of Matua practitioners. An extensive corpus of verbal arts, performative traditions, and literature has been composed by Matua gurus and devotees. For an overview, in Bengali, see Bairagya (1999).



## Liquid Borders and Islands as Borderlands

The borders conventionally dividing South and Southeast Asia owe much of their existence to colonial state making and to a rapid, often violent, decolonization, which left people fragmented and territories disputed (de Maaker and van Schendel 2014). The end of the British Empire, the Partition of India (1947), and the newly imposed—and often hastily drawn—borders in the second half of the twentieth century triggered massive flows of forced migration and transformed “centers” into state “peripheries.” Since such peripheries are strategically important for the maintenance and consolidation of the state, South Asian borderlands became increasingly militarized. Mobility became restricted and heavily monitored.

Recent studies of Asian borderlands have pointed out that the sovereign power of the postcolonial state is in its most manifest form at its borders (van Schendel 2005; Gainsborough 2009). Much of the related academic work concerning South Asia has been concentrated on mainland borders (especially between India and Pakistan) and on high-level politics regulating borders, focusing on state actors, border officials, and formal authorities. There is still relatively little knowledge of local perspectives on borderland discourse (Baud and van Schendel 1997) or of how borderland peoples cope with and resist borders. This article responds to this lack of balance. It focuses on borderland people surrounded by maritime borders, physically distanced by the barbed-wire borders of the mainland. It offers a reflection of borderland voices from below and of their strategies to contest political borders and consolidate cultural identity across borders by maintaining cross-border linkages and connections.

People inhabiting the borderlands of South Asia are often viewed with suspicion from the perspective of those inhabiting geographical and social centers of power. In mainstream narratives borderland peoples represent threatening and subversive “others,” readily conspiring against the state, its unity and integrity (van Schendel 2005; Evans 2010). Those inhabiting the peripheries are often the object of subtle—or even open—accusations of being less civilized, less proper, less “citizens” than members of the dominant culture (Scott 2009; Bonnin *et al.* 2015; Andělová 2017). Thus, the inhabitants of the Andaman Islands, distant enough from the Indian peninsula to justify exotic accounts and stereotyped descriptions of “the locals,” have been subject to a range of accusations, applied not only to indigenous people but also to later settlers. Premodern sources maliciously inform us of the existence of wolf-headed man-eating natives (Vaidik 2010, 18–20). Post-Independence accusations are, by contrast, more subtly crafted. Reports and popular media depict the Andamans as a pluralistic and multireligious “melting pot” which challenges the moral and cultural caste-based structures of the mainland,

especially in terms of connubial and commensal restrictions (Biswas 2009, viii; Zehmisch 2012; Abraham 2018). These descriptions tend to represent a homogeneous “island culture” where different ethnicities coexist peacefully, disregarding caste-based differentiations, freely intermarrying, and happily participating in each other’s cultural and religious festivals. Such depictions serve the purpose of “Indianizing” the public image of the Andaman Islands by representing the islands as the mosaic miniature of a modernized, egalitarian, and secular mainland India (Abraham 2018). This responds to anxieties and suspicions awakened by the islands’ borderland-ness, the presence of potentially dangerous “foreign” elements—be they Bangladeshi infiltrators or Burmese poachers—and the increasing Chinese presence in the Bay of Bengal.<sup>5)</sup> The romantic and nationalist tone of the homogeneous-casteless-progressive mini-India narrative truly applies only to a very small part of the urban inhabitants of South Andaman, where higher education and the infrastructures of modernity are concentrated.<sup>6)</sup> Recent empirical research on the contemporary communities inhabiting the Andamans has started to deconstruct the myth of the Andaman Islands as a casteless “Mini India” (e.g., Zehmisch 2012; 2017), revealing instead the presence of tensions and competition among communities.

Presenting the oral narratives of a Bengali religious community in the Andaman Islands, this article contributes to the ongoing conversation by adding specificity and contextualization to an otherwise flattening description of Andamanese society as a single, though multicultural, cauldron. The histories shared in this article, by contrast, present a community that resists “melting in the pot” and instead holds on to past values, rituals, and traditions. Tenaciously preserving and performing an imagined homeland

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5) While this article was being written, the Indian Army operated a simulation on a massive scale: a military exercise to recapture and “liberate” the Andamans in the event that they were seized and claimed by China (Sudhi Ranjan Sen, *India Today*, November 24, 2017).

6) The portrait of a multicultural society is exploited not only for nationalistic goals (Abraham 2018) but also for commercial purposes. The Andaman and Nicobar administration organizes an Island Tourism Festival every year. According to the official website for the festival: “This festival attracts participation from people belonging to different religious groups and cultures. A vivid reflection of the cosmopolitan culture of the region . . .” (Andaman Tourism 2017). In an online article, the local teacher Raisuddin Gayen states:

Andamanese society is different. Andamanese culture does not pay heed to castes and religious differences. Here we celebrate Christmas, Eid, Pongal, and everybody is welcome. In North Andaman there is a community of Bengali Christians: they pray to Jesus in the church and they sing praises to Hari participating in the Harisabha [the Matua religious congregation]. (Gayen 2016)

This statement was written in response to the book *Āndāmāne Bāñālī* (Bengalis in the Andamans) by Bandana Gupta (which I was not able to locate), in which the author apparently says that the Andamans come across as a sort of Bangladesh recreated by numerous settlers from untouchable groups; however, because of the lack of high-caste Hindus, Gupta argues that they have not been able to create a healthy and “decorous” society.

through the use of the Bengali language and the reproduction of soundscapes and religious narratives, the Bengali community of low-caste Matuas on the Andaman Islands<sup>7</sup> questions dominant representations of society on the islands. Inhabiting mainly remote and isolated areas of the archipelago, the Matuas are looked down upon and despised by other communities as well as by educated urban Bengalis. I remember vividly my surprise when an older member of the Bengali community in the capital city of Port Blair, a well-traveled retired music teacher and himself a successful folk-music performer, referred to Matua devotees as *ek murkher dal*—a band of idiots. A similar contempt was implied when a professor of Bengali language at the main college of Port Blair, with whom I was tentatively discussing the richness of Matua literature, emphatically said that he would never participate in any Matua festival, because “they are not *bhadralok*.”<sup>8</sup> It is in such situations that the homogeneous-casteless-secular paradigm shatters, opening a space where a critical investigation of the segregation and marginalization of subaltern communities on the Andaman Islands becomes clearly necessary.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, Matua narratives from the borderlands tell us how subaltern communities create their (hi)stories in a dialogic response to criticism from the dominant culture, constructing low-caste myths and reshaping memories of subjugation and displacement in order to challenge their supposed deficiencies: their being “less *bhadralok*,” less Bengali, less Indian.

Critically considering spaces in between the macro regions which have been described as South and Southeast Asia, inspired by recent innovative articulations of such areas,<sup>10</sup> I take the Bay of Bengal and its liquid, maritime borders as a fulcrum, rather than considering the area as being at the margins of both South and Southeast Asia. In doing this, I look at the Andaman Islands as a borderland of South Asia but also as a center and

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- 7) As far as I am aware, there is only one previous study of the Matuas on the Andaman Islands, authored by Madhumita Mazumdar (2016). Focused on oral histories from South and Middle Andaman, the chapter brilliantly underlines the role of Matua moral order, singing sessions, and shared religious values as crucial place-making devices for these Bengali settlers.
  - 8) The *bhadralok* in colonial Bengal represented a class of urban educated Hindus, mainly upper caste, serving professionally in the British colonial system as lawyers, higher civil servants, doctors, etc. Literally meaning “gentleman” or well-mannered person, the term is still widely used to communicate the notion of a person who has *bhadratā*, the perceived quality of gentleness and of being “cultivated,” inextricably related to the dimensions of class and caste.
  - 9) Recent anthropological work has uncovered in a remarkable way the histories and negotiations of one such community, the so-called Ranchi, who arrived on the islands as contract laborers and are infamously known for encroaching on forestland and providing cheap manual work. See Zehmisch (2017).
  - 10) Particularly important for my area of study is Sunil Amrith’s work on colonial migration, economies, and environment across the Bay of Bengal (Amrith 2013). An interesting formulation has been proposed by Itty Abraham, who envisages the Andaman and Nicobar Islands union territory as a “sea of islands” that have long-standing relations with the coastlines and communities of both Southeast Asia and South Asia (Abraham 2018, 5).

cultural hub from which people, items, and ideas flow and seasonally circulate. Privileging liquid borderlands as opposed to solid borders in a political, social, and also religious context provides a vantage point from which to question reified demarcation lines, such as those drawn by the politics of cartography or by modern religious institutions (Kassam and Kent 2013), while taking into serious consideration interactions, porousness, and contradictions across borders. It is in these multiple and liquid borderland trajectories that the narratives laid out in this article are situated, taking on a role as traveling archives crossing, connecting, and challenging binary notions—of homeland and diaspora, of mainland Bengal and insular Bengalingness, of high-caste Hindu narratives and Matua mythopoiesis.

The Andaman Islands are absent from most discussions on South Asian borderlands, where mainland borderlands are given more space and emphasis while the isolated islands remain at the margins of academic thought. Scattered exceptions can be found in adventurous travelogues (for example, Damodaran 2017) and in political studies of military history, Indian borderlands, and the Sino-Indian maritime competition (e.g., Upadhyay 2009; Orton 2010; Ward 2017). Despite being at the margins of scholarly literature, because of their strategic position in terms of access to the Malacca Strait, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands have not been at the margins of military thought; they have been heavily militarized and inscribed in a strong and insistent nationalist rhetoric.

With the islands being geologically part of the extended mountain range of mainland Myanmar, their political status after the independence of India was heavily debated. Under the British Raj the islands were developed as a dreaded penal settlement and were a mine for natural resources at the expense of the aboriginal people (Sen 2000; Vaidik 2010; Uditi Sen 2017). When the islands became part of independent India, a popular idea envisaged them merging with the state of West Bengal (Biswas 2009, 72). Finally, in 1956, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands were redesignated as a union territory of India (Higgins 2016). They are proudly acknowledged as the first Indian land liberated from British rule, as the place where the anticolonial leader Subhas Chandra Bose planted the first independent flag of India; but nevertheless, the Andamans are geographically closer to Burma than to Indian shores. They are within reach by boat from Burma, Thailand, and Aceh (Indonesia), and until 1986 the maritime borders between South and Southeast Asia remained blurred, with Burma claiming sovereignty over some of the peripheral islands, although these were later annexed and came under India (Charney and Alexander 1998, 2372). The majority of the prisoners detained in the jail outside of Port Blair—the urban capital in South Andaman—are not Indian: fishermen and “poachers” of Thai and Burmese origin are often detained after entering into Indian waters. It is not uncommon to hear about stranded Bengali fishermen from the Andamans rescued on Myanmar

shores, waiting for complex bureaucratic processes to be completed so that they can eventually be repatriated (Roy, *Indian Express*, October 2, 2018), or about boatloads of Rohingya refugees seeking shelter on the Andamans (*The Hindu*, February 11, 2011). The Andaman Islands' liquid borders are trespassed and challenged by a multiplicity of ethnicities and nationalities. This, however, is not the only dimension that explains the borderland-ness of Bengali Matua residents and how their stories contest a larger and more nuanced understanding of borderland self.

### **Multiple Borderlands: Refugee Settlers and the Matua Community**

In this section, I will discuss how the Matua community came to inhabit Asian borderlands and how we can consider Matua practitioners on the Andaman Islands as inhabiting multi-layered and overlapping notions of borderland-ness in between the physical, the social, and the religious. First, I will give some historical background to explain how and since when Matua devotees have been dwelling in these remotest borderlands of India. Second, I will locate Matua practitioners as borderlanders within the society of the Andaman Islands, where they constitute a rural population, between the sea and the cultivated fields on the one hand and between the village and the dense forest on the other. Third, I will explain how Matua people on the Andaman Islands perceive themselves as inhabiting a borderland of the Matua faith, being located at the margins of a Matua cultural world, whose authenticity is seen as firmly anchored to mainland Bengal, where the descendants of the founding guru Harichand Thakur live.

After Independence, in order to sustain the new state apparatus and an increasingly heavy military infrastructure, the Andaman Islands needed to be developed and to produce increasing quantities of food. The expense to be borne by the central government to cover subsidies and imported goods would otherwise have become unsustainable. The administration struggled to find laborers willing to settle on the remote, jungle-covered islands, infamous for their dreaded prison and "savage" natives. A solution was found in exploiting India's post-Partition refugee crisis (Uditi Sen 2017, 952). After the 1947 Partition, millions of Bengali migrants from East Pakistan crossed the border and entered the small and overcrowded state of West Bengal as refugees. The Indian state opted for a "policy of dispersal" (Chatterji 2007, 1012), aiming to scatter them far from the political center of Kolkata to contain the potential for dangerous political mobilization. Low-caste and economically disadvantaged refugees were persuaded to accept rehabilitation and resettlement in distant and unfamiliar areas, such as the Dandakaranya region and the Andaman Islands (Kudaisya 1997; Mallick 1999; Mandal 2011). Refugee camp officers,

unsurprisingly, found thousands of low-caste agriculturist families willing to enlist in “Colonization Schemes,” which after 1949 offered a plot of land, manure, cattle, construction material, and other benefits to settle on the Andaman Islands (Biswas 2009; Sen 2011). The Andamans thus became a postcolonial dumping ground for some of the unwanted citizens of independent India. This community and their descendants are known to the islands’ administration as “Bengali settlers.” Bengali-speaking inhabitants, whether legitimate or contested “encroachers,” represent the largest linguistic group inhabiting the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.<sup>11)</sup> After their arrival, many more people, connected to those who had already settled by relations of kinship, district of origin, guru-disciple circles, and other networks, migrated independently from East and West Bengal to the Andaman Islands, neither approved of nor assisted by the government. These people, a large proportion of whom make up the Matua community, often settled on squatted land; they are known in the local parlance as people “without.”

Governmental plans for the resettlement of refugees were based on discriminatory caste lines (Sen 2014). The families selected for resettlement on the islands were mostly Namashudra (*namaḥśūdra*), a formerly untouchable group with a long history of oppression and exploitation from high-caste Hindu landlords (Bandyopadhyay 1997, 20–25). They were landless farmers and fishermen in East Pakistan who for complex historical and political reasons became borderland people. Namashudra people, who fled East Pakistan as “riot-refugees” (Rahman and van Schendel 2003, 566–569), are now scattered around many borderlands of India: not only the Andamans but also West Bengal, Assam, and Tripura, with major “branches” of the Matua Mahasangha extending as far as Odisha, Maharashtra, and Uttarkhand. On the Andamans they represent, according to unofficial estimates, 80–85 percent of the Bengali population (Mazumdar 2016, 173).

The Dalit<sup>12)</sup> novelist Manoranjan Byapari writes:

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11) According to the Census of India 2001, out of a total population of 356,152, Bengali speakers amounted to 91,582, representing the largest linguistic community (almost 26 percent), followed by Hindi speakers (18.23 percent) and Tamil speakers (17.68 percent) (see GOI 2014, 138).

12) The word “Dalit” means, in a number of Indian languages derived from Sanskrit, “broken” or “oppressed.” It refers to formerly untouchable communities that were seen as impure and polluting by high-caste Hindus because of their traditional occupations. Dalits remain significantly disadvantaged in relation to the rest of the Indian population and are, moreover, routinely subject to violence, sometimes of extreme forms (Sikka 2012, 45–46). Not all “untouchable” groups refer to themselves as Dalit, which is a loaded term, emerging from a precise political context. Members of the Matua community on the Andaman Islands with whom I interacted never referred to their group as Dalit. Their caste awareness and its related struggle, based on shared memories and religious narratives, resists the pan-Indian Dalit formation constituted through the Ambedkarite discourse. Some well-educated urban Matua members of West Bengal employ the term for self-ascription. However, scholars have often written about Namashudras in general, and Matuas in particular, as the Dalits of West Bengal (e.g., Bandyopadhyay and Basu Ray Chaudhury 2016; Sinharay 2016).

Prior to 1947 almost 90% of them [Namashudras] lived in East Bengal in the districts of Khulna, Faridpur, Jessore and Barishal. . . . The fear of communal violence drove them away from their villages. In the darkness of night they crossed the border, leaving behind their land, houses and all material possessions. Year after year they lived under trees, on pavements, on railway platforms, in refugee camps—existing at a subsistence level. In the name of rehabilitation, some were sent to uninhabited islands in the Andaman region, some were packed off to the forests and the unproductive terrain of Dandakaranya in Madhya Pradesh and other barren pockets of the country. Thus an organized and cohesive community got fragmented and lost its strength. (Byapari and Mukherjee 2007, 4116)

Byapari's last statement underlines the fact that the cohesiveness of the Matua community was disrupted by Partition and the creation of new nation-states. But the fragmented pieces of the Matua whole have created a strong and interconnected network of sacred places, stories, and songs, and their unity is maintained by cross-border flows of pilgrims, preachers, singers, and their tales. From the second half of the nineteenth century the Namashudras of East Bengal united around the charismatic figure of Harichand Thakur (1812–78) and his son Guruchand Thakur (1847–1937) and created a distinctive religious as well as social identity, the Matua sect (*Matuṣyā sampradāya*).<sup>13</sup> The Matua leaders Harichand and Guruchand Thakur proposed a religion akin to other unorthodox lineages of Bengali Vaiṣṇava devotionalism, while stressing the need for literacy, education, social advancement, and equality. While the gurus' ancestral home is located in Orakandi, now in Bangladesh, the most powerful Matua headquarters is situated in the newly created refugee town of Thakurnagar, in West Bengal, which functions as the Matua cultural capital (Bandyopadhyay and Basu Ray Chaudhury 2016, 75–78), providing a model shaping religious consistency between the scattered branches of the sect. The Matua community is possibly the strongest Dalit movement in West Bengal, where it has consolidated into a powerful political institution called Matua Mahasangha (Sinharay 2016). On the Andaman Islands, as well as in other borderlands, the religious and cultural identity provided by Matua doctrines, rituals, and narrative repertoires has united Bengali refugees and their descendants, offering a source of dignity, status, and symbolic capital (Mazumdar 2016; Lorea 2018).

According to the Matua Mahasangha's estimate (although this may be exaggerated), there are 50 million followers of the Matua sect, about 12 million of them residing in West Bengal (Chowdhury 2014, 188). When the revered Matua leader Gopal Maharaj, a displaced East Bengali guru resettled in Uttarkhand, goes to visit his disciples on the Andamans, enormous gatherings of devotees assemble to listen to his speeches, and

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13) On the Matua community's literary production and institutionalization, see Mukherjee (2014; 2016) and Sinharay (2016).



local politicians offer him garlands, publicly seeking his blessings (*Andaman Sheekha*, December 5, 2012; December 10, 2012). The major Matua festival of the year (Bāruṇī) celebrated on the Andaman Islands, at Tugapur, is the “prime folk festival of the Andamans” (Roy Chowdhury 2004, 152). However, a newspaper article covering the event in 2017 reported that despite the incredible number of people, the local authorities did not provide any facilities—such as special transportation services, sanitation, or drinking water—apart from basic traffic management (*Andaman Sheekha*, March 26, 2017). This reflects the lack of visibility of the Namashudras and the Matua sect on the Andaman Islands; while a majority, they perceive themselves to be both marginalized and silenced.

The borderland inhabited by Matua devotees is not only physically and politically an Indian borderland, representing a strong Indian state presence in the middle of the Bay of Bengal, but also a social and a religious borderland. In this social borderland, Bengali practitioners negotiate their lives with neighboring linguistic and ethnic communities with different degrees of visibility and power: urban educated elites, Tamil entrepreneurs and businessmen, Ranchi laborers, illegal migrants, indigenous Jarawas, and other groups. As members of a depressed caste previously marked by the stigma of untouchability,<sup>14</sup> they carry the double burden of being outcastes and also refugees. Time and distance have set them apart from their imagined communities, who have largely forgotten about the outcomes of the “policy of dispersal.” In mainland Bengal and Bangladesh it is now largely unknown that more than one-fourth of the Andaman Islands’ population is Bengali. The flattening effect of popular media, portraying a romantic and monolithic unity in diversity in Andaman society, cancels the separate voices of marginal identities, subsuming the Bengali Matua community under the homologating violence of the “melting pot.” A similar discourse has affected low-caste selves both on the mainland and at its borders. Distinct and polyphonic cultural autonomies belonging to diverse low-caste groups in South Asia have been subsumed under the flattening effect of Dalit identity scholarship, portraying a distinct and singular “untouchable mode of thought” (Deliège 1993, 534) and reducing the multiplicity and creativity of low-caste narratives to a monolithic “untouchable myth of origin” (Deliège 1989, 110).

In local society, Matua devotees are seen by other communities—but also by other

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14) Notwithstanding their caste background, Bengali settlers on the Andaman Islands are not categorized in the local administration as Scheduled Caste (whereas the Namashudras of West Bengal can access affirmative action programs and the corresponding reserved quotas as Scheduled Castes). Since 2011, they have been able to compete in the reservation system as Other Backward Classes, a category that they share with four other communities residing on the Andamans: Local Born, Bhandu, Karen, and Moplah. The low-caste Bengali community has interpreted this decision as an injustice (Biswas 2013).

Bengalis who are well educated and have salaried jobs in the city—as living at the borders of civilization (Lorea 2018). Especially in the villages of North Andaman, where I conducted most of my research, Matua practitioners have lived in dramatic isolation and lacking basic facilities for decades since their migration. Settled in remote rural areas, apart from a few educated members of the community who found governmental employment, the people I worked with are agriculturists, farmers, vegetable sellers, fishermen, conch-shell divers, deer and wild pig hunters, and itinerant singers. Some families have rights over the land that they cultivate; some have illegally cleared a piece of land in the jungle and occupy a space from which they could be evicted at any point in time. The latter, living in “forest encroachments” (Biswas 2009, 22), have started to receive access to basic facilities—drinking water, transportation, health care, education, and so on—only in recent years. Several settlements of Bengali refugees, particularly those established in 1952–56 around Rangat and Kadamtala in Middle Andaman, have been placed at the edge of the forest inhabited by the indigenous Jarawa population, provoking competition for use of the same natural resources, a series of violent encounters, and ultimately the forced displacement of the Jarawa people (Uditi Sen 2017). Later resettlements in Little Andaman have compelled the indigenous Onge community to share local resources with the new population of displaced Bengali as well as Sri Lankan Tamil settlers (Heidemann 2016). None of this displacement of indigenous people occurred in the areas of the Indian archipelago where I worked. Here, Bengali Matua settlers are located in culturally homogeneous areas, relatively far from the political and physical border that runs through Andamanese society, dividing settlers from indigenous people (Pandya 2010; Uditi Sen 2017). For my participants, knowledge about indigenous people dwelling in reserved tribal areas is indirect and inferential. The common opinion is that Jarawa people are wild (*jangli*) and non-human until “we” have civilized them (*amra manus karechi*). Most Bengali settlers concur with the mainstream racist attitude that deprives the aboriginal people of the qualities that make a cultured human being (*manus*). Some informants described Jarawas as having venomous saliva just like wild snakes, because they do not add salt to their food; hence, they can make their arrows lethally poisonous just by licking them before shooting.<sup>15</sup> Whereas in mainland Bengal the Matua religion has spread beyond the ethnic community of low-caste refugees to include tribal groups,<sup>16</sup> on the Andaman Islands interaction between these groups is minimal and mainly takes the form of an unequal competition for natural resources, or of straightforward exploitation. While Matua myths include many legendary encounters with the wilderness in the forests and

15) Fieldwork recordings, N. Karmakar, Subhash Gram, Diglipur, North Andaman, December 18, 2018.

16) In my last fieldwork trip in interior West Bengal I met Santal families initiated into the Matua religion and skilled in the practice of Matua religious songs (*kīrtan*).

rivers of East Bengal, the uncomfortable border between indigene and settler is absent from local Matua narratives.

The religious borderland which Matua followers inhabit both separates them from the other religious communities living on the Andamans—mainly orthodox Vaiṣṇava, neo-Hindu and Hinduizing forces, Muslim minorities, and proselytizing Christian missions—and places them in a peripheral position in relation to the imagined powerful core of the Matua movement. This split, transnational core is constituted by an imagined homeland—the birthplace of the Matua founders Harichand and Guruchand Thakur, in Orakandi; and a displaced cultural capital and administrative center, located in Thakurnagar, West Bengal, just on the Indian side of the India-Bangladesh border, where one of the descendants of the Thakur family migrated right after Partition (Bandyopadhyay and Basu Ray Chaudhury 2016). After I presented my paper at a conference in Dhaka, one attendee commented that a study of the Matua community had no value unless it was based on research in Orakandi or Thakurnagar. Matua devotees on the Andaman Islands constitute a small and distant fraction of the larger and highly scattered Matua religion, which gravitates around the two poles of Orakandi and Thakurnagar. It is perhaps because of such distance and perceived marginality that local practitioners cherish Matua myths, rituals, and cultural expressions with particular tenacity.

The stories across borders shared and performed among the Matua followers of the Andaman Islands have to be contextualized in this “multiple borderland” scenario. These stories fulfill manifold purposes in the diasporic and borderland consciousness of their tellers and listeners as social coagulants of diasporic identities, as religious stories of ethics and faith, and as narratives of contestation and social mobility.

### “Local” Narratives

The bundles of narratives<sup>17</sup> that I use for this article are “local” only in a very limited sense of the term. While they were collected in a particular site within the Andamans, they are far from being exclusively pertinent to this locality. They are shared in various regions of South Asia, among all Matua followers, with local variants and adaptations. Some of the narratives are part of a larger set of beliefs and systems of knowledge recurrent throughout rural Bengal and shared among many esoteric lineages. They can be seen as “local” although they come from the opposite shore of the ocean, from East

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17) Gary Alan Fine proposed conceiving of a social movement as a “bundle of narratives” (Fine 1995, 128) that, when expressed within an interactional arena by participants, strengthens the commitment of members to shared goals and status-based identities.

Bengal, and perhaps from somewhere else before that. They are traveling archives of stories which have become local, in the Andaman Islands, and yet remain extremely mobile, fluid, and itinerant: using as vehicles a regular transnational and trans-regional circulation of devotees, singers, preachers, books, VCDs, and magazines, they move between the Andamans and many other borderlands, at times settling down and at other times disappearing. Preservation and reiteration of such pan-Indian Matua narratives on the Andamans attests to a strong desire for unity and consistency with the larger, widely scattered Matua faith and a desire to connect diasporic lives to Matua cultural capitals and ancestral places of worship on the mainland. On a collective level, they are “movement narratives” (Benford 2002, 54), the collectively constructed stories and myths that participants tell about the movement itself and the domains of the world it seeks to affect. Yet on a broader level they may represent what James Hunter and Joshua Yates call “world-historical narratives” (Hunter and Yates 2002, 128, 146): myths and legends that interpret and configure overarching historical transformations and developments, and contest competing sociohistorical narratives on the same scale.

The borderland location of the Andaman Islands, where Bengali refugees have been living for 70 years, and its environment and social structure profoundly inform the ways in which Matua participants have created, consumed, and reproduced pan-Indian Matua narratives. A mechanism of familiarization (Honko 1981, 19–29) has permeated recurrent myths and tales and the manner in which they are selected, expanded, invented, or totally removed. Some stories are told only on the Andaman Islands.<sup>18)</sup> For example, the recurrent story of a pious crocodile, which I have transcribed in several variants, justifies why on the third and last day of Matua festivals (*mahotsab*) fish is cooked and served to all devotees, whereas the first two days are strictly vegetarian.<sup>19)</sup> On the other hand, stories

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18) At least I have never heard (nor read) such stories in other places where Matuas live. Apart from the Andaman Islands, I have conducted fieldwork with the Matua community mainly in West Bengal and southern Bangladesh.

19) It is believed that at the time of Harichand Thakur a disciple traveled from village to village to invite devotees to gather at the *mahotsab*. When he had to cross a river at night, he sat on a crocodile, which he mistook for a tree log, and the crocodile, also a pious devotee of Harichand, transported the disciple safely to the other side. When he understood what had just happened, the disciple extended the invitation to the crocodile. Every participant brought to the *mahotsab* the best produce or the most precious thing that they could provide as an offering: rice, fresh vegetables, expensive sweets, and so on. The crocodile was concerned that it would not be able to offer a prestigious donation. After much thought, it caught a very big fish and decided to bring that as an offering. But by the time the crocodile arrived at the festival, it was already the third and final day. Harichand reassured all the participants, who were terrified by the arrival of the enormous crocodile carrying a huge fish in its mouth. Together with all the other customary donations offered by the devotees, that day the fish was also cooked, sanctified as a divine offering, and then shared by all devotees. Since then, on the third day of the festival the final and most important meal has included fish. The ↗

and visual representations which connect Harichand Thakur to the Buddha are completely absent on the Andamans.<sup>20</sup> The stories I present in the following sections are not found exclusively on the Andaman Islands; these are narratives that are particularly stressed, valued, or related as most important by Matua devotees in the Andamanese frontier, as compared with other areas densely populated by Matua members, where they feel less—or differently—peripheral.

In order to select significant bundles of narratives, I chose the most commonly told stories which I heard, noted down, and/or recorded during my last two fieldwork periods on the Andamans. I also looked at the distribution of these oral narratives in printed texts, in the corpus of Matua literature, as well as in Matua periodicals, magazines, and booklets for religious practice, found throughout the Andamans and in many other areas.

### We Come from a Mother and a Father

The first narratives on which I focus here are a set of stories which will sound familiar to any reader acquainted with the doctrines of esoteric Bengali Tantric lineages. They relate to a local knowledge system called *mātāpitātattva*, which refers to “the truth or the doctrine of the mother and the father.” When I enquired about the *sādhanā* (practice for self-realization, both spiritual and body-centered) of Matua practitioners, the first thing that my interlocutors talked about was the necessity to know about “the mother and the father.” Ideas about the mother and father are not only linked to parenthood: they are about conception and offspring, reproduction and ontogenesis; but more broadly, they are inextricably part of a sophisticated understanding of cosmogony, anatomy, sexuality, and soteriology, translated into ethical norms. It is maintained in these narratives that at the first stage of practice, a person should learn how to answer the questions: Who are we? Where do we come from? The answers to these questions suggest that we come from the union of a mother with a father. As a myth of origin, this sounds strikingly

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↘ use of fish on a ritual occasion is scorned by orthodox Hindus and Bengali Vaishnavas. They view it as an unsophisticated practice which violates norms of ritual purity. On the Andamans, the story of the pious crocodile responds to these contemptuous statements and stresses shared values of inclusivity and equality.

20) These are fairly common among educated urban Matuas living in West Bengal, where some have joined the pan-Indian Dalit trend of reconstructing an exalted history of Buddhism for the low castes. In their homes and temples Buddha images abound, either alone or in posters side by side with Harichand Thakur, who is said to be a reincarnation of the Buddha. Parallels of Harichand and the Buddha are sparsely present in the oldest Matua scriptures (Sarkar 1916, 15), but they assume a particular importance in contemporary Matua narratives and politics within urban West Bengal.

straightforward. But this apparently banal statement is enclosed within a wider ontology. The mother and the father are not only our biological parents; they are a principle, a fundamental couple, a husband and a wife, sexual types, as well as cosmogonic opposites. They represent two principles that underlie the entire creation, and they stand for their essential properties, which are called *pitrdhan* (literally the wealth of the father, patrimony) and *mātrdhan* (the wealth of the mother). The essence of *pitrdhan* is semen, but it also stands for the bodily constituents that are inherited from the father: bone, marrow, brain, and seed. The fundamental substance of *mātrdhan* is uterine blood, but the wealth of the mother can also represent the four substances of the body that are given by the mother: flesh, blood, skin, and hair.

The substances of *pitrdhan* and *mātrdhan* are part of a doctrine of the body, relating to the “subtle” body and to health, known as *dehatattva*.<sup>21</sup> According to the basic tenets of *dehatattva*, men are dominated by six vices (*chay riṣu*), particularly by the king of the six, which is *kām* (a multilayered concept meaning lust, passion, or sensual and selfish desire). To conduct a happy life in a happy household (*samsār*), men (and women, to a lesser extent) should learn how to restrain *kām* and bring the vices under control, and they should worship and respect their mothers and fathers, who are regarded as being, simultaneously, their bodies, their essential substances, and their gurus, which are first and foremost represented by one’s biological parents. Sexual desire is to be restrained not through abstinence and renunciation, but through a regulated and disciplined sexual life with one single partner of the opposite sex, recreating the fundamental pair of opposites represented by the mother and the father. Therefore, *mātāpitātattva* is also the

21) *Dehatattva*—the doctrine of the body—operates on the premise that liberation is achieved with and through the body. Based on the assumption that the body works as a microcosm that contains and mirrors the macrocosm, *dehatattva* songs and teachings reflect a Bengali esoteric stream which has been referred to as “sacred biology” (McDaniel 1989) as well as “cosmophysiological soteriology” (Hayes 1989). Ethnographic insights relating to the set of beliefs on *mātāpitātattva* and *dehatattva* can be found in Cakrabarti (1990) and Jha (1999), both based in West Bengal. On the Andaman Islands, *dehatattva* practices and specific theories are restricted to initiated practitioners and are hard to find in printed literature. There are, however, explicit discussions of *dehatattva* and *mātāpitātattva* in some booklets distributed among practitioners and disciples. Songs in printed collections discuss *mātāpitātattva* with a typically metaphorical code language. In a song by the famous Matua saint-composer Tarakchandra Sarkar, for instance, the doctrine is expressed in the following verses: *pitrdhan mātrdhan dhani sabe sei dhane / pitrdhan sayatne rākhli nā man bholā / tor mātrdhane yatna yata / yadi pitrdhane kichu hato / tabe tor haye yeto / thāktō nā samsārer jvālā* (Sarkar 2009 [1900], 73). This translates as follows:

the wealth of the father, the wealth of the mother: all are wealthy because of those gifts. Reckless mind, you did not look after your father’s wealth with care! If you put as much care into your father’s wealth as you do into your mother’s—that would be the day! You wouldn’t be burning after worldly matters.

basis of Matua social structure. Matua religion is called *gārhashtya dharma*, the religion of conjugal life: a religion for married couples, presumably with children. Conjugal life is seen as the main characteristic of this social system, and it is systematically and sharply opposed to celibacy, asceticism, and renunciation, interpreted as negative ideals perpetrated by high-caste Hindus.<sup>22)</sup> Therefore, important prescriptions, attributed to the guru and sect founder Harichand Thakur, are often directed to the husband and wife, to be practiced by the couple, while other explicit instructions are addressed to both men and women alike.<sup>23)</sup>

These narratives are perceived by Matua devotees to be extremely innovative and revolutionary, as they are diametrically opposed to the Hindu and orthodox Vaiṣṇava ideal of *sannyās*, renunciation, which in most cases means single male asceticism. Matua ethics is, instead, focused on the dignity of manual work,<sup>24)</sup> and it glorifies the sexually productive couple and their (controlled and limited) progeny. These regulations can be seen as providing a family structure and (heterosexual) normative discipline in a frontier space where sentiments of anxiety in relation to the loss of traditional structures of social control are often displayed. According to recurrent tropes and popular imaginaries—sometimes justified by academic research (Chakrabarty *et al.* 1998)—for Bengali settlers on the Andamans social taboos count less (Sen 2018, 149) and rules of endogamy are more relaxed, leading to more frequent intercaste and inter-community marriages (Zehmisch 2018, 77). Ubiquitous rumors, which also contribute to identity formation processes (Kalmre 2013), report that people could not “really” get married for the lack of Brahmins (high-caste officiating priests), and that Bengali women on the Andamans do not have any qualms about abandoning their husbands and children to run away with their lovers (Roy Chowdhury 2004, 173–174, 186). The emphasis on the mother and the father as the underlying foundation of *gārhashtya dharma* counteracts such anxieties and also reproduces and justifies, in a religious domain, the administrative criterion of providing rehabilitation and relief to post-Partition refugees on the basis of the patriarchal nuclear family as the fundamental social unit; this unit was, and still is, the recipient of allotted plots of land granted to Bengali settlers’ families by the Indian government.

22) The Bengali *bhadralok* reevaluation of asceticism in nineteenth-century Hindu reformist and institutionalizing endeavors left underprivileged working classes out of the modern religious discourse, largely inspired by neo-Vedantic perspectives (see Sardella 2013).

23) For example, *Nara nārī ye bā hao mityā balibe nā*, which translates as “Whether man or woman, you must not tell lies,” and *Patī patnī ek sāthe hariguṇ gāo*, which translates as “Husband and wife, sing together the songs of praise of Hari” (Bairagya 1999, x).

24) *Hāte kām mukhe nām* is a persuasive and omnipresent proverb of the Matua community, which means “Work with your hands, chant the holy name with your lips.”



According to Sekhar Bandyopadhyay (2004, 96–97), strict sexual discipline and family values are so insistently and overtly stressed because they are intended as a response to criticism from the dominant culture. Bandyopadhyay argues that social mobility and equal rights could only be achieved through respectability and by creating a distance from the allegations of sexual promiscuity and polygamy often leveled against Matua followers and other rural unorthodox sects. Without contesting the validity of this argument, I also interpret the Matua stress on conjugality as mirroring popular ideas on decency, marriage, and particularly companionate marriage, diffused in nineteenth-century Bengali print and in the public sphere as a result of a long and close relationship with Christian missionaries in the nineteenth century in Faridpur District (Bandyopadhyay 1997, 56; Sarkar 2002, 73–74),<sup>25)</sup> and as a coherent development of the emphasis on the cosmological as well as social importance of a male-female pair promoted in several low-caste Bengali lineages springing from a common Tantric Vaiṣṇava substratum. The soteriological dignity provided through the emphasis on family and manual work made the Matua faith particularly suitable in a “frontier” environment such as the Andaman Islands, where isolated farming families needed to transform uncultivated land into productive crops, and to recreate a home space, a sense of belonging, cultural identity, and solidarity, based on shared values and memories. This hypothesis would also explain why in several Matua temples in mainland Bengal, apart from the fundamental Harichand–Shanti Mata couple, many icons of (male) saints are displayed without their married partner, whereas on the Andaman Islands Harichand–Shanti Mata as well as Guruchand–Satyabhama are always displayed in pairs (see Fig. 1). Moreover, in several Matua congregations on the islands a different *guru bandanā* (praise to the founding gurus, the first song that opens a *kīrtan*

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25) According to Eliza Kent, elite Indian Christians were the first group to actively appropriate companionate marriage as the conjugal ideal (Kent 2004, 180). The Christian missions of Faridpur have been living side by side with Matua followers for several decades. The suggestion that Matua leaders and disciples in East Bengal nurtured a lively dialogue with a strong nearby Christian community is justified by Matua scriptures (for instance, the name of the Baptist missionary Cecil S. Mead, who worked in Faridpur in the early twentieth century, appears extensively in *Śrīśrīgurucāṃdacarita*) as well as by other practical considerations. Matua teachings and norms of behavior have been consolidated in the “Twelve Commandments” (*dvādaś ājñā*). It is legitimate to suspect that such systematization was inspired by the proximity of Christian missions. The 12 saint-composers of the Matua sect have similarly been systematized as “the 12 holy madmen,” *dvādaś pāgal*. One of the 12 commandments prescribes honoring one’s mother and father, a familiar biblical commandment that perfectly reflects local concerns for *mātāpitā* as parents as well as cosmo-physiological entities. One of the commandments prescribes treating another person’s wife as one’s mother, reminiscent of the Christian commandment not to covet a neighbor’s wife. Furthermore, Harichand as the father, Guruchand as the son, and Hari as the supreme and absolute godhead are supposed to be one and the same, reflecting a vernacular elaboration of the Christian concept of the Trinity that echoes familiar parallels in Vaiṣṇava theology.



**Fig. 1** Harichand Thakur (Centre) Surrounded by Previous Incarnations of Vishnu  
 Source: Cover Image of the monthly Matua magazine *Yugadiśā* August-September issue 2006

session of congregational singing) is used. Instead of the more standard invocation (found in the holy book *Śrīśrīharilīlāmṛta*; Sarkar 1916), praising Harichand Thakur, his ancestors, and male disciples, the *guru bandanā* sung on the islands starts with praising Harichand's mother and father.

Among the many oral testimonies on the fundamental importance of *mātāpitātattva* which I collected during Matua gatherings, festivals, personal interviews, and group conversations on the Andaman Islands, I report and discuss here only a few sentences from a long exchange with Ambarish Biswas, a local practitioner in his 60s whom the other members of the community considered to be particularly knowledgeable, since he was able to read and discuss the scriptures of the Matua corpus proficiently. Chatting in the quiet morning after *adhibās*, the opening day of a Matua festival, characterized by the worship of Harichand, Guruchand, and their wives; communal feasting; ecstatic ritual dancing (*mātām*); and a whole-night music session (*kīrtan*), Ambarish Biswas said:

In the lowest stage of religious practice you have to learn *dehatattva*; you learn about your gross body. The guru you recognize and worship in this phase is your mother and father. This is the main teaching of the Ramayana: *pitrbhakti* (filial piety). . . . Otherwise you try to climb a tree from halfway up! You have to start from the base.<sup>26)</sup>

It is worth mentioning that the Ramayana provides the main motifs for the folk genre known as *rāmāyaṇ gān*, a theatrical singing of Ramayana stories. Many of the singers, gurus, and preachers of the Matua community are professional folk singers of this genre. Ambarish Biswas explained something obvious to those familiar with the main story of the epic poem: he stated that the whole plot of the famous Ramayana and its main events—he mentioned the exile in the forest, the abduction of Sita, and “the suffering she had to go through”—occurred only because Ram had to abide by his duty as the king’s son. Filial piety, obedience, and respect toward one’s parents are all that Ram can teach us from the point of view of correct behavior: all the rest is just a story.<sup>27)</sup> These values are the basics, like the roots of a tree. Though foundational, however, they can be surpassed and higher truths can be found. Open criticism of the values and models projected by the Ramayana and its orthodox readings are further explored in the other “bundles” of narratives discussed below.

### A Genealogy of Incarnations: Subverting Familiar Tales

A second set of narratives on which I will focus here relates to the divine ancestry of the Matua gurus Harichand and Guruchand. This is a recurring theme among Matua devotees, recited orally during performative occasions as well as printed in books and periodicals published by Matua presses. Histories of the gurus, as suggested by Aditya Malik, cannot be separated from the actions and words of their devotees, whose deep concern for justice in their own lives or in their post-memory (Kabir 2004) is a mirror of the example set by their divine leaders, and the power that they possess (Malik 2016, 5). As clearly portrayed in Fig. 1, Harichand Thakur, who occupies the center, is inscribed in a frame of avatars (Bengali: *abatār*) of Vishnu. The saint Chaitanya, who popularized ecstatic devotionism toward the Radha–Krishna couple throughout Bengal

26) Fieldwork recordings, Krishnapur, North Andaman, February 8, 2017.

27) Studies of eastern Indian versions of the Ramayana seem to concur that Bengali and Oriya retellings of the epic are critical of Ram’s moral standards and are particularly concerned with Ram’s mistreatment of Sita (Bose 2004, 107–118). Ambivalence—if not outright subversion—has characterized the response to the Ramayana in Bengal since the nineteenth century. Matua preachers, who are very often also professional performers, trained and experienced in *Kabigān* (a genre of oral musical-rhetorical poetry) and *rāmāyaṇ gān*, openly discuss these concerns with their audiences.

in the sixteenth century (Kennedy 1925), stands above Harichand, closest to him, as the last divine descent recognized by orthodox Bengali Vaishnavism. On either side Harichand is flanked by Ram and Krishna, possibly the most popular incarnations of Hari (another name for Vishnu) as worshipped in devotional Hinduism. Giving authority and legitimacy to his sainthood and superhuman character, Harichand is depicted as the final incarnation of Vishnu—who has rightly been described as an “inclusivity tool” in South Asian religious literature (Appleton 2017, 83)—while Guruchand, his son, is described as an avatar of the god Shiva. Their epithet is *patita pāban*: saviors, messengers of freedom, for the oppressed and the downtrodden. A considerable part of the Matua scriptures is dedicated to explaining why the world needed another avatar and for what purpose God had to come back to Earth. This is clearly summarized by the narrator voice of Ambarish Biswas:

In *satya*, *dvāpara*, *tretā*, and *kali yuga* [the four cosmic eras] no avatar could do anything for us.<sup>28)</sup> Narayan [Vishnu] in *satya yuga* [the first cosmic era] did not do anything for those like us. Ram [the avatar of the second era] killed with his sword Śāmbuka, a Śūdra who was performing austerities, because the Brahmins were not happy and were not allowing this, so he had to punish him. In *kali yuga* [the fourth and ongoing cosmic era] Gaurāṅga [an epithet of Chaitanya] did not do anything for us. So he had to come back again, in the northeastern land,<sup>29)</sup> as Harichand Thakur. Harichand came for the low castes, for the powerless people. Brahmins divided the Śūdras in castes according to their occupation. . . . We were their slaves. We used to work for them, and they gave us food. We could not read their texts. If we tried to recite them, they would cut out our tongue. If we listened to them, they would pour lead in our ears.<sup>30)</sup> But Harichand and Guruchand gave us literacy and education. Since then, we can read.

Narratives of the succession of avatars unanimously emphasize the birth of Harichand as the culmination of the divine incarnations, accomplishing what the previous saviors could not:<sup>31)</sup> empowering low-caste devotees and providing them with dignity and the instruments for not only spiritual but also social liberation, through literacy, education, awareness of their rights, and participation in political power. Much of the long biographic poem dedicated to Guruchand Thakur (Haldar 1943) is focused on Guruchand’s social

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28) The definitions that Ambarish Biswas and other Matua followers use when they speak of their own people as “us” are *pichiye parā mānuṣ* (backward people), *nimna jāti* (low caste), and *choṭa mānuṣ* (literally little people, as opposed to the “big people,” *baṛolok*: important, affluent, and educated people occupying positions of power in society).

29) Matua participants state that in the orthodox Vaiṣṇava scriptures it is written that Chaitanya will be reincarnated and will appear again in the land of Isān (the cardinal direction of northeast). This land is interpreted as Bangladesh, where Harichand was born.

30) In Brahminical Hinduism, according to the doctrinal scriptures (*śāstras*), women and low-caste people are not allowed to read, learn, recite, or even listen to the Vedas.

31) For a history of the narrative concept of “avatar” and the theology of hierophany, see Jones (2015).

work and his ability to negotiate with government officers and Christian missionaries in order to provide schools and governmental jobs for members of the Namashudra community (Sarkar 2002, 34, 72, 236). The founding gurus are inserted in the cosmo-history of avatars: divine figures who provide the necessary guidance at critical points of time when divine intervention is needed in the human realm to restore *dharmā*. Matua myths, in this sense, can be regarded as conscious reproductions that replicate the shared narrative universe of Indic religious literatures. Similarly, in the history of Bengali literature, the Prophet Mohammad has been “translated” as an avatar of Vishnu,<sup>32)</sup> while Indian Christian theologians have employed the concept of avatar in their Christological explanations (e.g., Chakkarai 1926). Adopting the concept of avatar, in all these instances, also means that the new avatar can be presented as the ultimate and greatest one.

There is a dimension of dissent and innovation inscribed in the act of “reproduction” (Dumont 1970; Moffatt 1979). Borrowing and re-utilizing the Brahminical narrative model does not imply compliance or complicity with the system that it represents; rather, it expresses dissent toward the hegemonic narrative and assertion of an alternative one. The Dumontian idea that low castes do not have an autonomous culture and that they replicate the system (and stories) of the higher castes, thus tacitly accepting them, is strongly contested by Matua and other Dalit narratives. It is a common trait of several Dalit communities to create countermyths and reverse discourses based on the stories of the “big Hindus” (*baro hindurā*; Zene 2002, 38), especially building on the great epics, for example tracing their origins back to Ram (Narayan 2006, 19), claiming descent from Valmiki (the legendary composer of the Ramayana; Narayan 2006, 65), or transforming marginal figures into their central, iconoclastic heroes (Zecchini 2016, 66). This process of dialogic and narrative identity constitution (Benhabib 2002, 16) cannot be explained as a mere replication of the ideas or beliefs of the dominant castes. It is not “mimesis” simplistically interpreted as passive imitation and as an expressive form of submission. As other empirical studies of low-caste communities have clearly demonstrated (e.g., Karanth 2004), far from bearing witness to an acceptance of a subordinate status and consensus, these kinds of oral narratives and mythological reconstructions aim to express resistance. That the creation of a separate cultural identity for the low castes often relies upon characters and symbols borrowed from hegemonic narratives is perhaps due to the fact that the oppression of Dalits has resulted in a denial of cultural specificity and a lack of awareness of their own culture, as Kancha Ilaiah has famously argued (Ilaiah 1996). Or, in other words, it may be because, as a South Indian untouchable community informs

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32) I am referring especially to the opus of Saiyid Sultan; in the sixteenth-century Nabī-Baṃṣā he identified the Islamic notion of prophet (*nabī*) with the Indian notion of avatar (Eaton 1993, 288).



us, “only Hindu Gods are available” (Moffatt 1979, 268).

Ambarish Biswas’s (hi)story-telling revolves around a memory of exploitation and slavery, a social memory that is transmitted through oral as well as printed sources among Matua followers. It forges a view of the past, and it provides for a vision of how the future ought to be. The necessity of Harichand as a final avatar is a pan-Indian Matua narrative provided and justified in detail in the earliest Matua poems (Sarkar 1916). However, the fact that the caste-based revolution initiated by Harichand figures so prominently on the Andaman Islands also serves more topical purposes. The promise of education and social upliftment brought forward by Harichand is still a significant story in a place where only low-caste refugees found resettlement, carefully selected from mainland refugee camps as young, illiterate, hard-working bodies. The memory of this reproduction of pre-Partition structural inequalities and caste-based discrimination is still vivid in second- and even third-generation Matua followers. Equally vivid is the memory of the hardships, intensive labor, physical exhaustion, and dramatic isolation that the Bengali refugees had to face for decades after their migration.

In Ambarish Biswas’s narrative, the fundamental values of equality, social awareness and mobilization, caste consciousness, and action are unfolded through a traditional Hindu narrative scheme and time line, which is the succession of avatars in the cosmic eras.<sup>33</sup> This concept is a profoundly important literary topos in Matua oral as well as written narratives. It follows a well-established marketing strategy: introducing a new religious leader as an old and famous divine character who has returned to Earth. Chaitanya himself came to be known as the incarnation of the divine couple of Radha and Krishna together, in one single body, so that they could finally enjoy love in union. Following the same narrative stratagem, the mysterious fakir who founded the Kartābhajā movement, Aul Chand, is none other than Chaitanya himself: according to legendary accounts (Cakrabarti 1989, 60; Banerjee 1995), Chaitanya did not die in Puri but simply disappeared. Afterward, he came back and reappeared as the fakir Aul Chand, because the high-caste religious leaders in charge of leading the community of Chaitanya’s Vaiṣṇavism had replicated caste-based inequalities and placed too much importance on the ideal of *sannyās* (renunciation). In a very similar manner, in Matua poetry it is said that the Lord had to come back as Harichand because of the decadence of *dharma* among the *Vaiṣṇavas*

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33) The narrative logic of karmic causality, cyclical time, and the periodic restoration of *dharma* (religion, cosmic order) through the intervention of divine incarnations are not confined to Hindu mythology. As a narrative scheme and as a set of cosmo-historical patterns, they are widely shared with Jain and Buddhist literature (characters and mythical episodes are also shared between Brahminic, Jain, and Buddhist mythological literatures; see Appleton 2017). In the case under analysis, though, storytellers have consciously borrowed, and critically addressed, Hindu mythological characters and their deeds.

and because their ideal of devotion to pure love (*prem bhakti*) had deteriorated.<sup>34)</sup>

Matua hagiographies and oral narratives create a parallel and alternative mythological universe where the Hindu narratives of the so-called Great Tradition<sup>35)</sup> are adopted and subverted: they are accepted and appropriated as suppliers of authority and prestige, but then they are also surpassed and creatively expanded. At times they are overtly criticized, as is the case with the story of the low-caste renunciate Śāmbuka, a Dalit martyr in the reconstruction of Hindu epics from the borders (Narayan 2006, 65–66). Together with Eklavya, the low-caste archer of the Mahabharata, they are emblems of Dalit “political orality” (Narayan 2006, 50). In the Matua case, this reiteration of Hindu mythology as a “shared narrative universe” (Appleton 2017, 18) with a Dalit twist is applied not only to Harichand and Guruchand, but also to all the major figures of the Matua religious sphere. For instance, the saint-composer Tarakchandra Sarkar (1847–1914), who composed an important part of Matua sacred songs (1900) and the versified hagiography of Harichand Thakur (1916), is said in his previous lives through earlier cosmic eras to have been none other than Vyasa, the legendary sage who compiled the Mahabharata, and then Valmiki, the sage who is said to have authored the Ramayana.<sup>36)</sup>

Aswini Kumar Sarkar, known as Aswini Gosain, a disciple of Tarakchandra and himself a revered saint-composer of Matua sacred songs (Sarkar 1915), was blind in one

34) In the initial section of the hagiography of Harichand Thakur, composed by Tarakchandra Sarkar and published long after the guru’s demise, we read: *Kṛṣṇabhakta śauca ācāraṇ khuṃtīnāṭi / śuddha prem bhakti baiṣṇabete pare truṭi*, which translates as “Krishna devotees being very particular about purity norms / devotion to divine love in Vaiṣṇavas declines” (Sarkar 1916, 8).

35) The controversial categories of “Great Tradition” and “little traditions” have been used by many anthropologists of South Asia. Introduced by Robert Redfield (1956), they are meant to distinguish between the major, continuing components of a Sanskrit religious tradition developed by high-caste elites regarded as more prestigious, and the plethora of popular religious practices and their narrative foundation at the local or village level.

36) Tarakchandra Sarkar’s divine genealogy of previous lives also appears in some songs, according to the verses of the composer Prafulla Gosain from Jessore: *Kabi rasarāj Tārakcāṃdare / śatakoṭi praṇām jānāi āj tomāre [ . . . ] / tumi Bālmiki chile tretāy, Rāmāyaṇ likhle amar bhāṣāy / tumi dvāparete Bedbyās, sudhījaner biśvās, kabi rasarāj ebāre* (Bairagya 1999, 156), which translates as follows:

Oh Poet Tarakchandra king of *rasa* / let me offer you hundreds of salutations [ . . . ] / you were Valmiki in the Third Era, in the immortal language you wrote the Ramayana / in the Second you were Ved Vyasa, faith of the erudite ones, and this time you’re our king of *rasa*.

While some low castes trace their myths of origin back to Valmiki (Narayan 2006, 65), other Dalit spokespersons and activists sharply criticize the casteist narratives of the Ramayana by addressing its legendary composer, as is the case in Daya Pawar’s poem:

Oh Valmiki [ . . . ] One Shambuk of your own blood / Caught fire, rose in anger. / [ . . . ] Singing the praises of Ramrajya / Even there the icy cliff of inhumanity towered up / [ . . . ] How then should we call you a great poet? (Jaideva and Paswan 2002, 63)



eye.<sup>37)</sup> Fascinating oral (hi)stories from Matua singers on South Andaman recount that he was, in his previous life, none other than Jaimini, the world's most ardent devotee of Krishna, who offered both his eyes to his Lord when he heard that the latter had an eye illness.<sup>38)</sup> Krishna, who was merely testing the human world to see who deserved his grace, gave back one of his eyes to Jaimini, while he kept the other so that Jaimini could gain supernatural vision and partake in the spectacle of Radha and Krishna's divine play whenever he wanted to. There are many parallel examples of the main motif of this story in the Bengali repertoire of religious tales as well as in other Indian myths. Offering one's eyes as a sign of great devotion is a topos often found in South Asian devotional literature. For example, in the Bengali retelling of the Ramayana depicted on nineteenth-century painted scrolls (*paṭ*), Ram counts all the blue lotus flowers that he is going to offer the Goddess Durga; since one flower is missing—another trick of the deity to test the devotee's fervor—he zealously takes his arrow and plucks out one eye in order to complete the offering of 108 flowers (Ghosh 2003).<sup>39)</sup> Familiar motifs and recognizable tales are borrowed, adopted, and creatively reinterpreted in order to formulate new and persuasive stories. Thus, the one-eyed saint-composer of the subversive Matua movement is directly linked to his more ancient, famous, and orthodox saintly antecedents (Jaimini and Ram). This is one of the stratagems by which, through narratives and (hi) story-telling, political, social, and religious borderland voices get closer to the center, capturing previously elaborated and well-known stories, reshaping them for revolutionary purposes, and feeding them out to the peripheries.

### Coming back to Earth to Respect Women: A Gendered Agenda for Reincarnation

The third set of narratives on which I want to focus relates to the position of women. Democratizing devotional Vaiṣṇavism and uplifting depressed classes was not the only purpose of Harichand's return to the mortal realm. The other reason why a new avatar of Vishnu was needed after Chaitanya is closely related to a specific Matua stance on

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37) A folk theater (*pālā kīrtan*) troupe staged the miraculous life story of Aswini Gosain; the *pālā kīrtan* rendition is available on YouTube, and the physical appearance of the saint-composer is explicitly represented (Lifeline4u 2017).

38) This may have a folk etymology explained by the fact that one of Krishna's affectionate epithets in Bengali is *Kānāi*; *kānā* means one-eyed, or blind in one eye.

39) Similarly, according to the legendary life of the saint Kannappa (Hudson 1989, 383), the saint, when he saw that the eyes painted on top of a Shiva-linga stone were bleeding, plucked out both of his eyes to place them on the stone.

religion and gender. The Matua discourse on gender is elaborated in juxtaposition to what is perceived as high-caste patriarchy and is shaped in response to derogatory caste stereotypes and criticism from the hegemonic culture. However, Matua ideas on the position of women can also be understood in the context of a certain reformist discourse on modernity linked to the emergence of new gender roles. Influenced by British colonialism and Christianity, in the nineteenth century Indian elites and social reformers started to disseminate ideas on the education and emancipation of women, companionate marriage, and conjugality (Walsh 2004, 51–60), which were widespread in early-twentieth-century popular culture and entered, in a reinterpreted and often subversive manner, into Dalit discourse on gender.

As already noted, Matua ethos is centered around family and conjugal life (*gārhashta dharmā*). Unsurprisingly, in the Hari Mandir, the shrine located within a household, Harichand and Guruchand are worshipped with their wives, as couples: Hari–Shanti and Guruchand–Satyabama (see Fig. 2). Like the divine couple of Shiva and Durga, equally popular among Bengali Hindus, they represent the ideal of a married couple with children. However, in the collective imagery, Shiva is both the ideal husband and the irresponsible ganja-addicted ascetic who neglects the family and related duties. Revolving around this



**Fig. 2** Radharani Shil Performs the Evening Worship in the Hari Mandir of Pahargaon, South Andaman  
Source: Photo taken by the author (February 2, 2017)

tension between (re)productive engagement in *samsāra* and an ascetic detachment from it, traditional narratives of cosmic eras and reincarnations adopted and reinterpreted by Matua devotees become counter-narratives.

In the outskirts of Wandoor, South Andaman, an old singer of Matua songs and *rāmāyaṇ gān* lives on squatted revenue land. Although non-literate, Paresh Mondal regularly travels, together with his stories and countless songs, to perform for diverse festivals. His wandering narratives are performed in various corners of the islands; seasonally in West Bengal, where part of his family settled after Partition; and in Bangladesh, his homeland, which became to him a foreign country for which he now requires a visa. To suit his itinerant lifestyle, he used his ingenuity to devise a portable, deconstructable *ektārā*, a traditional single-stringed instrument normally made of gourd and bamboo (see Fig. 3). He explained the origin of his sect as follows:



**Fig. 3** The Talented Singer Paresh Mandal and His Ingenious Deconstructable *Ektārā*, Sitting in His Veranda in North Wandoor, South Andaman

Source: Photo taken by the author (January 30, 2017)

Harichand is an avatar of our dark age: first Ram, then Gaurāṅga. Ram's mother reincarnated as Gaurāṅga's mother. Because of her, Ram had to leave the kingdom and was exiled to the forest. So in her next life, as Chaitanya's mother, she was left alone. Her only son became a renunciate and left home, and she had to beg from house to house. Next came Harichand and Shanti Devi! He had to come back, because Chaitanya had hurt his mother too much.<sup>40)</sup>

It is not only important leaders who have famous personalities as their previous incarnations; their mothers, too, are inserted in the revised history of metempsychosis. In the opening section of the rhymed hagiography of Harichand Thakur, a dialogue between Chaitanya and his mother, Śacī, expresses the sorrow of a mother left alone by her son when he opts for solitary renunciation: "If you leave me now, who will ever respect mothers?" Chaitanya replies that for this reason he will have to come back to earth again.<sup>41)</sup> The talented storyteller thus framed the appearance of the first Matua leader as an inevitable result of karmic deeds accumulated by his predecessors era after era: Ram's stepmother forcing the king's son into exile, which resulted in Chaitanya's mother being left miserably alone, without the economic support of a working son, and finally the coming of Harichand, whose choice of a holy life within the household structure repaid the emotional debt of the previous avatars. The motif of maternal grief emerges as a recurrent topic in religious literature across South Asian traditions (Appleton 2017, 129). Its emotive value is grounded in the tension between the feelings and responsibilities associated with the life of the family and the household, on the one hand, and the lure of renunciation on the other. This is an underlying dichotomy—characteristic of much Indian religious literature—which Matua narratives systematically address, with an obvious standpoint in favor of the first way of life, *samsār*. Local perspectives on Matua historiography reinforce core values and beliefs by framing them in a cyclical time frame and an etiology based on *karma*. Similar notions emerge from another narrative on avatar genealogy and gender. The local guru Manik Gosain, a long-white-bearded man in his 70s, narrated the following during a gathering in Radhanagar, at the extreme tip of

40) Fieldwork recordings, Wandoor, South Andaman, January 30, 2017.

41) The verses from *Śrīśrīharilīlāmṛta* relate:

*Śacī bale tumi yadi more chere yābe / e brahmāṅḍe tabe āṛ mātā ke mānibe / e samay Gaurāṅga karilo aṅgikār / tomāke chārite mātā śakti ki āmār / śodhite nāribo mātā taba ṛṇ dhār / janme janme taba garbhe ha'ba abatār / [. . .] āṛ ek janma bāki Prabhūr / ei sei abatār Śrī Hari Thākur* (Sarkar 1916, 3)

which translates as:

Śacī says, if you go and leave me alone / who will ever respect mothers again on this earth? / At this point Gaurāṅga promised / Do I have the power to leave you, mother? / Incapable of repaying my debt toward you, mother / Birth after birth I will descend again into your womb / [. . .] And one more birth was left to the Lord / That is this avatar, Harichand the God.

## North Andaman:

They [Vaiṣṇavas] follow Chaitanya; we follow Harichand Thakur. It is the same, the One is just one, Bhagavān [God]. But Harichand had to come to Earth because of something his previous incarnations could not do. Mainly, because . . . they could not honor (*sammān deoyā*) the woman. . . . Women have been abused and mistreated in a way that cannot be expressed through words. So Harichand came. In *dvāpara yuga*, Ram could not respect Sita. In the next *yuga*, Krishna could not respect Radha: look what he did with all the cowherd girls! All that pain in separation! Chaitanya left his wife Vishnupriya alone, to become an ascetic. Then Harichand came to teach us religion within family and worldly life (*samsārer dharma*).<sup>42)</sup>

It is not my intention in this article to analyze gender roles within Matua society, nor to judge the kind of empowerment that is offered as a solution to a cosmic history of female subordination. However, it is worth pointing out that honoring and respecting women obviously means, according to the oral narratives discussed in this section, giving them a happy life as married women and mothers, in other words, a “new patriarchy” (Chatterjee 1989). This teaching, addressed to men,<sup>43)</sup> reminds them that mothers should not be abandoned and women should not be left alone and without financial support, as prestigious saints of the past left their own mothers. The point that I wish to remark upon is that these narratives are crucial for identity making and community building, creating distinctions between the Matuas and others, as well as a certain sense of superiority on the part of the Matuas vis-à-vis surrounding communities. Matua values include (a certain) independence for women, in comparison with high-caste and neo-Hindu institutionalized valorization of *sannyās*. Among several Dalit groups, sympathetic narratives expressing pity for the condition of women among high-caste Hindus, in order to assert the superiority of one’s outcaste community, are often underlined through countermyths: for instance, by glorifying paramount enemies within the high-caste tradition. The demon Ravana, in these kinds of stories, is presented as a virtuous king who treated Sita with respect, in contrast with Ram, who repudiated her unjustly (Jaoul 2007, 185).

In Matua narratives, this sense of distinction, permeated by views on gender, relates first and foremost to an opposition between themselves and the Vaiṣṇavas (Chaitanya left his wife and his mother in desolation and misery), and between themselves and orthodox Hindus (Ram mistreated his pious wife, Sita). These two groups inhabit adjacent and overlapping social and territorial areas in the Matua borderlands. This open

42) Fieldwork recordings, Radhanagar, North Andaman, February 11, 2017.

43) There are also separate teachings for women, called *nārītattva*, and a spiritual practice (*sādhana*) addressed to women, which revolves around the control and discipline of sexual life and devotion to one’s husband.



criticism clearly emerges from an article titled “*Matuyā dharme nārīr sthān*” (The position of women in the Matua religion), which appeared in one of the inexpensive Matua periodicals, circulated widely:<sup>44</sup>

The Matua religion takes shelter in conjugal life. It is built on the husband-wife relationship. Their effort makes life happy. And that happiness is the aim of life. . . . In Hinduism, women are described as a gateway to hell (*nārī naraker dvār*), a thorn on the path of devotion. This is a great offense. . . . Lord Gaurāṅga got married, but did not create a *samsāra* [a household]. He rejected his mother and his wife, and pursued spiritual realization for himself, preaching the name of god. Ramakrishna got married and stayed far away from his wife. . . . There are only two castes among humans: men and women. Among the two, there is no bigger one or lower one. . . . The Matua religion, which is the refined *sanātan dharma*,<sup>45</sup> has given to women utmost respect and dignity. The Matua cult does not only recognize women as Mothers, but also as inspiring, empowering, glorious figures. . . . In the Matua religion, polygamy and child marriage is forbidden. . . . During singing sessions of sacred music [*nām saṅkīrtan*], men and women both, together, meld in the ecstasy of love. This is a proof of women’s independence. . . . In Hinduism, women are merely slaves: they cook, serve and raise children. They have to obey whatever the husband says: they are not given the opportunity to contribute their opinion. They are only fit to be objects of enjoyment. . . . On the contrary, among Matuas the authority of women is of utmost importance. (Bagchi 2008, 19–20)

This counter-narrative, opposing the position of women in conservative Hinduism and asserting the superiority of the role of women among the Matuas, is articulated by retracing the (hi)story of incarnations and reminiscing about a past of injustice and disrespect: Chaitanya got married and then selfishly abandoned his family; the well-known Śākta saint Ramakrishna abhorred women and their sexuality.<sup>46</sup> Hence, in the present *yuga*, Harichand had to bring back justice and restore to women the right to participate in family life and religious practices. Narratives on Harichand’s and Guruchand’s social and miraculous deeds, simplistically discarded by some as personality cult stories (Das 2014, 173), establish these Dalit leaders as counter-elite idols encompassing both *bhadralok*-dominated politics and the Ambedkarite discourse on low-caste struggle.

44) Produced in the mainland, such periodicals have one or more offices on the Andaman Islands: for example, *Matuyā Darṣan*, published in Burdwan (West Bengal), with one branch on the Andamans, in Neil Island; and *Yugadiśā*, published in Kharagpur (West Bengal), with two offices on the Andamans, one in Port Blair and the other on Little Andaman.

45) Whereas Hinduism is referred to as the eternal order, or *sanātan dharma*, Matua followers refer to their creed as *sūkṣma sanātan dharma*, where *sūkṣma* means primarily “subtle” but also sharp, refined, appropriate, just, in juxtaposition to the “gross” (*sthūl*) religious order of the Hindus. With this formulation, Matua believers can justify their connections with the ancient and prestigious Hindu past, while rejecting it as surpassed and unrefined. In this ambiguous and negotiable relationship with Hinduism, the new *dharma* of the Matuas is presented as a superior, more evolved form of the same, perennial (*sanātan*) *dharma*.

46) This is at least what most critical writers have related about the personal life of Ramakrishna (see Kripal 1995).

Parameters of modernity and development are not confined to the awakening of caste and class consciousness. Highlighting the intersectionality of caste and gender, Matua myths relate very significantly to women's roles, advocating for the value of (a certain) independence for women. Such narratives are present in many Dalit contexts throughout South Asia, finding echoes in the construction of the image of the Dalit woman orally and in print. Such an image paints Dalit women and wives as enjoying greater freedom and dignity compared to their caste Hindu counterparts (Ilaiah 1996, 27; Ucko 2002, 103; Nubile 2003, 78). This trope represents the flip side of a coin, the coin of colonial reformist and Indian upper-class narratives portraying Dalit women as sexually promiscuous, moving suspiciously freely, and accused without fail of having a dubious sense of morality (Gupta 2016, 28–42; Christy 2017, 25). The criticism of Dalit women from the viewpoint of high-caste morality and aesthetics has resulted in contrasting reactions from the Dalits themselves. Some Dalit communities purportedly adopted the moral system of the dominant castes in order to secure a better status, while others appropriated part of the slanderous attacks and converted them into a matter of pride and superiority. Matua codes of behavior and myths of origin perfectly reflect this complexity, as they demonstrate a situationally appropriate adoption of both types of reaction. Like the Matua author of the above-mentioned article (Bagchi 2008), Ilaiah reports that a Dalit woman in his South Indian village in Telangana is “very much a political being, a social being and an economic being. Whereas a Brahmin woman is not,” because “their [Hindu women's] existence is subsumed into their husbands' existence” (Ilaiah 1996, 27). It should be noted, however, that a large proportion of these criticisms of “patriarchal sexist” Hindu Gods and customs (Ilaiah 1996, 33), advocating that “we” Dalits treat our women much better, are written by men. Women's voices often contradict such cultural representations, highlighting a Dalit woman's “triple burden” of caste discrimination, economic deprivation, and gender bias (Sabharwal and Sonalkar 2015, 46).

The complex discourses around gender, caste, and class and their reflection in low-caste myths become particularly complex in the oceanic borderlands where the Andaman Islands are situated. The karmic plot culminating with the final Matua incarnations bears a gendered agenda: imbibing modern notions on women's empowerment, it supports dignity and respect toward women. This assumes a more radical rationale, relevant to the borderland context of the Andaman Islands. Where nuclear families were the unit of measurement for governmental plans of resettlement, and the male workforce was not large enough to fruitfully put under cultivation large and distant plots of land, women needed to contribute with arduous manual labor, and they needed to find an ethical and religious foundation for their roles. When they first arrived on the Andaman Islands, Bengali refugee families suffered from a lack of manpower in a context where a good deal



of labor was required in order to clear vast, distant plots of land of stumps and bushes to build huts, to protect the crops from wild animals, to hike for entire days through the forest in order to access basic facilities and provisions. Women would normally contribute, taking responsibility for tasks that were not necessarily part of their gender role “back home.” Apart from husking, boiling, and drying rice, women started helping in the fields, protecting the crops, fishing in ponds and on the seashore, watering vegetable gardens, and harvesting vegetables in thick, frightening forests. Most of these activities are still carried out by Matua women on the Andaman Islands—together with the numerous activities linked to farming of the ubiquitous *supari* (betel nuts), a more recent and most remunerative cash crop—while in their ancestral homeland, in southern Bangladesh, the role of women is relegated to a much more conservative position and confined to the realm of domesticity. The composition of the Bengali diaspora on the islands led to more relaxed rules for marriage between members of families belonging to different subcastes and districts of origin (Singh *et al.* 1994, 35–38), as well as a simplification of marriage rituals. The distance from traditional patriarchal structures loosened the patterns regulating marriage unions and gave ample space for semi-arranged, companionate marriage (Zehmisch 2017, 101). This is mirrored in local gossip and malicious literature maintaining that Bengali women on the Andaman Islands are prone to eloping with lovers, and to adulterous relationships, and that due to the lack of Brahmins on the islands—especially in the early days after the resettlement of refugees—Bengalis did not “really” marry (this is on the basis of the assumption that a wedding’s authority and authenticity can be guaranteed only by an orthodox Hindu ritual officiated by a Brahmin). In this scenario, it becomes even more evident why the conjugality-centered *gārhasṭha dharma* of the primordial Matua gurus, their emphasis on sexual control, and the centrality of the father-mother doctrine (*mātāpitātattva*) found a prominent place in the oral narratives of the Andaman Islands. Retracing the mythological (hi)story of avatars, avatars’ female partners, and avatars’ mothers, Matua narratives at the borders address these composite dimensions, responding to old and new challenges, justifying claims of gender equality, and encouraging action, both “at home and in the world,”<sup>47</sup> under the aegis of Harichand’s grace.

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47) The quote refers to the title of a famous novel by Rabindranath Tagore (1941), often used as an allegory for domesticity and political engagement, and more broadly as encapsulating the polarity between the private and public spheres.

## Stories of Change: The Narrative Foundation of Resistance<sup>48)</sup>

In one of the limited number of academic articles available on the Matua movement, Abhishek Das writes that the Matua faith, which emerged as a reformist movement against inequalities, ritualism, and superstitions grounded in religion, is now “stuck in the quagmire of superstitions” (Das 2014, 173) and that the religious texts of the Matuas

became mere books of myths, legends and claims of mythic antecedence was [*sic*] disconnected from the new realities whereby the erstwhile *namashudras* from predominantly rural Bengal were struggling in the alien and alienating urban culture. . . . [S]ectarianism further weakened the movement along with their later insistence on perpetuating a personality cult. (Das 2014, 173)

This very secularist and rationalist understanding of myth, invoking terms like modernity, reality, and struggle, implies that myths and legends are seen as opposed to, and totally detached from, the real struggle of low-caste practitioners. Envisaging mythmaking as an innocuous, apolitical process, this view fails to take the political implications of myths seriously. However, the rationalist attitude toward myth has been systematically dismantled in several studies that portray the transition from “being Untouchable to becoming Dalit” (Zene 2007, 260) as a mythopoeic process.

This secularist bias explains why Matua cultural expressions, which started to be disseminated in print as early as 1900, have failed to be considered in the larger field of Dalit literature.<sup>49)</sup> It is only quite recently that the sharp divide between religious texts and South Asian literature, deeply entrenched in the approach of literary scholars and critics, has started to be debated as questionable, and new perspectives on a post-secular methodology in literature have begun to be embraced.<sup>50)</sup> In her book chapter, Sipra

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48) Resistance as a concept is something that has preoccupied anthropologists since the 1970s. Critiques have been addressed at social scientists’ obsession with finding and celebrating resistance wherever it is palpable. Some have argued that scholars have a tendency to romanticize and fetishize any form of resistance (Abu-Lughod 1990). In the case analyzed in this article, the vocabulary of resistance is consistent with the vernacular expressions of the people that I have worked with. Local terms that translate as “revolution,” “opposition,” and “protest” (*biplab, pratibāda*) are interspersed in oral as well as written accounts of Matua spokespersons. For example, a particularly eloquent statement by one of my interlocutors emphasized the fact that Guruchand Thakur paved the way for the community’s access to education because “without literacy there can be no movement, no protest, no revolution!” (Fieldwork recordings, Joydeb, January 16, 2017).

49) Regarding Dalit literature in Bengali, the contribution of Matua literature has been acknowledged in the writings of Manoranjan Byapari. As he rightly pointed out: “Before talking about Bangla Dalit literature today, we need to look back to a phenomenon called *Matua sahitya* [Matua literature]” (Byapari and Mukherjee 2007, 4118).

50) Post-secular views affected a number of disciplines, including international relations and political sciences. On the “post-secular turn” in literature, see Paul Corrigan’s exhaustive article (2015).

Mukherjee (2016) has revised the secularist bias of literary scholars of Dalit literature and advocated that this kind of religious literature should be given the recognition it deserves. She argues that the aesthetics of Dalit literature have often been criticized for being self-pitying, overtly ideological, narrowly propagandistic, closer to “testimonies rather than works of imagination” (Kannan and Gros 2002, 24, cited in Mukherjee 2016), representing “material more suited to the study of anthropology rather than the renewal of the literature” (Kannan and Gros 2002, 24, cited in Mukherjee 2016). Implicitly accusing subaltern narratives of lacking creativity and artistic value, such statements reinforce the hiatus between two scholarly fields that could have a lot to say to each other, as well as misrecognizing local aesthetics and culture-specific rhetoric devices that shape the narratives of resistance. Dalit literary criticism has contributed a deep understanding of a kind of “alternative aesthetics” which cannot continue to be ignored by the canons of literary scholars (Paniker 1994).

As is the case for many subaltern groups in South Asia,<sup>51</sup> a clear-cut separation between the religious and the social cannot represent an appropriate premise to study the Matua community and its narratives. If we embrace local categories as more suitable analytical tools, and take into serious consideration local exegeses and oral literary criticism (Dundes 1966), the struggle for liberation emerges as simultaneously twofold: inward and outward, soteriological as well as social. As explored earlier, Matua “bundles of narratives” present human beings as enslaved by the six vices and dominated by *kām*; the resolution of this condition is to be realized through knowledge of the gross body (*sthūl deha*), its “mother” and “father”: we come from a male-female couple, we are made of male-female substances, and we achieve freedom from desire and liberation from the vices through the spiritual and embodied path for self-realization (*sādhanā*). Simultaneously, humans are exploited on a socioeconomic level by oppressors and unfair power relationships. The origins of this condition are explored in Matua narratives through a (hi)story-telling of past oppression perpetrated by high-caste landlords and religiously justified by Brahminical tyranny over the downtrodden and backward castes (*patita*, *pichiye parā mānuṣ*). Liberation from such conditions means freedom from powerful exploiters, through literacy, education, and social mobility. For both conditions—inner slavery and outer marginalization—the key is liberation from ignorance. It starts from one’s own gross body and continues by rectifying the social unit of the family, all the way up to the larger political structure. The social movement and the religious movement,

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51) The approach sustained by Subaltern Studies has highlighted the way in which the rebellions of peasants, tribal people, or forest-dwellers in India have frequently been expressed in a religious idiom. For instance, Ranajit Guha (1988, 78–79) argued that religiosity was central to the Santal rebellion.

the inward fight for liberation and the outward struggle of social awareness and mobilization, necessarily go hand in hand. Both find their place in the myths, sacred songs, and genealogies of the Matua community and should not be dismissed as an apolitical “quagmire of superstition.” As Guruchand Thakur eloquently declared, according to one of the “books of myth” (Haldar 1943), “there is no strength unless there is a united group” (or party: *yār dal nāi tār bal nāi*) and “there is no upliftment without political power” (*rājsakti binā keha bāra nāhi hay*).

Traveling stories and cross-border narratives of the Matua community cannot be understood simply using the top-to-bottom notion of Sanskritization<sup>52)</sup> or acculturation, focusing on the ways in which elements from the dominant Hindu culture are accommodated. Some elite members of the mainland Matua community have begun to reject some of the traditional narratives as irrational and contaminated by Brahminization.<sup>53)</sup> Taking into account the broader use of narratives for resistance and social mobilization, it is clear that the borrowing of plot elements, of familiar terminologies, and of prestigious characters associated with higher status is a very common subaltern strategy to build community and to articulate resistance.

The idea that popular repertoires of stories sustain conscious political action was admirably developed by Joseph Davis in *Stories of Change: Narrative and Social Movements* (2002) and taken up later by Eric Selbin in *Revolution, Rebellion, Resistance: The Power of Story* (2010). I build on some of their reflections to argue that Matua counter-narratives do not imitate familiar stories and narrative patterns borrowed from the so-called Great Tradition because of a lack of creativity, acculturation, or an essential Indian carelessness for originality.<sup>54)</sup> To recycle old stories and to build upon a familiar set of images, symbols, and worldviews in order to create new stories is not something

52) The term “Sanskritization,” introduced by M. N. Srinivas in his study on the Coorgs of South India in 1952, has been adopted by various anthropologists to describe social phenomena within and beyond the tribal, low-caste, and subaltern context. For an analysis of the concept and its legitimacy, see Simon Charsley’s article “Sanskritization: The Career of an Anthropological Theory” (1998).

53) Sudhir Ranjan Haldar, a Dalit writer who also authored several works on Matua history and doctrines, stated:

A greater number of diseases were cured . . . by Harichand Thakur and mostly for that reason he gained a good standing as a deliverer of the poor and the Patit [downtrodden] people. So, superstitious people of that time, influenced by the Vedic religion regarded him as an Avatar of so-called God. (Haldar 2015)

54) Orientalist writers and Indologists have often lamented, using Eurocentric paradigms, what they believe to be a lack of originality on the part of Indian authors. According to this perspective, in the absence of the idea of individual creativity and authorship there is no new work which departs completely from past tradition. An example of this attitude can be found in Allardyce and Allardyce’s “The Calcutta Natives” (1874, 447). Echoing the same orientalist discourse, some literary critics deny originality or any innovative contribution to Dalit literature.

peculiar to South Asian subaltern narratives. We all copy and imitate familiar stories, because mimesis is a fundamental way of knowing (Selbin 2010, 68). Cultural emulation and replication in Dalit oral traditions have often been seen as the product of a subaltern fascination with powerful others, or the sign of a lack of cultural authenticity, sincerity, or charisma. The Matua adaptation, incorporation, and transformation of Hindu mythological and epic episodes into their own narratives of resistance and upliftment can be better understood by rehabilitating the power of mimesis and by considering Matua composers and storytellers' agency in a process of "cultural re-editing"<sup>55)</sup> across borderlands. Like the Puerto Rican witch healers discussed by Raquel Romberg (2016), through the imitation of hegemonic symbols and gestures on the margins Matua composers have resisted the exclusionary power of such symbols. Like Comaroff's South African *bricoleurs*,<sup>56)</sup> they take the available material—a toolbox of symbols, characters, conceptualizations of time—and creatively use all this equipment to produce a new cultural expression that responds to contextual needs. This helps us to navigate through the ambiguous Matua approach toward powerful religious establishments in their environment—Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam<sup>57)</sup>—from which it has consciously included some things and rejected others, adopting elements and subverting them. Deploying cultural loans for specific purposes, Matua mythopoiesis actualizes a creative process of subversive bricolage-thinking. In Matua narratives, Ram and Krishna, the orthodox incarnations of God, do not appear as honored special guests projecting dignity upon a Dalit group from their high heavenly seats. Rather, they are kidnapped and showcased as captured bearers of an alien power (Comaroff 1985, 197) which is constantly debated and contested. Charismatic characters of "the big people" (*barolok*), such as the same

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55) Cultural re-editing has been discussed as referring to one culture's integration of another's story or symbol into its own (Selbin 2010, 37). I prefer this expression as opposed to more hierarchical terms, such as "Sanskritization" and "acculturation," because it still allows us to discuss issues of legitimacy, authority, and authenticity without presuming a one-way movement between cultural material of high and low status.

56) Studying the postcolonial South African Zionist movement, Comaroff suggested that colonized societies deploy and deform imperial institutions; they actively appropriate, transform, and turn to their own advantage a number of key symbols drawn from the dominant culture. The result is a kind of "subversive bricolage" which adapts strategic elements of colonialist discourse as "captured bearers of alien power" (Comaroff 1985, 197).

57) Islam is often interpreted by Matua interlocutors as the quintessential "other." In southern Bangladesh, where the Matua community is surrounded by a Muslim majority, narratives of the Matua faith in relation to Islam abound, while these are missing in other areas where the Matua community lives in a predominantly Hindu environment. Stories about the Muslim devotees of Harichand Thakur, their offerings of beef—which gets miraculously transformed into *sandesh* (traditional sweets)—and the Hindu-Muslim marriage celebrated by Guruchand Thakur are recurrent in Bangladesh but are not common in other Matua diasporic contexts where there is little contact with Muslims.

Ram who killed the low-caste ascetic Śāmbuka, are appropriated and reproduced without asking for permission, engaging in a form of cultural piracy (Romberg 2005), subverting the same symbols of power which had been intended to exclude and vilify the practices of people at the margins.

## Conclusion

I have presented a limited and selected set of extracts from stories collected on the Andaman Islands from the extensive oral and written production of the Matua community. Through an analysis of narratives of the cosmological mother and father, the king of vices, the ultimate godly incarnations and their gendered agenda, I have underlined how these stories are shared, preserved, and valued in order to shape an alternative Bengali identity in a diasporic context and in a borderland environment where uprooted Namashudra people from a culturally more homogeneous rural East Bengal have been living adjacent to other communities for 70 years. These stories have served the purpose of generating cohesion and building community in an extremely isolated place, both when the first batches of refugees were working hostages on remote islands, and more recently when mainstreaming forces with tremendous social and economic power, such as neo-Hindu institutions and Christian missions, have a strong presence (Zehmisch 2017, 214, 278). Stories have a powerful and pervasive role in articulating the past into collective memories. Accordingly, they forge a collective image of the future, providing the tools to imagine transformation and conceive of how the community ought to be; therefore, they also provide a structure to take decisions and actions in the present.

With their power of trans-regional and transnational connectivity, Matua myths and legends contest the rigidity of postcolonial borders: they maintain unity and bind communities scattered around the Bay of Bengal and in different corners of the subcontinent through governmental policies of “dispersal,” “rehabilitation,” and “colonization,” which drew subaltern agricultural castes and contracted laborers into new forms of exploitation. They are a traveling “archive of feelings” (Cvetkovich 2003, 7), and they constitute the basis of people’s conscious resistance and social mobilization aimed at overcoming other kinds of borders, such as those marking out the territory of religious and social marginality which they inhabit.

The stories I have explored are bricolage narratives that expand on familiar characters, worldviews, and sets of beliefs in order to assert a distinct cultural consciousness, imagining a new world order and a distinct sense of righteousness. Through ethnography and literary studies in the borders between South and Southeast Asia, such bricolage

narratives emerge not just as a finished cultural item but as a process of bricolage-thinking in borderland ontologies, by which narrators retrospectively frame the past and mobilize present action. In the multiple borderland in which Matua history makers are located, bricolage is an eclectic process of creation and restoration. On the one hand it employs, recycles, and rereads old material; and it uses familiar tools to create a new cultural identity at the margins, often in response to criticism and accusations put forward by the dominant culture. On the other hand, it expressly employs the tools it has at hand for restoration, in order to repair and bring back to life a fallen institution of pre-existing cultural and religious importance. Hence, the new and distinct religious identity asserted to be “Matua” is at times overtly non-Hindu or anti-Hindu, while on other occasions it is presented as a refined and superior version (*sūkṣma sanātan dharma*) of a deteriorated, unjust, and chauvinistic Hinduism (*sthūl sanātan dharma*). In this sense, the idea of bricolage-thinking as an epistemological and compositional tool is reflected in the local discourse on *dharma* and its restoration: as our storytellers recounted, and as the general repertoire of Indic mythology tells us, *dharma* is a transient and dynamic order; its religious institutions’ adherence to truth and righteousness periodically reaches the brink of collapse and needs avatars who periodically return as champions to restore it.

As a confluence of myth, memory, and mimesis shaping the everyday art of resistance (Selbin 2010, 48–73), Bengali Matua stories from the heart of the Bay of Bengal mirror an overlapping borderland and diasporic self, characterized by multiple, ambiguous, and situational identities. They provide, for their tellers and listeners, a symbolic capital enabling them to trespass borders, to connect with imaginary homelands, and to link up with imaginary fellow countrymen and countrywomen who share a similar, ever-changing, itinerant reservoir of stories, in many distant borderlands of South Asia.

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