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A Cowherd's Chapbook: An Inquiry into the Ethics of Literary Historiography

Pranav Prakash, Ph.D.¹

¹ Florida State University

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This article appraises the relevance of chapbooks in exploring the literary cultures of colonial Mithila and the ethics of literary historiography in Mithila Studies. As a case study, I examine a chapbook featuring *Mithila Natak* (*Mithilā nāṭak*) by Brj Bihārī Lāl Maṇḍal. The playwright identifies himself as a member of the cowherd caste (*gvālā jāṭ*). My research shows that *Mithila Natak* is one of the first modern plays in the history of Maithili literature. Reflecting on the materiality of chapbooks and Maṇḍal's creative imagination and social critique, my essay argues that chapbooks are extraordinary sources for exploring how marginalized communities shaped the literary and cultural landscape of colonial Mithila. Furthermore, the printed ephemerae of disenfranchised peoples enrich our literary historiography in a way that facilitates an ethical narration of our cultural past.

On February 2, 1901, the Krishna Press in Bhagalpur published 1,000 copies of Brj Bihārī Lāl Maṇḍal's *Mithila Natak* (*Mithilā nāṭak*).¹ This was an ambitious undertaking for an aspiring small-town press since Mandal was still to achieve renown as a playwright and poet. In the postscript of his play, Mandal identified himself as a "fallen" (*adham*) person hailing from a "cowherd caste" (*gvālā jāṭ*) and noted, "I have authored this book diligently so that whoever is stressed out—affected by any kind of human misery—can revive their spirits upon reading this book; they will laugh until their belly hurts."² Despite his commitment to alleviating human suffering and his creative engagement with the poetic genres and performative traditions of Mithila, neither Mandal nor *Mithila Natak* was critiqued by any contemporary scholars of Maithili literature.

Mandal and Krishna Press were active at a time when both Maithili print cultures and the genre of literary history were very much in their infancy. In the subsequent decades, scholars of Maithili literature published a variety of articles, essays, and books with the intent of configuring literary historiography—its critical methods, analytical frameworks, and historical sources—and consolidating the process of literary canonization. Mandal was ignored by all literary histories, and the Krishna Press died out in unremarkable circumstances.

1 Hereafter, the author and title of his play are written without diacritics, except for citations of his work. Other Indian names are written with diacritics only when referring to a foreign-language publication of the author in question.

2 *Yab pustak hamne babut pariśram se taiyār kiya hai. Manuṣya kaisābu vipatti se pīrit bokar cintit ho, to is pustak ke padhne se citt ānand ho jātā hai. Vo hanste hanste peṭ phattā hai* (Maṇḍal 1901, back cover). For my alternate translation of this passage, see the first paragraph of the section of this essay titled "The Antithetical Stances of *Mithila Natak*."

Why did Mandal and *Mithila Natak* remain outside the purview of literary historiography? In evaluating the aesthetic attributes, creative insights, and cultural significance of canonical works, did historians of Maithil literary cultures develop methods and paradigms that could expose the imperfection of works like *Mithila Natak*? How did literary historians envision the ethics of reading literature and evaluating contributions by diverse peoples? My essay reflects upon the ethics of literary historiography with a view to appraising how literary histories may represent their community and cultural past.

The Ethics of Literary Historiography

Thinking along with the historian Hayden White, one may ask if it is possible—and when possible, if it is desirable—to narrate the history of Maithili literature from the vantage point of marginalized communities. White reflected on the possibility and desirability of historical narratives in the context of the Holocaust. There was no Holocaust in Mithila, but its people's condition in the closing decades of the nineteenth century was seldom less dire. This region suffered devastating famines in 1866, 1873–1874, and 1888–1889. Frustrated with the colonialist British government's apathy toward the residents of this region, Charles James O'Donnell (1834–1934), an Indian Civil Service officer deputed in this region, reported on July 1879:

It is indeed unfortunate that, when Bihar is nowadays mentioned, its name usually calls to mind the fact that one of the most fertile tracts in India has become notorious as the scene of frequent famines, and that its inhabitants, naturally a robust and healthy people, are among the most poverty-stricken and least happy subjects of the empire. (O'Donnell 1879, 152)

So all-encompassing and unyielding was the plight of these impoverished subjects that they rarely had the wherewithal to create historical records of their collective experiences. Oral narratives and witness accounts have no doubt transpired through the vestiges of time. By reading between the lines and deciphering the silences in historical records and oral narratives, one may piece together—albeit with varying levels of plausibility and certainty—how marginalized communities participated in and contributed to the making of Mithila culture. Such attempts at narrating the history of Mithila culture, wherever possible, are not only bound to be fragmentary and conjectural but also—given the extreme forms of violence and alienation suffered by colonized subjects—to trigger intergenerational trauma and emotional stress.

What should historians do? Should they—following Michael Oakeshott's and Hayden White's proposal—preserve the distinction between the “historical past” and “practical past”? And should they—like Oakeshott and White—argue that ethical concerns arise only when one makes use of historical narratives, not necessarily when one goes about finding and narrating “what had really happened in discrete domains of the past” (White 2014, 75–76)? Literary historiography cannot be likened to a sentient and

contemplative being; it is not endowed with agency and discretion in the same way as an individual accustomed to specific cultures of introspective thinking are. However, literary historiography is predicated on the thought processes, personal experiences, and intentional actions of specific individuals and intellectual communities. The methods and praxes of narrating history are firmly entrenched in the conscience of the narrator—the historian—who is obligated to set the terms of their inquiry and evaluate accordingly the relative merits and contributions of generations of literary communities in history. In constructing their narratives, historians are expected to judge in ethical ways how insightful, influential, and valuable the works of past writers, poets, and performers have been. No history can ever be truly exhaustive; and the process of selection inevitably entails determining who are worthy of being the key characters in our narratives of the past.

One of the key problems with the modern genre of Maithili literary histories is that these histories have relied so heavily on literary production by the dominant castes—most notably, Brahmins and Kayasthas—that their narratives are tantamount to silencing minority castes and religious groups in Mithila. Such criticism of Maithili literary histories has been prevalent since, if not before, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (P. Jha 1996, 585). Despite recognizing the presence of rampant religious and casteist biases in Maithili histories, Maithili scholars have time and again failed to suggest methodological and theoretical reforms in literary historiography: reforms that would ensure a just and fair inclusion of all sections of Maithili-speaking communities. The acute paucity of Muslim, Dalit, women, gender non-conforming, and the so-called “lower-caste” contributions to Maithili literature is conspicuous in most, if not all, literary histories that were published in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (for a few representative examples, see Mishra 1949; 1950; Singh 1956; Chaudhary 2010). Furthermore, the colonialist and Orientalist strands of historiography have been so predominant in Maithili literary histories that “Muslim invaders,” along with “lower-caste” communities, are frequently held responsible for the decline of chaste, classical traditions of Maithili literature (for instance, consider Chaudhary 2010, 5, 35, 43, 54; Jhā 1999, iv, xviii; Singh 1956, 97).

The impetus for reflecting upon the democratic ethics of inclusion, equity, and fair representation was particularly strong when Maithili language movements were still campaigning for official recognition by Indian and Nepalese constitutions. However, in the opening decades of the twenty-first century, Maithili was recognized as a state language in both India (Ninety-Second Amendment Act, 2003) and Nepal (Constitution of Nepal 2015, part 1, sections 6–7). Whatever little impetus for ethical historiography had prevailed in the last century diminished substantially after Maithili acquired official sanction in both nations. In recent decades, South Asia has—like several other regions of the world—succumbed to radical right-wing politics

that not only feeds on populist, majoritarian histories but also forestalls any efforts at narrating history in a methodologically rigorous, ethical, and compassionate manner.

As a critical intervention to the unfortunate—albeit dominant—trend of majoritarian historiography and an inquiry into the ethics of literary historiography, it was important for me to ask afresh some basic questions about the cultural history of Mithila. Was it really the case that marginalized communities—religious and caste minorities, women and gender non-conforming groups among others—did not engage with any literary, cultural and performative traditions in Mithila? Did underprivileged communities endure—at times resist—systemic exploitation and caste hegemony without any recourse to creative imagination and cultural production? Were Maithili archives designed to systematically erase the legacy and heritage of suppressed communities and did they succeed in their venture? To grapple with the politics of communal archiving and to unravel the literary cultures of marginalized communities in Mithila, I conducted archival research in different parts of India, England, France, and the US.³ My research explored the history of early print cultures of Mithila with the aim of understanding how inexpensive printing technologies may have served the interests of underprivileged, exploited communities.

The Archive of Maithili Chapbooks

The 1867 Press and Registration of Books Act of the British Parliament required all authorized printing presses and newspapers to deposit a copy of their work to the national library and archive. Additionally, the widespread European interest in Oriental objects motivated many enterprising collectors to dispatch a variety of printed materials from South Asia to their Western networks. Consequently, some of the earliest printed ephemera, if they have not survived in South Asia, are still extant in Western libraries, archives, and museums. Notable examples of printed ephemera include advertisements, broadsheets, engravings, leaflets, match-stick boxes, newspaper clippings, pamphlets, periodicals, playbills, postcards, and posters, among others.⁴ A

³ In India, my archival research was focused on the collections available at the Sahitya Akademi Library, Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts in Delhi (2017–2018), and in Patna, the Khuda Bakhsh Library and Hindi Rashtrabhasha Parishad (2017–2018, 2021–2022). I have also consulted the Bodleian Libraries (Oxford), Cambridge University Library (Cambridge), John Rylands Library (Manchester), British Library (London), and SOAS Library (London) in England (2016, 2020–2022). In France, I conducted my archival research primarily at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Bibliothèque universitaire des langues et civilisations, and École nationale des chartes in Paris (2018–2019). My archival research in the United States extended over a decade (2010–2012, 2014–2022) to explore the rare book collections at the Library of Congress, University of Iowa, University of Chicago, University of Michigan, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, University of Virginia, University of Pennsylvania, Princeton University Libraries, and Yale University Libraries.

⁴ On the significance of printed ephemera in the historiography of the British Empire, see Tomkins and Jackson (2015, 142–67). For a sampling of printed ephemera at the British Library, see Pickett (2012); Shaw and Lloyd (1985); at the Cambridge University Library, see the Royal Commonwealth Society (RCS) Library Collection that has been digitized by the RCS Photography Project (<https://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/rcs>); and at the Bodleian Libraries, consult the library catalog of the John Johnson Collection and of a 1971 exhibition based on this collection. See Anonymous (1971).

special class of printed ephemerae—which is not quite as ephemeral as, say, playbills or gift wrappers, but whose existence is transitory, mobile and often short-lived—comprises chapbooks.⁵

The term chapbook is of recent provenance. An older word, chapman, was used to describe an itinerant hawker or dealer, who wandered from one place to the other with the intent of buying and selling different kinds of commodities. As printing technologies spread across Europe, they traded in a diversity of book objects and even helped with the circulation of pamphlets and propaganda materials. Although the term chapman had gained currency by the late sixteenth century, one of the first attested academic uses of chapbook is found in writings of a prominent English bibliographer Thomas Frognall Dibdin (1776–1847). In *Library Companion; Or, The Young Man's Guide, and The Old Man's Comfort, in the Choice of A Library* that Dibdin published in 1824, he deployed the term chapbook to describe “a neat black letter” book that was “embellished with several spirited and not ill-drawn woodcuts” (Dibdin 1824, 238). These sorts of compact, portable books—which often comprised popular tales, ballads, and stories—were attractive to chapmen because they sold well among both lay and elite buyers. Dibdin's depiction of collectible chapbooks is elitist and divorced from the reality of printing workshops.

Printers espouse a different view of chapbooks based on their experience of printing techniques and materials. To fathom the printerly definition of chapbook, I asked John Kristensen to explain what chapbook meant to the nineteenth- and twentieth-century printers. Kristensen is a seasoned American printer who—despite training as an architectural historian at Cornell and Oxford—chose to dedicate his life to mastering the craft of letterpress printing. To my query, he responded that printers tend to view chapbooks as booklets made up of a single “gathering” of pages.⁶ Gathering is a technical term used by both bookbinders and printers to denote a collection of loose sheets that are arranged in proper sequence. Letterpress printers do not print page by page on separate pieces of paper. Rather they arrange the text of several pages of a book—often in the multiples of two or four—on the bed of the printing press so that they are able to print all these pages over a large sheet of paper in just one go. This large sheet containing the proof of multiple pages is referred to as “signature.” When the signature page is folded in the correct order, it yields a gathering of folios. If such a gathering is saddle-stitched or bound together, it would—for fine printers like Kristensen—constitute a

⁵ For a more elaborate discussion of the academic definition and historiographical implication of ephemera, see Garner (2021, 244–63).

⁶ This conversation took place when I was enrolled as a student in a course titled “The History of 19th- & 20th-Century Typography & Printing” that John Kristensen and Katherine M. Ruffin taught at the Rare Book School, University of Virginia, from July 10 to 14, 2023.

chapbook. In light of this printerly conception of chapbook, Robert Bringhurst advises printers to leave adequate space at the beginning and end of signature pages of chapbooks (Bringhurst 2004, 72).

These codicological attributes that form the basis of a printerly definition of chapbooks are frequently neglected in common parlance. Urban Dictionary, a crowdsourced dictionary of American slang, offers two definitions of chapbooks. A contributor named Una Malachica described chapbook as “a small, often self-published, usually inexpensive, book; a collection of such items as poetry, family recipes, political thoughts” (Malachica 2008). Four years later, another contributor, Polaris Jewlee, posted the following definition: “A chapbook is exactly like a zine or alternative magazine for someone who is too cheap to afford anything but a bunch of papers stapled together” (Jewlee 2008).

Although Mithila did not witness any signs of the zine subculture in the late nineteenth century, Mandal—like most aspiring writers and poets of his generation—was interested in alternate media that were affordable and readily accessible. After the publishing boom in the 1860s and 1870s in north and east India, the printing of chapbooks was relatively inexpensive, especially when they consisted of fewer gatherings.⁷ Moreover, chapbooks could be published through a personal arrangement with local printers and without much interference from editors, proofreaders, reviewers, and critics. Consequently, the chapbook emerged as a medium of self-expression and knowledge-production that marginalized communities—due to its low-cost publishing, fast-paced distribution, speedy sale and high turnover, alongside the paucity of editorial intervention and institutional bottleneck—could print to their advantage. For authors of dominant-caste backgrounds, too, this mode of textual production provided favorable opportunities to test the waters of emergent readership, particularly when they sought to proffer literary innovation, social critique, and religious reform that could unsettle the traditionally minded, conservative elites patronized by the Darbhanga Durbar.

By the end of the nineteenth century, chapbooks emerged as a major vehicle for mobilizing popular vernacular readership. Printing of Maithili chapbooks was mostly undertaken in the traditional strongholds of Maithil communities in Bihar, Bengal, Assam, United Provinces, and Rajasthan.⁸ As attractive as the printing of chapbooks was to the emerging printers in Maithil-dominant areas, the commercial infrastructure of the printing industry was not secure yet. The attrition rate among the newly established printing presses was still quite high. Among such short-lived Maithili printing presses in Bhagalpur was

⁷ On the publishing booms of the 1860s and 1870s, see Orsini (2009, 1–48). For an overview of the history of printing presses prior to 1857 and the commercialization of the printing industry in the nineteenth century, see Stark (2007, 29–83).

⁸ For exploring the history of Maithili outside of Bihar, particularly in Rajasthan and Assam, see Jha (2018, 88–89, 124); Chaudhary (2010, 98–116, 170, 267); Singh (1956, 91–96, 122–32); Mishra (1950, 50, 100, 160, 176–78, 360, 372).

the Krishna Press. *Mithila Natak* seems to have been its signal publication. So confident was the press about the success of *Mithila Natak*—an octavo codex comprising sixteen pages (ii + 12 + ii)—that it published 1,000 copies of this play on February 2, 1901. That it noted its publication of the “first edition” on the title page suggests that they were open to the possibility of publishing subsequent editions or reprints in the future.

The Chapbook of a Cowherd Playwright

Mithila Natak seems to be the only extant work of Mandal. Since we do not find any references to his literary works prior to *Mithila Natak*, it is possible that this was his debut work. Whatever little is known about this debutant playwright is based on a brief postscript that appears at the end of his play. He refers to his postscript as *bhumikā*, which is usually translated as “preface” or “foreword” in English and which is conventionally printed at the beginning of codices. Although prefaces belong to the front matter of a book, authors usually compose their prefaces only after they have completed their original works. From the vantage point of composition, then, prefaces are in effect postscripts—or possibly a weft of afterthoughts—aimed at drawing the attention of prospective readers to the recently completed work.

The standard format of chapbook is such that its last page functions as the back cover of its text block. By printing his postscript on the last page of the chapbook, Mandal strategically cast his postscript as the back-cover advertisement for potential readers and buyers. A couplet (*dohā*) featured in his postscript reveals his personal background.⁹

jāt gvālā majhrauṭ hū / basau maī murho grām //
*tāke yah viracit kiya / adham brjibihārī nām //*¹⁰

I'm from a cowherding caste of Majhraut.
I've settled down in a village called Murho.
That is where I composed this play.
This lowly playwright is named Brijbihari.

In his couplet, Mandal identifies himself as a member of the *gvālā* (cowherd) caste and *majhrauṭ* subcaste. *Gvālās* were viewed as mixed-caste *ahīra* in most regions of colonial Bihar in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. *Ahīra* is a Prakritization of the Sanskrit word *abhīra*, or its cognate *ābhīra*, both of which were used in premodern sources to describe cowherds, shepherds, and similar pastoral communities (for instance, in *Mahābhārata*, *Rāmayaṇa*, *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, and *Manusmṛti*). Their caste status remains

⁹ *Dohā* is a rhyming couplet comprising of four feet (half-lines) such that the first and third feet have thirteen syllables each whereas the second and fourth feet have eleven syllables each.

¹⁰ I have transliterated the Maithili quotations according to the Library of Congress's Hindi transliteration scheme with one exception. When the final vowel /a/ is nasalized, I have used a caron (ˆ)—instead of *m*—to highlight its nasalization. I have used a caron for *candrabindu* and *candra* as well. My transliteration conveys the preferred reading of the text, not the orthography of the printed material. All quotations from original text have been lightly edited to enhance their readability and comprehension.

ambiguous in most ancient, medieval, and early modern sources: ranging from the elite class of warriors and wrestlers (*kṣatriyas*) to the underclass of manual laborers (*śūdras*) and untouchables (Michelutti 2002, 80–102; Alter 1992, 45–46; Rao 1987, 123–32; Mandelbaum 1970, 442–45). In some sources, they are recognized as offsprings of mixed marriages, mostly between the priestly caste of Brahmins and the scribal caste of Ambasthas (*Manusmṛti* 10.15).¹¹ In other sources, they are cast as independent tribal groups, foreigners (*mleccha*), and freebooting gypsies (Mehendale 1993–2007, 1:624–25; Sircar 1966, 2; Dikshitar 1951–1955, 1:164–65). In colonial Bihar, *gvālās* were divided into numerous subcastes: *dhadhhor*, *ghanroār*, *gauryiā*, *kanaujiyā*, *kiṣnauṭ*, *majhrauṭ*, *sadgop*, to name but a few (Russell and Lal 1916, 18–37; Risley 1892, 2: appendix 1, 47–53; Sherring 1872, 332–38). These subcastes—despite their cumulative population—were treated as a “lower-caste” community of pastoralists and cultivators in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Several subcastes are known to develop origin mythologies and community histories in order to resist the inequities perpetuated by dominant castes, to stake claim for a higher status within the broader caste hierarchy, and to inspire dignity and honor for their community members.¹² Mandal makes no efforts to claim a higher caste status; on the contrary, he describes himself as an *adhama*. The word *adhama* is of Sanskrit origin. It is a superlative adjective denoting the lowest, vilest, or meanest of all sentient beings. That the playwright casts himself as an *adhama* is a painful—albeit powerful—reminder of how writers from marginalized caste backgrounds were expected to present themselves to the public at large.

Poets and writers in classical literature often belittle themselves while praising their gods and patrons. For upper-caste writers, such a gesture is a mark of modesty and humility. This literary convention, however, loses its symbolic power when it is practiced by someone who would anyway be treated as a mean or vile person by dominant castes. More so, when there is no ostensible, blameless god or patron to whom the playwright may dedicate his work. Mandal's couplet in the postscript of the back cover offers a glimpse of his critical approach to literary composition: an approach that is motivated by a desire to engage creatively with popular literary and performative traditions, and that offers an unapologetic portrayal of the inhuman inequities prevalent in his community. This ethics of literary composition is more fully pursued in the play itself.

11 The Ambastha caste (*ambastha* in Sanskrit) was also viewed as a mixed caste that was formed when a Brahmin man married a Vaishya woman (*Manusmṛti* 10.8, 13.15; *Yājñavalkya Smṛti* 1.91).

12 On the rewriting of their caste mythologies and their activism for upward caste mobility, see Jaffrelot (2003, 187–213); Michelutti (2002, 103–126); and Rao (1987, 123–203).

The First Act of *Mithila Natak*

Mithila Natak is a play in three acts (*ank*). In the opening scene of the first act, a king named Hukum Babu is accompanied by his secretary Kafir Lal in a room lit by an English lamp (*vilāyatī lamp*). It is 10:00 p.m. in the night. The omniscient narrator informs the readers that Lal is somewhat of a “loose” character (*adhalā*). To entertain his master, Lal begins singing the glories of *naṭin* performers. The terms *naṭin* (feminine) and *naṭa* (masculine) denote members of an underprivileged caste of performers, jugglers, and entertainers in Bihar. No sooner had Lal broached the issue of *naṭin* performers that a *naṭa* named Bol Miyan and a *naṭin* called Rambha arrive at their residence. Miyan informs the king that he has brought an exceptionally beautiful and talented artist from Lucknow.

Swayed by Lal’s “loose” talk and Miyan’s praise of Rambha, the king invites her to perform a song for him. Miyan prods her to perform a song that will gladden and cheer up the king. Rambha seems eager to perform in front of the king, “Yes, of course, you have spoken well. I’ll sing such a song” (Maṇḍal 1901, 1) However, the songs she chooses to perform that evening were not all cheerful or jolly (Maṇḍal 1901, 2–3). Her first song is a song of despair and longing (*viraha*).

piyā gelū pardes / ajahū nahī āye-re //
suti uṭhi sej socane lāge / vah dukh mohi hṛiday se na jāy //
piyā gelū pardes / hṛday mor phāṭere //
*mē abalā kachu bhedau na jānū / nā kachu meto sunan pāū //*¹³
nā vah likhe pāntī / nahī vah āyere //
chan chan mohi kalap sam bīte / ab vah bāt bāt nahī jīte //
tāpai madan satāve / suman sar mārere //

My lover has gone abroad.
 He didn’t return even today.
 Waking up on my bed, I think of him.
 That pang of separation doesn’t spare my heart.
 My lover has gone abroad.
 My heart is falling apart.
 I’m naive, I know no secrets.
 I have received no news of him.
 He doesn’t write letters to me.
 Nor does he come back to me.
 Each passing moment feels like an aeon.
 All our talk of living together, it won’t happen anymore.
 Madan, the God of love, sears and tortures me.
 His lustful arrows are killing me.

¹³ Please note that the final long vowels of both half-lines—namely, the /ū/ of *jānū* and the /ū/ of *pāū*—are nasalized. I have used caron (˘) for nasalization in this article. The word processor and unicode does not allow a combination of caron (˘) and macron (ˉ). Hence, my transliteration displays only the diacritic for long vowels (macron) and not the one for nasalization (caron).

After this intense emotional outpouring of heartbreak, she sings the signature verse in which Mandal's poetic persona advises Rambha to repose her faith in Lord Ram and to cultivate patience (*dhairaj*) in life.

śrī rām ke caraṇ navāy / kahat brj bihārī yah gāye //
dhairaj dharu jiv māhi / piyā tor āye-re //

“Bow down to Ram's feet,”
Brij Bihari sings and says,
“Be patient with sentient beings,
your lover will come back.”

This signature verse segues into another song that celebrates the glory of Ram and that is intended to stir devotional sentiments among its audiences.

rām pratāp ganpati pratham pūjya hoī / khaṁbh phārī āpu
dhāye prahlād ko bacāī //
rām pratāp hanumant sindhu pār jāī / laṅkā kī nās kīnhā jānkī
sudhi lāī //
rām pratāp sabri tare aur mīrā bāī / ulṭā japat bālmiki mukta
pad pāī //
jaise vibhiṣaṇ rājya pāyo rām kī sevakāī / taise brj bihārī cahat
rām kī rajāī //

Such is Ram's glory that Ganesha is worshiped first of all.
Such is Ram's glory that he—rending asunder the funeral
pyre—rushed to rescue Prahlad.
Such is Ram's glory that Hanuman could cross the ocean,
destroy Lanka and bring news of Sita.
Such is Ram's glory that Sabri and Mirabai were liberated.
Such is Ram's glory that Valmiki—despite chanting in reverse
sequence—was set free.
In the same way as Vibhishan was rewarded with his kingdom,
Brij Bihari seeks Ram's blessings.

Rambha's choice of songs sharply contrasts the ones that her male patrons—Hukum Babu, Kafir Lal, and Bol Miyan—desired to listen to. Taking up the voice of a powerless female protagonist (*ablā*) in her first song, she recounts the suffering and pain experienced by women who are abandoned by their male lovers or husbands. Several female protagonists in the play, including the queen and one of her chief attendants (*sakhī*), are abused and cast away by their unfaithful consorts or lovers.¹⁴ Her first song exposes the ethical and moral failings of male, patriarchal, and bourgeois figures in Mithila. In her second song, she deploys devotional sentiments and religious mythologies not only to seek hope and optimism amid despair and disillusionment but also to ward off the lecherous desires of her predominantly male audiences.

14 For comparable cases in contemporary Maithili literature, see Dev Nath Pathak's essay “A Ghumakkar in Modern Mithila” in this special issue.

While Rambha is performing her songs, a crowd of local residents gather outside the king's chamber. The queen Nandrani is also present in the crowd. She overhears the crowd gossiping about the prurient behavior of the king. Unaware of the gossip spreading outside, the king asks his secretary to make arrangements for Rambha's overnight stay at his place. But Rambha declines his invitation as she has already committed to another performance in Lucknow the next morning. The king then orders Kafir Lal to accompany her to Lucknow and bring her back after her performance is over. He also gifts her an expensive sari that he had originally purchased for his queen in Varanasi. Rambha wears the sari and everyone on the stage is smitten by her beauty.

The Second Act of *Mithila Natak*

The queen Nandrani takes the center stage in the second act of the play. She is so utterly upset by the king's behavior that she decides to confront and chastise him. Instead of paying heed to his wife's reprimand, the king turns violent toward her and beats her mercilessly. Hurt by the king's abusive behavior, the queen breaks into tears and isolates herself in her quarters. Two of her female attendants, Kusumvati and Alakhi, appear on the stage to share anecdotal reports about what is unfolding behind the scenes. Kusumvati confides in Alakhi that the queen—after prohibiting the king's entry to her chamber—invited Kusumvati to stay with her. Consequently, Kusumvati witnesses how restless the queen was in the absence of the king. The queen would frequently break into fits of rage and despondency and would lay undressed in her bed. Alakhi hears similar reports about the king, who was also unable to sleep without his queen. He was desperately craving the queen's nightly company.

The king requests his priest Khudur Mishra to perform a special ritual prayer (*pūjā*) to Lord Shiva so that the latter may reunite the king with his queen. Although Mishra agrees to performing the prayer, he tells the king that Kusumvati, the queen's attendant, was more likely to change the queen's mind than any religious ritual. The king nevertheless insists on the prayer, and Mishra follows his command. When the religious rituals are completed, Mishra approaches the king for alms. The king complains that Mishra's prayer rituals had failed to reunite him with the queen. All that the king received from his queen was an angry side-glance. Mishra argues that even though her side-glance was the less-than-desired outcome of his religious performance, it was nevertheless brought upon by his prayer rituals; hence he was entitled to the alms.

Two days later, the king and his priest manage to arrange a meeting with the queen, and their long conversation pacifies the queen. She agrees to reunite with the king. The king resumes sleeping in the queen's chamber. In the last sentence of the second act, the omniscient narrator reports, "The queen slept with the king, who—after stretching his groins—began wondering again" (Maṇḍal 1901, 7). As may be apparent from his concluding remark, Maṇḍal's

style is often curt, earthy and direct. The expression “stretching one’s groins” (*kāch phaulaik*) is a rude slang that most upper-caste, Sanskritized Maithili writers in colonial Bihar would be wary of using in their literary oeuvres.

Although it is not uncommon that some Maithils display their intense rage and desperation by discarding various pieces of their personal clothing (*nūā phujalnā*), it is difficult to imagine that any mainstream Maithil playwrights in colonial Bihar would make use of this learned cultural behavior to create dramatic scenes in their plays. In contrast, Mandal—unencumbered by middle-class ethos of his times—lets both the king and the queen undress themselves for varied reasons. The queen has been betrayed, abused, and violated by her husband; which is why she lapses into fits of rage and despondency. Depressed and alone in her room, she sees no point in dressing up. The king is a lecher and abuser; he is restless and desperate because he is unable to satiate his sexual urges. He does away with his clothes because he craves sexual intercourse. Mandal would have known that none of thespians in colonial Bihar would agree to expose themselves on stage. Even when theater performers are capable of acting out these scenes without needing to expose their bodies, it is apparent from these scenes that Mandal’s creative imagination was more focused on the social critique of Maithil communities than on the technicalities of dramaturgy.

The Third Act of *Mithila Natak*

In the third and final act of the play, Rambha—along with Kafir Lal and Bol Miyan—are back in town. The king invites Rambha and Miyan to perform again at his place. Miyan begins performing a folktale (*khīsā*). The king is not amused and he asks Miyan to spice up his performance with some dance routines by Rambha. Many local residents are gathered outside his chamber to watch Rambha’s dance. When Rambha’s performance is over, everyone leaves the stage. Then the queen’s attendants, Kusumvati and Alakhi, enter the stage.

Kusumvati informs Alakhi that a scary, bearded singer had shown up at the queen’s quarters. He performed three songs, which affected the queen in a bad way. The first song belonged to a genre of folksongs called *baṭa gamanī* (or *baṭa gāminī*). *Baṭa* refers to a path, street, or highway. *Gamanī* (or *gāminī*) can mean a passer-by or a traveler, among other things. The collocation *baṭa gamanī*, however, denotes a collection of folksongs that Hindu women perform during some auspicious ritual processions in Mithila. For instance, the women in a bride’s family are required to build an earthen stove for wedding rituals. When they lead a procession to a nearby body of water (lake,

river, pond) to collect some mud for building the stove, they sing *baṭa gaminī* songs on their way. Their songs celebrate fertility symbols, erotic desire, sexual union, conjugal love, and filial bonding.¹⁵

Contrary to the established custom of upper-caste, female performances, Maṇḍal makes a man, who is wearing his beard like a sadhu and whose caste status is ambiguous, perform the *baṭa gaminī* song in his play. In his song, the bearded singer captures the excitement that surrounds a bride when she witnesses the arrival of her groom. One of his verses describes Parvatī's emotions on the eve of her wedding to Shiva, "I've served Shiva's feet for so long; O dear, all that I ever craved for was just this moment!"¹⁶ Such passionate vignettes in the second song would have intensified the queen's awareness of what she was lacking in her conjugal relationship and how her husband had betrayed her. Whereas *baṭa gaminī* is performed during the ritual procession of upper-caste women to delight and gratify its audiences, the playwright deploys it to convey the emotions of heartbreak, hopelessness, and despair that the lead female protagonist experiences in her life.

The queen's sentiments are explored further in the second song. Even though the name and background of the bearded singer is never revealed in the play, his choice of songs show that he was somehow aware of the crisis brewing in the royal household. The sentiments expressed in his second song, like his first song, resonate deeply with the queen's experiences. The second song is in effect a dramatic monologue between the poetic persona—most likely a female heroine like the queen Nandrani—and a silent listener who would be a protagonist like the adulterous king Hukum Babu. The poetic persona is frustrated by her unfaithful partner, who is smitten by the sight of Rambha. Comparing herself to a lotus (*ambhā*) growing in a mucky swamp, the poetic persona notes that she can no longer endure the swamp's company. Above all, she is so angry with Rambha that she cannot stand her anymore, "How can I tell which husband will go down next?"¹⁷

The third song that the bearded man performs is titled *gīta sama kantā*. *Kantā* in Maithili can function as both adjective and noun. As an adjective, it can mean beautiful, pleasing, or adorable. As a noun, it refers to a beloved or a husband. Since the *gīta sama kantā* is a song intended for one's lover or spouse, this genre functions like a dramatic monologue insofar as the silent listener is the beloved. However, the poetic persona's monologue in the *gīta sama kantā*—unlike dramatic monologues—can be interrupted by another poetic voice. This second poetic voice may belong to the poet, or to another poetic persona, but never to the silent listener. The goal of the second poetic

15 For a more detailed exposition on the diverse themes of *baṭa gaminī*, see Singh (2012, 261–92). Singh has included twenty-five *baṭa gaminī* songs in his chapter.

16 *et dīn śīṭpad sebal sajanī-ge keval etvahi bāt* (Maṇḍal 1901, 8).

17 *kāse kabab kaun pati āy* (Maṇḍal 1901, 9).

voice is to advise and counsel the affected poetic persona. In addition, it can perform the signature verse at the end of the song. In his *gīta sama kantā*, the bearded singer narrates the agony and helplessness of a poetic persona who—despite trying hard to contact her lover abroad—fails to connect with him. In the signature verse of the song, the poetic voice advises the despairing protagonist to be patient and, against all odds, to hope for the best.

*Brj bihārī man karu abhilās /
kant elā mor pūral ās //*

O Brij Bihari, in your heart,
pray for the best,
“On my lover’s return,
my dream will come true.”

These three songs cause much emotional turmoil in the queen’s heart. At the end of Alakhi’s conversation with Kusumvati, the queen is heard performing a *caumāsā* song backstage. *Caumāsā* (literally “four seasons”) is a poetic genre that deploys the theme of four seasons to convey sentiments of love, longing, and despair. When the queen reaches the end of her song, she relates to Kusumvati that the king has stopped visiting her since Rambha’s return. She seeks Kusumvati’s advice on what to do next. Kusumvati does not know how to advise the queen as her own condition is even worse than that of the queen. Her husband left her after having two children with her. Had Kusumvati known a way to safeguard her marriage, she would have advised the queen too. But, regrettably, she does not know how to resolve these personal issues in life.

As a last resort, the queen decides to write a letter to the king. Her letter is brief and to the point. When the king reads the letter, he not only tears it to pieces but also annuls his marriage to the queen. When the queen receives the news, she is devastated. She suffers a stroke and passes away. In the meantime, the king sends his secretary to fetch Rambha from Lucknow. However, before his secretary can board the train, the king receives a telegram about Rambha’s unexpected death from a heat stroke. The king is now filled with remorse and grief. He laments the death of his wife and passes his days in sorrow and regret. Six months later, he too meets his end.

The Antithetical Stances of *Mithila Natak*

On the back cover of the chapbook, Mandal writes, “I have prepared this book with much effort. It doesn’t matter what kind of miseries and anxieties one is suffering from in their lives. When they read this book, their hearts will rejoice and their bellies would burst with laughter.”¹⁸ Advertisements are hyperbolic by design. The play is certainly not devoid of humorous, funny, even playful, moments. Adept thespians can further enhance the play’s humorous tenor

¹⁸ *Yab pustak hamne babut parīśram se taiyār kiya hai. Manuṣya kaisābu vipatti se pīrit bokaṛ cintit ho, to is pustak ke padhne se citt ānand ho jātā hai. Vo hanste hanste peṭ phattā hai* (Maṇḍal 1901, back cover).

through their skilled performances. Sexual innuendos, when performed in a slapstick manner, would no doubt provoke laughter among the audiences. Gossip about the lewd behavior of some key characters can also cause many to smirk and giggle. But the dominant readerly experience of the play is not that of unrestrained laughter and rejoicing.¹⁹ This play does not read like the folktales of a legendary character named Gonu Jha (Jhā 1909) or the modern fictional character of Khattar Kaka that Harimohan Jha (1908–1984) created for his humorous and satirical stories in *Khattar Kakāk Taraṅg* (1955). Rather, the playwright punctuates the play with several songs that focus on themes of unrequited love, longing, heartbreak, and despair, alongside conversations about betrayal and infidelity, which overshadow—and at times even subvert—the humorous and jubilant moments in the play. The ending of the play is ultimately very violent and tragic.

Like his protagonist Rambha, who agrees to sing cheerful songs but eventually performs songs of despair and devotion, Mandal promises a humorous play but delivers a tragic drama. This antithetical stance serves as an effective tool to critique the religious and social order of Maithili literature. Consider, for instance, his cast of characters, which is representative of a wide segment of Maithil society but which betrays the boundaries of religion, caste, and class. The royal consorts—Hukum Babu and Nandrani—are upper-caste Hindus, most likely of the ruling class (*kṣatriyas* or *rājapūts*), but their specific caste designations are not revealed in the play. The omniscient narrator identifies Bol Miyan as *miyān*, meaning “Muslim,” and a *bhāṭ*. *Bhāṭs* are one of the marginalized castes of colonial Bihar, who specialize in performative and acrobatic arts. Although Kafir Lal’s religious background is not revealed in the play, both his name Kafir (an Arabic word meaning “unbeliever,” “infidel,” “pagan,” “idolater”) and his association with Bol Miyan suggest his ties with underprivileged castes and Muslim communities. The royal priest Khudur Mishra is a Brahmin. He is the only Brahmin in the play, and his religious rituals—by his own confession—are barely effective. The religious and caste backgrounds of Kusumvati and Alakhi are unknown; their profession suggests they are from marginalized-caste backgrounds. When the upper-caste queen is distraught, she turns to a “lower-caste” attendant for comfort and advice. When a king is distraught, he turns to a Muslim for support and advice. The plot of the play moves forward because of Bol Miyan, a Muslim male, and Rambha, a female performer, whose religion or caste is never revealed but whose status—as a prostitute—is quite low in both Hindu and Muslim societies. Despite their centrality in the play, the chapbook begins with an icon of Lord Ganesha and ends with a moral axiom that is widely held by patriarchs of all caste and class backgrounds. In the last line of the play, the

¹⁹ For a comparable example of a modern play that is tailored to readerly experiences more than dramaturgy, see Christopher L. Diamond’s essay, “The ‘Indescribable Country’: Locating Mithila Between Bengal and the Hindi Heartland in Raghunandana Das’s *Mithilānāṭaka*” in this special issue.

omniscient narrator addresses the readers (*pāṭhak gaṇ*) directly and reveals the moral of his story: “O readers, see what happens to a person who falls in love with a prostitute; reflect on this issue.”²⁰

***Mithila Natak* as a Chapbook**

The gap between the playwright's stated goal and the play's tragic plot is not the only lacuna in the play. Some of the dialogs can be reorganized to avoid repetition of key details and to sustain a sense of suspense in the unfolding of the plot. For instance, in the second act, prior to narrating how the king contrived to reunite with the queen, the playwright makes one of the attendants gossip about how the king made out with the queen after the reunion (Maṇḍal 1901, 5–6). Additionally, the omniscient narrator appropriates the role of main protagonists at several occasions in the play (for example, note the opening paragraphs of the second act; Maṇḍal 1901, 4). Some of the information that the narrator passes on to the audiences could be turned into compelling dialogs and plot devices. The playwright also neglects to offer stage directions and to delineate the settings of various scenes. The play abounds in grammatical liberties, orthographic irregularities, and callous punctuations. Had Mandal or Krishna Press consulted a seasoned editor or proofreader, some of these issues would not have cropped up in his chapbook. But printers in colonial Mithila rarely, if ever, involved editors or proofreaders while printing chapbooks.

Chapbook was the ideal codicological format for Mandal's play. His play is short and fast-paced. It has ample twists and turns, gossip and betrayal, melodrama and scheming, which sustain the interest of the readers until the end. His literary style is so direct and saucy that the play would be accessible to all classes of Maithili readership. Besides, the play has several songs, which are composed in traditional genres (*baṭ gamanī*, *gīta sama kantā*, *khemṭā*, *caumāsā*) and which evoke a diversity of emotions—from love to longing to despair. Such songs are always popular in Mithila. Many readers would buy Mandal's chapbook just for his songs. Given that these songs can be used on a variety of cultural occasions, a printed copy of such songs would be a useful commodity for most households.

Printers and writers are known to pay considerable attention to the piecemeal nature of literary consumption. The knowledge about the diverse ways in which books are read, handled, repurposed, and recycled informs the creative imagination and craft of both writers and printers. All songs included in the chapbook of *Mithila Natak* are properly titled so as to facilitate readers' discovery of these songs. The advertisement on the back cover is composed in a predominantly Hindi register. The address of the place from where one could purchase a copy of this chapbook is printed in English. The name of the

20 *Pāṭhak gaṇa, dekhiye, vaisyā se prīt karne par kaisī dasā hotī hai, uskā khyāl kijiye* (Maṇḍal 1901, 12).

printer, the date of printing, the total number of printed copies and the edition of the book are all mentioned in English. The strategic use of songs, titles, and multiple languages in the chapbook shows that both Mandal and Krishna Press were operating under the belief that there was a substantial market for a chapbook like *Mithila Natak* and that the play would attract potential readers and buyers from a wide range of backgrounds. The Krishna Press therefore decided to print 1,000 copies of the play.

Mandal could have approached a mainstream literary journal or a more established publisher to print his play. After all, he had the wherewithal to connect with prominent publishers and printers in north and east India. He was a landlord (*zamīndār*) in an up-and-coming village called Murho in the Madhepura region of colonial Bihar (Maṇḍal 1901, 13). He was more affluent and learned than most of his fellow caste members. Regardless, he chose to publish with the Krishna Press, which had yet to make its foray into Maithili publishing. Although he does not explain his decision, one can still fathom some of the key factors that would have influenced his decision.

Around the time he was writing *Mithila Natak*, several printers and presses specialized in printing Maithili books. Most notable among them are: Śrīkānt Vihārī Miśra and Union Printers (Darbhanga); Śrī Mithilā Press (Bhagalpur); Bhārat Jīvan Press (Benaras); Śrī Kṛṣṇadhan Maujumdār and Rāj Darbhanga Yantrālay (Darbhanga); and Prābhākārī Press (Banaras). Prior to 1901, however, there were no literary journals devoted exclusively to Maithili literature. The first Maithil literary journals *Mithila Moda* and *Mithila Mibir* were founded in 1906 and 1908 respectively. But several academic and research institutions in Hindi and Bengali—most notably, Baṅgīyā Sāhitya Pariṣad (founded in 1893) and Nāgarī Pracāriṇī Sabhā (founded in 1893)—were open to Maithili contributions in their journals.

Almost all established Maithili printers, presses, and publishers were run by upper-caste interest groups, and many were funded by courtly elites associated with the Darbhanga Durbar. These interest groups were deeply steeped in middle-class ethos and Sanskritic learning. Consequently, most of the early printed books grapple with premodern religious, cultural, and philosophical traditions: for example, *Sudāmā-carita* of Harinandan Dās (1840–); *Ahalyā-carita Nāṭak*, *Śrī Lakṣmīśvar-vilās* (1888) and *Mithilābhāṣā Rāmāyaṇa* (1907) by Candā Jhā (1830–1907); *Sundar-saṃyog* (1892), *Narmadā-sāgar Sattaka* (1906) and *Maithilī Sattaka* (1906) by Jīvan Śarmā *alias* Jīvan Jhā (1848–1912); and *Kṛṣṇa-janma* (1901) by Bholana; among others. It is reasonably apparent from these early printed works that some of the key stakeholders in Maithili literary circles were unlikely to approve of Mandal's literary style and social critique, particularly his subversive treatment of traditional genres and his exposition of the sexual and moral corruption of upper-caste patriarchs. Had Mandal sought to publish with them, their critical and editorial intervention would have induced Mandal to conform to

the literary style, aesthetic taste, and social worldview that were then prevalent among upper-caste writers and poets. That Mandal chose to publish with the Krishna Press, which had no history of publishing in Maithili, shows that the playwright was willing to take his chances rather than give in to the hegemony of Maithili publishing.

Conclusion

Historians of Maithili literature are unanimous in identifying Jīvan Jhā (1848–1912) as the founding father of modern Maithili drama (Chaudhary 2010, 246; Mishra 1950, 115–16). His first play *Sundar-saṃyog* was published by the Bhārat Jīvan Press in 1892 in Banaras.²¹ No other Maithili writer is known to have published a play prior to Mandal. There were efforts made to revive the early modern tradition of *Kīrtaniyā* dramas in colonial Mithila, most notably by Candā Jhā (1830–1907) in *Abilyā-carita Nāṭak* (Chaudhary 2010, 246). With the exception of Candā Jhā's work, these revivalist attempts materialized several years after Mandal's publication of *Mithila Natak*. Candā Jhā was a traditionalist committed to recasting classical Sanskrit drama (*nāṭya*) and poetry (*kāvya*) in the Maithili language. Revivalist writers like Candā Jhā remained disinterested in modernist experiments even when they proposed reforms and changes in classical genres. In contrast to the likes of Candā Jhā and Jīvan Jhā, Mandal was keen to challenge any and all established literary conventions and traditions. He tackles head-on issues relating to domestic abuse, lecherous conduct, sexual frustration, caste identity, and religious morality, which were still unnerving to most Maithili writers and poets hailing from upper-caste and middle-class backgrounds. *Mithila Natak* is the first play of this kind, and Mandal is in effect a pioneer in the history of modern Maithili drama.

Pioneers, like Mandal, who hailed from marginalized communities and who were sufficiently endowed to participate in the early print culture, have failed to survive in the historiography of Maithili literature. This is partly due to the politics and economics of archival collections in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which were directed at identifying rare and valuable manuscripts and books. Since ephemerae, like Mandal's chapbooks, were cheaply printed and distributed, they were often viewed as lowbrow commodities for immediate consumption. Such book objects were unlikely to yield much profit for rare book collectors and traders. Their chances of survival in private collections in colonial Mithila were abysmally low for a variety of reasons: harsh weather, annual floods, frequent famines, fluctuating family fortunes, cultural apathy, to name but a few. In addition to the paucity of printed ephemerae in surviving archives and collections, Maithili literary

²¹ Both Jayakanta Mishra and Radhakrishna Chaudhary report that *Sundar Saṃyoga* was published in 1904 (Chaudhary 2010, 246; Mishra 1950, 116). Mishra's dating is based on the third edition of this book. Chaudhary does not record the source of his information. The first edition of the book was published in 1892 and a copy of this chapbook (14158.a.8) is housed in the British Library, London (Blumhardt 1913, 130).

historians have remained disinterested in appraising the relevance of ephemeral printed objects for documenting the evolution of literary cultures and communities.

The significance of ephemeral objects is conspicuous when one probes the ethics of literary historiography. Our critical methods and archival collections are premediated to exclude such communities that have historically lacked the resources to produce durable evidence of their cultural activities. If the “historical past” is the past of all communities, then the exploration of such a past requires evaluating how different communities articulate, preserve, and lose sight of their unique experiences and cultural contributions. Such an inquiry is crucial for elucidating how a historian ought to practice their craft. Ultimately, the study of chapbooks like the *Mithila Natak* of Brij Bihari Lal Mandal not only illuminates the contributions of marginalized communities in colonial Mithila but also elucidates the relevance of ephemeral objects for an ethical narration of our cultural past.

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