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Translational Dynamics in Urban Space: Exploring Battala's Multilingual Cultural Encounter

ABSTRACT

"Battala" is a Bengali metonym for commercial print culture which gained popularity during the Bengal Renaissance. This print culture became a translational palimpsest, disseminating literary genres and leading to the creation of a site where high and low culture converged. Our paper examines the complex relationship between 19th-century colonial Calcutta and the languages in this fast-developing city. The popular print culture blurred distinctions between cultural forms, transcending geographical and literary boundaries of the colonial cosmopolis.

This paper contributes to the discourse on translating otherness in the city by demonstrating how Battala intricately reflected relationships between language, memory, and urban space within the historical and cultural context of colonial Calcutta. This is done through an analysis of selected works, including *Koutuk Shatak* by Harishchandra Mitra, *Rar Bhar Mithya Katha Tin Loye Kolikata* by Pyarimohan Sen, and *Ki Mojar Koler Gari* by Munsi Azimuddin. Other works that highlight the blurring of cultural spaces include the translation of *The Arabian Nights* by Avinash Chandra Mitra (titled *Sachitra Ekadhik Sahasra Dibas)*. Additionally, translations of *Ameer Hamzar Puthi* by Abdun Nabi and Shah Muhammad Saghir's *Yūsuf Zuleikhā* show significant Urdu and Arabic-Persian influence.

By analyzing Battala's interactions with marketplaces, different communities, and intellectual salons, this study adds to the interdisciplinary discussion on translation and urban space. It examines the city's symbolic representations in popular literature, as well as its geographic location and social significance.

Keywords: transcultural urbanism, print culture, Battala literature, colonial modernity.

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INTRODUCTION: CALCUTTA AS A LIVING TRANSLATION SPACE

This article is divided into five sections. In the first part we discuss the city of Calcutta and its translation practices, while the second section focuses on the rise of Battala as a key publishing space. In the third part we examine how Battala evolved into a "third place," where different cultures converged. The subsequent section is an inquiry into how the diverse languages and cultures interacted through translation, and how Battala emerged as a prominent urban site for such cultural exchanges. The final part offers reflection on how recent scholarship has overlooked the transformation of Battala into an urban space and an alternative site, distinct from the highbrow culture of Calcutta.

Calcutta, a city rich in history and culture, has long served as a hub for literary and linguistic exchanges. Its name is the anglicized version of "Kolkata," with multiple theories regarding its origin. Some scholars trace it to the Kali temple at Kalighat, while others suggest that it evolved from the name "Calicut," which was familiar to European traders (Sengupta 148). Within this vibrant metropolis, translation acts not only as a bridge between languages, but also as a vital mechanism for cultural mediation. Calcutta's mix of cultures fosters a dynamic environment where different narratives and experiences intersect and are exchanged across boundaries. This fluidity promoted the emergence of hybrid cultural forms that reflect the complexities of identity in colonial contexts. The significance of translation as a tool for cultural mediation is particularly evident in the works of Bengali writers who engaged with foreign literary traditions, for instance, the translation of *The Arabian Nights* by Avinash Chandra Mitra, titled *Sachitra Ekadhik Sahasra Dibas*. Moreover, translations of Western literary classics into Bengali not only introduced new genres and styles, but also encouraged local writers to experiment with their narratives. The role of translation in the literary evolution of Calcutta cannot be overstated; the city has been a crucible for literary innovation, where translation has played a pivotal role in shaping its literary trajectory (Simon 53). During the colonial period, translating literary works from Europe, Asia, and other regions into Bengali facilitated the introduction of new literary forms, which has had a profound influence on the language's literary traditions.

The colonial legacy has left an indelible mark on the linguistic landscape, where English emerged as a language of power and prestige, while Bengali and other vernacular languages were often marginalized. Christian missionaries played a significant role in the early translation initiatives in colonial India, particularly in Bengal. Their primary objective was to promote Western education and facilitate religious conversion.

Missionaries such as William Carey, Joshua Marshman, and William Ward—collectively known as the Serampore Trio—established schools and printing presses, notably the Serampore Mission Press, which became a hub for translating educational and religious texts into Indian languages (Gupta, "The Calcutta School-Book Society" 56). The Charter Act of 1813 allowed missionaries to enter India freely, leading to the establishment of several missionary-run schools and translation initiatives. They translated the Bible, textbooks, and European classics into Bengali, Sanskrit, and other Indian languages so as to reach a wider audience. Alexander Duff, a key figure in English education in Bengal, emphasized the importance of English-language instruction while also encouraging vernacular translations to facilitate learning.

The practice of translation became increasingly significant with the establishment of Fort William College in Calcutta in 1800. The institution played a crucial role in promoting translation by commissioning and publishing works in multiple Indian languages, including Arabic, Sanskrit, Bengali, Punjabi, and Hindustani (Raheja 506). This facilitated the development of dictionaries, grammars, and literary texts, contributing to the standardization and modernization of Indian linguistic traditions. Following this, the Calcutta School-Book Society (CSBS), established in 1817, played a crucial role in the production and dissemination of educational materials in colonial Bengal. Unlike many institutions of the time, it prioritized secular education, focusing on subjects like science, arithmetic, and language studies. A key aspect of its activities was translation as it sought to make Western knowledge accessible by converting English textbooks into Bengali and other Indian languages (Kumar 456). Collaborating with presses like the Serampore Mission Press, CSBS published bilingual editions of history, law, and science texts, standardizing curricula and expanding access to European knowledge.

Beyond the educational initiatives, societies promoting language and literature also emerged. One such group was *Banga Bhasanubadak Samaj* (Vernacular Literature Society), founded in 1851 by Bengali intellectuals in colonial Calcutta (Tah 86). However, it is interesting to note that a Bengali zamindar (feudal lord) from Uttarpara—Jaykrishna Mukhopadhyay—played a key role in establishing this society. By promoting translations of English works and funding vernacular publications, he made knowledge more accessible to the Bengali-speaking masses (N. Mukherjee 170).

Similar societies came to be established in Gujarat, Madras, and Bombay during this time. The *Gujarat Vidya Sabha*, or Gujarat Vernacular Society, was established in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, in 1848, by a British administrator named Alexander Kinloch Forbes, along with the Gujarati writer Dalpatram (Isaka 4867). *Maharashtra Granthottejak Sanstha* was

a similar institute: established in 1894, it recognized and awarded works in the Marathi language to encourage writers and publishers (Deshpande 78). This institution was founded by Mahadev Govind Ranade, Sir Ramakrishna Bhandarkar, Hari Narayan Apte, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, and twenty-five other visionaries of Maharashtrian society. Several other vernacular societies have significantly contributed to the literary sphere of India, promoting their languages and literature: for instance, the Madras School Book and Vernacular Literature Society undertook to translate a large number of prose works from English into Tamil during the colonial period (Venkateswaran 284).

All the books of the Vernacular Literature Society in Kolkata were published as part of a series called *Garhastya Bangla Pustak Sangraha* (Tah 88). The intended readership of this series was not limited to any particular age or class. Thirty six texts of varied tastes were carefully picked based on subject matter and published by the Society. Apart from biographies, science, parable, and historical romance, the Society's publications also featured translations of European classics and travel writings. One of the main promoters of this series was Madhusudan Mukhopadhyay, a prolific translator of the Calcutta Vernacular Literature Society. He translated Hans Christian Andersen's stories, Krylov's Fables and biographies of historical figures. Abhijit Gupta argues that the establishment of the Vernacular Literature Society in Kolkata aimed to promote publications of higher quality, contrasting them with the popular works and genres found in Battala, which were often criticized for their perceived "vulgarity" and "obscenity" ("Household Words" 1).

THE EMERGENCE AND POPULARITY OF BATTALA

The arrival of the printing press transformed colonial Calcutta and aided in its urbanization. During this time, missionary printing presses started translating texts into different languages, thus making literature accessible to a larger audience. Books, newspapers, and magazines became popular, and book markets began to emerge all over the city. One such well-known market was Battala, famous for selling affordable books that entertained the public. With Calcutta's growth as a major colonial city in India, books from Battala attracted a diverse audience, including many readers from rural areas who had recently moved to the city. It played a crucial role in meeting the cultural needs of this growing population. In *Cities in Translation*, Sherry Simon discusses how Battala helped to shape the literary scene in 19th-century Calcutta, using James Long's careful cataloging of Bengali publications, which highlighted Battala as an important center

for the production of vernacular literature (43). It also played an important role in translating and adapting Western literary traditions for Indian readers (50). While colonial accounts such as Long's recognize the importance of book markets like Battala, some of them often downplayed its significance compared to the production of what they considered "high literature."

The word "Battala" itself originates from the Bengali *bat* (banyan tree) and *tala* (space underneath), referring to either a shaded gathering place under a banyan tree or the entire neighborhood (Anwar). While the literal meaning relates to a physical space, its generic use was extended to represent the production of cheap, mass-printed literature and painting, including religious texts, novels, plays, calendars, and manuals—often catering to common audiences. As a result, Battala became synonymous with affordable, vernacular publications, sometimes viewed as vulgar or lowbrow by the elite. Tapti Roy argues that over time, the term came to define a neighborhood in North Calcutta which became a major hub for early Bengali printing and publishing. This transformation was largely influenced by Biswanath Deb, who is regarded as the founder of popular printing in the region. Although there are no clear records of how his first publication performed, his efforts laid the foundation for what later became known as Battala publishing (Roy 60).

With the arrival of Batttala print, a shift in both artistic production and public consumption in colonial Bengal can be observed. The transition from large religious or mystical prints to smaller Battala prints, including Kalighat paintings, bears testimony to this shift. Initially, large patas (scroll paintings) depicted mythological and religious themes in a performative setting, used by patuas (scroll painters) to narrate stories. However, as urban centers like Calcutta grew, demand for affordable, mass-produced religious imagery increased. Battala woodcuts, emerging in the 1840s, were block-printed and hand-colored, making them cheaper and more accessible than traditional Kalighat patas or patachitra, which were handcrafted and painted individually (Hirsch 24). While Kalighat paintings retained their artistic refinement, Battala prints embraced popular themes, catering to a broader audience with their bold, mass-produced designs. This shift marked the democratization of visual culture, allowing religious and popular imagery to reach a much wider section of society.

The decline of Battala woodcuts in the 1870s was primarily due to competition from new printing technologies such as lithography and chromolithography, which offered glossy, colorful images that appealed to urban consumers. These techniques democratized art by making high-quality, vibrant prints accessible to a broader audience, thereby shifting consumer preferences. Kamalika Mukherjee draws attention to Walter Benjamin's idea that, with mechanical reproduction, art loses its

"aura" or authenticity; however, she suggests that the glossy appeal of chromolithographs did create a new kind of allure. This change in the popular art market led to the gradual fading of traditional forms like Battala and Kalighat prints, which were unable to compete with the mass production and appeal of the new prints (K. Mukherjee 106).

Battala's peak popularity can be traced to the period of roughly thirty years from 1840 to 1870. During this time, many small and affordable printing presses emerged. Sukumar Sen described these presses as being "scattered like toadstools," suggesting that they were widespread but difficult to trace (58).The spatial site of this print phenomenon extended to Nimtala Ghat Street, Biddon Street, and Cornwallis Street. Sen notes that Battala's reach even included areas like Sobhabazar and Chitpur. An interesting aspect of the Battala book market was its decentralized distribution system. Unlike traditional bookshops, Battala books had the place of receipt written on the cover, often indicating a specific house or residence where the books could be obtained (Bhadra 222). While some records mention other locations, the primary distribution centers were personal homes or offices. Another striking feature was the prominent display of the word "Calcutta" on the covers of Battala books, which served a specific purpose. The large print of "Calcutta" on each cover reflected a desire to appeal to readers outside the city—those in villages, small towns, or semi-urban areas. These readers were eager to engage with the new civic paradigm and modernity that was emerging in Calcutta (Biswas 16). They sought a connection with the city's vibrant social and cultural life, unavailable in their rural or semi-urban environments. The prominence of Calcutta in these publications signaled the city's importance as a center of urbanization, modernity, and civic life, which Battala literature sought to share with a wider audience. This appeal was a key factor in the rise of Battala's influence and its connection to the evolving identity of the city. Battala carved out a distinct space in urban life—existing as the opposite of "highbrow" literature—while still playing a crucial role in popularizing texts that appealed to the masses (Ghosh 109). It produced a wide range of literature, including almanacs, satirical writings, and mythological tales. Another key aspect was the *dobhashi* literature—texts written in a blend of Bengali, Arabic, and Persian—that became popular in Battala in the mid-19th century (Bhadra 260). Additionally, there is a shift from educational to non-educational literature in the late 19th century, marked by the growing popularity of vernacular works based on the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, Islamic legends, and almanacs (Banerjee, *The Parlour* 168). Sumanta Banerjee argues that Battala literature can be seen as an extension of the urban folklore of the 19th century, capturing the spirit and narratives of everyday urban life (*Unish Sataker Kolkata o Saraswatir Itar Santan* 230).

The influence of urban social dynamics, caste tensions, and emerging translation practices on Battala's literary sphere was profound, shaping Bengali literary culture in the late 19th-century Calcutta. Institutions such as the press, the post office, and evolving readership practices, influenced by English, played a key role in structuring Battala's literary landscape (Bhadra 256). This environment facilitated an exploration of translation practices as publishers and authors sought to reinterpret Bengali literature for a broader readership.

BATTALA AS A "THIRD PLACE": A SITE OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION

Battala played a pivotal role in translating literature into a form of Bengali known as Gaudiya, which was a popular tongue in Bengal during the 18th and 19th centuries. Influenced by medieval roots, Gaudiya became a bridge for vernacular translations of texts originally written in English, Sanskrit, Persian, and various Indian languages. The efforts of Battala translators marked a significant moment in Bengali literary culture by bringing international and classical Indian works closer to the Bengali public. *Bibek Ratnabali*, published in 1864 by Madhusudan Bandopadhyay, is a prime example of how Sanskrit tales were made accessible to a broader audience through their Bengali translation. Battala's translators not only transferred linguistic content, but adapted style and form, often choosing verse structures resonant with medieval Bengali literary traditions. A notable example of Battala's translation legacy is *Parasya Itihas*, translated in 1846 by Girish Chandra Banerjee and Nilmani Basak. Originally an English text on Persian history, it was transformed into verse, imitating the lyrical form of medieval Bengali texts. This creative approach ensured that readers experienced translated material in a format familiar and accessible to them.

Book markets like Battala are vital third places in urban environments, where diverse communities converge to facilitate cultural exchange and interaction through translation. In these lively settings, translation transcends mere language conversion; it becomes a dynamic process of negotiation and understanding that fosters social cohesion among individuals from varied linguistic and cultural backgrounds. These markets enable the circulation of ideas, goods, and cultural practices, empowering marginalized voices, challenging dominant narratives, and contributing to the formation of cosmopolitan identities within multicultural urban landscapes. Beyond high literature, there is an increasing focus on these third places, defined by sociologist Ray Oldenburg as informal gathering places where people from diverse backgrounds can interact and build

community ties (7). As argued by Simon (256), in urban contexts, such "third spaces" often emerge in culturally diverse neighborhoods, serving as sites of cultural exchange and hybrid identity formation.

In cities like Calcutta, these spaces challenge binary classifications of identity, allowing for the emergence of hybrid identities that reflect the complexities of urban life. They serve as arenas where individuals negotiate their cultural affiliations, fostering a sense of belonging that goes beyond traditional boundaries. Translation practices in urban settings promote citizenship and inclusion by incorporating multiple languages into the public sphere, enhancing social cohesion and facilitating communication among diverse communities. This transforms translation from a mere linguistic act into a vital process of negotiation and understanding. Urban spaces also function as cultural memory, where translation plays a crucial role in preserving and transmitting local histories and identities (Simon 24). The interplay of languages within cities not only reflects historical narratives, but also shapes contemporary cultural expressions, underscoring the significance of translation in the ongoing evolution of urban identities. In the case of Battala, translation gives voice to different cultural groups and helps them assert their urban experience within colonial modernity.

URBAN VOICES: CROSS-CULTURAL EXCHANGES

Battala, a vibrant crossroads of markets, communities, and intellectual salons, reflects the dynamic intersections of urban space and cultural exchange. In *Koutuk Shatak*, this landscape comes alive, linking translation to the city's symbolic and social fabric. *Koutuk Shatak*, published in 1862, is a notable example of a unique mix of translation, humor, and social commentary found in Battala literature. Edited by Harishchandra Mitra and featuring many jokes written or translated by Durgadas Kar, this book reflects the interests of Bengali civil society while offering a humorous view of the changing urban life in Calcutta. In the introduction, Mitra mentions that many jokes were adapted from English or taken from proverbs, showing how Battala helped introduce Western literary styles into Bengali culture, similar to European jestbooks. The jokes in *Koutuk Shatak* focus on everyday life, featuring characters like English clergymen, doctors, professors, lawyers, and European judges. These characters provide a glimpse into how the Bengali society of that era interacted with colonial institutions. Under the surface of humor, the book critiques the new elite class in Calcutta—known as babus—who often embodied the contradictions and excesses of colonial modernity. By including topics like foreign lands and girls' schools, *Koutuk Shatak* demonstrates that Battala

publications, though often viewed as lowbrow, played an important role in shaping public conversations and reflecting the complex realities of 19th-century Bengal.

In *Koutuk Shatak*, many jokes are based on everyday events in urban life, providing a satirical look at issues like child marriage and promiscuity while highlighting societal hypocrisies. This collection of sharp jokes comments on the contradictions found in 19th-century Calcutta, particularly among the educated youth. For example, one joke tells of a conversation between two friends, where one asks Ramesh how he could marry off his five-year-old daughter after always opposing child marriage; Ramesh replies that he could not ignore his father's request, revealing the deeper hypocrisy of the so-called progressive and educated youth (Mitra 83). Even those who publicly criticized outdated practices often submitted to familial and societal pressures, exposing the gap between belief and practice; this joke highlights how superficial reformist values could be when faced with the weight of tradition and parental authority. The book also paints a picture of life in Calcutta, showing the mix of different classes and languages. In one instance, a drunk man scolded by his wife gives orders to a doorman in Hindi, even though he is likely Bengali. This scene reflects the interactions among various linguistic communities and showcases the pluralistic nature of colonial Calcutta, where people from different backgrounds lived side by side (77). Such mixing of languages showcases how communication flowed easily in a bustling city which was rapidly growing and attracting people from all over India. Through humor, *Koutuk Shatak* captures everyday social interactions in the colonial metropolis. It reveals that beneath the polished surface of urban life, there were contradictions and a rich blend of cultures shaping daily experiences. The book not only reflects Calcutta's transformation, but also offers a witty take on the contradictions of civil society. Amusing on the surface, the jokes hold a mirror to the deeper issues and tensions present in a changing society. In this way, *Koutuk Shatak* invites readers to consider the complexities of modern life, urban growth, and the push for social reform in 19th-century Bengal.

While *Koutuk Shatak* reflected the transformations within Calcutta's urban and social landscape, a parallel development was taking shape in Battala, where Muslim authors were making significant contributions to Bengali literature. Their writings covered a wide range of topics, from everyday life to religious stories. There was a strong demand for Persian-to-Bengali translations, Urdu-Bengali bilingual texts, and Islamic moral stories, which were widely read across different social groups, including urban migrants, boatmen, and small traders (Gupta, "Chāpā-Puthis" 223). Publishers like Kazi Safiuddin played a key role in bringing popular stories such as *Yūsuf Zuleikhā* and *Gul-i hormuz* to Bengali readers by working

with various printing presses. Despite its popularity, this body of literature was often viewed with skepticism by elite literary circles, who dismissed it as vernacular or philistine (226). However, these works played a crucial part in shaping a distinct Bengali Muslim literary identity, reflecting the tastes and concerns of a broad and diverse readership.

Writers such as Munshi Namdar and Munshi Azimuddin made significant contributions to Battala's print culture, with Azimuddin's play *Ki Mojar Koler Gari* exemplifying how these authors blended domestic and foreign influences. This satire on the British introduction of railways uniquely combined traditional Bengali rhyming forms such as pāyār and tripādi with elements from Arabic-Persian literary traditions. This fusion not only reflects the rich cultural influences of 19th-century Bengali society, but also highlights the literary innovations within the Muslim community. In the broader context of dobhashi literature, as discussed by Sumanta Banerjee, it is evident that Muslim authors in Battala were navigating a complex cultural landscape. Banerjee points out that dobhashi—a mix of Bengali, Urdu, Arabic, and Persian—emerged in response to Hindu pundits' efforts to sanskritize Bengali (Banerjee, *Power in Print* 45). Similarly, Azimuddin's work, with its genre-blending and linguistic fusion, illustrates the Muslim community's endeavor to preserve and promote its identity amid colonial modernity and linguistic reform efforts.

Furthermore, these Muslim authors were not merely reacting to external pressures, but actively shaping the literary landscape of Battala. Their works catered to a Muslim readership while contributing to the rich tapestry of Bengali literature, often featuring epic tales, moral teachings, and elements of the supernatural. This cultural production was not only a form of resistance, but also a creative engagement with the evolving urban realities of colonial Calcutta. Muslim authors like Azimuddin helped define Battala as a space where diverse voices could coalesce, influencing the broader literary and intellectual currents of the time. Thus, the literary contributions of Muslim authors in Battala illustrate a more nuanced understanding of this market as a site of cultural and religious convergence, where both Hindu and Muslim writers navigated modernity, tradition, and the complexities of colonial society. Battala publications played a significant role in colonial Bengal by presenting a rich diversity of voices that contrasted with the "high" literature favored by the educated bhadraloks (gentlefolk/elite). The *bhadralok* were a socially mobile, English-educated elite in colonial Bengal, primarily drawn from the Brahmin, Baidya, and Kayastha castes. Their rise was shaped by wealth, access to English education, and administrative service, forming what came to be seen as a "new aristocracy" (Bandyopadhyay 154). However, the bhadralok were largely dismissive of Battala literature, which they often

regarded as vulgar or substandard. The primary promoters and consumers of this popular literary form belonged to a different social group, situated outside the cultural and ideological domain of the colonial elite. As Sumanta Banerjee observes, the language and subjects of Battala literature ranged from "the patois of the Calcutta streets to the slang of the village marketplace," creating a counterculture that celebrated the vernacular and regional dialects of various communities (*Power in Print* 45).

The presence of Muslim authors in the Battala book market highlights the complex nature of this literary space and challenges the idea that it was solely dominated by Hindu Bengali "babus." Muslim authors played a key role in the Battala print culture, particularly in the production of chāpā puthis, i.e. printed books that retained the style and layout of traditional manuscripts. Writers such as Phakir Garibullah and Saiyad Hamza were instrumental in adapting Persian and Deccan romances, Islamic historical accounts, and religious tales for Bengali readers (Gupta, "Chāpā-Puthis" 209). Initially, many of these works were published by Hindu-owned presses, but by the 1870s, Muslim publishers such as those running the Barkati, Bashiri, Ahmadi, and Kaderiya presses began to make their mark. A significant figure in this movement was Muhammad Naser, whose Hanifi Press was responsible for publishing *Bhābalābh* (1851), considered one of the earliest examples of printed Bengali prose by a Muslim writer (221).

Another prominent example is *Jaiguner Puthi*, written by Syed Hamzah of Udna, Hooghley, in 1797. As the Bangladeshi scholar Wakil Ahmed notes, this text is "one of the finest examples" of puthis composed in Dobhashi Bengali—a register heavily influenced by Persian and Arabic vocabulary (qtd. in "Jaiguner Puthi"). *Jaiguner Puthi* draws on earlier works such as Shah Barid Khan's *Hanifar Digvijay* (16th century) and Muhammad Khan's *Hanifar Ladai* (1724). It narrates the tale of Jaigun, the princess of Erem, who first defeats and then marries Hanifa, the male protagonist ("Jaiguner Puthi"). The poem celebrates both martial valor and spiritual triumph, reflecting a vision of Islamic heroism that resonated deeply with Bengali Muslim readers during British colonial rule. In an era when the Muslim community grappled with the loss of political power, such texts reinstated their past heritage and pride at a time of significant political and social change.

In this way, Battala's vibrant print culture not only showcased Muslim literary voices, but also facilitated the reimagining of Bengali literary culture through the lens of Islamic history and legend. It became a crucial site for the vernacularization of Perso-Arabic narratives, allowing Bengali Muslims to assert their presence in a rapidly transforming literary and social landscape. With the development of print culture in Battala, Muslim writers also increasingly chose to address the everyday realities of colonial modernity,

moving beyond heroic tales and religious epics. Some authors focused on contemporary society and the changing dynamics of rural and urban life under British rule. One such example, Munshi Azimuddin's *Ki Mojar Koler Gari*, presents an interesting glance at how people, especially women, reacted to modern changes brought by colonial rule, particularly with the arrival of the railway. The story focuses on a conversation between a mother-in-law and a grandmother on a train, which symbolizes progress and modernity. This setting provides a perfect backdrop for discussing how the railway changed life in the villages. The narrative reveals that the introduction of trains sparked a mix of excitement and curiosity among the villagers. Showcasing how the railways transformed daily life and personal relationships, the young woman points out that the trains made it easier for husbands, who might have been away for long periods due to work, to return home more often—"once or twice a year" (Azimuddin 282). This convenience was not just about technology; it had deep emotional effects. Wives were no longer distanced from their husbands, leading to a more connected family life. The young woman expresses appreciation for the British, recognizing that their infrastructure allowed these new opportunities (286).

Furthermore, the railway offered women a new level of freedom. The story highlights that wives could now leave their fathers' homes more easily if they were unhappy in their marriages. This shift indicates a significant change in women's roles and independence. The arrival of the train did not just change how people traveled; it also began to reshape social structures, especially regarding marriage and gender roles. Through the dialogue on the train, Azimuddin's text skillfully blends themes of modernity, colonial influence, and gender issues, demonstrating that such technological advancements reached into the very heart of daily life in colonial Bengal. This text serves as a testament to the fact that the effects of colonial modernity were complex and varied, impacting different groups of society in distinct ways.

Pyarimohan Sen's *Rar Bhar Mithya Katha Tin Loye Kolikata* vividly portrays life in 19th-century Calcutta, focusing on the changes occurring in society at the time. The play captures the lives of educated upper-class Bengalis who moved away from old feudal systems and became influential in the British Empire. It not only describes the experiences of the upper class, but also reflects the complex mix of languages spoken in colonial Calcutta. The language used in the play is a blend of Bengali, English, and various regional dialects, highlighting the diverse and cosmopolitan nature of the city. For example, there is a scene where a sage visits a red-light district, and those around him speak different languages—Bengali mixed with English, Hindi, and Persian. This variety of speech illustrates the multicultural and multilingual character of Calcutta, showing how

different social classes and communities interacted in urban life. The characters in the play represent the babu or bhadraloks of Calcutta, who were accustomed to moving between multiple languages and cultures. The mixing of languages in their conversations symbolizes the city's own blend of Western influence and local traditions, which often coexisted or clashed. Overall, *Rar Bhar Mithya Katha Tin Loye Kolikata* serves as a testament to the rich linguistic diversity that defined life in the city.

The trend of writing about urban life, as seen in *Rar Bhar Mithya Katha Tin Loye Kolikata*, is influenced by Western literary traditions. Pyarimohan Sen's work reflects the style and themes present in Western literature, especially in famous works like Lord Byron's *Don Juan* and Samuel Johnson's poem *London*. In these Western texts, authors often explore similar themes of societal decay and moral decline in urban settings. For instance, *Don Juan* presents a satirical look at the flaws and follies of society, focusing on the character's adventures in a world filled with corruption and extravagance. Similarly, *London* portrays the struggles and hardships faced by people living in a city that seems to be sinking into chaos and despair. Both works depict the darker aspects of city life, revealing a sense of disillusionment and moral decline.

In *Rar Bhar Mithya Katha Tin Loye Kolikata*, Sen adopts a similar approach to highlight the grim realities of 19th-century Calcutta. The lewd main character takes the saint through various parts of the city, including areas known for heavy drinking and prostitution. These locations serve as a backdrop for examining the city's underbelly. One of the significant turns in the play is the transformation of the saint: at first devoted to his religious work and living a life of asceticism, in response to the city's harsh realities, he begins to rethink his beliefs. He abandons his strict lifestyle and admits that his life has been a failure until now. This shift in the saint's character symbolizes the broader disillusionment and decline of society in Calcutta during that time. Through this transformation, Sen emphasizes the moral confusion and challenges faced by individuals in an evolving urban landscape, similar to the themes found in Western urban literature.

In his soliloquy, the saint expresses shock and disillusionment at the moral decay of Calcutta, wondering whether it has become a city of absurdities. The line "I had heard in the past that the condition of people goes back to Calcutta, today it was true" reveals his realization that the rumors and tales about the city's moral degradation were indeed accurate (P. Sen 269).[1] The rapid pace of time and change, symbolized by

[1] Adrish Biswas's edited book *Battalar Boi* is written in Bengali. As there is no English translation available, the excerpts quoted from book l in this article have been translated by the authors.

the line "What is the speed of time, nothing can be understood" (270), illustrates the saint's inability to grasp the shifting values and increasing chaos in the city. He further laments the erosion of religious and ethical practices by remarking, "Dharma Karma has gone" (278). He reflects on the rising prevalence of gambling, theft, cheating, and drunkenness. The saint's soliloquy also suggests that these developments were inevitable, perhaps even preordained, as the scriptures predicted that such things would come "by the mercy of Kali," which alludes to the destructive force of time and change as embodied by the goddess (280).This final reflection encapsulates the saint's despair over the moral and spiritual decline in Calcutta, where religious and ethical practices have been replaced by vice and corruption. His soliloquy not only provides a commentary on the city's transformation, but also serves as a metaphor for the broader anxieties faced by the society during a time of rapid modernization and colonial influence. The saint's inner turmoil is thus a powerful vehicle for understanding the complex relationship between urban space, time, and morality in colonial Calcutta.

The language used in three important books—Pyarimohan Sen's *Rar Bhar Mithya Katha Tin Loye Kolikata*, Munshi Azimuddin's *Ki Mojar Koler Gari*, and Harishchandra Mitra's *Koutuk Shatak*—exhibits a fascinating mix of Sanskrit, Hindi, and Persian words, reflecting the diverse languages spoken in 19th-century colonial Calcutta. For example, in P. Sen's play, the Persian word *yar*, which means friend, appears frequently (276). This demonstrates how Persian vocabulary was integrated into the everyday language of educated Bengalis, even as English and Bengali became more common due to colonial rule. Persian had been an important language in Mughal India, and its influence continued to be felt during this period. The use of such words illustrates the cultural and linguistic blending in Calcutta, where Bengali, Hindi, Persian, and English coexisted. Similarly, *Koutuk Shatak* also showcases this mix of languages by including Sanskrit along with Hindi and Persian. In one scene, the babu imitates a Hindi-speaking porter, saying, "ami bajra hai mangta" ("I just want a Budgerow"), which shows a unique blend of Bengali and Hindi (Mitra 85). Mitra also lampoons the pseudo-intellectuals of the time who often ignored logic and scientific reasoning. For instance, he describes a scholarly meeting in the city where it was debated whether the sun or the moon came first in providing light. This humorous reference captures the intellectual discussions of the period while poking fun at the sometimes ridiculous nature of these debates. Such treatment of these topics serves not only to entertain readers, but also to criticize the pretentiousness of some intellectuals at the time.

Koutuk Shatak also includes jokes translated from English, particularly those involving religious figures and the clergy. One such joke, translated

by Harishchandra Mitra, humorously describes a conversation between a priest and his disciple about drinking. This translation of English jokes highlights the growing influence of European literary forms and content in Bengal, as well as the ways in which local writers adapted these forms for a Bengali audience. The references to the Bible and Christian clergy in these jokes suggest broader cultural exchanges occurring in colonial Calcutta, where Christian missionaries and colonial administrators were significant players in the public and religious life. Furthermore, the inclusion of religious communities beyond the Hinduist—through mentions of Christian clergy and jokes about the Bible—shows how Battala literature engaged with various religious and cultural traditions through translations. While many texts produced in Battala were rooted in Hindu mythology and popular religious narratives, they were also open to incorporating elements from other religious traditions, reflecting the pluralistic nature of Calcutta's society.

REIMAGINING BATTALA: SOME OBSERVATIONS

Extensive research has already been conducted on various aspects of Battala's literary culture, offering insight into its unique contributions to Bengal's social and cultural landscape. One key area of focus has been the appeal of Battala literature to Calcutta's poorer and semi-literate populations, particularly through satirical, comedic, and farcical works that critiqued the excesses of commercialism and materialism in the city. These texts addressed themes like alcoholism, the commodification of relationships, and the pervasive influence of wealth, resonating deeply with marginalized communities (Basu 52).

Recent studies challenge the traditional perception of Battala as merely a hub for cheap and low-quality literature. While often described pejoratively as a place for crude and ephemeral books, Battala played a much more complex role in Bengal's literary and cultural history. The presses in Battala were not limited to sensational or obscene works; they also produced religious texts, almanacs, schoolbooks, and popular poetry (Gupta, "Book History in India" 155). Indeed, in the late 19th century, elite Bengali intellectuals viewed Battala literature as a sign of moral decline, leading to efforts to censor or refine texts like *Bidyasundar*; however, despite these criticisms, Battala significantly contributed to the accessibility of the book, creating a wider reading public beyond the educated elite (Roy 186). Scholars have pointed out that current research on Battala has often grouped all Battala publications under one label, ignoring their diversity and impact (177). Such broad generalization fails to capture its true contribution to our literature

and culture. Battala was not merely a site for lowbrow literature; it carried the legacy of Bengal's evolving print culture, influenced by market demand, technology, and changing social attitudes.

A significant limitation in the research on Battala's history is its tendency to focus on a specific period, resulting in a fragmented and incomplete understanding of its literary and cultural contributions. While elite historians focused on the early period of Battala's print culture, the tradition persisted well into the 20th century, continuing to cater for an evolving reading public with diverse literary tastes (Chakraborti 60). The content of those printed books demands special attention, as discussed by Kamala Sarkar. Her work presents Battala as a space of resistance and cultural commentary in colonial Bengal, highlighting how popular Battala writings responded to the rapid industrialization and socio-economic changes of the time. For instance, she points out how Munshi Abdul Ala's *Kabita Kusummala* (1833) critiques the impact of British machinery on traditional livelihoods, lamenting how industrial progress erased individual identity and labour (208). Similarly, poets used Battala literature to voice skepticism towards British rule, as seen in an 1887 village poet's sarcastic critique of Queen Victoria's Jubilee celebrations, which taxed the poor while epidemics ravaged the land (212). Battala writings not only reflected the anxieties of the urban Bengali middle class, caught between colonial subjugation and aspirations for upward mobility, but it also functioned as a tool for admiration and resistance, shaping 19th-century Calcutta's public discourse (215). Far from being a peripheral space, Battala provides a crucial lens through which we can understand colonial Calcutta, revealing the tensions between elite and popular literary traditions, the impact of colonial modernity, and the evolving reading practices of the Bengali middle class. Not simply a hub of cheap literature, Battala was a crucial space where urban anxieties, social critique, and cultural aspirations intersected.

While existing scholarship touches upon the social and linguistic dynamics of Battala, this paper extends the discussion by analyzing how selected texts reflect the intersection of local and global cultural forces through an examination of how these texts negotiate urban social tensions, caste relations, and emerging print culture. This study highlights the role of Battala literature in engaging with the changing cultural and economic landscape of colonial Calcutta. This focus on the translation and adaptation of themes and ideas from both indigenous and external sources adds a new layer of understanding to the existing body of work.

In conclusion, Battala in the 19th century was a vital crossroads for language, culture, and urban identity in colonial Calcutta. This lively area (both in the literal and the literary sense) brought together various

linguistic traditions, creating a unique environment for sharing ideas and stories. Through works like *Koutuk Shatak*, *Rar Bhar Mithya Katha Tin Loye Kolikata*, and *Ki Mojar Koler Gari*, authors skillfully blended Sanskrit, Hindi, Persian, and English, reflecting the city's developing multicultural society and the changes brought by colonial modernity. As a hub of commercial print culture, Battala demonstrated how literature transcended geographical and linguistic boundaries, highlighting the rich interactions among different communities. It became a site for intellectual engagement and cultural exchange, capturing the complexities of memory and identity in the process.

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