2 / Chandra's Death

Ranajit Guha

I

This essay begins with a transgression—a title that is designed to violate the intentions for which the material reproduced herein has already served with two authorities—the authority of the law that recorded the event in its present form and that of the editor who separated it from other items in an archive and gave it a place in another order, a book of documents collected for their sociological interest. The movement between these two intentions—the law's and the scholar's—suggests the interposition of other wills and purposes. Whatever these were—anthropological, literary, administrative, or any other—they had, from time to time, given this material names and functions in some very differently constructed series and under different classifications. We know nothing of them except that they must have occurred. Yet the very fact that they occurred, in whatever unspecified ways, would justify yet another intervention—a return to the terminal points of the shift, the only visible sites of legal and editorial intentionality, in order to desecrate them by naming the material once again and textualizing it for a new purpose. That purpose is to reclaim the document for history. Here is to quote it in extenso.[1]

> [Mark of Invocation]
> . . . a dose at . . . and I made a paste of the drug again at dawn and administered it to Chandra. That did nothing to destroy the fetus. The next day when I went again to the same Kali Bagdi together with my mother and Chandra, he gave us an herbal medicine that

had to be taken thrice a day [*jori tin pan*] together with some *hori-tuki* (a wild fruit of medicinal value) and two tablets of *bakhor guli* (a preparation of herbs and rice used to induce abortion) diluted in lime water. On 12 Choitra[2] I prepared a paste of the medicine with my own hands and administered one dose of it to Chandra at a quarter past the second *prohor*[3] of the night. Then at about a quarter past the second *prohor* the fetus was destroyed and it fell to the ground. My mother picked up the bloody fetus with some straw and threw it away. Even after that the pain in Chandra's belly continued to increase and she died when it was still four to five *dondoes*[4] left of the night. Chandra's corpse was then buried near the [river's] bend by my brother Gayaram, his brother-in-law, and my mother's brother Horilal. I administered the medicine in the belief that it would terminate her pregnancy and did not realize that it would kill her.

When the other defendants were arrested on the basis of this deposition, Bhagaboti Chashin, mother of the deceased Chandra, also got a deposition written for her on the same lines as Brindra's, and alleged further:

Toward the end of last Phalgun,[5] Magaram Chasha came to my village and said, "I have been involved, for the last four or five months, in an illicit love affair [*ashnai*] with your daughter Chandra Chashani, as a result of which she has conceived. Bring her to your own house and arrange for some medicine to be administered to her. Or else I shall put her into *bhek*."[6] Two days after that I sent my daughter Brinda and my sister and my sister's daughter Rongo Chashani to Bhabanipur to fetch Chandra. The same day they returned to Majgram with Chandra Chashani at about a prohor after nightfall, and Rongu said that Chandra's mother-in-law Srimoti and her husband's sister's husband Magaram Chasha had given them a brass pot and a bell-metal bowl [in order to pay] for the arrangements to procure the drug required for an abortion.

And Kalicharan Bagdi, defendant, said in his deposition:

It was still some five or seven days to go before the end of the month of Phalgun in the current year when I was at my vegetable plot on the bank of the river one day. Rongu Chashani approached me there at approximately the second dondo of the day and said, "Please call at my house. When you do so, I shall tell you all I have to say." The following day I went to the house of Bongshi Bagdi of Majgram, but failing to meet Rongu Chashani there I was going back home when I happened to meet Bhagaboti Chashani who said, "My daughter Chandra Chashini is in the third month of her pregnancy. Please let us have a drug to terminate that pregnancy and we shall give you a

pot and a bowl." I didn't agree [to her request]. The following day I was at my vegetable plot when at one and a half dondo of the day the said Bhagaboti Chashin came to me with an elderly peasant of the village Simla. He is Bhagaboti's son's father-in-law, but I don't know his name. Bhagaboti said, "Please give us a medicine to destroy the foetus. We shall pay for it in cash, if required." Since I didn't have the drug for abortion with me that day, I told Bhagaboti, "Please meet me here at this vegetable plot tomorrow and collect the medicine; your son's father-in-law need not take the trouble to call again." The next day I was at my vegetable plot. When the said Bhagaboti came to me at noon with her daughter Chandra Chashini and I asked for the price of the medicine on the understanding that Bhagaboti's son's father-in-law would pay it in cash, as promised the previous day, the deceased Chandra offered me one paisa (a copper coin valued at one sixty-fourth part of a rupee). I accepted that paisa, and after asking them to take their seat at the vegetable plot. . . .

II

How is one to reclaim this document for history? The ordinary apparatus of historiography has little help to offer us here. Designed for big events and institutions, it is most at ease when made to operate on those larger phenomena that visibly stick out of the debris of the past. As a result, historical scholarship has developed, through recursive practice, a tradition that tends to ignore the small drama and fine detail of social existence, especially at its lower depths. A critical historiography can make up for this lacuna by bending closer to the ground in order to pick up the traces of a subaltern life in its passage through time.

However, that is no easy task, as is made so painfully obvious by the material before us. The difficulty does not arise from its want of authenticity. On the contrary, both the prose and the presentation of the document speak of it as a genuine testimony to the event described. Written in rustic Bengali (some of which has inevitably lost its flavor in translation), it abounds in spelling errors. Characteristically, too, it has no punctuation and paragraphing (like those introduced by us in the English rendering). It begins with a mark of invocation that combines the customary sign *anji* (resembling the Bengali numeral seven, capped by a crescent) and the honorific word "Sree," duplicated for effect with the name of the deity, Hori. All this, taken together with an awkward mixture of country idiom and Persianized phrases borrowed

from the language of the courts, speaks unmistakably of this writing as the work of a village scribe drafted in the service of the local law-enforcing agents. As such, it is witness to the force of the disciplinary thrust made by the colonial regime into Indian rural society by the middle of the nineteenth century.

But with all its authenticity, this document still fails to satisfy an important condition required by the normal practice of historiography. It is the condition of contextuality. For unless his material relates to a context, it is difficult for the historian to know what to do with it. This is particularly true of narrative material that makes sense only if it connects with what goes before and comes after it. That is why an urge for plenitude constitutes the driving force behind much of historical research—an unsatiated, indeed insatiable urge for more and more linkages to work into the torn fabric of the past and restore it to an ideal called the full story. It is therefore frustrating for that urge to come up against the phenomenon of fragmentation, that maverick which breaks into Clio's estate from time to time, stalls a plot in its drive to a denouement, and scatters its parts. Our specimen is one such untamed fragment, as the lost beginning of its first sentence and the missing end of the last so clearly testify. An anecdote with no known context, it has come down to us simply as the residuum of a dismembered past.

It would help if we could find a way of neutralizing the effects of decontextualization by situating this fragment in a series. For the principles according to which a series is constructed and the character of the constructing authority are all relevant to one's understanding of what is serialized. Historians know all too well how the contents of a series in an official archive or a company's record room derive much of their meaning from the intentions and interests of the government or the firm concerned. The material under study also belongs to a series, an editorially constructed series in a book of documents. But this has, alas, been designed with such scant regard for the contiguities of time and place, and its contents have been arranged under rubrics so excessively broad in scope, that serialization, in this particular case, is of no assistance at all in our search for a context.

That search is made all the more difficult by the mediation of the law. Each of the statements in this document is direct speech, but it is speech prompted by the requirements of an official investigation into what is presumed to be a murder. "Murder is the point at which history intersects with crime," says Foucault, and the site of that inter-

section is, according to him, the "narrative of crime" (*récit de crime*).[7] The discourse of the broadsheet, in which this genre is represented in its most popular and accessible form, has as its function "to change the scale, enlarge the proportions, make the minuscule grain of history visible, and open up for the quotidian its access to the narrative." It is indeed in this way that such narratives are able to "play a role in the exchange between the familiar and the remarkable, between the quotidian and the historic." The common murder, trivialized by the tolerance all cultures have of cruelty, uses precisely this discourse as its vehicle to cross the uncertain frontier that separates it from the "nameless butcheries" of a battle and make its way into history—"a history without masters, a history crowded with frantic and autonomous events, a history below the level of power and one that fell foul of the law."

If the discourse of the broadsheet helps to open a path for crime to enter history, it is the function of judicial discourse as a genre to cut off that path by trapping crime in its specificity, by reducing its range of signification to a set of narrowly defined legalities, and by assimilating it to the existing order as one of its negative determinations. The *ekrars* (a legal term for confessions or acknowledgments of guilt) that make up our text are witness precisely to such a process of detaching an experience from its living context and setting it up as an empty positivity outside history. It is a process intended to take out of these statements all that stands for empathy and pity and leave nothing to show for their content except the dry bones of a deixis—the "then" of a "crime."

How this process is put in operation by the discursive strategy of the law, how the latter gives the event a name and stamps it with a purpose, is shown by the order of the ekrars. In an all too obvious sense this corresponds to the punitive procedure of an initial deposition leading to arrests followed by other depositions. The authorial voice of the law interjects between the first two statements in our text to say so: "When the other defendants were arrested on the basis of this [Brinda's] deposition, Bhagaboti Chashin, mother of the deceased Chandra, also got a deposition written for her on the same lines as Brinda's and alleged further . . ." However, what is not so straightforward is the disparity between the actual sequence of events and its representation in the document. It emerges clearly from the information we have that the initiatives taken by Bhagaboti on hearing about her daughter's pregnancy and the transaction with Kali Bagdi *preceded* the administration of the drug by Brinda and her sister's death. Yet, in

the order of the depositions Brinda had to speak first. Consequently, the "telling" began in medias res with an account of her part in the story and Chandra's death, and retraced its steps analeptically to fill in the background by two other accounts—Bhagaboti's and Kali's. In other words, the narrative in the document violates the actual sequence of what happened in order to conform to the logic of a legal intervention that made the death into a murder, a caring sister into a murderess, all the actants in this tragedy into defendants, and what they said in a state of grief into ekrars. Construed thus, a matrix of real historical experience was transformed into a matrix of abstract legality, so that the will of the state could be made to penetrate, reorganize part by part, and eventually control the will of a subject population in much the same way as Providence is brought to impose itself upon mere human destiny.

The outcome of this hypostasis is to assimilate the order of the depositions before us to another order, namely law and order, to select only one of all the possible relations that their content has to their expression and designate that relation—that particular connotation—as the truth of an event already classified as crime. It is that privileged connotation that kneads the plurality of these utterances recorded from concerned individuals—from a mother, a sister, and a neighbor—into a set of judicial evidence, and allows thereby the stentorian voice of the state to subsume the humble peasant voices that speak here in sobs and whispers. To try to register the latter is to defy the pretensions of an abstract univocality that insists on naming this many-sided and complex tissue of human predicament as a "case." For to take that word to mean, as it usually does, an "instance of thing's occurring" or a "statement of facts in cause *sub judice*"[8] is to confer on these statements the function of describing this death merely as a thing's occurring, as a fact shorn of all other determinations than being *sub judice*. It was as if there was no room in such description for a will or purpose and all that was said was meant to speak of an event without a subject. "The particular will of the criminal" is, according to Hegel, "the sole positive existence which the injury possesses."[9] To assume criminality and yet to exclude that "particular will" of the so-called criminal and substitute the empty factuality of a "mere state of affairs" for "the sole positive existence" of Chandra's "injury" in one's reading of these ekrars would be to keep their authors and their experience out of history. In contrast, to read these statements as an archive is to dignify

them as the textual site for a struggle to reclaim for history an experience buried in a forgotten crevice of our past.

That struggle is nothing less than a contest between two kinds of politics. Each of these has as its aim to try to appropriate the event of Chandra's death as a discursive site—on behalf of the state in one case and on behalf of the community in the other. However, the fact is that the law, as the state's emissary, had already arrived at the site before the historian and claimed it as its own by designating the event as a "case," the death as a "crime," and the utterances that describe it as "ekrar." The consequence of this appropriation has been to clip those perspectives that situated this incident within the life of a community where a multitude of anxieties and interventions endowed it with its real historical content. Some of those perspectives could perhaps be restored if the stratagem of assimilating these statements to the processes of the law were opposed by a reading that acknowledged them as the record of a Bagdi family's effort to cope collectively, if unsuccessfully, with a crisis.

III

The Bagdis belonged to that nether end of the colonial society where extreme poverty and abject pollution converged to make them among the lowest in class and caste. One authoritative description in official literature placed them beyond the pale of the dominant caste Hindu society ("dwellers on the outskirts of Hinduism)"[10] and another outside history itself ("lower Sudra people whose history in the majority of the cases is lost").[11] In Birbhum, a western district of Bengal where this particular family and their kin lived in a cluster of villages at the northernmost part of the area under Dubrajpur *thana*,[12] they were obviously agriculturists by occupation, as the male and female surnames Chasha and Chashani ("agriculturalist"; Chashini and Chashin are variants) indicate. They could thus be said to belong to the category of "cultivating caste" assigned to them by Risley in his ethnographic glossary.[13] But considered in the light of their actual function and standing in the local society, that designation must be understood as a euphemism for a rural proletariat. For even until fifteen years before the end of the Raj the Bagdis could be described, together with the other subaltern communities of that district, as "in the main . . . agricultural labourers" who "provide[d] the entire series of services for agricul-

ture."[14] A survey made at that time of three thanas, including Dubrajpur, showed what a "disproportionately small percentage of interests" they held "in the real landed property of the district."[15] While the Brahmans, who constituted only 6.48 percent of the population, owned 72.25 percent of all the land as proprietors, the Bagdis—9.13 percent of the population—owned no land at all. Again, while the Brahmans held 56.73 percent of the land as tenure-holders and 15.08 percent as ryots, the Bagdis' share was 0.24 and 2.37 percent, respectively. The proportions are reversed, significantly enough, in the case of land held as under-raiyats: 4.85 percent by Brahmans and 9.15 by Bagdis.[16] Nothing could speak more eloquently of the unequal distribution of resources between the purest and richest at one end of the social spectrum and the impurest and poorest at the other during the 1930s. In this respect the progress of British rule over a period of fifty years appears to have done little to change the condition of the Bagdis. For, as Risley observed on the basis of the 1881 census:

> Most of the Bagdis are also to some extent engaged in agriculture, usually as *kurfa* or under-raiyats, and comparatively few have attained the more respectable position of occupancy tenants. In Western Bengal we find large numbers of them working as landless day-labourers, paid in cash or kind, or as nomadic cultivators, tilling other men's lands on the *bhag-jot* system, under which they are remunerated by a definite share of the produce—sometimes one-half, sometimes less, as may be arranged with their immediate landlord. I can recall no instance of a Bagdi holding a zamindari, or even a superior tenure, such as *patni* or *mukarari* [types of landholding tenure], of any importance.[17]

Thus, as a labor force the Bagdis constituted a fertilizing sediment at the base of Bengal's agrarian economy, while being despised at the same time as a filthy deposit at the very bottom of its rural society. The comprehensive exploitation—economic and cultural—to which they were thus subjected robbed them of their prestige as well. As peasants they produced the wealth on the land by hard work, and as *lathials* (guards skilled in fighting with sticks) and nightwatchmen they guarded it for their landlord masters; yet they were stereotyped by the latter as incorrigibly prone to criminality. Again, it was the dominance of the upper-caste landed elite over this community that made Bagdi women a prey to male lust; yet they figured in patriarchal lore as creatures of easy virtue all too ready to make themselves available as objects of

sexual gratification. For a measure of such hypocrisy, in which an indigenous feudal ideology blends with colonialist anthropology, one has simply to notice how the Brahmanical fantasy of the lascivious Bagdini who tempts the god Siva himself in Rameshwar Bhattacharya's *Sivayan* (especially in the *Bagdini Pala* of that ballad)[18] converges on the learned insinuations in Risley's *Tribes and Castes* about "the lax views of the Bagdis . . . on the subject of sexual morality"—as supposed to have been demonstrated by their willingness to "allow their women to live openly with men of other castes" and their tolerance of "sexual license before marriage" among their girls.[19]

The pressures exerted by such patriarchal morality could strain the resources of an entire community of Bagdis to the breaking point. That is what seems to have happened in the instance given in our text. The unfortunate family at the center of this crisis was headed at this time by Bhagaboti Chashani, a widow. (The document makes no mention of any male member of the family other than a son, and all the crucial decisions bearing, literally, on matters of life and death seem to have been left to Bhagaboti herself—a most unlikely thing to happen if a patriarch, in the person of a spouse, were around.) She had three children, including a daughter called Chandra. It was Chandra's pregnancy and the efforts to terminate it that involved the rest of the family and their kin in the developments that followed. Brinda, the other daughter, is the only female for whom no reference is made to any relatives by marriage. Since this omission occurs in the context of a total mobilization of the kin group, it can only mean that she was a single girl still living with her mother. There was nothing unusual about this, for in the nineteenth century the Bagdis of West Bengal were known to "practise both infant and adult marriage indifferently."[20] Brinda was obviously grown-up enough to walk all the way to her sister's village and back within a day and be entrusted to administer the drug to the latter and generally to look after her—a chore that would be customarily assigned, under similar circumstances, to any unmarried daughter in a traditional Bengali household.

Gayaram, the widow's son, helped in a different way. Being married, he mobilized the assistance of his wife's family. His brother-in-law Pitambar is mentioned in Brinda's ekrar as one of the three men—the others being Gayaram himself and his uncle, Bhagaboti's brother Horilal—who removed the corpse and buried it. Yet another member of Pitambar's family was his father, the elderly *chashi* of Simla whose

presence was what apparently persuaded Kalicharan Bagdi to sell the drug for abortion. This is an important detail, which illuminates both the cohesion of a kinship network and the weight of male authority within it. The widow's word was not enough for Kalicharan; she had to be sponsored by a man whose standing, in terms of seniority, was the same as that of her late husband. In other words, the lacuna of male authority within the widow's own family had to be made up by that borrowed from another family allied to it by marriage.

Alliance by marriage brought help from other quarters as well. There was Rongu, the widow's sister's daughter, who, judging by her own statement and Kalicharan's, was a member of Bongshi Bagdi's household, a clear indication of her status as a married woman. However, there is no way to find out if Bongshi was her husband or father-in-law. Whatever the relationship, he has no role assigned to him in the document. By contrast, Rongu figures prominently as an escort for the pregnant woman on her way back to her parental home and as one of the party that negotiated the drug. Help also came from kinsfolk closest to Chandra by her marriage—from her mother-in-law, Srimoti, and her husband's sister's husband, Magaram. Together, they contributed a brass pot and a bell-metal bowl to pay for the abortion. But whether Magaram's contribution qualifies as help is another matter—a moot point of this affair, as we shall presently see.

The pot and the bowl, as the text tells us, were obviously not payment enough for the drug. The herbalist would not sell it except for cash. In rural Bengal under the Raj it was customary for such household utensils, usually regarded by a poor family as among its most valuable possessions, to be exchanged for goods and services or hypothecated for small loans.[21] Kalicharan's refusal to accept this mode of payment and his insistence on cash might have had something to do with the seasonal scarcity that generally hits the countryside toward the end of the Bengali calendar year. At this time, in Choitra (March–April), the village poor would have exhausted whatever savings in grain and cash they had made out of the winter rice harvest. Left with nothing after paying for some of their debts and those social obligations that occurred in this season, they would be busy soliciting loans again in money and grain in order to answer the landlords' and the superior tenants' call to clear all arrears of rent by *punyaha*—the ceremonial settlement of accounts due early the following month—as well as to stock up grain for sowing in monsoon and for consumption dur-

ing the lean period until the next harvest. In Birbhum, as in all of the western Bengal tract known as Rarh, this is the season of heat and drought when, traditionally, starvation combines with creditors and rentiers to start the village poor again on their annual circuit of hypothecation of household goods against small loans of money and grain. Phullora, the heroine of the Kalketu episode of Mukundaram Chakrabarty's *Chandimangal*, spoke for all the indigent and lowborn people of that region in her lament:

> Anol shoman porey choiter khara
> chalusherey bandha dinu matia pathora.[22]
>
> [The drought of Choitra scorched like fire. / I pledged my earthernware bowl just for a seer of rice.]

That was in the sixteenth century. Two hundred and seventy years later, under colonial rule, the rigor of the season still drove the peasant to go begging for rice, but with a difference; what had to be pledged now was not earthenware but metalware. And yet, as bell-metal and brass objects piled up with the creditor, the amount of grain lent per unit of weight in metal would decrease. By contrast, the seasonal scarcity of cash increased preference for the latter in ordinary transactions. At such a time of the year, during the first fortnight of Choitra, Kalicharan Bagdi was astute enough to insist on payment in cash for his services, which were as highly specialized as they were urgently in demand. A poor peasant, forced by the drought to withdraw from paddy culture and left to fill in his day tending a patch of vegetables, he knew the price of his skill, as is evident from his ekrar:

> When the said Bhágaboti came to me at noon with her daughter Chandra Chashini and I asked for the price of the medicine on the understanding that Bhagaboti's son's father-in-law would pay for it in cash, as promised the previous day, the deceased Chandra offered me one paisa. I accepted that paisa.

One paisa! Not a great deal to ask for an expertise as valuable as his, or for a drug meant to deal with a matter of life and death. But by insisting on that particular mode of remuneration, Kalicharan, although a Bagdi by caste, put himself on a cash nexus clearly distinguished from the network of relations based on consanguinity and marriage. And this transaction—the intrusion of money into a tissue of anxieties shared by kinsfolk—helps considerably to undermine the abstract le-

galism of the text and heighten its drama by a play between the contrasting elements of venality and solidarity.

IV

The solidarity inspired by this crisis had its territorial base in a cluster of villages in the southwestern corner of Birbhum, within and around the Dubrajpur thana area. The document does not mention where Horilal came from. But we know for certain that his sister, Bhagaboti, and a niece, Rongu, were both married to Majgram men. Bhagaboti's own children, however, had to find their spouses elsewhere: the son, Gayaram, in Simla, and Chandra, the daughter, in Bhabanipur. The household to which the latter belonged was headed at this time by her mother-in-law, Srimoti, presumably a widow (there is no mention of her husband), whose daughter was married to Magaram of the same village. Bagdi marriage rules which insisted on partners being selected from two different sections within the same subcaste,[23] appear thus to have resulted, in this particular case, in a web of alliances covering three villages. At least two of these, Majgram and Bhabanipur, were situated, as the map shows, within about six miles of each other—indeed, an easy walking distance, for, said Bhagaboti in her ekrar, one day in the month of Phalgun she had sent Brinda and Rongu to Bhabanipur to get Chandra, and they returned to Majgram the same evening. Simla, the other village, was about two miles to the south of Majgram, not too far for an old peasant like Gayaram's father-in-law to walk on an occasion so urgent as this, but a little too much, perhaps, to cover on two consecutive days. Taken together, these villages formed a kinship region for six Bagdi families, all of whom felt seriously threatened by Chandra's pregnancy.[24]

They felt threatened because a child born of an illicit, that is, socially forbidden, liaison between persons related as kin could have dire consequences for an entire community. For, unlike Europe, where according to Foucault the "deployment of sexuality" had already emerged as an independent apparatus of social control since the eighteenth century and superimposed itself on the "deployment of alliance,"[25] in nineteenth-century India sexuality was still subsumed in alliance for all social transactions—for marriage, kinship, and "transactions of names and possessions"—and for all the theories that informed them. The control of sexuality therefore devolved on those au-

thorities and instruments—*panchayats* (village councils), prescriptions, prohibitions, and so on—that governed the system of alliance. Speaking specifically of rural Bengal, one could say that the government of sexuality there lay within the jurisdiction of *samaj* (community, a term in which the institutional aspects of society and their moral and political attributes are happily collapsed). How a local samaj constituted either by a caste or subcaste or by a multicaste community based on one or more villages exercised its authority over the sexual conduct of its members can be seen from a number of other documents collected from the same region.[26] They, too, speak of conditions in the Rarh tract of western Bengal during the first half of the nineteenth century. Territorially as well as chronologically they belong to a tradition of rural politics that was dramatized, for one poignant moment, by the Majgram incident of 1849. As such, they may be used to illuminate some of the mechanics of discipline and punishment that are presupposed, although never explicitly mentioned, in the ekrars on Chandra's death.

However, unlike those ekrars this material does not relate to official justice. It belongs to that subcontinent of right and wrong that was never painted red. As such, it is witness to the historic, if largely unacknowledged, failure of the Raj to incorporate some of the most vital issues of indigenous social conflict within its hegemonic judicature. For each of these documents was addressed to a tribunal that functioned independently of and parallel to the network of colonial courts. Constituted at the village level of Brahman priests acting individually or collectively, or by the leadership of a caste or subcaste,[27] it operated by "a system of rules defining the permitted and the forbidden, the licit and the illicit,"[28] in a manner that had little to do with the codes and procedures of the *sarkar*'s *ain* and *adalat* (government's law and courts). Those rules were an amalgam of local custom, caste convention, and a rough-and-ready reading—more often just recollection—of the shastras. The judgments constructed with their help came in the form of a prescription for ritualized penalty, technically known as *byabostha* (a vernacular adaptation of the Sanskrit word *vyavastha*). Nothing speaks more eloquently of the uneasy compromise of the shastric and the customary than the rustication of that word as *byabosta*, *bebosta*, or even *brobosta* at the hands of village scribes, or the verdicts appended by semiliterate Brahmans in bastardized Sanskrit to the inelegant Bengali prose of these petitions.

But the force of a byabostha was hardly undermined by heterodoxy of idiom or disregard of grammar. That it was sought, without exception, by self-confessed offenders was itself evidence of that force. The latter derived directly from the authority of a samaj working institutionally through panchayat and priesthood and ideologically through custom and shastra in order to prevent its "system of alliance" from being subverted by unauthorized sexuality. For the offense arose, in each instance, from a liaison outside the socially approved limits of sexual relationship, and the applicant for a prescriptive writ happened invariably to be a relative of one of the partners in that liaison. To ask for a byabostha under such circumstances was therefore to incriminate oneself deliberately and to court the certainty of punishment by *prayashchitta*, or penitential measures made up of fines, fasting, and feasting. But willing submission to such discipline was a preemptive tactic on the petitioner's part to ward off the ultimate social sanction of outcasting, the terror of which is conveyed accurately by the Bengali word for that practice—*jatmara*, literally, the destruction of caste. In short, it was fear rather than choice that induced people to seek byabostha and submit to prayashchitta.

The nature and extent of that fear can perhaps be best understood by considering a petitioner's relationship to the transgressor. In each of these documents a villager named the transgressor as a relative, indeed as a consanguine in all instances but one (where it concerned a brother's wife).[29] In every instance, again, the relative was a woman and was referred to as "*my* daughter," "*my* sister," or "*my* sister-in-law." The paucity of male offenders in our sample is a telling index of patriarchal concern to exercise greater control over female than male sexuality. For the response of a samaj to sexual deviance was not the same for both genders. Since the prestige of a caste was higher or lower according to the degree of its purity—and the physical constitution of women as well as their cultural construction as objects of male lust made them, in men's eyes, potentially the more polluting of the two sexes—a maiden's virginity, a widow's chastity, and a wife's sexual fidelity to her husband were all highly valorized by a samaj. Any violation of norms in this respect could pollute all of an offender's kin, especially her consanguines, and undermine the group's ability to sustain and reproduce itself by recruiting and exchanging women through marriage. As a result, the first whispers of gossip (*janorob*)—most of the petitions testify to its power—alerted

an entire kinship network, and a father, brother, or husband would presume a woman's guilt without any further evidence, apply for a byabostha, and make peace with priests and panchayats by submitting to whatever penalty was imposed by them. These impositions could be oppressive for some of the less affluent villagers: one of them asked for a writ and protested his poverty (*iha ati daridra*) at the same time in a desperate attempt to persuade the tribunal—in this case, his caste council—to limit the price of exculpation to a sum he could afford.[30] It was a measure of their fear of exclusion from caste that people put up with the tyranny of such prescriptions and their disciplinary jurisdictions.

That fear was the reciprocal of solidarity under these circumstances. The two must be taken together for any proper understanding of a community's reaction to the kind of crisis that erupted on the Bagdis of Majgram. For the object of solidarity was also the person who could, by her transgressions, bring shame upon those she would most expect to stand by her when found guilty and to share the rigor of all the penalties prescribed by her samaj. Consequently, the limits of solidarity within a kin group coincided with those of its members' dread of caste sanctions, and the terms used by ego to call for help would evoke a sympathetic but apprehensive response in reciprocal terms from the rest of the group. Thus, between siblings, a sister's cry in her distress would be addressed to her brother, and his answer would be inspired as much by his sense of obligation owed to a sister as by the fear of his own culpability accruing from any moral lapse on her part if such assistance were not offered. In other words, the reciprocals that made up a lexicon of kinship terminology corresponded to the reciprocities of solidarity and fear within that particular kinship group. A correspondence of this order can be discerned quite clearly in the mobilization of Chandra's relatives during the four critical days before her death. For, as shown in the accompanying chart, those who rallied to her support as her brother, brother's wife's brother, brother's wife's father, mother's brother, and, of course, mother, sister, mother's sister's daughter, and mother-in-law were also those who had the most to dread from caste sanctions because of the misdemeanor of one who related to them respectively as sister, sister's husband's sister, sister's daughter, daughter, sister, mother's sister's daughter or daughter-in-law.

Kinship Terms and Their Reciprocals Designating Relatives Who Helped Chandra (Ego)

Relative's Names	*Ego's Terms for Her Kin*	*Reciprocal Terms*
Gayaram	brother	sister
Pitambar	brother's wife's brother	sister's husband's sister
Pitambar's father	brother's wife's father	daughter's husband's sister
Horilal	mother's brother	sister's daughter
Bhagaboti	mother	daughter
Brinda	sister	sister
Rongu	mother's sister's daughter	mother's sister's daughter
Srimoti	mother-in-law	daughter-in-law

V

It is the interplay of solidarity and fear that situates this tragic episode firmly within the politics of patriarchy in rural Bengal. For it is the direct outcome of a patriarchal society's concern to protect itself from the consequences of female sexual transgression. That concern is clearly inscribed in the series of petitions for byabostha mentioned earlier. In each of them it is a man who comes forward to report a woman's "sin" (*paap*), it is some other men who validate his statement by formally witnessing it, and it is the authority of a male-dominated samaj, personified by a pandit or institutionalized by a panchayat, which issues the verdict of guilt and the writ for prayashchitta. By contrast, man's power over woman and over society as a whole is documented in the Majgram ekrars by a formal absence, the absence of Magaram Chashi. Although deeply implicated in all that leads to abortion and death, he stands outside the purely legal determinations of the incident. There is no ekrar taken down from him, for he is technically beyond the ken of the law: the law does not see him; it doesn't have to.

Yet, unlike Chandra, who is also absent and whose absence corresponds to her silence (the only glimpse we have of her alive is when a paisa changes hands from her to Kali, presumably in silence), he is given a voice in the text. He speaks through Bhagaboti Chashin, who quotes him as saying: "I have been involved, for the last four or five months, in an illicit love affair [*ashnai*] with your daughter Chandra

Chashani, as a result of which she has conceived. Bring her to your own house and arrange for some medicine to be administered to her. Or else, I shall put her into *bhek*." Three short sentences, and even these are not uttered by the speaker himself. But that does not stop them from taking hold of the document and charging it with the speaker's will. Indeed, the reported character of the speech helps, somewhat paradoxically, to emphasize its commanding aspect. It resonates like the voice of an unseen but pervasive authority. For it is Magaram's will that, thanks to this reporting, is allowed to set the scene, define its context, and determine all the action in it. The three sentences work together to that end, as is made clear by their modal differences. The unmarked and merely declarative first sentence stands in sharp contrast to the markedly imperative and intentional function of the other two. Taken together, they act as a fulcrum for all the initiatives that follow from that utterance—the alerting of a social network to the gravity of an unwanted pregnancy in its midst, the mission to bring Chandra back to her own village, the quick polling of resources for consultation and medication, the desperation of Brinda's attempt to destroy the embryo and save her sister, and the sad, furtive digging at dawn to dispose of the corpse. Magaram's voice thus dominates the text. It does so not merely by providing a cue for its drama but by elucidating its politics.

For what he had to say brought out into the open an element of power play that, although implicit in all the statements, was left to him alone to spell out. He could do so because he was not directly involved in the processes of the law himself: unlike the others, he was not a "defendant." Indeed, his was the only voice in the text to escape superimposition by the discourse of law and order, the only utterance that was not an ekrar. As such, it was possible for it to speak in terms of a power relation that was sited at a depth within the indigenous society, well beyond the reach of the disciplinary arm of the colonial state. There, in the unredeemed obscurity of a still active feudal culture, female sexuality was so relentlessly and comprehensively subject to surveillance that the only relief a woman could have from the combined rigor of a loveless marriage and domestic drudgery lay in subterfuge and secrecy. Subterfuge enabled her to dissolve some of the gall of interdicted desire in a socially approved discourse—that of the joke. Indeed, the joking relationship—a genre that, in the vocabulary of anthropology, marries the figure of a social contradiction to a figure

of speech, that is, the tensions of unauthorized sexuality to those of irony—was not only allowed but positively encouraged, as witness the multitude of usages to that effect in the Bengali language. But sexuality that was not contained and subdued by jokes could be driven underground and flourish in the secrecy of an illicit and reprehensible passion.

The slide from subterfuge into secrecy was as common in Bengali society of that time as it was commonly suppressed, although nothing could be more difficult to document than the path such a slide actually took in any given instance and its critical moments. For a transgression of that order, born in secrecy, survived by stratagems of secrecy. Silence and evasion, fear and shame—all conspired to tolerate, or at least look away from, whatever exceeded the prescribed limits of sexual politics within a kinship group, so long as it was not forced out into the light of day by violence or by a rupture in the mute complicity of horizontal loyalties. We shall never know, therefore, how that eminently permissible joking relationship between a *salaj* (wife's brother's wife) and her *nondai* (husband's sister's husband)[31]—the reciprocal terms designating Chandra and Magaram as kin—turned into an *ashnai* (affair)—that is, whether it developed out of mutual affection or some force of circumstance subjecting a poor widow to the lust of a man of authority among her close relatives. Whatever the truth of the beginning of this affair, there is nothing in these depositions to illuminate any secrets of the heart. They only throw a lurid light on its end as the heartless rejection of a woman by the man who got her into trouble. That rejection shows where a liaison, with all that it might have meant as a relation of intimacy between two persons, stopped and social opprobrium against forbidden love took over.

In turning from his role of lover to that of a custodian of patriarchal ethics, Magaram speaks for all men in a semifeudal society and for male dominance itself. There is nothing remotely of a lover's sentiment in what he says, no acknowledgment at all of sharing any sexual pleasure with his partner. What comes through is the other male voice—not the one that croons so exquisitely about love in Bengali lyrics, but the disciplinary voice that identifies and indicts an offense against public morality to pronounce: "Abortion or bhek!" Or is it simply the same male voice speaking in one of its two distinct but complementary idioms, an idiom of feudal love rooted firmly in the inequality of gender relations and a penal idiom used for policing the second sex?

pressed there is another to act as an opiate. It is the opiate of bhakti on which the engine of oppression turned in this particular case to make of the *sebadasi*—literally, "a woman devoted to [spiritual or divine] service"—an object of male exploitation for manual labor and sexual gratification. Indeed, exploitation of this order has been established long enough to constitute a tradition that has continued well into our own times. It is a continuity that feeds on the tragic institution of Hindu widowhood in rural Bengal, especially among its subaltern population. As a sympathetic and acute observer reflects on some of his findings from a recent visit to an akhra in a West Bengal village not far from where Chandra died:

> I couldn't help wondering where all these sebadasis came from? . . . An answer occurred immediately to my mind. In this wretched land there is no dearth of widows, hence no want of sebadasis either. Is there any scarcity of poor, dependent, childless widows in the countryside? How they go through the ritual of adopting a guru in order to escape from the aggressive lust of their husbands' elder or younger brothers, how they happen to congregate in akhras, who are the people who attract them, seduce them, and infect them with venereal diseases—who is to write the social history of all that?[34]

Some of the local male informants spoke to this observer with bitterness about the uses made of religion to corrupt women. This was a censure that had all the force and falsity of a half-truth insofar as it correctly identified a canker at the heart of rural society, but failed at the same time to discern its etiology by refusing to acknowledge the factor of male complicity in what religion did to women. Thus, said one,

> How many of these sebadasis you see here are genuine devotees? The great majority of them are flotsam. Nobody knows where they come from. They are recruited by procurers. It is the same story for all akhras. Corrupted themselves, it is they who would bring other people's wives and daughters here in the name of religion and corrupt them as well.

Another villager described these akhras as "abortion centers." According to him,

> parents in these rural parts, sometimes bring an unmarried daughter to such an akhra, if she happens to conceive, and leave her there for a month or so. The villagers are told that the girl has been sent to serve the family's guru. It is only after a successful abortion that the

> girl returns home. Occasionally, a girl dies [in the process]. Well, there are men who will undertake to dig a pit in the sandbank of a river and hide the corpse there. The police would look away. The police station is far away. The guru sends his votive offering there at regular intervals. Everything is in order.[35]

It was as a variation on this theme that Magaram Chasha had pronounced his ultimatum: "Arrange for an abortion, or she must be dumped in an akhra!" This attempt to shirk parenthood by the destruction of an embryo or by consigning its carrier to living death in an akhra earns for Magaram a place in a historical relationship of power, a relationship of male dominance mediated by religion. It is a relationship that is overlaid and obscured, in our text, by the law's concern to assign criminality to one or more of the "defendants" in this "case." But the project to reclaim this material for history calls for a movement in the opposite direction, so that the pall of abstract legalism is penetrated in order to identify the murderer's hand as that of patriarchy in its dual role of the cynical lover and the authoritarian samaj.

VI

In the end, as this document shows in no uncertain terms, patriarchy won out. Magaram's ultimatum produced the desired effect. The pregnancy was terminated. Both the fetus and the body that had carried it for three months were put out of the way. But it was by no means an easy victory. The solidarity born out of fear contained within it *another solidarity* activated by a different, indeed contradictory, principle—namely *empathy*. If it was the power of patriarchy that brought about the first, it was the understanding of women that inspired the second.

The ekrar taken down from Brinda is instructive in this respect. Here she concentrates meticulously, for the most part, on the procurement, preparation, and administration of the drug that killed Chandra. This is precisely what the law wants her deposition to do. In its eye she stands nearest to the crime as its *immediate* agent and is, therefore, required to describe the process of its commission in all detail. So we are given an account of her part, spread over four days, in obtaining the ingredients for the drug, mixing them for medication by the right dosage twice a night, and caring for the pregnant woman for the next twenty-four hours until the latter ejects the fetus, bleeds to death in extreme pain, and is buried. It is only when, at this point, the sequence of

medication, abortion, death, and burial grinds to a halt that she exclaims: "I administered the medicine in the belief that it would terminate her pregnancy and did not realize that it would kill her." With these words she comes out of the metonymic trance of her deposition and identifies herself no longer as a defendant speaking of a crime but as a person speaking of her sister and as a woman speaking of another woman. The recollections of that night of violence—of Chandra's body racked by fever and pain, of a plucked fetus, of hemorrhage and death, of a corpse surreptitiously buried in the darkness before dawn, and the recollection, above all, of the supreme violence of a man's rejection of a woman impregnated by him—combine to produce an utterance that defies the ruse of the law and confers on this text the dignity of a tragic discourse.

What we have here is indeed a classic instance of choice overruled inexorably by necessity—by fate, in short. For Chandra was killed by the very act that was meant to save her from living death in a ghetto of social rejects. Yet here, as in all tragedies, the triumph of fate helped to enhance rather than diminish human dignity, the dignity of the women's choice to terminate the pregnancy and their determination to act according to it. The contradictions through which they picked their way to arrive at that choice were a measure both of its gravity and its complexity. They could not defy the authority of the samaj to the extent of enabling a widow with a child born out of wedlock to live honorably in the local society. It would be a long time yet before such a thing could happen in rural Bengal. Historically, therefore, abortion was the only means available for them to defeat the truly cockeyed morality that made the mother alone culpable for an illicit childbirth, threw her out of society, and allowed the father to go scot-free. Under these circumstances their decision to go ahead with the termination of Chandra's pregnancy acquired a content very different from what Magaram had on his mind when he confronted her mother with that alternative. It was for him merely a ploy to save his own face. But for the women who had gathered around Chandra at this crisis the destruction of the fetus was a desperate but consciously adopted strategy to prevent the social destruction of another woman, to fight for her right to a life with honor within her own society. The decision to which Bhagaboti, Brinda, Rongu, and Chandra herself were party amounted thus to an act of resistance against a patriarchal tradition that was about to claim yet another woman as its victim, and their resistance

took that characteristic form often adopted by the oppressed to subvert the designs of their oppressors in the guise of conforming to them.

Seen in this light the activity of women assumes a remarkable salience in this text. Indeed, such activity is one of the most visible aspects of an event that is otherwise so shrouded in secrecy and shame. It is women who generate most of the movement in it. Men have a part to play as helpers, but they do so clearly as auxiliaries: Kali Bagdi, who has to be coaxed to sell the drug; the elderly peasant from Simla mobilized simply to add a nodding consent to Bhagaboti's decision to go ahead with the abortion; and the three male relatives who figure as undertakers. By contrast, the initiative for all that follows Magaram's threat lies with the women. It is they who make up the party that travels to Bhabanipur and brings the young widow back to her village. It is they again who clinch the deal with their herbalist, get hold of the drug, administer it, and care for Chandra as she lies convulsed with pain. The exclusion of men from these interventions is hardly fortuitous. They are excluded because such interventions relate to a domain regarded as woman's own. It is the domain of the female body where, according to Simone de Beauvoir, "pregnancy is above all a drama that is acted out within the woman herself" in terms of the contradictory pulls of the immanence of her body and its transcendence: "The pregnant woman feels the immanence of her body at just the time when it is in transcendence."[36] The rhetoric and the development of this drama lie, on the one hand, in the immanence of that body as it "turns upon itself in nausea and discomfort," making the flesh feel like nothing but "a gross and present reality," and, on the other, in the body's transcendence as "the flesh becomes root-stock, source and blossom . . . a stirring towards the future," when by "carrying [the fetus within her] she feels herself vast as the world."

If, therefore, in many societies like the one under discussion natal care lies exclusively with women, this is so not simply because men would have it that way. On the contrary, this may well be a sign of patriarchy's retreat in the face of woman's determination to assert her control over her own body at a time when, in pregnancy, she knows that "her body is at last her own, since it exists for the child who belongs to her."[37] This knowledge constitutes a challenge that is genuinely dreaded by male authority. For it operates in an area of liminality not strictly governed by the will of husbands and fathers—an area that appears to the latter as fraught with uncertainty and danger, since

women speak here in a language not fully comprehensible to men and conduct themselves by rituals that defy male reasoning.

Hence the elaborate structure of patriarchy's self-defense set up precisely to meet this challenge—the shastric injunctions that condemn woman's body as impure by definition at childbirth, the physical exclusion of that body from domestic space immediately after parturition, the quarantine imposed by prohibitions and purificatory rules to ensure the safety of the social body from parturitive pollution, and so on. That such prescriptions should so often be accompanied by an equally prescriptive male chorus in praise of motherhood is quite in order. For such idealization serves a twofold purpose—on the one hand, as a foil to those bans and exclusions that symptomize the fear by which male dominance seeks to defend itself, and, on the other, as a technique to defuse the threat that woman's consciousness poses to patriarchy at every childbirth in a traditional society.

That is why the Bagdi women of Majgram chose a far from instrumental role for themselves even as they pooled their resources and wit to arrange for an abortion demanded by a man speaking for all of the local patriarchy. As a role situated within the social domain of childbirth, it defined their independence negatively by excluding men from all those decisions and initiatives that were vital to the termination of Chandra's pregnancy. What is equally, if not more, important is that even in their apparent complicity the women acted in accordance with a project that was by no means identical with Magaram's. The latter had made out his ultimatum as a choice between abortion and bhek for Chandra. Either of these would have served his own purpose, which was to get himself off the hook and escape social sanction. Since all he wanted was to destroy the evidence of his guilt, it could have been achieved as well by the physical destruction of the incriminating embryo as by the social destruction of the person who carried it. However, for the women who had rallied in support of Chandra, the alternatives were by no means of equal value. In their judgment abortion, with all its risks, was preferable to bhek. This was a choice made by women entirely on their own in order to stop the engine of male authority from uprooting a woman from her place in the local society.

To explain this resistance merely in terms of the obligations of ***kutum*** (kin) is to ignore what is distinctive about it and what sets it apart from kinship solidarity. It is a fundamental condition of such solidarity that the relation between the genders within the group, what-

ever its structure, should remain cohesive and nonantagonistic. For without such cohesion there can be no reproduction of species, hence no kinship. But that relation turns antagonistic whenever a termination of pregnancy is enforced by patriarchy. On such occasions man's authority stands so clearly opposed to woman's interest that no subterfuge, theological or sociological, can hide the truth of their relationship as one of dominance and subordination. No experience, other than that of rape, elucidates sexual politics more forcefully for the woman. Betrayed and bleeding, she sees a core of coercion in what she believed was mutual consent and an abstract masculinity in the person she thought was her lover. Simone de Beauvoir writes of the bitterness of this disillusionment thus:

> When man, the better to succeed in fulfilling his destiny as man, asks woman to sacrifice her reproductive possibilities, he is exposing the hypocrisy of the masculine moral code. Men universally forbid abortion, but individually they accept it as a convenient solution of a problem; they are able to contradict themselves with careless cynicism. But woman feels these contradictions in her wounded flesh; she is as a rule too timid for open revolt against masculine bad faith; she regards herself as the victim of an injustice that makes her a criminal against her will, and at the same time she feels soiled and humiliated. She embodies in concrete and immediate form, in herself, man's fault; he commits the fault, but gets rid of it by putting it off on her. . . . It is at her first abortion that woman begins to "know." For many women the world will never be the same.[38]

It is this knowledge of man's bad faith that makes woman wiser about the limits of a solidarity that pretends to be neutral to gender. The rounded, unitary world of kinship can never be the same for her again. "Soiled and humiliated," she has recourse to an *alternative solidarity*—a solidarity of women. Not an "open revolt" armed with trumpet and banner, it is still a visible and loud enough protest in a society where initiative and voice are given to man alone. For when a victim, however timid, comes to regard herself as an object of injustice, she already steps into the role of a critic of the system that victimizes her. And any action that follows from that critique contains the elements of a practice of resistance. In rallying around Chandra at the hour of her rejection by Magaram and the samaj he spoke for, the women of Majgram transcended the limits of kinship relations. In choosing abortion as an alternative to bhek, they defied the sentence

of living death that had already been pronounced upon Chandra. That she lost her life as a result of this effort made by the other women to save her is the truly tragic import of Brinda's despair as she said, "I administered the medicine in the belief that it would terminate her pregnancy and did not realize that it would kill her." That tragedy was a measure, for its time, of the strength of women's solidarity and its limitation.

Notes

I am grateful to my colleagues of the Subaltern Studies editorial team and to Ahmed Kamal, Rajyashree Pandey, and James Scott for their comments on a draft of this essay.

1. This document is published as item no. 380 in *PMCS*, my abbreviation for Panchanan Mandal, ed., *Chithipatre* ᶜ *majchitra*, vol. 2 (Calcutta, 1953), pp. 277–78. It is taken from the archives of Viswabnarati University. Its date is given as 1255 according to the Bengali year. Since the event of which it speaks occurred in the month of Choitra (see note 2), the corresponding date, according to the Christian calendar, should be A.D. 1849. Some of the proper names in the document appear in several variations: the surname Chashani as Chashini and Chashin, and the prenoms Brinda as Brindra, Rongo as Rongu, and Kali as Kalicharan. These variations have been retained in the translation.

2. Choitra is the twelfth month of the Bengali year and corresponds roughly to the second half of March and the first half of April.

3. *Pohor* and its variation, *prohor*, are a measure of time roughly equal to an eighth part of a twenty-four-hour day. "A quarter past the second pohor of the night" may therefore be taken to correspond approximately to three-quarters of an hour past midnight.

4. *Dondo* is a measure of time equivalent roughly to twenty-four minutes, so that the expression "four to five dondoes left of the night" may be taken to mean an hour and a half to two hours before dawn, and the expression "second dondo of the day," a little less than an hour after sunrise.

5. Phalgun is the eleventh month of the Bengali year and corresponds roughly to the second half of February and the first half of March.

6. The habit of a person belonging to the Boishnob sect.

7. This and the other extracts quoted in this paragraph are taken from Michel Foucault, *Moi, Pierre Rivière, ayant égorgé ma mère, ma soeur et mon frère* (Paris, 1973), pp. 269–71. My translation of these extracts is intended to be more faithful to the original than that of the English edition of this work published as *I, Pierre Riviere . . .* (Harmondsworth, 1978), pp. 204–6.

8. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 6th ed. (Oxford, 1976), s.v. "case."

9. *Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, translated with notes by T. M. Knox (Oxford, 1967), para. 99, p. 69. Knox's comment on this passage is relevent to my argument: "Crime exists as a fact, an event, and it is 'positive' to that extent," he writes, "but as an event it is not differentiated by any criminal character from other events such as accidents. As a crime it exists only for those who understand it from the inside, i.e. as a *purposeful* action, and so considered, it lacks the positivity of a *mere* event: it is made something genuinely positive, a crime and not an accident, by the presence in it of the criminal's will, and in this sense it is 'positive' only because it carries out his conscious purpose"; ibid., p. 331.

10. H. H. Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, vol. 1 (reprint, Calcutta, 1981), p. 43.

11. Government of Bengal, *Final Report on the Survey and Settlement Operations in the District of Birbhum, 1924–1932* (Calcutta, 1937), p. 17. All further references to this work will be cited as *Final Report*.

12. See note 24 for further details of this identification.

13. Risley, *Tribes and Castes*, p. 37.

14. *Final Report*, p. 15.

15. Ibid.

16. This statistical information is derived from "Comparative Statement Showing the Interests in Land of Certain Castes in Thanas Suri, Khayrasol, and Dubrajpur in the District of Birbhum," in ibid., p. 71.

17. Risley, *Tribes and Castes*, p. 42.

18. Rameshwar Bhattacharya, *Siva-samkirtan va Sivayan*, ed. Jogilal Haldar (Calcutta: Calcutta University, 1957), pp. 225–77.

19. Risley, *Tribes and Castes*, pp. 39, 41.

20. Ibid., p. 39.

21. In Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's *Pather Panchali*, a bell-metal dish changes hands from a poor Brahman woman to the village barber's wife for half a rupee. The time of that story is the early decades of this century, but the practice has apparently continued well into the postcolonial period; see *Bibhuti racanabali*, vol. 1 (reprint, Calcutta, 1979), pp. 145–46, and N. K. Chandra, "Agricultural Workers in Burdwan," in R. Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies II* (Delhi, 1983), pp. 243, 247.

22. Mukundaram Chakrabarty, *Kavikankan-candi*, p. 1, ed. Srikumar Bandyopadhyay and Biswapati Chowdhury (Calcutta: Calcutta University, 1958), p. 262.

23. "A Bagdi cannot marry outside the sub-caste, nor inside the section to which he belongs. Thus a Tentulia must marry a Tentulia, but a man of the Salrishi section, to whatever sub-caste he may belong, cannot marry a woman of that section"; Risley, *Tribes and Castes*, p. 38.

24. My identification of these villages is based on *Alphabetical List of Villages, West Bengal*, ed. P. C. Banerjee (unpublished typescript, Office of the Superintendent of Census Operations, Government of West Bengal, Calcutta, 1956), and *Final Report*, appendix 7, p. 2 (map), and index to appendix 7, p. 2 (village list). Majgram has been identified with the only village of that name (although spelled "Majhgram") in the *Alphabetical List*. Bhabanipur could be either of the two villages of that name, both nearly equidistant from Majgram at about six miles to the north within Rajnagar thana in one case and to the south within Dubrajpur thana in the other. I prefer the latter, as forming a better cluster, if taken with the third village, Simla, an abbreviation for Simlakuri, about two miles south of Majgram.

25. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1 (London, 1978), pp. 106–7.

26. *PMCS*, pp. 166–68, 175, 176, 179–80. The total number of these documents—all from Birbhum and Bankura—and their dates as shown in parentheses, are 225 (1840), 227 (1804), 229 (1819), 240 (1823), 241 (1824), and 247 (1834).

27. For specimens of an individual constituting such a prescriptive authority, see *PMCS*, documents 225 (pp. 166–67) and 247 (pp. 179–80). The collective authority of a group of six Brahmans is sought in another document—227 (pp. 167–68). In 229 (pp. 169–70) the petitioner addresses the leadership of his caste.

28. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, p. 106.

29. *PMCS*, 240, p. 175.

30. Ibid., 229, pp. 169–70.

31. I think Ronald B. Inden and Ralph W. Nicholas are a bit too restrictive in their description of the range of joking relationships in Bengali society. The *salaj-nondai* relation, together with a few others they do not mention, could be quite legitimately added to their list; Inden and Nicholas, *Kinship in Bengali Culture* (Chicago, 1977), pp. 31–32.

32. The ritual of bhek is described in this work thus: "[Sect leaders called] Goswamis usually rely on their [assistants called] Foujdars and Chhoridars for this ceremony. The latter would get an acolyte to go through the ritual of head-shaving and bathing, confer on him a stylized knot on a waist-band (*dor*), a loin-cloth (*koupin*), an outer garment (*bohirbas*), a characteristic mark of the sect on his forehead (*tilak*), a lesson in ritual gestures (*mudra*) as well as a water pot (*koronga*; *ghoti*), a necklace for telling beads (*japomala*) and a three-stringed necklace for wearing (*trikonthika galomala*). They would then instruct him in a *mantra*. They charge a minimum fee of one and a quarter rupee for all this. Moreover, offerings of food (*bhog*) have to be addressed to Lords Advaita, Nityananda and Chaitanya on this occasion and Boishnobs fed in a large banquet. It is popularly believed that the institution of bhek (*bhekasram*) was created by Lord Nityananda"; Akshaykumar Datta, *Bharatbarshiya upasak sampraday*, ed. Benoy Ghose (Calcutta, 1970), p. 105.

33. *PMCS*, 248, pp. 180–81.

34. Sudhir Chakrabarty, "Gabhir nirjan pather ulto banke," *Baromas* 6, no. 2 (April 1985): 4.

35. Ibid., pp. 4–5.

36. These and the other extracts quoted in this paragraph are taken from Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (Harmondsworth, 1984), pp. 512–13.

37. Ibid., p. 513.

38. Ibid., pp. 509–10.