

**Forgotten Phenomenon, Lost Songs: Chandrabati
and Her Literature in Modern Bangladesh**

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March 2020

University of Technology Sydney

Faculty of Arts and Social Science

Year of Submission 2020

CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I, Sumaya Afrin Eku declare that this thesis, is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Master of Arts (Research), in the Faculty of Arts and Social Science at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise reference or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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This research is supported by the Australian Government Research Training Program.

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Acknowledgement

First of all, I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor Professor Devleena Ghosh, who, not only introduced me to Chandrabati and her literature but also encouraged me to research on this inspirational woman of medieval Bengal. She has supported me very patiently throughout all the ups and downs of this journey. Her valuable advice helped me in every step of this thesis.

I would like to acknowledge Professor Heather Goodall, my secondary supervisor, with whom I have applied for the Human Research Ethics application. Through that process, I have received extensive advice and support from her, which helped me to shape the base of this thesis. The words of encouragement and positivity I received from Professor Goodall has always been my inspiration.

I thank Dr Lorraine Shannon for her time and efforts in editing and proofreading this thesis.

I would also like to thank Dr Bhuvan Narayan, Dr Hilary Yerbury for their supports at the initial stage of this thesis. Dr Burcu Cevik has been a good friend and supported whenever I needed them the most. A special thanks to Dr Samia Khatun (Tinni) who introduced me to my wonderful supervisors and showed interest in my project. I remember Dr Sanjida Khatun (Gaan Nanu) for her encouragements and valuable discussions. I would like to take the opportunity to thank all my teachers and mentors who helped me to grow as a human being.

I thank the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) community, including FASS, GRS and IT services for their help and support. They have always been prompt and efficient with their services.

I acknowledge all the informants who gave their valuable time and shared their insights, stories and memories with me. I would especially like to express my gratitude to the people of Kishoreganj, who made my fieldwork a pleasant and positive experience. I would like to remember the teachers of Chandrabati Primary School in Kishoreganj for their warm welcome, time and conversations. The officials and

founders of Chandrabati Academy in Dhaka also gave me time from their extremely busy schedule, which I highly appreciate.

I want to express my gratitude towards my family and friends in Bangladesh, especially my grandparents, my Nanu, Nana, Dadu and Dada. I want to thank Ibban, Niloy, Purni, Tanni, Irina, Aish and Inaaya, who are not only my family but my biggest supporters. I want to acknowledge all my friends and families in Australia, especially Navela, Shawon, Shompriti and Nashmin. My friend Sabrina deserves a special mention to be there for me. I thank My mother-in-law Professor Naima Haque and father-in-law Artist Nasim Ahmed Nadvi who always expressed their interest in my thesis. I had many valuable discussions with both of them.

My Baba, Artist Mohammad Ibrahim taught me to love and appreciate nature and encouraged me to read world literature. I appreciate all the knowledge, stories and dreams I have gathered from him, and thank him for everything. My Ammu Reela Mansura has made me the person I am today, and I would like to take the opportunity to thank her especially for all the hard works, dedications, sufferings and sacrifices she has made for our family.

I would love to express my gratitude to my daughter Nashwa Nadvi. She inspires me in so many ways with her positive, cheerful presence and words of encouragements. I would also love to thank my son Nevan Nadvi, who as a newborn was very patient and understanding when his mother wrote the very last chapters of this thesis, sitting beside him. I want to say a special thanks to my husband Dr Naveed Ahmed Nadvi (Nibirh), who from the very beginning supported me to gather this valuable research experience. No matter how complicated the situation was, I have always gained positive inspiration and feedback from him. Nashwa, Nevan and Nibirh: without your help and understanding I could not have completed this thesis. I am thankful to the ALMIGHTY for everything I have in my life.

And lastly, I would like to thank Chandrabati, for being an inspiration to me, to the Bengali women and women all over the world.

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Abstract

This thesis focus on the first woman poet of Bengal, Chandrabati and her literary works. Chandrabati who was born in the sixteenth century has written many songs and ballads which contain important elements and insights of her time. Her songs were one of the very first depictions of Bengali women, written from a woman's perspective. Moreover, her version of *Ramayana*, for its content, style and approach, can be attributed as one of the most important and unique retellings of *Ramayana* in Bengali.

The search for the relevance and importance of Chandrabati's songs and ballads to the people, especially the women of present-day Bangladesh brought out the sad reality of Chandrabati's disappearance of people's memories and lives. Beside exploring Chandrabati's life, the unique qualities of her songs and ballads, and their importance in writing the history of medieval Bengal, this thesis aims to find out the reasons why the people of Bangladesh forgot the poet they once adored. Besides this thesis demonstrates the journey of some contemporary cultural activists who are trying to reintroduce Chandrabati and her songs in modern Bangladesh and tells the story of their struggles and triumphs. It also describes what inspired the activists and singers to pursue this task. With a combination of semi-structured and in-depth interviews and observations, data was gathered. Using Thematic and Narrative analysis this thesis outlines the prevailing status of Chandrabati and her songs in modern Bangladesh.

This thesis does not confine itself to the past and present. Bangladesh, since its birth as an independent country in 1971 has experienced many changes in its social, cultural, political and religious scenario. The attitude of people is also an ever-changing aspect in the modern world because of globalization and extensive use of technologies. Entertainment industry too has changed all over the world, offering too many options for the public. In this context, with careful observation of the social, cultural, religious changes that are taking place in Bangladesh, and also taking consideration of the natural tendency of Bangladeshis, this thesis tries to predict, as an old indigenous cultural aspect, how Chandrabati's songs will be regarded in Bangladesh in the future.

Forgotten Phenomenon, Lost Songs: Chandrabati and Her Literature in Modern Bangladesh

Sumaya Afrin Eku



Chandrabati's Temple

Photographed by Sumaya Eku

Chapter One

Introduction

I praise the core of this world, Father and Mother

Who gave me birth in their shelter.

I praise *Valmiki Topodhon* among the Saints

I praise all the plants in water and land.

I praise land, water, sky and earth underneath

I praise *Kaal Mahakaal* lowering my head.

After that, I praise *Sri Guru's* feet

Praising everyone's feet I present my request.

Praising the four corners of the world I put an end to it

To gain the purpose, praising song Chandrabati sings.

Chandrabati

This literary piece, taken from the *Bandana* of the medieval Bengali ballad *Molua*, was written by a poet, who, along with many other masterpieces, wrote a *Ramayana*, which with its extraordinary characteristics and contents, can be regarded as one of the best *Ramayana* retellings in Bengali. This exemplary sixteenth-century poet is Chandrabati, who is credited as the 'first woman poet of Bengal'.

Chandrabati lived in the greater Mymensingh region, which is now situated in Bangladesh. Born into a poor Brahmin family, Chandrabati struggled against social and religious norms and succeeded in proving herself to be a strong, educated, independent person, who showcased her extraordinary talent in poetry in later life.

In her article 'Folklore and Gender Patriarchy and the Individual Voice of Women in Folk Tradition', Dr Susmita Chakrabarty criticised scholars for regarding Chandrabati as a 'woman poet'. She argued that the tendency of characteristically distinguishing feminism and poetics influenced people to acknowledge Chandrabati as a 'woman poet'. She added that it draws more attention that despite being a woman Chandrabati wrote poetry. As it is speculated that writing poetry is 'a normal thing' for men, they are not particularly addressed as 'male poet' (Chakrabarty 2014).

I disagree with Dr Chakrabarty's argument here. I too believe that a person's ability, creativity and creation should not be judged by their gender. However, the fact that Chandrabati could start writing poetry in a mediaeval, male-dominated and conservative society, and establish herself as a poet shows that she was not a poet who just happened to be a woman. In a society where women struggled to be educated, were forced to marry at a very young age, and were confined within boundaries created by religion and society, Chandrabati set an example by choosing a different path. She proved that women were not only capable of writing poetry, but also of creating masterpieces. I believe, people who credited her as the first Bengali woman poet usually highlighted her gender to mark the beginning of a new era of women contributing in Bengali literature and glorify her for being a pioneer for women of Bengal.

Chandrabati's work is a rare representation of women of medieval Bengal, which depict the stories of women from a woman's point of view. She depicted the issues that Bengali women faced in their everyday lives and their constant struggles against social norms and even their family and loved ones. She also portrayed how these women tried to negotiate the challenges in their lives. Chandrabati's writings also contain details of daily life. She was aware of the social, cultural, economic and religious aspects of her lived environment and her descriptions of medieval Bengal present a vivid picture of that time.

Patriarchal society restricted the accessibility of the *Ramayana* to women, but women found ways to get around these restrictions and Chandrabati was one such woman. She wrote a version of the *Ramayana* in which she depicted the story from Sita's point of view, making it a unique addition to *Ramayana* retelling. This is why it is also known as *Sitayana* (Sen 1997). Besides this *Ramayana*, she produced other vibrant and extraordinary literary masterpieces such as *Molua* and *Doshshu Kenaramer Pala*. Women, especially, adored Chandrabati's ballads and sang them both in festivals and in their daily lives.

Chandrabati was a devout Hindu but her religious views did not hinder the acceptance or popularity of her works, even when East Bengal (now Bangladesh) became a predominantly Muslim region. Bengali women performed Chandrabati's *Ramayana* and other songs to celebrate childbirth, weddings and religious festivals (Sen 1997). But eventually, the circumstances changed which affected Chandrabati's popularity and practice of her songs in Bangladesh.

In 1971 Bangladesh emerged as an independent country. Since then, it has experienced many political, social and cultural changes, and religion was no exception. From the beginning, Bangladeshis practised a more lenient and moderate form of Islam. Maneeza Hossain argued,

Due to their country's indigenous Sufi movements and the assimilation of Hindu and Buddhist attributes, most Bangladeshis have historically practised a moderate and tolerant form of Islam.

(Hossain 2006, p.69)

However, globalization opened up more opportunities for Bangladeshis to mingle with the outer world for economic, educational and other reasons. They observed the practices of different nationalities which modified their own beliefs and outlook of Islam. Akhand Akhtar Hossain said,

Their observations of other Muslims have prompted a measure of convergence with Islamic practice in the Gulf countries, which has undermined some elements of Bengali cultural customs and traditions. (Most modern Islamic scholars consider such customs unIslamic even though they remain popular, especially among literary figures and cultural activists.) (Hossain 2012, p.180)

Furthermore, world politics which had a great influence on Bangladesh's politics and people changed the religious dynamics of the country. Some religious scholars started to preach a more hardcore form of Islam and undermined 'Bengali culture' during their highly popular Islamic lectures. Eventually, Bangladesh experienced radical changes in the religious and political arena with the rise of fundamental ideologies which affected the social, cultural practices and festivals, in a nutshell, the core of Bangladesh's national identity. Apart from these circumstances, with advanced and easy to access technologies and different media, indigenous and old cultures are struggling to retain their place in all over the world, and Bangladesh is no exception. People especially younger generations are more drawn to

modern forms of entertainments which resulted in the disappearance of many older cultural practices and forgetting the cultural heroes who were once popular.

In this context, I was interested to observe the current status of Chandrabati and her songs in modern Bangladesh and find out the reasons behind the making of such a situation. In this thesis, I take a practical and personal approach to the poet's literature and songs. I visited her homeland, talked to people from her locality. I also talked to people who are associated with cultural activities in both rural and urban areas. Based on these conversations, observation of the past and recent events and considering the disposition of the Bangladeshis, I speculate on the challenges Chandrabati and her songs would face and also on the chances of them prevail in the future.

In the second chapter of this thesis, I discuss the literature that frames this thesis. The third chapter presents the methodology I used in my fieldwork and research. The fourth chapter contains a brief introduction to Chandrabati's life and a discussion of some of her most important literary works and their significance in the history of Bengal. The fifth chapter reviews her *Ramayana* and its distinct characteristics and importance. It also discusses the relation of Chandrabati's *Ramayana* to other *Ramayana* retellings, from India and neighbouring regions. In the sixth chapter, based on my fieldwork, I describe the present state and acceptance of Chandrabati and her works in Bangladesh and analyse the reasons behind them. The seventh chapter discusses cultural activists who are rethinking Chandrabati and her songs from different perspectives. It also reveals their aims and goals regarding Chandrabati's songs and memories and how they are working to achieve those goals. The eighth chapter describes the challenges cultural activists face while working on Chandrabati's songs in the context of the social and religious situation in modern Bangladesh. It explores the possibilities of Chandrabati and her songs being sustained in the long run. The ninth and concluding chapter summarises the findings of the whole thesis.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

This chapter reviews and discusses the literature that provides a thorough understanding of the different phases of this study, including Chandrabati's life, her works and the social, cultural and religious aspects of modern Bangladesh. There are three main focuses of this chapter. Firstly, it discusses and reviews the secondary literature that shaped the foundations and strengthened the hypothesis of this thesis. Secondly, it identifies gaps in previous literature, which this thesis aims to fill out. The final objective of this chapter is to establish the importance of this thesis as an original academic contribution to Chandrabati and her literature in recent Bangladesh.

The Literature that Shaped the Thesis

To discuss the secondary literature, I have categorised it into two main parts. The first part discusses the literature that included Chandrabati's life story, and directly reviewed and discussed her works. It also includes literature that had no direct connection to her works but helped to explain them better. Chandrabati's *Ramayana* is one of her most outstanding and unique works. To understand her *Ramayana* and to determine its special characteristics, I have explored literature that discussed not only the original Valmiki *Ramayana*, but also its countless retelling and representations from various regions and languages. This literature is outlined in the first section.

One of the main intentions of this thesis is to determine the extent to which Chandrabati is known nowadays and, to what degree her works might be accepted and have a future in modern Bangladesh. To provide a clearer understanding, I have explored literature outlining various aspects of Bangladesh, including the social, cultural, religious and political features following its emergence as an independent country. In the second part, I discuss that literature.

Chandrabati, Her Works and *Ramayana*

Noyon Chand Ghosh's ballad '*Chandrabati*' was one of the earliest pieces of literature, if not the first, on Chandrabati and her life (Sen 1990). The later literature discussing Chandrabati's distinguished life and character was mainly based on this ballad, and almost all writers have acknowledged it in their writings. Ghosh's ballad beautifully depicted Chandrabati's love for Jayananda, her obedience to her father, the sorrows she encountered when Jayananda betrayed her, her determination, her devotion to Lord Shiva, her writing the *Ramayana* and lastly her tragic death. However, this ballad did not place any particular emphasis on Chandrabati's writing skills or literary works. Although it mentioned her writing the *Ramayana*, it did not allude to her other literary works. It seems as if Ghosh's main intention was to glorify Chandrabati as a tragic heroine in a sad love story rather than a pioneer writer. Yet, despite this, the importance of this ballad in writing the history of Chandrabati is undeniable.

Author, researcher and folklore collector Chandrakumar Dey has been credited with introducing Chandrabati to the educated and civil society of Bengal (Borkot 2012). In 1913, his paper, in which he discussed Chandrabati's life and introduced her work, was published in '*Shourav*' and attracted the attention of Dr Dineshchandra Sen. Later with the help of Sir Ashutosh Mukhopaddhay, Dr Sen appointed Chandrakumar Dey as Collector of Folklore at the University of Kolkata (Sen 1923). From the year 1923 to 1932, Dr Sen published '*Purbabanga Gitika*' in four parts. He included Chandrabati's ballad *Molua*, *Doshshu Kenaramer Pala* and *Ramayana* in that compilation (Borkot 2012).

Another researcher who played an important role in compiling and discussing Chandrabati's works was Dr Khitishchandra Maulik (Borkot 2012). Dr Maulik argued that Chandrabati's *Ramayana* was her first attempt at writing, in which she followed in her father's footsteps and expressed the language and rhythm in a style of writing, which could be found in the '*Mongolkavya*' written in West Bengal. He continued, later Chandrabati realised her mistake and followed the writing style of Eastern Bengal, her homeland. Dr Maulik argued, what she delivered in her later ballads like *Molua* and *Doshshu Kenaramer Pala*, determined her place as one of the finest ballad writers of all time (Maulik 1975). In my opinion, Dr Maulik has discussed Chandrabati's *Ramayana* solely from the perspective of a literary critic. If we place literary excellence aside, I believe the distinct qualities of her *Ramayana* alone, (written from

Sita's perspective, criticising Rama et cetera) possessed sufficient qualities to include her among the greatest ballad writers of Bengal.

Dr A. K. Ramanujan's work on various forms of *Ramayana*, from oral to written, translation to rewriting, helped my comprehension of them enormously. In his paper, 'Three Hundred *Ramayanas*: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation', Dr Ramanujan gathered various telling of *Ramayana* from different regions, compared these *Ramayana* stories and figured out the relations among them. He said that,

In this paper, indebted for its data to numerous previous translators and scholars, I would like to sort out for myself, and I hope for others, how these hundreds of telling of a story in different cultures, languages, and religious traditions relate to each other: what get translated, transplanted, transposed. (Ramanujan 1991, p.134)

There are countless retellings of *Ramayana*. Dr Ramanujan said that, in 1950, a *Ramayana* student Camille Bulcke, counted three hundred tellings of *Ramayana*. Dr Ramanujan stated,

It's no wonder that even as long ago as the fourteenth century, *Kumaravyasa*, a Kannada poet, chose to write a *Mahabharata*, because he heard the cosmic serpent which upholds the earth groaning under the burden of *Ramayana* poets. (Ramanujan 1991, p.134)

Under these circumstances, where there are so many *Ramayana* stories in Bengal, India and beyond, the pertinent question is why it is worth mentioning and discussing Chandrabati's *Ramayana*? Most of the *Ramayana* writers wanted to establish Rama as an ideal human with divine qualities. Swami Paramatmanand Saraswati, like most of the authors who discussed *Ramayana*, portrayed Lord Rama as a perfect human. Despite Rama's weaknesses and vulnerability on various occasions, the writers tried to establish Rama as a 'complete role model' and 'complete hero'. He also said that Rama provides the values and inspirations that are important for all of us to transform ourselves into mature and responsible human beings (Saraswati 2001).

Rushikesh N. Upadhyay, while discussing the essence of husband-wife relationships as demonstrated in *Ramayana*, tried to justify Rama's actions towards Sita. We know from the story that Rama did everything he could to keep Sita safe in the forest and later to save her from Ravana. But when it came to protecting her from humiliation and the prejudice of his subjects, he turned his back and abandoned Sita, who, at the time, was carrying his child.

Upadhyay tried to defend Rama's action claiming that Rama was selfless. He abandoned Sita, not because he didn't trust her or doubted her chastity, but to perform his duty as a king; as his pupil was suspicious about her purity and did not want to accept her as their queen. Upadhyay further added that Sita never complained about any injustice meted out to her and thus tried to glorify this dishonourable chapter of Rama and Sita's lives (Upadhyay 2001). While other authors tried to picture Rama as a complete and flawless human, the uniqueness of Chandrabati's *Ramayana* rests in the fact that she boldly criticised Rama for his misdeeds. Dr Nabaneeta Dev Sen indicated this rare quality of her *Ramayana* and also credited her for constantly questioning and doubting Rama's judgement (Sen 2001).

Another unique feature of Chandrabati's *Ramayana* is her emphasis on Sita's character and relating the story from Sita's perspective. Dr Nabaneeta Dev Sen has studied the female re-telling of *Ramayana* and pointed out some basic rules women followed when retelling their version of *Ramayana* stories. She observed and mentioned Chandrabati's writing the *Ramayana* from a woman's perspective. She said that,

- 1) You could tell it like it is, by borrowing the traditional eyes of the male epic poet, as Molla does in her 16th century Telugu *Ramayana*. Or 2) you could tell it like it is, looking at it with your own women's eyes, as Chandrabati does in her 16th century Bengali *Ramayana*. Or 3) you could tell it like it is by borrowing an ideological viewpoint as Ranganayakamma does in *Ramayana Vishabriksham*, rewriting the Rama tale from the Marxist point of view. Or 4) you could tell your own story through the story of Sita, as the village women of India have been doing for hundreds of years. (Sen 1998, p.1)

Sita, Lord Rama's wife is one of the most important characters of *Ramayana* and is a representation of an ideal woman. She is also undoubtedly one of the most adored characters in Indian epics. Sita's place as an ideal woman and wife became evident once again when in 2012, the Bombay High Court while hearing a divorce case, suggested the wife return to her husband and follow the example of the goddess Sita. The court affirmed that wives should always behave like Sita and support their husbands in every situation as she did in the epic *Ramayana*. Interestingly this incident once again proved the relevance of *Ramayana* even in the 21st century and raised a series of questions. One obvious concern raised by this incident was the expectation that modern women possess the same beliefs and values and act like a woman who supposedly resided on earth two thousand years ago. Interestingly, while going

through the *Ramayana* related literature, I discovered that, although there were so many colours and shades of Sita's character, both positive and negative, patriarchal societies emphasised only those elements that enabled them to present Sita as the epitome of ideal womanhood and impose that as an image for modern women to emulate.

Jayananda Dave pointed out that, the original *Ramayana* writer Valmiki's Sita was not a mere weak, vulnerable woman. She had a strong personality and did not hesitate to criticise her husband Rama on various occasions (Dave 2001, p.22). So it was clear that Valmiki's intention was not to portray Sita as an ideal woman. It was the later interpreters and translators of *Ramayana*, and religious leaders, who pictured her as a sophisticated, cultured, obedient, soft-spoken woman. They used her character as a weapon to deploy against Indian women to confine and control their behaviour within their family and social life. Dr Nabaneeta Dev Sen said that 'Sita remains the ideal woman through whom the patriarchal values may be spread far and wide, through whom women may be taught to forbear all injustice silently' (Sen 2001, p.4). Chandrabati's Sita did not differ from the Sita patriarchal society wanted to promote; sweet, obedient and passionate, her Sita tolerated almost all injustice silently. Chandrabati's Sita did not particularly oppose Sri Rama in her version, but Chandrabati did. Her *Ramayana*, which contained taunting words towards Rama, is bold and unique.

Shashitoranjan Chakrabarty wrote his book '*Chandrabati Prothom Mohila Kobi*', based on Noyon Chand's ballad. Although he did not add any new information in his writing, his book managed to deliver primary knowledge on Chandrabati and her writings to the young people of her locality. One of my informants Sathi Rani Das said that she found Chakrabarty's book in the office of Chandrabati Primary School and this book was the only source from which they could learn about the poet.

Dr Bani Das, in her book '*Bangla Shahittya O Bangalir Jatiya Jibone Ramayana*', not only discussed the different characteristics of *Ramayana*, but also the importance of *Ramayana* in the society, religion and culture of Bengal. In this process, she discussed the *Ramayana* and its impact on various aspects of India, rather than Bengal alone. According to Dr Das, *Ramayana* is the national epic of India. She argued that *Ramayana* is an overall representation of the high idealism that the Indian states, societies and families possess. She stated that the ideal family story of *Ramayana* had an enormous effect on the family life of India (Das 2000).

Dr Das discussed Chandrabati's *Ramayana* in detail in this book and credited her *Ramayana* with being the 17th or 18th-century version of *Ramayana* stories. She stated that Chandrabati's *Ramayana* has a special place in the literary history of Bengal (Das 2000). To support her argument, Dr Das added that, Chandrabati has constructed her characters based on the characters she had seen in her everyday life. For this reason, her *Ramayana* came to reflect on Bengalis and their day-to-day life (Das 2000).

Dr Das's work is an important overall contribution to the knowledge of *Ramayana* in Bengal, including Chandrabati's *Ramayana* but I disagree with her theory that Michael Modhushudon Dutta (a famous Bengali poet), was not influenced by Chandrabati's *Ramayana*. I discuss this in detail in Chapter Five, *Chandrabati's Ramayana: A Known Story, A Different Approach*.

'*Chandrabatir Ramayana o Prashangik Path*' is an important and recent compilation of Chandrabati's life and her *Ramayana* related papers. In the preface to this book, editor Himel Borkot stated that Chandrabati has not gained the respect and recognition she deserved from the critics and indicated that this circumstance was his motivation for compiling the book. He said that Chandrabati was not only unique in Bengali literature for her creativity, wisdom and sense of protest, but also was known as the only woman poet of the entire medieval age. He argued that, despite writing many ballads including *Molua*, *Doshshu Kenaramer Pala*, *Ramayana*, and some parts of *Padma Puran*, Chandrabati was not evaluated properly because of the colonial aesthetic philosophy and dominant attitudes of the male, modern critics. Borkot also added that the critics placed greater emphasis on Chandrabati's father's achievement, even when they discussed her works. They also highlighted her love life more than her works and were interested in portraying her as a tragic heroine betrayed by her lover. Borkot stated that, although Chandrabati's name is mentioned in the history of Bengali literature, her literature has not been discussed and has been neglected. (Borkot 2012).

Chandrabati and Her Works in Bangladesh: Past, Present and Future

At the start of my fieldwork, I became aware that people lacked almost any knowledge of Chandrabati, let alone her works. This was true even in her locality. I was intrigued and determined to explore the reasons for this ignorance. I believe, the domination of male historians, writers and critics and their collective disregard of literature written by women

prevented Chandrabati's works from gaining their due recognition. Bishwajeet Ghosh's discussion on how Bengali literature has been under male domination (Ghosh 2012), supports my hypothesis. Dr Nabaneeta Dev Sen was discouraged from reading Chandrabati's *Ramayana* by reading the reviews of literary historians (Sen 2000), who failed to recognise the essence of Chandrabati's writings. Dr Sen also criticised Sukumar Sen for highlighting Chandrabati's love story rather than her literature (Sen 2000).

A further reason for Chandrabati's fading memory is the widespread neglect of, and disregard for history, archaeology and heritage. Susmita Chakrabarty (2016) criticised Bangladeshis for their lack of awareness and neglect of their own history and culture. Even the Department of Archaeology in Bangladesh fails to adequately maintain and renovate archaeological sites (Hossain 2009)

After Bangladesh emerged as an independent country in 1971, the father of the nation, Bangabondhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, along with other principles, focused on secularism (Jahan 1973). When Bangabondhu was killed in 1975, Islam acquired greater significance (Jahan 1976). Later General Ziaur Rahman deleted the articles relating to secularism from the constitution (Alam 1993) and General Ershad thereafter directly imposed Islam as the 'state religion' (Samad 2009). The enforcement of Islam as the state religion, not only made minority groups feel even more neglected but also encouraged Muslims to become dominant over the minorities.

The history of discrimination towards Hindus in Bangladesh is a history replete with denial, betrayal and grief. It has been a continuous process and can be dated back to before the birth of Bangladesh. Choudhury and Kanta's (2015) discussion on the discrimination of Muslims towards Hindus revealed the different shades and layers of this long-existing problem; a problem which eventually compelled Hindus and other minority groups to leave Bangladesh and migrate to neighbouring countries in increasing numbers. In Chapter Six, I examine how the declining number of Hindus in the population has played an important role in the diminishing status of Chandrabati and her works.

This research explores the possibility of how Chandrabati and her songs might be revived and survive in modern Bangladesh. I have observed and studied the recent social, cultural and religious changes that are taking place in Bangladesh. Various insightful articles and journals

written on these aspects of Bangladesh by Sabir Mustafa (2015), Mukul Devichand (2015), Gwynne Dyer (2016), Sandip Roy (2016), Simon Tisdall (2016) and Sanjay Majumder (2016) have provided me with a clear and rounded perspective on this subject.

The Aims, Goals and Importance of this Research

Most of the literature on Chandrabati and her works were based on secondary literature. Many writers have discussed Chandrabati's life from the viewpoint of a storyteller, while very few have discussed her life from the perspective of a historian. On the other hand, most of the writers and researchers who analysed Chandrabati's literature mainly focused on the literary values of her writings, rather than their extraordinary contents. This was mainly because her ballads gained more attention from literary scholars than from historians. Writers such as Dr Nabaneeta Dev Sen, Susmita Chakrabarty emphasised the role of gender in her literature and discussed her works from women's perspectives. Notably, Dr Nabaneeta Dev Sen was one of the first scholars to draw the attention of educated society to the bold and rebellious quality of Chandrabati's writings, especially her *Ramayana*.

Many valuable works and early research has been conducted on Chandrabati and her works (especially on her *Ramayana*), which I have discussed in this chapter. Among all this research and writing, the question posed by this thesis is why have I pursued this study? What are the principal intentions behind this particular research and how does my research claim an important place in the study of Chandrabati and her works in Bangladesh? I answer these questions below.

In this thesis, I discuss Chandrabati's life in detail. An integral part of this thesis is a discussion of the rare quality of Chandrabati's *Ramayana*, which is written from a woman's perspective. I have also emphasised the different characteristics and components of her other literature, such as *Molua*, *Dhoshshu Kenaramer Pala*, which contain valuable aspects of the social, cultural, and religious history of medieval Bengal, but are often overlooked by scholars. I have sought to establish Chandrabati as one of the most important writers of medieval Bengal and to demonstrate the reasons why this legendary writer and her literary works deserve greater recognition from scholars and the general public alike.

One of the most important elements of my thesis is the attempt to ascertain the current status of Chandrabati and her works in modern Bangladesh. Previous literature has claimed that women in Bangladesh love Chandrabati and sing her songs in their daily lives. During my fieldwork, however, I found such statements at odds with the present situation. When I realised that her name and works were largely forgotten and generally women no longer sang her songs, I was determined to discover the reasons for this situation. I spoke to several people from different sectors of society. Based on conversations with them and the stories they told me, I have identified some of the underlying reasons for the current status of Chandrabati and her songs in modern Bangladesh. I discuss these in detail in Chapter Six.

This thesis not only pinpoints why Chandrabati has been neglected and forgotten but also sheds some light on the recent activities of those who have greater cultural awareness and are trying to revive Chandrabati's status and re-establish her songs locally and nationally. This thesis discusses the reasons and motivations that have inspired activists to reintroduce Chandrabati. It also discusses the process singers and activists are following to recreate Chandrabati's songs. Moreover, it investigates the challenges activists are facing to achieve their goals and indicates how to overcome them.

The research in this thesis is not confined to the present. Following a careful examination of the recent changes in Bangladesh's religious and cultural aspects, it examines what effects the changes might have on Chandrabati's legacy. This thesis also aims to demonstrate the possibilities of Chandrabati and her songs being revived and surviving in modern Bangladesh despite those changes.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have reviewed the literature both primary and secondary, that enabled me to develop the initial research questions and to form the basis of this thesis. It also discussed omissions in previous literature on Chandrabati and her works and how this thesis seeks to address these gaps by adopting a more practical approach.

Chapter Three

Methodology

The main focus of this chapter is to demonstrate the methodology I followed when conducting my research. Throughout this chapter, I justify the methods I chose as being more suitable to perform the study successfully, along with the ethical responsibilities involved in undertaking this research. I also describe the data storage and data analysing method I have employed. In conclusion, I describe how 'rigour' was established and maintained throughout the study.

Research Questions and Ethical Challenges

In this thesis, I examine how Chandrabati and her songs are regarded in modern Bangladesh and why Chandrabati's songs were at the edge of extinction in the first place. Besides, I seek to ascertain whether they have any place in Bangladesh's future. As analysing the stories and responses of people, who were (and are) somehow associated with Chandrabati and her works, was one of the main research components, qualitative research was appropriate for the study. Historical method, semi-structured interviews and observation were some of the methods I employed to execute this study. In 2002 Mason described qualitative research as,

Through qualitative research we can explore a wide array of dimensions of the social world, including the texture and weave of everyday life, the understandings, experiences and imaginings of our research participants, the ways that social processes, institutions, discourses or relationships work, and the significance of the meanings they generate. (Mason, cited in Lynch 2014, p. 1)

I started my research using the historical method in which I focused principally on the primary (Chandrabati's writings) and secondary (writings on Chandrabati and her works) sources. Hammersley and Atkinson suggested that,

While there are no hard- and- fast rules for deciding how far initial ideas can be clarified and elaborated before the collection of data begins, exploring them and their implications with the help

of whatever secondary literature is available is certainly a wise first step. (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, p24)

This process provided me with a basic grasp of the overall idea and also enabled me to identify the initial research problems and develop the research questions. Once I identified the research questions, I focused on designing a data collection method to gain the necessary ethics clearance from the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) of the University of Technology Sydney.

At that stage, I encountered two challenges. First of all, as my thesis was mainly based on the Bengali poet Chandrabati and her works which were written in Bangla, I had to demonstrate the significance of my research to an audience who were largely unfamiliar with Bangladeshi culture, tradition and lifestyle. Secondly, my research site was in Bangladesh (mainly the rural areas of Kishoreganj) and the potential informants were of Bangladeshi background. As there are significant differences between Bangladesh and Australia, including language, cultural and social practices, as a Bangladeshi-Australian researcher, conducting research from an Australian university, I had to incorporate aspects from these two cultures to present a research plan that was intelligible to the Ethics Committee and would also respect the social practices and etiquette of the Bangladeshi community. Besides, I had to translate the information sheet and consent form into Bangla to make them accessible to informants with limited knowledge of English. As I wished to include the views of the younger generations towards Chandrabati and her works, I had to justify interviewing children, if needed, while maintaining the responsibilities and also the code of ethics.

The process of acquiring the Ethics clearance for my research (UTS HREC REF NO. 2013000565), enabled me to establish a thorough plan for collecting data including preparing the information sheet, selecting the participants and designing the questions. The process helped me to make plans to record my data, store them and also anticipate any emergencies.

Data Collection Procedures

Here I demonstrate the various elements of the data collection process and how I executed them.

Recruiting the Informants

Informants were recruited using Purposeful Sampling and Snowball or Chain Sampling techniques. I began to identify informants with relevant information and insights prior to my fieldwork. Once I had collected the names of people who were well acquainted with Chandrabati and her works, I contacted them via phone. They spontaneously introduced me to other potential informants, whom I also contacted and arranged meetings via phone calls.

Although most of the informants came from one area, Kishoreganj, they were from different economic, educational, social and religious backgrounds. The diversity of the informants provided insight into the overall perspective of the population. I interviewed both male and female informants, ranging in age from nine years to a hundred and two years. As I wished to understand Hindu woman Chandrabati's status in a predominantly Muslim occupied country, I talked to both Hindu and Muslim participants to obtain a better grasp of the situation. Conversations with younger generations offered insight into some of the reasons behind the neglect of Chandrabati along with the challenges her identity and works are likely to face in attempting to re-establish her recognition in modern Bangladesh.

The informants in this research can be categorised into two broad groups. The first group consisted mostly of people with limited knowledge or no knowledge of Chandrabati. Most came from Chandrabati's village and the surrounding areas. The interviews included teachers and students from the Chandrabati primary School and some cultural activists from Chandrabati's village. I also spoke with two different groups of women and young adults (8 to 10 participants in each group), who still sing women's songs on various occasions and in their daily lives.

The people with limited knowledge of Chandrabati shared their experiences and views on why they thought Chandrabati had lost her prominence, and what could be done to alter the situation. These conversations enabled me to grasp their understanding of Chandrabati's

status and how they would react to initiatives to reintroduce the poet in society. The second group was comprised of people with extensive knowledge and understanding of Chandrabati and her works. Some were directly involved with Chandrabati's songs in an ambitious plan to recreate a place for her works in modern Bangladesh, while others worked indirectly to bring awareness of their hero Chandrabati to the general population.

The Site

The fieldwork took place mainly in Chandrabati's village Patuayr and the surrounding areas of Kishoreganj, and also in Dhaka. I travelled to Kishoreganj, (a district not very far from the capital city Dhaka) and stayed there for one week to conduct the interviews in the familiar environment of the informants. I interviewed two groups of women in the front yards of their homes. As they were in their natural setting, they participated in the conversation spontaneously. The other interviews mainly took place in the workplace of the participants.

Consent from the Participants

I strictly followed the code of Research Ethics in performing the study. I prepared a participant information sheet and consent form both in Bangla and English. Prior to every interview, I explained my research area to the participants, what it was about and what they could expect from the research. I also assured them that participating in the study was voluntary, and the data generated from the study would be stored in a safe place. A couple of informants who wished to be anonymous were reassured that their wishes would be respected at every step of the study. Some participants were reluctant to sign a written document (the consent form) so I acquired verbal consent from them. Other participants, who had limited literacy skills, also gave verbal consent.

Data Recording

In 2000 Thorne argued that 'Qualitative data comes in various forms including recorded observations, focus groups, texts, documents, multimedia, public domain sources, policy manuals, and photographs' (Nowell et al. 2017, p.5). Besides, various data collection modes for a particular research project was supported by Lincoln and Guba, who in 1985 stated that data collected in various forms accelerated the possibility that 'the research findings and interpretations' would attain greater credibility (Nowell et al, 2017, p. 6).

With the consent of the participants, I audio recorded all the interviews, as repeated and slow playing of the recordings supported transcribing and also helped with the analysis of detailed interactions (Hoey and Kendrick 2017.) In the case of the group interviews, I audio recorded them along with video recording. I video recorded these interviews so that I could view them several times to obtain a better understanding of the gestures, behaviour and attitudes of the participants, especially while performing Chandrabati's songs. I also took many photos of Chandrabati's home, the temples and surrounding areas, which provided valuable material to demonstrate the present condition of her home and property.

Combination of Semi-Structured and In-Depth Interviews

I conducted both individual and group interviews. The individual interviews largely consisted of those with extensive knowledge of Chandrabati. Included in this group were the cultural activists working on restoring Chandrabati's legacy and the singers and activists working on Chandrabati's songs. Besides, I interviewed both the founder and co-founder of the Chandrabati Academy, who are focusing on promoting her name in urban areas.

I conducted semi-structured and in-depth interviews with these informants. I asked them some general questions including how they became familiar with the name and works of Chandrabati and where they obtained this knowledge. The questions also included what kind of information they had received on Chandrabati and what did their knowledge and understanding of Chandrabati's life and work consist of. Aside from following the questions, I was interested in learning their individual stories about Chandrabati so I encouraged them to talk about their memories and experiences relating to the poet.

In addition to the general questions, I asked specific questions to those interviewees with differing knowledge and expertise. To the founder of Chandrabati Academy, my questions were, what motivated and inspired them to work on Chandrabati's legacy, what were their achievements so far and what were their plans for the future. Whereas, when I interviewed the Chairman of *Gana Shanskritik Dol*, who is working on Chandrabati's songs, my main intention was to know the entire process they followed to recreate the songs. I was interested to find out what encouraged them to work on her songs, what challenges they were facing and how they intended to resolve any problems.

Combination of Semi-Structured Interview and Observation

I included two groups of women in my study. I combined semi-structured Interviews and observations to conduct my study with them. The first group was from Noyaparha in the Jafrabaad area. The second group was from Shotal Bhattacharya Parha, which was not very far from the Kishoreganj Jilla Sadar. As these women still sing women's songs on various occasions and in their daily life, I anticipated finding them singing Chandrabati's songs. Although I did not succeed in this particular mission, (I will describe this in detail in Chapter Six) their insights helped me to understand some aspects of Chandrabati's current status and the reasons behind it. Their thoughts about the future of Chandrabati's status and her works also helped me to figure out the possibilities and challenges. These women performed some women's songs for the study including one song 'about' Chandrabati. Their performance revealed their passion and enthusiasm for women's songs. Their communal behaviour during performances was also an important part of the observation. As these interviews took place in open, shared places, small groups of people gathered to view the performances. This allowed me to observe the audience and their reactions while the women performed their songs.

Data Management and Storage

As I mentioned earlier, I audio and videotaped the interviews and also took photos. The audio and videotaped data acquired during the interviews as well as the photographs were stored

in safe places, both online and offline. The general data contained little in the way of sensitive issues. But as there were one or two informants who wanted to be anonymous, their safety and security were considered during all aspects of the research.

The interviews took place in Bangla. Once I finished the interviews, I translated them into English. While translating, I concentrated on remaining true to each participant's comments and insights. I listened to the audio recordings many times to translate them accurately and when the translation was completed, I transcribed the interviews.

Data Analysis

A combination of Thematic Analysis and Narrative analysis was used to explain the data, which I demonstrate below.

Thematic Analysis

Bricki and Green argued, 'A Thematic Analysis is one that looks across all the data to identify the main themes that summarises all the views you have collected' (Bricki and Green 2007, p.23). Braun and Clarke in 2006 and King in 2004 stated that 'thematic analysis is a useful method for examining the perspectives of different research participants, highlighting similarities and differences, and generating unanticipated insights' (Nowell et al. p.2). When I commenced the data analysis, I was trying to identify the main concepts, insights and ideas generated from the data and I believed Thematic Analysis suited the study best. Therefore, a Thematic Analysis framework as described by Nowell et al. (2017) was employed to study the data.

In the first phase of the analysis process, I acquainted myself with the data as it is important for researchers to 'immerse themselves with the data to familiarize themselves with the depth and breadth of the content' (Braun & Clarke, cited in Nowell et al. 2017, p.6). While translating and transcribing the data, (listening to the audio data repeatedly and comprehensively) I become very familiar with them and noted their potential themes. I also attained detailed knowledge of the video recordings and visual material.

In the next stage, I focused on potential themes and found common issues, insights emerging from the data. I listed them and went through the list thoroughly and determined the main themes. The significance of identifying themes was described by Srivastava and Hopwood as,

In any case, the qualitative data analyst is constantly on the hunt for concepts and themes that, when taken together, will provide the best explanation of “what’s going on” in an inquiry.

(Srivastava and Hopwood, 2009, p.77)

Once the main themes were established, I searched for connections among them. I then made detailed notes and subcategorised the main themes to gain a better understanding of the data. This process was supported by DeSantis and Ugarriza’s (2000) statement that,

A theme is an abstract entity that brings meaning and identity to a recurrent experience and its variant manifestations. As such, a theme captures and unifies the nature or basis of the experience into a meaningful whole. (DeSantis and Ugarriza, cited in Nowell et al 2017, p9)

I have presented a glimpse of the outcomes of this process in table 1 (page 22). The basis of the reported elements of my thesis was formed by the patterns and relationships that emerged from the main themes (Brikci and Green. 2007, p.24).

Table 1: Identifying Main Themes

Categories (Main Themes)	Sub-categories (Sub- Themes)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Chandrabati's current status 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not many people remember Chandrabati • People mainly emphasise her love life • The present status of her home and temples
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The reasons she was erased from people's memories 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Neglect by the scholars • Insufficient Government initiatives • Her absence in primary and secondary books. • Neglect by the Media • The decreasing number of Hindus
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The motivation behind recreating a place for Chandrabati 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Memories of the activists • Promoting local hero • Promoting their area • A sense of responsibility
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Main Challenges for the Activists 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lost Tunes • Lack of funding • Lack of Governmental support • Insufficient Media coverage

Narrative Analysis

During the interviews, the participants shared their experiences and stories regarding Chandrabati. As the interviews took place in Bangla, the native language of the interviewees, they felt comfortable and motivated to share their stories. Also, open-ended questions such as: what are your early memories regarding Chandrabati, or how did you come to know about her, encouraged the participants to express their personal experiences and memories. The interviews generated story-like data and a narrative approach was employed to analyse them. One important aspect of the narrative approach is to explore why a story is being told in a certain way. Eathy and Cronin explained,

A narrative approach is concerned not only with the story-telling components or characteristics of an account, but also with the social interactions between interviewer and interviewee that encourage and influence the way that an account is presented. (2008, p.8)

In this study, I particularly concentrated on how stories were told because this helped me to identify contradictions in the stories, including similar elements shared by different people. I used Fraser's (2004) framework to analyse the narrative data, which I describe below.

Hearing the stories and experiencing each other's emotions: I conducted semi-structured and in-depth interviews with the informants in an endeavour to understand their feelings.

Transcribing the materials: Fraser argued, 'Transcriptions are useful because they offer a more accurate record of the interview than memory alone' (Fraser 2004, p.188). In this phase, I emphasized the transcriptions. Firstly, I translated the interviews into English. During that process, I also transcribed the interviews. I tried to accurately convey the comments and remarks of the interviewees while translating.

Interpreting individual transcripts: I read the interviews several times to identify stories within them. I also paid attention to any contradictions within them.

Scanning across different domains of experiences: The same elements were experienced and described differently by people of different religion, gender or age. I emphasised 'why' interpersonal stories and experiences differ from one another and 'what' the elements were that influenced them. Examining different perspectives helped me to obtain a clearer understanding of the 'whole' situation.

Linking ‘the personal with the political’: During this phase, I was alert to popular discourses (‘religious intolerance’, ‘modern music’ et cetera) that emerged in the conversations and how they were represented.

Looking for commonalities and differences among participants: Fraser argued,

Similar to the work undertaken on individual transcripts, this may be done by comparing and contrasting the content, style and tone of respective speakers. Patterns may surface that are worth exploring. (Fraser 2004, p.195)

I emphasised Fraser’s argument to find similarities and dissimilarities contained in the conversations. I also looked for connections between them and explored ‘why’ there were common issues or contradictions. I also searched for any theme or pattern that might emerge from the stories.

Writing academic narratives about personal stories: While writing the thesis, I was mindful of the fact that, based on the personal stories of others, I was telling my own story (Ellerman 1998, Ezzy 1998, and Solas 1995, cited in Fraser 2004, p.196).

Establishment of ‘Rigour’

Establishing reliability, credibility and trustworthiness are some of the most important elements when conducting research. Brikci and Green argued that ‘it remains important to ensure that your analysis is reliable and its validity safeguarded’ (Brikci and Green 2007, p.26). They suggested that researchers should stay ‘as rigorous as possible to get the most out of the collected information’ and also to attain credit from everywhere (Brikci and Green 2007, p.26). Baxter and Eyles (1997) explained rigour by stating that, ‘Ensuring rigour in qualitative research means establishing the trustworthiness of our work’ (Baxter and Eyles, cited in Welland 2015, p.22).

‘Rigour’ has been the main concern from the outset of this research as Bradshaw and Stratford (2005) suggested, ‘When conducting research, rigour must be considered from the outset and therefore must underpin the early stages of research design’ (Bradshaw & Stratford, cited in Welland 2015, p.22).

To attain trustworthiness and validity, a Triangulation method was adopted by using a mixed-method approach (semi-structured, in-depth interviews, observations along with collecting visual material). According to Brikci and Green, 'Triangulation is one method for increasing validity of findings, through deliberately seeking evidence from a wide range of sources and comparing findings from those different sources' (Brikci and Green 2007, p.26). Reliability and trustworthiness were acquired by using direct quotes from the informants throughout the paper to support my, the researcher's, interpretations.

In this research, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) 'criteria checklist for evaluating qualitative research', cited in Baxter and Eyles's article 'Evaluating qualitative research in social geography: establishing 'rigour' in interview analysis' (1997) was used to ensure that rigour was established (Baxter and Eyles 1997, p.521). The checklist is described in Table 2 (page 26-28).

Table 2: Checklist for Evaluating Qualitative Research

Criteria	Definition	Assumption	Strategies implied to this study to meet the criteria
Credibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Authentic representations of experience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple realities • Causes not distinguishable from effects • Empathetic researcher • Researcher as instrument • An emphasis of the research endeavour 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Purposeful sampling • Conversation with different participants with an empathetic attitude • Extensive engagement with the informants • Triangulation by adopting multiple analysis methods
Transferability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fit within contexts outside the study situation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time and context-bound experiences • Not responsibility of 'sending' researcher • Provision of information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Purposeful Sampling • Detailed and responsible description of the research methods

		for 'receiving' researcher	
Dependability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimization of idiosyncrasies in interpretation • Variability tracked to identifiable sources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Researcher as instrument • Consistency in interpretation (same phenomena always matched with the same constructs) Multiple realities • An idiosyncrasy of behaviour and context 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digitally recorded data • Triangulation by adopting multiple analysis methods • A research audit trail was developed
Confirmability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The extent to which biases, motivations, interests or perspectives of the inquirer influence interpretations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Biases, motivations, interests or perspectives of the inquirer can influence the interpretation • Focus on investigator and interpretation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fieldwork journal • Be mindful about keeping the interpretations free from the bias, motivations, interests or perspectives of the researcher • Regular contact with the

			supervisors to discuss the interpretation
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Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have discussed the main research questions and how I designed the research to answer these questions. I also addressed the principal ethical challenges (language barrier, working with children et cetera) and the way I resolved these issues (translating important documents and the transcripts, being mindful of not offending the social etiquette and practices of both Bangladesh and Australia). To ensure that rigour was established, I used multiple methods of qualitative approach (semi-structured and in-depth interviews, observations). I was respectful towards the informants during fieldwork, and afterwards when translating, transcribing, interpreting the data and writing about their memories and stories. To maximise the validation of my findings, I have used multiple data analysing methods (Thematic and Narrative Analysis). In later chapters (Chapter Six, Seven and Eight) I tell the 'stories' I found from my fieldwork. The next two chapters (Chapter Four and Five) shed light solely on Chandrabati and her literary works.

Chapter Four

The Story of an Exemplary Character: Chandrabati and Her Literature

With a basket in hand, maiden Chandrabati

Goes to pick flowers when the night is over.

First, she picks marigold to worship *Shiva*

Then she picks *Maloti* flower to weave garland.

Nayon Chand Ghosh

In his ballad '*Chandrabati*', Noyon Chand Ghosh depicted the different layers and components of Chandrabati's life with love, passion and tenderness. It is this ballad which is our main source of knowledge of the personal life of this pioneer woman (Das 2000). Fortunately, Dr Dinesh Chandra Sen realised the importance of this ballad and included it in his compilation of Bengali Ballads '*Mymenshingha Gitika*'. Here I briefly discuss Chandrabati's life based on Nayon Chand Ghosh's ballad.

Story of Chandrabati's Life

Chandrabati's life contained all the components necessary to create an engaging story. Her life, although short, was full of romance, devotion, betrayal, struggle and tragedy. Ironically, it is a harsh truth that more attention has been paid to her colourful life and love story than to her outstanding literature, which I discuss in later chapters. Most importantly, however, even Noyon Chand Ghosh failed to give her credit as an extraordinary author. In his ballad, Chandrabati's personality overshadowed her skill as an author.

Shulochona Devi gave birth to Chandrabati in 1550 (Chakrabarty 2012). Chandrabati's father Dija Bangshi Das is credited as being one of the authors of the medieval Bengali epic '*Monsha*

Mongolkavya' (Das 2000, p. 146). Chandrabati was a scholar of both Sanskrit and Bengali languages and it is believed that she also contributed to '*Pudma Puran'*, another popular epic of Bengal (Borkot 2012). Chandra Kumar De mentioned that a significant portion of '*Pudma Puran'* was written by Chandrabati and stated that, 'We can see very reliant relationship between the Pudma Puran of Dija Bangshi Das and Chandrabati' (De 1993, p. 83).



Chandrabati's temple in Patuayr village, Kishoreganj, Bangladesh

Photographed by Sumaya Eku

Bangshi Das was very devout and prayed to Lord Shiva for a suitable husband for his daughter. As an obedient daughter, Chandrabati helped her father to perform his prayers. When Jayananda, her childhood sweetheart expressed his love for Chandrabati in a letter, despite being deeply in love with him, she refused to commit herself to him, saying that her father was responsible for all the decisions in her life.

How can I write you a letter

At home, I have my father.

I have father at home what do I know

Just being a feeble woman how can I answer you.

Noyon Chand Ghosh

Bangshi Das desired a son-in-law who was handsome, talented and possessed an aristocratic lineage. As Jayananda met all these criteria, Bangshi Das was happy to welcome him into his family. Chandrabati's dreams appeared to be coming true and she could not have been happier. When the wedding preparations were taking place in Chandrabati's home, Noyon Chand Ghosh described people screaming and singing with joy. They drew plants and flowers in the front yard, and to welcome the guests they prepared betel leaves.

But unfortunately, Jayananda fell in love with a Muslim girl and eloped with her. He also accepted Islam as his religion. Bangshi Das was devastated when he heard the news. He blamed his fate for his misfortunes and spared the Gods to whom he prayed every day.

This is the fault of my fate, not God's

This is what was written on my forehead by the Divine.

Noyon Chand Ghosh

Chandrabati was devastated on hearing the news but while her friends were crying over her misfortune she hid her emotions from them. This can be seen as depicting her strong character.

Does not cry, does not laugh, Chandra does not say a word

Once a beautiful girl, now turned into a stone.

The fire of her mind she keeps hidden in her mind

Does not express anything just dying inside.

Noyon Chand Ghosh

Chandrabati stopped eating. She cried continuously, soaking her bed and pillows. She could not forget her beautiful childhood memories of being with Joyananda. Her nights became sleepless and morning brought even more misery. During this devastating phase of Chandrabati's life, her father gave her enormous support, providing her with the courage to fight. Although the cancellation of marriage was considered as bad luck at that time (and even today), people expressed a desire to have Chandrabati as their daughter-in-law. But Chandrabati proved she was now sufficiently strong to make her own decisions and refused to marry simply to make her family and society happy. She expressed her desire to remain unmarried and spend her life worshipping Lord Shiva.

Chandrabati said, 'Father, accept my word

I will not get married in my life, will remain unmarried.

I worship Lord Shiva, under Shiva's feet I find my solace

Please keep the word of the sadden and keep my request.

Noyon Chand Ghosh



Shivlinga that was worshiped by Chandrabati

Photographed by Sumaya Eku

Bangshi Das was respectful of his daughter's decision. In this regard, Chandrabati can be related to a *Brahma-Vadini*. During the era of *Ramayana*, there were two types of women in terms of education, *Sadyo-Vadhus* and *Brahma-Vadinis* (Upadhyay 2001). To describe the *Brahma-Vadinis*, Upadhyay stated that they remained unmarried and dedicated themselves to Vedic studies, sacrifices and penance (Upadhyay 2001). It is highly probable that even in Chandrabati's time this concept was not completely lost. Despite the neglect of education for women in the medieval period, there were some people (and most likely Bangshi Das was one of them being a well-educated person), with the knowledge that, even in ancient India, women were sufficiently privileged to be educated. And this may be the reason Chandrabati's decision to remain unmarried and worship Shiva, was accepted by Bangshi Das and he associated his daughter with the *Brahma-Vadinis*. Another important aspect, however, is that although Bangshi Das was a devotee of Shiva, he told Chandrabati to write the story of *Ramayana*. I believe Bangshi Das realised that the tragic story of Sita would help his daughter to cope up with her pain and humiliation.

In the meantime, Jayananda was betrayed by his Muslim partner and realised he had been unjust and betrayed Chandrabati. He felt guilty over his behaviour and expressed his desire to meet Chandrabati one last time and seek forgiveness. Joyananda said,

I ask you Chandrabati open the door
 So that I see you for the last time in life
 I will not see you anymore with these eyes
 Say goodbye for the last time by forgiving my sins.

Noyon Chand Ghosh

In this vulnerable situation, Chandrabati did not relent. She stayed strong and refused to meet Jayananda for the last time.

Did not open the doors of the temple, did not say a word
 The maiden stayed inside, *jogini* in her youth.

Noyon Chand Ghosh

Jayananda committed suicide from great disappointment and disgrace. Chandrabati also died young but her death remains a mystery. Most people believe that she could not accept Jayananda's death and took her life by drowning herself immediately after seeing Jayananda's body. I found that this is the most popular theory among the masses, probably because they love to dramatise her death. Noyon Chand Ghosh's Ballad '*Chandrabati*' did not mention any details of her death.

The more I think about Chandrabati's character, I tend to reject the claim that she committed suicide. I believe someone like Chandrabati who displayed such courage, calmness and determination throughout her life, was unlikely to commit suicide. Chandrakumar Dey's

(1913) theory of her death caused by depression appears more plausible to me. As she was a compassionate and sensible woman, it was likely she would blame herself for Jayananda's death. Struggling with this terrible guilt and eventual sickness may very likely have brought about her demise.

Chandrabati entertained thoughts ahead of her time. She showed courage by deciding to remain unmarried in a conservative society, where the marriage was (and in most cases is) considered an inevitable, ultimate and obvious goal for women. When unfavourable and difficult situations led to the loss of hope and weakness, she kept her composure. Her personality is the epitome of courage, self-respect, obedience, knowledge and devotion. She is a true representation of the power of women.

Literary works of Chandrabati

While patriarchal society created barriers for women through religion, women chose to speak for themselves through folklore. A statement by Humaira Ishfaq certainly supports this statement and brings out the different interests and antagonisms between men and women, religion and folklore. She stated that,

In mid-late 19th century famous mystic poetess Peero Preman said that religion belongs to men. In early 21st century I would like to add that folklore belongs to women. It is folklore which is unbiased, secular and speaks of women rights to love. (Ishfaq 2011, p. 205)

Chandrabati's literary works are an example of such folklore that speaks against the dominant patriarchal society and its injustice towards women. In *Ramayana*, she depicted Sita's struggle against society, even against her loved ones. Her other literary masterpieces such as *Molua* and *Doshshu Kenaramer Pala* also depict strong female issues. Although Chandrabati depicted the love, faithfulness and obedience of women towards their families, she also described the everyday struggles of women and their ongoing fight to win them. But unfortunately, these works of literature have been given little attention even though some scholars admit they possess excellent literary values, in some cases even more than her *Ramayana*. In this section, I discuss these two ballads by Chandrabati. While outlining their

stories, I also offer a glimpse into the social, religious and cultural elements they contain, which can contribute to understanding the social and cultural history of medieval Bengal.

Molua

The core of *Molua's* story is similar to the story of Sita. Molua was a very beautiful girl who was married to Binod. Kaji, who was the protector of justice in the society was, ironically, wholly unjust. He fell in love with Molua but despite Kaji making several attempts, Molua refused to be won over. When all his attempts proved to be in vain, Kaji put financial pressure on Chand and took revenge on Molua. He forced Binod to leave his home. He then tricked Molua and handed her over to his superior Dewan, who was the representative of rulers of that region. Kaji and Dewan were both Muslims since, at that time, even in rural Bengal, it was predominantly Muslims who were in charge of the administration, economy, justice and law.

When Molua was tricked by Kaji into leaving her home, Chandrabati compared her with Sita, who was abducted by Ravana.

The room was empty, the beautiful girl was not there

Ravana has seized Sri Rama's woman.

Chandrabati

She also described how Molua struggled to maintain her sexual purity in Dewan's house. Finally, she tricked Dewan and escaped with the help of her brothers. She then went to her father's house with Chand. Chandrabati interpreted this situation as being quite similar to the one when Lord Rama freed Sita from Ravana. Just like Sita, Molua faced humiliation and questioning by relatives who doubted her sexual purity as a Hindu woman who had lived in Dewan's house for some time.

What happened here listen attentively

All the relatives and friends became enemy.

Some said Molua is impure
 By eating food from a Muslim she has lost her caste.
 Three months she has been to the house of Dewan
 Who knows how she survived.

Chandrabati

Just like Rama, Chand abandoned Molua because of people's judgement and gossip. Molua lost her self-respect and instead of all the humiliation decided to live in her husband's house as a servant. She even pressured Chand to take another wife. She acted like a 'so-called' ideal self-sacrificing woman who did not stand up for her rights. Moreover, she sacrificed her happiness for her husband's honour. She did not take any initiative to prove herself innocent though she had a very supportive family, and her brothers were ready to help her. She suffered both social and religious injustice and choose not to fight against them. Molua's story proved that religion and society were two major means of controlling women in Chandrabati's time.

When Chand was bitten by a snake, it was Molua who saved his life by fighting against all the odds. When society witnessed Molua's passion, obedience and dedication towards her husband, they started to praise her. People started to compare her with Behula, another popular character of Bengali literature who fought against the world and the gods to resuscitate her dead husband. People started to say that Chand should take such a pure heart back home.

However, Molua was not accepted by members of her husband's family because they thought that it would make them outcast from their religion and society. Molua was so devastated that she decided to commit suicide. She believed that she was the reason for the sufferings of her husband and in-laws and that they would always be subject to social opprobrium because of her. She refused the request of her in-laws and brothers to live with them. She rejected Chand's request and blessed him, saying that he should have a happy and peaceful life with his new wife. Although the ballad is not explicit, it appears from the description that Molua drowned herself.

Molua portrayed herself as an ideal woman and wife who sacrificed everything, even her life for the sake of her husband and family. She chose not to stand up as a strong woman who could fight society and live with dignity. Society and religion were so powerful that women often found it impossible to protest despite having a supporting family. Her sacrifice displays the situation of most Bengali women who were bound by social restrictions and injustices where often death was their only escape.

Sita and Molua: Comparison of Their Characteristics

Sita had a great impact on Chandrabati and in many ways, her character Molua is a representation of Sita and her life. Many similarities can be found between the characterisation and experiences of Sita and Molua. Both of them were loved by their families and initially by their husbands. Both these characters were tricked and abducted by powerful, evil men. They struggled to contain their sexual purity in captivity and succeeded. Eventually, they were freed but their husbands did not believe them. Both their husbands were pressured by society and failed to support their wives. Both were compelled to accept injustice in one form or another. Sita and Molua were both oppressed by religion and society. They both had tragic endings to their lives.

Chandrabati, Molua and Their Characteristics

Chandrabati's own life has obvious similarities to Molua's life. Both of them were literate women, which was rare in mediaeval Bengal. In her story *Molua*, Chandrabati mentioned how sons were considered to be a 'valuable gift from God' by society. And as Molua's father had five sons, he was regarded as really blessed by the Gods. Nevertheless, just like Chandrabati, Molua was deeply loved by her parents. Chandrabati presented a vivid description of how Molua was loved and valued by her parents and brothers. She also depicted how that love and protection made the pain, struggles and hatred Molua had to endure later in life, even more unbearable.

During childhood got happiness from father and brothers

She got immense happiness in the lap of her mother.

Apple of her mother's eyes, like a *Nayantara* flower

Did not even face the tap of a flower.

The maiden was valued more than her five brothers

Such pain her heart could not bear.

Chandrabati

Moreover, both their families respected every decision they made and supported them unconditionally. Both were hurt by their lovers, and when their loves returned realising their mistake, both refused to take them back. Surprisingly, Chandrabati did not criticise Molua's husband Chand for the tragic end of Molua's life in the way she criticised Lord Rama. Possibly, as a God, her expectations of Rama were higher than for human Chand.

Social, Economic, Religious and Cultural Elements of Medieval Bengal in *Molua*

In *Molua*, Chandrabati described many social, cultural and economic aspects of medieval Bengal. She gave a vivid description of how nature had many different facets and changed according to the different Bengali months. Her writing beautifully depicted how every month of the Bengali year had a different influence and impact on people and their livelihoods. In the *Ashwin* (a month in the rainy season), black clouds covered the sky causing heavy rain. To protect their lands from flowing rainwater, people constructed barricades or dams (*baadh*) in their fields. Chandrabati described how Chand's mother asked him to go to his land and make a dam so that he can grow *Shali Dhaan*, a kind of paddy grow in *Kartik* (a Bengali month). Chandrabati presented a touching description of how the colder months of winter brought immense misery to poor people and how they struggled to keep themselves protected from cold with their torn clothes. In her ballad, she vividly depicted how the lives of the poor were controlled by nature.

Ashwin came and drowned everything underwater

Field, farm everything is drowned, there is nothing left.

Chandrabati

In *Molua* Chandrabati also described various economic aspects of medieval Bengal. She stated that people travelled far from home to earn a livelihood. Hunting was a way of earning a livelihood at that time. In the month of *Jaishtha* (a month in the summer season), when there was no other way to survive, with a birdcage in hand, Chand asked his mother to say goodbye to him because he was leaving home to hunt birds. To survive poor people were forced to selling their land, cattle and gold. Sometimes they became so desperate that they had to mortgage their own children to stay alive. Interestingly Chandrabati mentioned that people mortgaged their sons to celebrate Durga Puja.

Durga Puja came to the country, the Mother Earth

People mortgage sons from the lap to worship the Queen Durga.

Chandrabati

I believe there is a two-fold significance to this incident. Firstly, it depicted how important religion was in people's lives and how they were willing to go to extremes to showcase their devotion. Secondly, it also depicted the power of social pressure. Society played an important role in people's lives and relationships. People would at times extend themselves beyond their means to maintain their status and prestige in front of others. This ballad described how people's desire to maintain their social status compelled them to make such difficult decisions as mortgaging their own children. Parents married off their young girls to maintain their honour in society. When *Molua* was leaving for Chand's home, her mother reminded her to behave properly so that the neighbours could not find any fault with her. Chand and his family abandoned *Molua* to protect their honour in society.

Chandrabati also mentioned a tax referred to as *Najar Moreecha*, which people had to pay to the Dewan before they could marry. Chandrabati recounted in her ballad how failing to pay

this tax could bring unimaginable misfortune. She described the devastation of famine when the price of food and crops were beyond the means of the poor. In contrast, she stated, although there were those who were unable to afford the bare minimum for their families, others lived lavishly and without any consideration for the poor.

Chandrabati mentioned some traditional Bengali cuisine in her ballad. While the poor lived on simple fermented rice (*Panta Bhaat*), rich people had the luxury of eating different vegetables, fish, desserts and sweets. Girls were married off at a very young age. Chandrabati mentioned Molua became anxious at the thought of remaining unmarried at the age of twelve. She stated, when Molua turned twelve, even her parents became anxious.

The difference between social classes and the clashes that transpired was also showcased in her writing. At the time Muslims were the ruling class, so Chandrabati portrayed kaji and Dewan both as Muslims. The suppression of poor people by the ruling class and the consequences for the masses were mentioned as well. The rulers had power over the life and death of their poor subjects, who were helpless and had no means of resistance.

In *Molua*, Chandrabati depicted the love of parents towards their children and the bonds among siblings with a great deal of care and attention. Chand's mother was shown to be the epitome of an ideal mother whose sole intention was the happiness and safety of her child. Chand's sister's care and concern for her brother was described with tenderness by Chandrabati while the love, care and protective nature of Molua's five brothers were an integral part of the ballad. The relationship among in-laws also played an important part in *Molua*.

Doshshu Kenaramer Pala

Chandrabati's ballad *Doshshu Kenaramer Pala* is the story of her father Bangshi Das and a notorious bandit Kenaram. As mentioned previously, Chandrabati was a very obedient daughter. Her relationship with her father was exemplary. And this ballad is her homage to her talented father, in which she emphasised Bangshi Das's excellence as a poet and singer.

The ballad opens with the story of a childless couple Khelaram and Joshodhara. Their unfortunate situation made them unacceptable to their neighbours. No one wanted to see

them because they believed that it would bring misfortune to them. Under such circumstances, Khelaram and his wife Joshodhara could do nothing but blame their bad luck. When they could bear no more, they decided to take their lives to end their misery.

We will starve to death, can't bear the pain anymore

Will not face the neighbours anymore.

Will not see the Sun anymore, will not lit the light

We will spend in dark our days and nights.

Chandrabati

In the meantime, Joshodhara dreamt of a beautiful woman who asked her to become her devotee. This holy deity assured Joshodhara that, if she worshipped her for one month, she would be blessed with a son. When Khelaram heard about her dream, he immediately consented to worship the goddess, as he was eager to have a son. After a month, Joshodhara became pregnant. At this point, Chandrabati included some descriptive passages about the physical and mental condition of a pregnant woman and her sufferings throughout that period. After ten months and ten days, Joshodhara gave birth to a son and named him Kenaram.

Everything was going well and the baby was growing happily when misfortune struck them. When he turned seven months old, his mother, Joshodhara, died. Khelaram was devastated and became even more anxious about the future of his son. He was aware that it would be very difficult to nurture his son without a mother. As a solution, Kenaram went to the home of his in-laws and left Kenaram there where his aunt nurtured him. When Kenaram turned one, Khelaram decided to be a pilgrim and left for the holy lands. Three years went by, but Khelaram did not come back to his son.

In the meantime, lack of rain caused famine in the country and people started to die from starvation. Unbearable hunger and pain forced people to sell their wives and children. And in such devastating circumstances, Kenaram was sold for food by his uncle. The peasant who

bought Kenaram had seven sons who were bloodthirsty robbers. They were not bound by any law or order and did not even spare the king. They were merciless and did not hesitate to cut people to pieces. They became wealthy from robbing people but that did not stop them from heinous acts that they enjoyed. Kenaram was bound to live with them, and eventually, he became one of them. He too became unjust, merciless, greedy and disregarded all law and order. He became a famous robber at a very young age.

Chandrabati vividly portrayed Kenaram's character in her ballad. She said that Kenaram had no respect for Gods and Deities, as no one ever taught him right and wrong. He killed people for fun, snatched children from their parents and did not even allow the parents to say goodbye. Chandrabati's vivid description of Kenaram's reign of terror is a portrayal of the criminal activities in medieval Bengal. These robbers, who usually lived in the forest, were so pitiless and evil that even the rulers and lawmakers were afraid to take action against them.

In contrast, Chandrabati's father Dija Bangshi Das, whom she said, usually dressed up as a saint, was a learned man. He earned his livelihood by singing *Bhaashaan* or holy songs. He used to travel far and wide along with his followers. One day when Bangshi Das entered the forest, Kenaram blocked their way and tried to terrorise Bangshi Das. Bangshi Das, instead of being afraid smiled and said that everyone was capable of recognising the difference between evil and sin. He added that he sang from door-to-door because he wanted to draw people away from sin. When Kenaram asked for money, Bangshi Das said that he had none. Kenaram was about to kill Bangshi Das, but Bangshi Das reminded him that money was not everything and he would be punished for his sins but Kenaram paid no heed to Bangshi Das's words. Bangshi Das's followers started crying when they realised that the robber in front of them was none other than the great robber Kenaram. But even this terrifying fact did not scare Bangshi Das. He kept smiling and his smiling face and confidence startled Kenaram who began to wonder about the man standing so strong before him. Chandrabati then described how Bangshi Das mesmerized Kenaram, the deadliest of all bandits with his beautiful voice. Bangshi Das inspired him to change his life and follow the path of peace and justice.

One characteristic of this ballad is that it does not deal with women's issues. Instead, women are mainly supporting characters who do not have a direct impact on the story. *Doshshu Kenaramer Pala* was also inspired by *Ramayana* (Das 2000). Valmiki, the writer of *Ramayana* was a monstrous bandit. When he came to realise that his life was not on the right path he

decided to change his life entirely. He changed his name from Doshshu Ratnakar to Rhishi (Rhishi means saint) Valmiki and started to write *Ramayana*. Doshshu Kenaram, the main character of this ballad was a cruel bandit, who, after hearing the divine songs of Chandrabati's father Bangshi Das, decided to change his ways and live the life of a saint.

Social, Cultural and Economic Aspects in *Doshshu Kenaramer Pala*

Chandrabati depicted some serious social issues in this ballad. She mentioned how society harassed any childless couple. People avoided them because they believed such a couple would bring them bad luck. Moreover, they mocked and belittled them and pushed them to utter depression. Joshodhara and Khelaram both were victims of such a heinous attitude of society. They became so devastated that they even decided to take their lives. Chandrabati also described Joshodhora's sufferings when she was pregnant and mentioned a celebration known as *Anna Praashon* that was celebrated when the baby had her first solid food. *Anna Praashon* is celebrated in Bengal even today. She also mentioned that severe poverty was a common problem in Medieval Bengal. Natural calamities such as drought could cause famine and made the situation even worse.

What happened this time listen, good people,

Lack of rain brought famine.

People did not have a handful of paddy

People were dying on the road starving.

Chandrabati

Chandrabati described how famine made people so desperate and helpless that when rice was not available they ate fruit and when they could no longer find fruit they were forced to eat leaves, even grass. Under famine conditions, people felt they had no option but to sell their wives and children. Chandrabati portrayed the devastation and desperation of famine

so realistically that she may have witnessed or at least heard descriptions of famine from her parents and relatives.

In this ballad, Chandrabati mentioned the *Garopahar* (Garopahar Hill), a hill that is a popular landmark of the greater Mymensingh region of Bengal. She also said that people went far and wide for various reasons. And the roads were dangerous because of the bandits. She pointed out the limitations of law and order saying that bandit Kenaram was a threat to the rulers as well but they did not dare to take any action against him. Poverty, natural calamities along with inadequate security from robbers and bandits made the struggle even harder for the people of Bengal. This is evident in Chandrabati's writings.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have discussed Chandrabati's life, derived largely from Noyon Chand Ghosh's ballad. I have also described two of her most significant literary works *Molua* and *Doshshu Kenaramer Pala*, which, despite being literary masterpieces, did not gain the attention they deserved from scholars, let alone the general public. I have also indicated some of the social, cultural, religious and economic elements that Chandrabati alluded to in these ballads, which provide us with a clearer picture of medieval Bengal.

Chapter Five

Chandrabati's *Ramayana*: A Known Story, a Unique Approach

Although *Ramayana* consists solely of Hindu mythology, its popularity is unrivalled, not only in India but also in other South Asian countries. Interestingly, a predominantly Muslim country like Bangladesh is also spellbound by the story of *Ramayana*. As a child, I saw my grandmother, who was a practising and pious Muslim woman, exhibit much love and interest in *Ramayana* stories. In the late 1980s, the Indian Government-owned channel Duradarshan telecasted a series based on *Ramayana* on Sunday mornings. It was described as the '... World's most viewed mythological serial' (Dalrymple 2008). My grandmother would not miss it for anything. She waited eagerly the whole week to find out what would happen next and always enthusiastically discussed the *Ramayana* events with others. Now that I am aware of how the broadcast of *Ramayana* was capable of stopping the whole nation of India due to its mesmerising and captivating power, I can understand my grandmother's passion for *Ramayana* stories much better.

Ramayana's popularity and familiarity are quite evident in Bangladesh, even today. It would be almost impossible to find someone who did not know about the story of *Ramayana*, even if only by name. The main Characters Rama, Sita and Ravana are also very popular names in Bangladesh. People of Bangladesh use many proverbs in their conversations that refer to *Ramayana*. One of the most popular proverbs is, 'সাত খন্ড রামায়ণ পড়ে বলে সীতা কার বাপ' (after reading the whole *Ramayana*, asks whose father is Sita?).

It is quite understandable that, during Chandrabati's time, in the sixteenth century, the popularity of *Ramayana* was phenomenal. Even then, however, *Ramayana*'s importance was not restricted to religious themes. The story of *Ramayana* is packed with love, devotion, romance, adventure, betrayal and wars, along with very strong and moving main and supporting characters. As a source of recreation, *Ramayana* stories had an immense impact on the lives of people all over India and the surrounding regions; Bengal was no exception.

Although the story of Rama and Sita mesmerised people, it was Sita's eventful life that was especially attractive to women as they could relate to it. When Chandrabati needed the

inspiration to resolve her grief, I believe, Bangshi Das thought Sita's sorrows and struggles could motivate Chandrabati to find a renewed meaning in life. He inspired Chandrabati to write *Ramayana*. Chandrabati obeyed her father and wrote a *Ramayana* that can be regarded as one of the finest additions to *Ramayana* retellings in terms of its content, presentation and perspective. Chandrabati's *Ramayana* was one of her most dignified works. Dr Bani Das argued that along with other male writers Chandrabati was one of the most important writers who translated *Ramayana* in Bengali (Das 2000).

Chandrabati's *Ramayana*

In this section I outline the story of Chandrabati's *Ramayana* based on the version which was first published in 1932 in *Purbabanga Gitika*, edited by Dr Dinesh Chandra Sen (Borkot 2012). As later discussion requires an understanding of the plot it is important to summarise it.

Chandrabati did not start her *Ramayana* with the customary hymn of praise to the gods as she did in her other writings. Nor did she dedicate it to her parents. She started the story directly and uniquely, from Sita's perspective (Sen 1997). Chandrabati's *Ramayana* began with the story of Ravana. Then one after another, Chandrabati described Sita's birth, Rama's birth, Rama and Sita's wedding, Rama's banishment to the forest, Sita's abduction by Ravana and her days in Lanka, Rama's quest to free Sita, Rama and Sita's happy life in Ajodhya, the conspiracy against Sita, Rama's suspicion of Sita's chastity and finally, Sita's banishment to the forest.

Chandrabati wrote a vivid description of Ravana's realm, Lanka at the beginning of her version.

By the side of the sea, the realm of gold

There reigns Ravana of Lanka.

Bishwakarma created Ravana's palace

Can not describe the features it had.

Hugely expanded palace, beautiful to see

Huge rooms were like mountains and hills.

Chandrabati

She described how Ravana was not afraid of the Gods, but rather, the Gods were afraid of him. She added that humans and monkeys were his foes. Chandrabati then described Ravana's quest to conquer heaven. He destroyed heaven, defeated the Gods and abducted the daughters of the Gods. The kings of the earth surrendered to Ravana without even fighting for their kingdoms. After conquering the earth, Ravana vanquished hell with ease. Chandrabati provided an elaborate description of how the daughters of the Gods were abused by Ravana. She depicted how many of them decided to commit suicide to protect their purity. Those who chose not to give up their lives had to satisfy Ravana's sexual desires.

When Mandodari, Ravana's wife, learned of his adultery, she became jealous and decided to poison herself with a poison that Ravana had given her for safekeeping. However, Mandodari became pregnant from drinking the poison. After ten months and ten days, she gave birth to an egg. When Ravana came to know the news, he summoned a psychic to read the fortune of the egg. The psychic told Ravana that, the egg would cause Ravana to lose his kingdom. He also added, that because of the egg the demon family would be destroyed. Hearing this, Ravana decided to destroy the egg. But Mandodari became anxious and asked him to throw it into the sea instead. Ravana ordered craftsmen to make a golden box with a silver knob, which he then threw into the sea with the egg inside.

Following this episode, Chandrabati introduced a vivid description of the poor in society through the sad story of Madhab and his wife Shota who lived in the city of Mithila. Shota represented an ideal woman and wife, who sacrificed everything for her husband. Madhab, who was a fisherman found the golden box that Ravana had thrown into the sea. The box dispelled all his sorrows and poverty and he was showered with good fortune. Shota began to worship the box and regarded it like a holy object in her house.

One night, Shota dreamed of a little girl, who came out of the box and asked Shota to take her to King Janaka. She also told Shota that the king and the queen were the girl's parents. When Shota took the egg to the queen, the queen wanted to shower Shota with ornaments and gifts. Instead of any gift, Shota asked the queen that, if her dream came true and a girl was born from the box, the queen would name her Sita, after Shota's name. Eventually, a daughter was born from the egg. Chandrabati praised the girl in her ballad as having a 'pure heart'. She also said that the girl would be praised throughout the world.

After Shota's name, Sita the girl was named

Chandrabati says, in all over the world, the girl would be praised.

Chandrabati

Following the story of Sita's birth, Chandrabati told the story of the birth of Lord Rama. In Ajodhya, Dasharatha, the king ruled his subjects like his children. But he was very unhappy because he did not have any child. He married three times in the hopes of having a child but to no avail. His misfortune made him so depressed that he neglected everything, locked himself up in a room and began to starve himself.

It was under these circumstances that a saint arrived in Ajodhya. He called Dasharatha and asked him the reasons for his sorrow. After hearing his reasons, he gave the king a holy fruit and asked him to give it to queen Kausalya. Kausalya had a good heart and she divided the fruit into three pieces and sent them to the other two queens of Dasharatha. When the three queens became pregnant, the king was so overjoyed that he opened his treasure house and generously donated money to his subjects. Chandrabati wrote a very precise description of the baby shower that was organised by the female members of the family. She also gave a vivid description of the physical challenges and changes of an expectant mother.

After ten months and ten days, Kausalya gave birth to a son. Chandrabati wrote an elaborate description of the festivity that took place in Ajodhya following the birth. She described the naming ceremony and listed some of the names that were suggested for the newborn.

Pupils of the reign named him *Rama Raghubaar*

Women of the palace named him *Shyamol Shundor*.

Bashishtha Topodhan knowing from meditation

Named him *Ramachandra, Komol Lochon*.

Chandrabati

The king called a psychic who said that this boy would be very powerful, and he would defeat the enemy of the world. At the same time, the psychic gained knowledge of the devastating fact that the newborn, Rama, would be banished from his kingdom and live in a forest. He also learnt that Rama would be the reason for the king's death. But he kept these readings secret.

The next chapter is titled 'Sita's Baromashi', in which Sita describes to her friends how she spent each month of the year in the forest. At first, Sita describes how she became married to Lord Rama and then stated that, although she had Rama for a husband, luck had always eluded her. She said that she was very happy with her life before Kayseri's conspiracy, which had led Rama to leave his kingdom and live in the forest for seven years. Sita and Rama's brother Lakshman went to the forest to live with them.

Although Chandrabati's intended audience was women and women are specifically interested in weddings and rituals related to the ceremonies, she did not give an elaborate description of Sita and Rama's wedding.

Joyous sounds echoed in the Palace of Mithila

Friends were singing and dancing.

Everyone fascinated by the groom, some said *Kali*

Some said he was lightning in the cloud.

The night goes over with humour and laughter

Lord goes to *Ajodhya* with Sita.

Listen carefully how the days went by

This is how the unfortunate got married to the Lord.

Chandrabati

Later, Sita praised her brother-in-law Lakshman for being caring and helpful to her. She said that, when she was hurt and rendered unconscious, Lord Rama felt sorry for her and took care of her. But, she also said that she was unable to give voice to every single talent, ability and attitude that Lakshman possessed. It was evident that Sita was very pleased with Lakshman and his obedience, devotion and service to her and Lord Rama in the forest. Sita also described how happy she was in the forest. As an ideal wife, simply being with her husband was sufficient for her to remain happy. Here Chandrabati depicted Sita as an animal lover. She said that Sita was friends with the birds and animals of the forest and they responded to her.

Deer, peacock, all the forest animals and birds

Companions they were of Sita, sorry for Sita's sorrows.

Chandrabati

Chandrabati then described how Sita's happy forest life came to an end when Ravana abducted her. In this section, Chandrabati did not mention Shurponokha, who was Ravana's sister in the original *Ramayana* story. She was a strong character who fell in love with Lord Rama and expressed her feelings to him. Rama and Lakshman mocked her and cut her nose. She went to Ravana and told him about Sita's beauty. Shurponokha thought that Ravana would help her to take her revenge on Rama and Sita by abducting the princess. Surprisingly,

this important and bold female character did not get attention from Chandrabati. Instead, she added another evil female character Kuku, whom I mention later.

Chandrabati gave an elaborate description of how that Ravana tricked Rama and Lakshman with a golden deer and abducted Sita. Chandrabati was attracted to the story of Sita's solitary life in Lanka and she vividly described Sita's loneliness and sorrow. However, she omitted a detailed description of how Lord Rama was preparing for the battle to free Sita. Instead, she described the incidents from Sita's perspective as Sita told the story to her friends. Sita told her friends how she came to know about the alliance of Rama and Shugrib from a dream. She also mentioned Hanuman in a couple of sentences. Chandrabati did not pay much attention to the great battle between men, monkeys and demons. She avoided describing the Great War and merely alluded to the key points, such as when the monkeys made a bridge over the sea and Ravana's son Indrajit's defeat by Lord Rama. Even the death of Ravana, the greatest king on earth, did not receive much attention from Chandrabati. She simply stated that Ravana's entire family was destroyed by Lord Rama. And thus, Sita was freed from Ravana's kingdom by Lord Rama.

Next Chandrabati described Sita and Rama spending time together when Sita accidentally asked Rama to send her to the forest where she used to live with Rama and Lakshman. She expressed her admiration for the forest and her desire to be there once again. Rama promised that he would take the initiative and send Sita to the forest.

Later Chandrabati described how Sita was tricked by Kuku, Sita's evil sister-in-law. Chandrabati portrayed Kuku as a negative character, relating how Kuku failed to maintain a good relationship with her in-laws and husband. Kuku, who was jealous of Rama and Sita's peaceful conjugal life and wanted to divide them, repeatedly requested Sita draw a portrait of Ravana. Eventually, to honour Kuku's constant requests Sita drew a portrait of Ravana.

During the following incidents, Chandrabati portrayed Rama as a vulnerable person. Kuku complained to Rama about Sita, saying that Sita must possess a soft spot for Ravana and that is the reason she drew his portrait. She questioned Sita's purity as she had lived in Ravana's palace for ten long months. Lord Rama fell for Kuku's conspiracy and failed to act as a strong-hearted, trusting, loving husband. He did not even ask Sita if she had anything to say in her defence. Although Sita was pregnant at the time, Rama showed her no mercy and banished

her from his kingdom. At this point, Chandrabati intimated that Rama's weak mentality would lead everyone to misfortune. Not only Sita but Rama also would suffer the consequences.

A fire was lit today by Kukua, sister in law
Sita will burn in that fire with *Raghumoni* (Rama).
After some days the palace of *Ajodhya* will burn
The kingdom will get shattered losing its lucky charm.
To pay heed on others brings one's misfortune
Chandrabati says Rama has lost his mind.

Chandrabati

In 1975 Khitishchandra Maulik added some new chapters of Chandrabati's *Ramayana* in his seventh edited version of *Prachin Purbabanga Gitika*. In these added chapters we can find the rest of the story of Chandrabati's *Ramayana* which was previously unknown. Here I describe the contents of these chapters.

Chandrabati continued her story with the description of Rama and said that when Rama decided to send Sita to exile, he was devastated. Lakshman could realise that Rama was in pain. And when he asked Rama how he could resolve his misery, Rama answered that he has lost his happiness, peace forever. Rama Said,

I will burn into ashes, so will Ajodhya
The fire of the curse of the pure, I cannot endure.

Chandrabati

He then told Lakshman about his decision, which hurt Lakshman immensely. On the other hand, oblivious of what fate was bringing for her, five-month pregnant Sita was having nightmares during her sleep. But all her worries came to an end when she saw the face of Lakshman. Lakshman, however, with a heavy heart, informed Sita about Rama's decision that Sita would go to the forest alone, without any companion or helper.

I am the servant of the King, just obeying his order

I inform you about his wishes, queen.

Chandrabati

Sita obeyed Rama's order without even thinking and started for the forest. But when Lakshman told her that Rama has banished her to the forest and that Lakshman would leave her there forever, she was speechless.

Her eyes did not have water, her mouth did not say a word

She stood under a tree like a statue of gold.

Chandrabati

When Sita absorbed reality, she comforted Laksman. She said that she had brought death, pain and endless misfortune to the people of Lanka. Sita continued, she has heard the crying of countless women, children and their curse have brought sorrows for her. She did not blame anyone for her misfortune and asked Lakshman to pay her homage to Rama. After Lakshman left Sita in the forest, Saint Valmiki gave her shelter. She found happiness in her new home and gave birth to her twins Lava and Kush. Rama, the father, however, was unaware of their births. Baishishtha, a renowned saint taught Lava and Kush how to write. On the other hand, Saint Valmiki, who according to Chandrabati was an omniscient, taught them archery, war

tactics et cetera. Animal lovers, just like their mother, the brothers were growing up happily in the forest.

On the other hand, banishing Sita to the forest brought misfortune for Ajodhya. Chandrabati described,

There is no crop in the field, no water in the river

Disease and sickness brought misery to the lives of the people.

Trees do not have fruits, vines do not have flowers

The straight river changes its route, breaking down banks of the river.

It does not rain on time, rains offseason

People become devout of sins, forgetting their religion.

Chandrabati

The older people started to blame their king Rama's poor judgements for their misery. The situation compelled Rama to rethink about his decision. To find a solution he called Saint Baishishtha. The saint suggested Rama to arrange '*Ashyamedh Jagya*', a special worship which could save Ajodhya from the adversity. Baishishtha, however, suggested that without Sita, the queen of Ajodhya, the worship was not possible. He informed Rama about Sita's whereabouts, her sons and suggested to bring them all to perform the worship. But Rama was adamant to bring Sita back because he thought that it would create a bad example for his younger brothers. Moreover, he thought that his actions will hamper his religion and expose him to more criticism. To resolve the dilemma, he sought out a solution. He told saint Baishishtha that, he will put Sita to test to prove her purity in front of his people. Sita would go inside the fire pit and if she comes out alive and untouched by the fire, it will prove that she is innocent and Rama will take her back.

After this event, Chandrabati described how Hanuman, after twelve years of his quest to Lanka, started from home to visit Rama and Sita at Ajodhya. But when he reached the shelter of Saint

Valmiki, he met Lava and Kush who tried to captivate him to make him their pet. The brothers succeeded in their quest. They tied Hanuman and brought him to their mother. Sita freed Hanuman from her mischievous sons and told them everything about Hanuman.

In Ajodhya, Rama asked Lakshman to bring Sita back. Lakshman took a chariot decorated with flowers and started for Saint Valmiki's shelter. Sita, along with her sons, Hanuman and thousands of saints who lived in the shelter, started for Ajodhya. When she reached Rama's court, she started trembling to look at her husband's face. Rama told Sita,

Daughter of Janaka, listen carefully

One year you have spent in Ravana's home.

No one in Ajodhya knows if you are pure or unpure

You have to give the exam in front of the court.

Chandrabati

Sita, during such a crucial moment, stayed calm and told to Rama that she does not fear to enter the fire. She even expressed her concern about Rama's pale face. She said that, if Rama thinks that, her going into the fire would put an end to his misfortune, she would do that. She was, however, worried about her sons and gave their responsibilities to Saint Baishishtha, not Rama.

Sita went inside the firepit (*Chita*), but nobody wanted to light it. Kukua the jealous sister-in-law was eager to do the job. However, she caught herself in the fire when she tried to light it. Sita, untouched by the fire, rescued Kukua. Rama's people who were good at heart said that, as the fire could not touch Sita or hurt her, proved that she was pure and innocent and does not need to face any further exam. The evil people, however, kept saying that, as Sita is the queen, she is getting the exemption; if she were a pupil's wife, she would have been forced to give the exam. When Rama heard these, he lit the fire. When Sita entered the firepit, the earth started to tremble. Mother Earth came out and asked Sita to come with her. She took

Sita into her lap and went back inside the Earth. Everyone started to cry for Sita, including Rama. Chandrabati blamed king Rama for his decision saying that,

What have you done paying heed to the evils

You have lost Sita forever.

Chandrabi said crying, no one is guilty

Happiness, sorrow and karma everything is decided by the Divine.

Chandrabati

This is how Chandrabati ended her *Ramayana*, with Sita entering the womb of Mother Earth. One of the most unusual characteristics of Chandrabati's *Ramayana* lies in its bold criticism of Lord Rama. Since Rama was considered to be the divine incarnation of the God Vishnu, it was not traditional to question his character or judgements. Moreover, there was the possibility of angering religious leaders and even common people who were passionate about their religion. Chandrabati displayed no fear of either patriarchal society or the religious leaders. She fearlessly expressed every doubt in her mind about Rama and his actions. Dr Nabaneeta Dev Sen said, 'She is not merely narrating the epic, but also judging and criticising its hero' (Sen 2001, p.4). She also added that 'Chandra is constantly questioning Rama's wisdom, his integrity, both as a husband and as a ruler' (Sen 2001, p.4).

Humour in Chandrabati's *Ramayana*

Another distinct feature of Chandrabati's *Ramayana* that attracted Barunkumar Chakrabarty's attention was humour. Chakrabarty remarked that although there was little scope to incorporate humour into a tragic story such as *Ramayana*, Chandrabati managed to find a few opportunities to add humorous elements. He commented that the description of the Gods doing household works in Ravana's palace created some comic relief in this tragic story (Chakrabarty 2009).

But as Chakrabarty was not aware of the later additions of Khitishchandra Maulik, he did not consider the comical elements Chandrabati added in those chapters. Before going to the crucial story of Sita being summoned for the exam, Chandrabati brought some comic relief with the witty presence of Hanuman, and mischievous adventures of Lava and Kush. When Hanuman was going to Ajodhya to visit Rama and Sita, he stopped at the shelter of saint Valmiki. When he was eating fruits, Lava and Kush saw him. They decided to captivate the mighty Hanuman, take him home and keep him as their pet. Kush said to Lava that, they would give him milk and banana to eat and will assign him whatever works need to be done. They even daydreamt of riding on Hanuman's back and roam around the forest. When Hanuman got caught by Lava and Kush, he was shocked that two little kids could defeat him. He said,

Wishes of God Rama I do not understand

After conquering the Lanka, I got caught by lads

Chandrabati

The humour continued when Lava and Kush tied Hanuman up on a stick and carried him on their backs. Hanuman increased his weight to make it harder for them. When he got heavier the brothers decided to cut his tail. Hanuman heard them talking and thought that even the demons of Lanka could not harm his tail, it has burnt the whole Lanka down and now he was going to lose it to two kids. To secure his tails from being cut, Hanuman decreased his weight again.

Adding these lighter moments in her otherwise serious and tragic story, proved that Chandrabati was a true entertainer and she knew how to lighten up the mood of her audience. Despite her sorrowful life, she did not lose her sense of humour. The comic reliefs in her *Ramayana*, according to me, is one of its most important characteristics.

Chandrabati's *Ramayana*: An Incomplete Work?

Dr Dinesh Chandra Sen first introduced Chandrabati's *Ramayana* in the fourth volume of his edited book *Purbabanga Gitika*. This version finished when Rama started to doubt Sita's purity. Even though this version lacked some parts of Sita's story, Barunkumar Chakrabarty did not think that it was an incomplete version, rather, he believed that it was deliberate. He argued that Chandrabati was familiar with the length of ballads and she knew that ballads were shorter. That is why, rather than writing a long version, Chandrabati delivered a shorter version of *Ramayana* and finished it in just three parts (Chakrabarty 2009, p.98).

However, as this version was promoted as an incomplete work, even academics failed to notice that, when Khitishchandra Maulik added new chapters of Chandrabati *Ramayana* in his edited version of *Prachin Purbabanga Gitika* (in 1975), it completed Sita's story. In these added chapters, as discussed before, we can see that Chandrabati has written on every single important phase of Sita's life, from her birth to her return to the womb of Mother Earth. Khitishchandra Maulik did not claim this version to be the final one, stating that, there might be sections which he had failed to find (Maulik 1975). Nabaneeta Dev Sen criticised the editors and especially the literary scholars of Bengal for not recognising Chandrabati's *Ramayana* as a complete work. She also criticised scholars for failing to see that Chandrabati had, in fact, presented a completed version of Sita's part of the story (Sen 1990). She discussed the events of Sita's life that Chandrabati included in her *Ramayana* in an article and posed the question, does the story seem incomplete in any way? (Sen 1990)

Chandrabati's *Ramayana* is considered 'incomplete' by the scholars partly because she did not focus on Rama. Dr Nabaneeta Dev Sen said that this *Ramayana* was considered to be a weak and poor work because it did not praise Rama (Sen 1990). I believe Chandrabati did not feel obliged to write about Rama, his quest or praise him as a God. It is also possible that she did not even realise that her version could raise rage and annoyance as it did not centralize Rama but criticised him. Chandrabati did not want additional layers or components in her version rather she focused on Sita and Sita only. Barunkumar Chakrabarty too assumed that Chandrabati deliberately chose the contents of her version of *Ramayana* (Chakrabarty 2009).

In my opinion, Chandrabati did not write her *Ramayana* for any appreciation or applause from the critics or scholars. Chandrabati's own unhappiness led to her fascination with Sita's

sorrows and sufferings. Perhaps she found some resonance in Sita's story. As a writer, she had the independence to write what she really wanted, telling Sita's story from Sita's perspective. Chandrabati was aware of her surroundings and did not consider the acceptance of her *Ramayana* beyond that. She knew that her audience was mainly women, women she mostly knew in person. Her main intention was to tell Sita's story to those women in a way that they could understand, relate and appreciate. In simple, jargon-free Bangla she described every suffering, sorrow and humiliation Sita had to endure in her life. Her *Ramayana* is indeed a complete story of Sita's life.

Valmiki's *Ramayana* and Chandrabati's *Ramayana*

Ramayana had a profound impact not only on the Indian subcontinent but also in the surrounding regions of Nepal, Myanmar, Indonesia, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, China, Japan, Persia, all of which were greatly influenced by this epic. In these regions, poets and writers wrote the story of *Ramayana* in their regional languages (Das 2000).

In 1903 Professor Silva Levi announced the publication of a Chinese *Ramayana* known as 'K-Kita-Ye-P' (Das 2000). *Ramayana* was also translated into Persian. The invaders who came to India to conquer it were mesmerised by the story of *Ramayana*. They brought this epic back to their own countries and thus the epic and its influence spread throughout many other countries. Some people even maintain that Homer's Iliad was influenced by *Ramayana*. Dr Das argued that those *Ramayana* stories written in regional languages were different from the main Valmiki *Ramayana*. When these additional stories were written in regional languages, they adopted the qualities, values and circumstances of each particular region. Two main examples of such *Ramayana* are the Hindi *Ramayana* by Tulsi Das and the Bengali *Ramayana* by Krittibasa (Das 2000). As a regional *Ramayana*, Chandrabati's *Ramayana* is no exception.

In this section, I point out some prominent differences between Valmiki's *Ramayana* and Chandrabati's *Ramayana*.

Beginning: Valmiki opened his *Ramayana* with his own story. He demonstrated the consequences that made Narada advise him to write the story of *Ramayana*. Chandrabati

omitted these introductory formalities and started her *Ramayana* by introducing Ravana, describing his kingdom and his cruelty over sages and gods. As Chandrabati portrayed Sita as Ravana's daughter, I believe, she needed to set a backdrop to her story by starting with Ravana's description and eventually Sita's birth.

Sita's birth: According to Valmiki, Sita was discovered in a furrow in the ground by King Janaka of Mithila while he was ploughing his land. She was named Sita, as Sita means furrow in Sanskrit.

In contrast, Chandrabati's Sita is Ravana's daughter. She related how Ravana's wife Mandadari became pregnant by drinking the poison Ravana had asked her to keep. After ten months and ten days, she gave birth to an egg. Eventually, Sita was born from this egg. She was named after Shota, who found her and brought her to the queen of Mithila.

Sita's characterisation: Valmiki's Sita was a Kshatriya woman who was courageous and had a very strong personality. She did not hesitate to express her feelings, stand up for her rights. She even disobeyed Rama and criticised him if he ever insisted she act against her own beliefs and ideals. Jayananda Dave said that 'Her words are like arrows, they pierce the vitals of Rama. And thus she makes him speechless in that matter' (Dave 2001, p.22). Lakshman also encountered Sita's taunting and harsh criticism in the forest. Dave stated that,

Here, in the utterance of Sita, Valmiki gives us an idea of a person who loses discrimination, when in difficulty. Sita does not hesitate in using harsh, uncivil and discourteous words against Lakshman.

She uses the worst of words which no cultured lady would ever use. (Dave 2001, p.22)

Chandrabati's Sita is, however, weak and vulnerable. She is full of fear. Although she fought to protect her sexual purity while Ravana's captive, she did not attempt to fight for her right as a wife and as a woman. Where Valmiki's Sita was not afraid to threaten Ravana, Chandrabati's Sita trembles just hearing his name.

Consequences prior to Sita's banishment: In the original *Ramayana*, the people of Ajodhya constantly expressed their doubt about Sita's sexual purity and questioned king Rama's dedication and loyalty towards his subjects. To sustain his image as a devoted and dutiful ruler, Rama decided to banish Sita from his kingdom. In Valmiki's *Ramayana*, this episode had a broader perspective (that included the whole Ajodhya) while Chandrabati made it a family affair.

In Chandrabati's version, Sita's evil and jealous sister-in-law Kukua persuaded Sita to draw a picture of Ravana. Sita drew the picture and fell asleep holding it. Kukua called Rama to show him that Sita was asleep holding Ravana's picture. Rama was furious and, without giving Sita any chance to defend herself, banished her from his kingdom even though she was pregnant at that time.

Description of war: A major part of Valmiki's *Ramayana* consists of the description of the great battle between Rama and Ravana. Besides, the martial skills of Rama and his brothers are recounted on several other occasions. The great battle did not appeal to Chandrabati. She merely mentioned some of the main points. Even Ravana's death did not receive any special treatment from her. She simply described the destruction of Ravana's whole family by Lord Rama who thus, freed Sita from Ravana's kingdom.

Chandrabati's *Ramayana*, Inspiration from Alternative Tellings

Chandrabati's *Ramayana* was inspired by various versions of *Ramayana* that were popular in Java, Malay, Kashmir and the Komboj regions. Although she had read the main *Ramayana* written by Valmiki in Sanskrit, she incorporated many anecdotes from the *Ramayana* stories popular in her neighbouring regions (Sen 1923). She gathered popular elements from other *Ramayana* retellings and as she aimed to write a *Ramayana* for women, she omitted elaborate descriptions of war and other masculine features. Rather, she included feminine elements such as wedding rituals, Sita's emotions as a wife, her cravings during pregnancy and childbirth, elements that would appeal to women.

Jain version and Chandra's version: Both these versions started with Ravana's story and his kingdom. While the Jain telling tended to portray Ravana as a noble soul, Chandrabati narrated the traditional version of his character. The Jain telling pictured Rama as an invader who forcefully and illegally entered Ravana's kingdom, whereas, for Chandrabati, Rama invaded Ravana's domain to free his wife Sita. Both these telling stated that Sita was Ravana's daughter although Ravana was unaware of this fact.

Kannada Version and Chandra's version: Both these versions demonstrated the story from Sita's perspective. In the Kannada version, much like Chandrabati's retelling, Sita is the hero.

Like many South Indian iterations, the Kannada version also indicated that Sita was Ravana's daughter.

Chandrabati focused in detail on Sita being Ravana's daughter. This may have been to establish the point that Sita was innocent and was not sexually harassed by Ravana. She wished to convey that, although Ravana was unaware of the fact, he somehow controlled his temptation towards Sita, and she was 'sexually pure' when Rama rescued her. Some stories even suggest that Ravana harassed a young woman and to take her revenge this woman was born as Ravana's daughter to destroy him (Ramanujan 1991).

Thai version and Chandra's version: According to a Thai telling Shurponokha's daughter was greatly annoyed about the fact that her mother was humiliated by Rama and Lakshman in the forest. So, when Sita came back from Lanka, Shurponokha's daughter arranged to be employed as her servant and somehow convinced Sita to draw a picture of Ravana. Other versions say that the drawing came to life in Sita's room and drew Rama's attention. Rama felt jealous and in a rage ordered Lakshman to kill Sita. Lakshman, a noble heart was unable to obey his brother's unjust command and set Sita free in the forest. He brought back a deer's heart to confirm Sita's death to Rama. This incident is similar to that portrayed by Chandrabati when, as previously mentioned, she depicted Rama banishing Sita after she drew a picture of Ravana. Chandrabati criticised him saying, 'Rama has lost his mind.'

Inspiration from Tibet, Java, Malay and other neighbouring regions: Chandrabati's *Ramayana* was influenced by the *Ramayana* stories of her neighbouring regions, although Dr Das refuted this, claiming that Chandrabati was educated in the village *pathshala* (school) and it was quite impossible for her to know about the *Ramayana* stories popular in Kashmir and other regions outside of India. To explain the common features in Chandrabati's *Ramayana* and other *Ramayana* stories, she maintained there are common beliefs and views reflected in stories regardless of where and by whom they have been written. She added that these stories were not influenced by or inspired by each other, despite sharing some similarities (Das 2000).

However, Dr Das's theory can be defended based on Kukua, an evil character in Chandrabati's *Ramayana* whose conspiracy compelled Rama to disbelieve Sita and send her into exile. According to Dr Das, Chandrabati's characterisation of Kukua is highly realistic and lively (Das

2000). The historian Dr Dinesh Chandra Sen, however, argued that Kukua was not an original creation of Chandrabati. He stated that ‘When we first read Chandrabati’s *Ramayan*, we thought that the character Kukua is her unique creation, but now we see that Kukua is not Chandrabati’s creation. This character can also be seen in the *Ramayana* of Kashmir, Malay, Java, Komboj and Tibet regions’ (Sen 1932, p.91).

Bengali Customs and Rituals, Social and Cultural Elements in Chandrabati’s

Ramayana

Although *Ramayana* is the story of Sita and Rama who were from *Ajodhya Nagari* (city of Ajodhya), situated in India, Chandrabati’s *Ramayana* is replete with elements of the lifestyle, customs and beliefs of rural Bengal. In her version, Chandrabati incorporated her own experiences that she gathered from her surroundings, making her *Ramayana* even more interesting. Borunkumar Chakrabarty stated that mentioning such folk elements in her *Ramayana*, Chandrabati gave readers a believable picture of contemporary social life (Chakrabarty 2009).

To describe Madhob and Shota’s misfortune, Chandrabati mentioned that they did not have their own land and were forced to buy crops. They also did not have a pond and had to acquire water from other people’s ponds. By including such descriptive passages she presented the struggles of poor people in Medieval Bengal. She wrote of huts made of plants and leaves, a common way of building houses for the poor. She also mentioned *shaare*, a traditional dress for women of Bengal (and also India) which they still wear in their daily lives. A special *shaare* named *Gongaal* was also mentioned and it seems that it was a costly *shaare* which only the rich could afford. She wrote that married women wore *shaakha* (a bangle that married Hindu women wear) named *Rama Lakshman*.

Chandrabati also mentioned various folk objects and items that were used by the people of Bengal in their everyday lives. She alluded to a manual fan made with palm leaves (*taaler pakha*) used to circulate air and make the surroundings cooler on a hot summer day as well as a particular kind of basket that fishermen used to carry fish (*machher jhapi*). Other aspects of local life mentioned by Chandrabati included *shitol pati* made with rattan and used to cover

the floor, an item that is popular even in modern Bangladesh, that people ate betel leaves with areca nut (*paan shupari*) as a delicacy and that gold was a precious item at that time.

Her version offers a description of some Hindu religious rituals in which people honoured objects they considered to be sacred with a touch of vermilion (*shiduur*), along with lighting special lamps and incense. They drew plants and flowers in their yard (mainly known as *aalpona* in Bengal) to decorate and celebrate. To celebrate a pregnancy, female relatives arranged a program named *shaadh*. Chandrabati also provided examples of Bengali superstitions such as believing that the sighting of widows and empty vessels was auspicious. The caw of crows and lame dogs were also symbols of bad luck in Chandrabati's time (These superstitions are believed by some even today). In her *Ramayana*, Chandrabati mentioned some of the local deities such as *Mongolchandi*, *Shubochoni*, *Bondurga*, *Shitola Shoshthi* and *Monsha*, who were respected and worshipped by the people of Bengal.

'*Baromashai*' is a special element of Bengali literature in which the writer or poet described how a character, in a particular phase of his or her life spent the twelve months of the Bengali year. Chandrabati, while depicting Sita's Baromashai, described the distinct features of each Bengali month. She stated that in *Jaishtha* (a month in the Summer) the rays of the sun were too intense. In *Asharh* (a month in the Rainy season) heavy rainfall fell from the sky. Chandrabati described the cloud as having less water than Sita had in her eyes while she was a captive in Lanka.

Chandrabati's Influence on Later poet Michael Modhushudon Dutta

Michael Modhushudon Dutta is one of the most famous writers of Bengali Literature. His '*Meghnad Badh Kavya*' is a literary masterpiece of the nineteenth century. And interestingly, this masterpiece bears some resemblance to Chandrabati's *Ramayana*. As in Chandrabati's *Ramayana*, Modhusudon Dutta's version of *Ramayana* '*Meghnad Badh Kavya*', does not have Rama as the hero. Modhusudon Dutta chose to concentrate on a particular episode of *Ramayana* in which he told the story of Ravana, who, in some instances, received more attention from Chandrabati. Prama Bhattacharjee, in her paper, 'The Store of Your Mother is Full of Jewels: The Idea of the Nation for Michael Madhusudan Dutt' said that,

He selected a particular episode from the epic that described the death of Meghnad, prince of Lanka in the hands of Lakshmana in an unethical combat. Dutt inverted the point of view of the narrator as seen in the original Sanskrit text and told the tale from the side of the vanquished, the Rakshashas, rather than the victor, the Aryans. (Bhattacharjee 2018, p.261)

Having considered these similarities, Dr Dinesh Chandra Sen argued that Modhushudon Dutta was inspired by Chandrabati (Sen 1923). However, Dr Bani Das disagreed. She argued that, if Modhushudon Dutta was familiar with Chandrabati's songs and influenced by them, he would have mentioned them in his works or letters. As she could not find any trace of their mention, she did not believe that Modhushudon Dutta was inspired by Chandrabati (Das 2000). She further argued that the compiler and editor of Chandrabati's songs, Chandra Kumar De was influenced by Modhushudon Dutta and thus when he compiled and rewrote Chandrabati's songs, he imposed Modhushudon Dutta's style on Chandrabati's songs. She also added that Chandrabati's songs were popular and were sung in the Mymensingh region of East Bengal. Modhushudon Dutta, however, was living in Kolkata. Dr Das regarded it as very unlikely that he could have listened to any of Chandrabati's songs (Das 2000). However, she did admit that, if in the seventeenth-century Chandrabati's songs had resemblances and similar tones to the songs of Java, Malay and Kashmir regions, it was not impossible that in the nineteenth-century Modhushudon Dutta's work would have resemblances to Chandrabati's works (Das 2000).

I discuss below why I disagree with Dr Das. Firstly, she stated that if Modhushudon Dutta had been influenced by Chandrabati, he would have acknowledged this somewhere. But it was not mandatory for Modhushudon Dutta to acknowledge Chandrabati and her songs, especially if he was unsure of their origin. Secondly, Dr Das claimed that, as Modhushudon Dutta was living in Kolkata it would be impossible for him to hear Chandrabati's songs. But as *Ramayana* songs, Chandrabati's songs were sung in the weddings of East Bengal and as such songs readily spread across boundaries it was possible that the people of Kolkata were familiar with Chandrabati's songs, although unaware of their author. Moreover, the people of West Bengal and East Bengal share the same language, culture, values and beliefs. Bormon, one of my informants shared his theory on what helped these women's songs to spread. He said that,

Women used to go far and wide to visit their relatives and friends. During those visits, women from different places sat together and sang songs from their own localities, and also discussed them. That is how they shared and learnt each other's songs.

In 1932, Dr Dineshchandra Sen argued that he could trace similarities between Chandrabati's *Ramayana* and Modhushudon Dutta's *Meghnad Badh Kavya*. He believed that Modhushudon Dutta must have listened to the songs of Chandrabati's *Ramayana* as they were sung in many places in East Bengal (Chakrabarty 2006).

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I initially described the main events of Chandrabati's *Ramayana* as background to later discussion. The distinct characteristics of her *Ramayana* (writing from Sita's perspective, criticising Rama) are important elements of this chapter. I also argued why I believe her version was not 'incomplete' and discussed some of the ways Chandrabati's version differed from the original Valmiki *Ramayana*. I indicated the similarities and relationships between Chandrabati's *Ramayana* and the *Ramayana* retellings and interpretations in other languages and neighbouring regions. I also listed the social, cultural and religious elements of medieval Bengal that she incorporated in her story. And finally, I provided reasons for my speculation that Micheal Modhushudon Dutta was inspired by Chandrabati.

Chapter Six

The Memory of Chandrabati and Her Creations in Modern Bangladesh: Reality and Reason

Chandrabati, in her songs and literature brilliantly depicted the lives of the people of medieval Bengal. She beautifully portrayed their eternal struggle to survive, and the story of their bravery; she vividly described their lives full of love and passion, betrayal and rivalry. The more I read Chandrabati's literature, the more I wanted to know of how the people of Bangladesh recall Chandrabati and her works in the present day. I wanted to know what impact Chandrabati and her works might have on the lives of people of Bangladesh and whether Chandrabati's descriptions have relevance to their own lives. To find out the answers I went to Bangladesh, where Chandrabati was born and lived in the sixteenth century and which was part of the Bengal province at that time.

I started my fieldwork in Chandrabati's village Patuayr, which is located at Neelganja Thana, in Kishoreganj, a district not very far from the capital city of Bangladesh, Dhaka. When I reached Kishoreganj and started to look for Chandrabati's village, the lack of information and proper direction, delivered by the respective authorities was visible. General people's minimal knowledge of Chandrabati also became apparent. I found an auto-rickshaw driver who knew the area quite well. But as the Department of Archaeology did not provide signs to direct people to remote village paths, travelling to Chandrabati's village, and then to her home, was a difficult task for him as well.

Later I realised that visiting there in the winter season was a huge advantage for me. In the rainy season, the village roads become extremely difficult to use and are sometimes impassable. Locals were vocal about their everyday misery and the local authority's neglect of such an important archaeological site. But this was just the beginning. Eventually, it became clear that Chandrabati's house and temples were examples of the collective ignorance and neglect of our history and heritage.



The official signboard of Chandrabati's temple in Bangla, near a tea stall

Photographed by Sumaya Eku

When I arrived, I could see Chandrabati's temples standing proudly behind the tall, lush trees. Locals informed me that the taller temple belonged to Chandrabati's father Bangshi Das and the smaller one to Chandrabati. Although I had seen numerous pictures of these temples in the past couple of years, they seemed unfamiliar. Immediately I realised why. To protect the medieval architecture, the Department of Archaeology had renovated the temples and coloured them in white and red. The professionalism and efficiency of the Department of Archaeology of Bangladesh have created controversies for many years. And these inappropriate renovations, which ruined the beautiful colour and texture of the temples, and also the surroundings, were enough to justify the criticism.

Chandrabati's home is located beside the temples. Chandrabati Government Primary School, which is a modern single-storey building, is also situated near the temples. Chandrabati's home has given rise to a huge controversy in the locality and had a latent but constant impact on her legacy. Before discussing these issues, I examine how the people of Bangladesh, especially Kishoreganj recall Chandrabati and her works.



The temples of Bangshi Das and Chandrabati, Patuayr village, Kishoreganj, Bangladesh

Photographed by Sumaya Eku

Memories of Chandrabati and Her Works in Modern Bangladesh

A very popular saying in Bangla is, ‘People remember the creation, not the creator’ (মানুষ কীর্তিকে মনে রাখে, কীর্তিমানকে নয়।). But when I was travelling through Bangladeshi cities and remote villages, in search of Chandrabati’s songs, I found this saying to be quite erroneous.

From the very beginning of my fieldwork, it became apparent that most people no longer remember Chandrabati, let alone know about her fascinating literary works and songs. Locals from Kishoreganj, who are familiar with her name, do not give her much thought. Many of the modern academics and scholars do not even know her name. And those who do, disregard her as being the author of an incomplete *Ramayana*. Almost all those who recognise Chandrabati, emphasise how she sacrificed her entire life for her childhood love, not that she was an extraordinary poet.

During my fieldwork, whenever informants were asked to say something about Chandrabati, they both started and ended with her love story. Some mentioned her writings, mainly her

Ramayana and that she was the first woman poet of Bengal, but her legendary love story with Jayananda clearly overshadowed her literary creations.

When I started to search for informants, I heard that a family distantly related to Chandrabati live in her village. I was excited at the thought of obtaining some insightful information from the family. But Arjun Chakrabarti, who claims to be Chandrabati's descendant, recited the same old story. Arjun Chakrabarti simply said that, in 1972, just after independence, some educated young students took the initiative to promote Chandrabati as a local legend. They established a cultural group named *Chandrabati Shahittya O Shanskritik Shangshad* (Chandrabati Literature and Cultural Group). Arjun Chakrabarti admitted that he would not have learned about Chandrabati if they had not taken the initiative. Later he became a member of the group. He added that his family was in charge of worship at the two temples, that are named after Chandrabati and her father Bangshi Das. He claimed that, with the end of their family, Chandrabati's memory and her temples would be ruined because of lack of maintenance. The irony was, however, that the protector of Chandrabati's memory knew a lot about her love story, very little about her *Ramayana*, and almost nothing about her other literary works.

Abul Hossain, a local elder and assistant teacher at Chandrabati Government Primary School recalled that they did not even know about her before 1972. In 1972 local youths formed a group, named after Chandrabati's father Dija Bangshi Das. As a young student, he joined the group. His mentor Swapon Pakrashi, a culturally and socially aware school teacher, advised them that they should promote Dija's daughter Chandrabati and enlighten people about this local hero. Thus, they changed the name of the group to *Chandrabati Shahittya O Shanskritik Shangshad*. The group arranged various cultural and sports programs and local educators and cultural activists joined the programs to deliver a speech on Chandrabati. But Abul Hossain admitted that they had no idea about Chandrabati's literature or her songs at that time. Abul Hossain added,

No one knew about her songs, nobody came to find her songs. No one sings Chandrabati's songs anymore.

He had heard about her writings such as *Doshshu Kenaramer Pala* and *Molua* but never read them. He added, now they have just one small book on Chandrabati written by Shashitoranjan

Chakrabarti and that is the only written material to learn about her. With Abul Hossain's statement, it became clear that the group itself had no access to Chandrabati's works, let alone be able to work on them or introduce them to others. Using Chandrabati's name was one of their biggest accomplishments in restoring her history and it is commendable that their efforts made Chandrabati Primary School a reality. Arjun Chakrabarti and Abul Hossain both said that *Chandrabati Shahittya O Shanskritik Shangshad* took the initiative to establish a school after Chandrabati's name. They asked the descendants of Chandrabati's family to donate land for the school. Arjun Chakrabarti said that his relative Tulsi Das Roy donated the land. In 1976, the government officially announced it as a government primary school.



Abul Hossain standing on the building of Chandrabati Government Primary School

Photographed by Sumaya Eku

Abul Hossain acknowledged that nowadays more people, both nationally and internationally, are becoming interested in Chandrabati and coming to visit her village and temples. He also informed me that the Russian ambassador visited the village recently and the American ambassador in Bangladesh at the time, Dan Mozena, intended to visit, but his trip was cancelled due to the lack of a proper transportation system. In answer to my question as to

why people were becoming interested in Chandrabati, Abul Hossain and other informants gave the credit to recent television and print media coverage. But this coverage, although it succeeded to some extent in reintroducing Chandrabati to society, was not able to end people's ignorance about her and her works. This ignorance was many years in the making.

Shathi Rani Das, also a teacher at Chandrabati Government Primary School, expressed her frustration stating that they cannot teach their students about Chandrabati because they themselves lack sufficient knowledge. Interviewing this young woman was an important phase of my fieldwork, as she was the only female informant who had some knowledge of Chandrabati's literature. Shathi Das had found a small book written on Chandrabati by Sasitranjan Chakrabarti in the school office and had read it thoroughly. She said that,

When I first came to know about Chandrabati, I had goosebumps. I got mesmerised by Chandrabati because despite not being formally educated, Chandrabati could hold the main essence of Sita's character in her heart and express that through her writing.

Shathi Das said that she was very impressed by Chandrabati's *Ramayana* and pointed out some relevant points between Sita and modern Bangladeshi women. She said that,

Sita was tormented by her Husband Rama's betrayal. Though Sita left everything behind, to be with Rama in his darkest times, Rama questioned her character and chastity to impress his subjects. Rama's questions towards Sita exposed the doubts he had in his mind. Modern Bangladeshi husbands possess the same doubtful attitude and mentality towards their wives.

Shathi Das continued, she herself often faces questions at the end of the day. Her husband asks her, where she has been all day or why is she late. She said that the scenario is quite similar to both working and stay at home women. She questioned,

Does not my husband know me? Yes, he knows me well. But even then, he questions me and I am bound to answer.

She continued,

Sita was compelled to prove her purity in front of Rama and his subjects and it was devastating for her. Not because she had to go through the exam but because even her husband, Lord Rama did not believe her, nor did he stand for her right.

My question about Chandrabati's songs made Shathi Das think about her point of view on women's songs. She admitted that she had never been very interested in these women's songs, but believed that this tradition of singing will somehow become natural to her. She stated that her mother, grandmother and aunts still sang women's songs on various occasions but she had not heard Chandrabati's songs in particular. She said that as Chandrabati's songs are not compiled, it was very hard to trace them. Shathi Das also focused on recent trends and said that nowadays the tradition has changed. The songs are more about dancing rather than singing alone. She explained that the younger generation prefers modern songs and do not like to listen to these 'monotonous' women's songs anymore.

She also confirmed that over many years, no one had taken any initiative to inform people about Chandrabati's bold writings and her courageous character. Shathi Das strongly believed that the government should take the appropriate steps to promote Chandrabati so that people could learn about her and can be aware of her extraordinary works. She said that the media should take the main responsibility of spreading her name because nowadays even the remotest places of Bangladesh have easy access to media, both print and electronic. Shathi Das continued by saying that electronic media is capable of spreading news and knowledge to people who are uneducated or less educated and do not have much access to books and other publications. She believed that if electronic media was determined to spread Chandrabati's name and works, it would be very effective. Shathi Das's statement made it clear that even if women still sing Chandrabati's songs, they are unaware of them. There is not a specific genre that can be categorised as Chandrabati's songs as they are included in hundreds and thousands of popular women's songs of that area.

The founding Chairperson of *Gana Shanskritik Dol* (The Cultural Group of People) and cultural activist, Khairul Alam Badal tried to describe what was behind people's ignorance of Chandrabati. He said that,

It is very unusual for people who are not directly associated with any cultural activities, to know about Chandrabati.

He added that when he was young, cultural groups played a major role in introducing Chandrabati to the youth of Kishoreganj. He continued by mentioning that he knew about her because he was associated with *Khelaghor Ashor* and *Nobin Mela* (two main cultural

organisations for children and youth in Kishoreganj). His cultural mentors informed him about Chandrabati. Later, he became interested in the poet and took the initiative to learn more about her.

Amin Sadi is a local journalist and an officer of the Department of Archaeology in Bangladesh. He is also the chairperson of *Kishoreganj Itihash O Oitijjhho Shongrokkhon Porishad* (The History and Cultural Preservation Organization of Kishoreganj). His opinion on people's knowledge of Chandrabati was similar to Khairul Alam Badal's answer. He too said that people do not know about Chandrabati and added that, if Chandrabati's history were included in school or college syllabus, the younger generation would have at least known her name. Amin Sadi continued by saying that although Chandrabati's literature was included in the university syllabus of some specific departments, that was not enough to enlighten the general population about Chandrabati.

Amin Sadi's direct involvement in the preservation of archaeological sites made his views and experience valuable. Amin Sadi informed me that he had arranged the formation of a human chain (মানববন্ধন) in front of Chandrabati's temples to demand the preservation of Chandrabati's history. According to him, that activity successfully attracted people's attention. But he admitted that the initiatives the Department of Archaeology had taken to preserve the temples were neither appropriate nor acceptable.

Another local cultural activist Saidur Rahman Kanchan is the chairperson of *Chandrabati Smriti Shahittya o Shamaj Kollyan Shangha* (Chandrabati Memorial of Literature and Social Welfare Association). He claimed that he is a poet and interested in literature. He has not read any of Chandrabati's writings, although he was eager to read them and had searched for them everywhere in the locality. He stated that he could not find any of her writings. Saidur Kanchan's story made it clear that ignorance of Chandrabati was not created solely through lack of interest. The lack of resources also constrained knowledge about Chandrabati and her literature.

Assistant teacher of Ajimuddin Government School, Swapon Bormon said that educated families were aware of Chandrabati's story and remembered them on many occasions. In wedding ceremonies, people used to recall Chandrabati. When Bormon was a child he had seen some of these rituals, in which people compared Sita and Chandrabati. He added that in

wedding ceremonies, when the families said goodbye to their beloved daughters, the parents and other women used to cry and the women sang sad songs. In those songs, they mentioned Chandrabati and Sita's sorrows and wished the bride a life unlike either of those two women. Bormon became conscious of Chandrabati and learnt more about her when he was studying in higher secondary school.

During my fieldwork, I interviewed two groups of women on different occasions and settings. I interviewed them because they still sang women's songs on various occasions and possess a good understanding of the local songs. I thought that I would find them singing Chandrabati's songs, but I was disappointed by their response.



Women singing songs in their front yard

Photographed by Sumaya Eku.

The first group lived near Chandrabati's locality and were economically less privileged of the two groups. In this group, the women were aged from 20 to 102 years. They admitted that they do not know much about Chandrabati. As Chandrabati was locally known as *Chandra*, I asked them if they have heard that name. Their response was negative. They added that they came to know about Chandrabati recently when a group of media activists came to their village to make a documentary on her. This group of women performed a wedding song of

Rama and Sita and some other songs for me, but they were not written by Chandrabati. They also had not heard of two of Chandrabati's most popular characters, Molua or Doshshu Kenaram.

The second group's knowledge of Chandrabati was much broader. This group was from a relatively urban background. They were more educated and financially well off. They were much more privileged than the previous group in every respect. These women sing women's songs on religious and cultural occasions. They were confident and smart and took pride in their practice. They were self-sufficient in their performances and did not require men to play their instruments. Among them was Reba Bashak, an elderly lady who worked in the government service. About fifteen years back, Reba Bashak first learnt about Chandrabati's story from her colleague who lived near Chandrabati's village. The group performed a song for me, which movingly described Chandrabati's sorrow when Jayananda betrayed her. It went like this,

Beloved has not come

Sorrows have not passed

Chandrabati is sitting on the road

Her wishes have come to an end.

O Jyo Radhe

O Jyo Radhe o

In the moonlit night of *Phalgun* (a Bangla month)

With joy in the *Brindabaan*

O Jyo Radhe

O Jyo Radhe o.

Ha re Rama ha re Rama

Ha re ha re Rama re

Ha re Krishna ha re Krishna

Ha re ha re Krishna re.

They said that, although they had been singing this song for years, they were unaware of the origin of the song. They sing this particular song on *Dol Purnima*, a religious festival for Hindus, they added. But they lacked any knowledge of Chandrabati's *Ramayana*.

Interviews and conversation with the people of Kishoreganj made it apparent that many people did not know of Chandrabati, let alone her works. But at the same time, it was obvious that her recognition and reputation in her area was stronger than in the rest of the country. Aside from literature, history and cultural enthusiasts, it was almost impossible to know about Chandrabati. Urban organisations like the Chandrabati Academy have taken some initiatives to promote her name nationally. But the founders of that organisation admitted that to date they had not taken any steps to rescue or restore her songs.



The second group of women talking about Chandrabati

Photographed by Sumaya Eku

At this point in the fieldwork, it became clear to me that the absence of information on Chandrabati in the mainstream educational curriculum, along with inadequate local and national initiatives, had created a huge gap in knowledge about Chandrabati. It also justified the statements of Swapon Bormon, Abul Hossain and other interviewees, who said that for a significant period Chandrabati was overlooked and almost no steps were taken to highlight her name and works. Generations after generations have grown up ignorant of her. It is therefore unlikely that the future generation will learn about her spontaneously.

As I discussed in Chapter Four, Chandrabati's contribution to Bangladesh's social, cultural, economic and religious history is enormous. Even if we put aside her excellence in literature, she is worthy of much more international, and especially national attention than she is presently receiving. This situation led me to think about the reasons why this huge gap in knowledge had come about. The most important question I have tried to answer here is, why Chandrabati failed to gain the attention and respect she deserved in the first place. I also examine some of the reasons that have made Chandrabati a distant memory, and a popular custom like singing Chandrabati's songs to fade away.

Forgotten Phenomenon: Causes and Effects

In the past, Chandrabati must have been a more familiar name to the people of Bengal than she is now, but she has never gained the reputation she truly deserved as one of the first female poets of Bengal. Her seriously underrated status, appreciation and fame in the international, and especially national context, is now a reality. Here I discuss the causes behind this situation in the hopes that finding the causes, both direct and indirect, will enable us to better comprehend the situation.

Male Dominant History and Literature

History, literature, and the history of literature, like most other major disciplines, have been dominated by men all over the world. Because of this reason, the literary achievements of women have been subjected to neglect and disregard everywhere. In the Indian sub-

continent, a patriarchal and highly conservative society, this dominance was similar if not greater.

Bishwajeet Ghosh said that 'Bangla literature, without some exceptions, is the literature of the male world, viewed from the male perspective' (Ghosh 2012, p. 125). While in the context of the modern world the accuracy of this remark can be challenged, we cannot deny its appropriateness in the medieval and pre-modern period. At that time, in Bangla literature, women were solely dependent on their counterparts. Even if women had contributed to literature, their works and thoughts were judged by men. The place of their work in history, their acceptance in society, their future, even their audience, all were determined by men.

In such a male-dominated society, it was inevitable that Chandrabati's distinct lifestyle and revolutionary literary works would not receive proper recognition from the historians and literateurs. Dr Nabaneeta Dev Sen mentioned how the previous reviews of Chandrabati's *Ramayana* had created a negative vibe in her mind. She affirmed that she was discouraged by the literary historians and did not read her *Ramayana* but only her ballads (Sen 1990). Dr Sen's statement surely justifies my argument that the acceptance and fate of the literature written by women, was dependent on men.

Dr Nabaneeta Dev Sen accused notable litterateur Sukumar Sen saying that when he discussed Chandrabati's life based on Nayon Chand Ghosh's ballad, he failed to mention that Chandrabati had started writing the *Ramayana* (although Nayon Chand's ballad did state at the end that Chandrabati wrote the *Ramayana*). Sukumar Sen highlighted her love story and emphasised the fact that she remained unmarried throughout her life (Sen 2000). In addition, Susmita Chakrabarti critiqued scholars like Shamsujjaman Khan, Momen Chowdhury and Borunkumar Chakrabarti for not including Chandrabati or her *Ramayana* in the folklore compilation of both East and West Bengal. (Chakrabarti 2006)

Based on the above discussion, I believe that the collective attitude of belittlement towards literature written by women prevented scholars from judging Chandrabati's writings with open and unbiased minds. Their presumptions stopped them from noticing the extraordinary features Chandrabati's writings possessed, especially her *Ramayana*. In contrast, Chandrabati raised questions about patriarchal society. Firstly, she challenged society by refusing to follow the usual path of marital life and motherhood that was imposed on women.

Secondly, men did not entirely accept Chandrabati's writing the holy book of *Ramayana*. One of my informants Swapon Bormon said that,

They did not like the idea of women being educated in the first place. On top of that, Chandrabati's writing the *Ramayana* threatened their religious point of view and they felt unsecured about their male dominance.

Such neglect and discrimination against women in general deprived Chandrabati and her works of the attention and importance they deserved. The attitude of male-dominated society eventually contributed to her being forgotten and created a huge gap in knowledge.

Archaeology: A Neglected Area

In Bangladesh, collective neglect and lack of awareness got mixed with lack of government initiatives and disregard. This combination created a nation highly ignorant of its history, culture, archaeology and heritage. Susmita Chakrabarty said that as a nation Bangladeshis have not learned to give their history and culture proper importance and do not know how to preserve them (Chakrabarty 2016). This circumstance has created huge gaps in knowledge among the younger generations, who are confused and ignorant about their own history. The Department of Archaeology in Bangladesh is no exception. Emran Hossain in his article *Heritage Sites Left in Ruins* reported that,

Years of irregularities and neglect by the authorities concerned have led to damage, destruction and even occupation of priceless archaeological sites across the country, but such persisting loss of national heritage has failed to yield their attention (Hossain 2009, p.1)

Taking care of historic buildings is one of the main duties of the Department of Archaeology in Bangladesh. Preserving sites, renovating them, maintaining appropriate procedures, placing proper directions to guide tourists to remote archaeological sites, and promoting these sites to encourage people to visit them are some of their main responsibilities. My visit to Chandrabati's village, however, caused me to doubt their sense of responsibility and action.

First of all, there were no adequate signs with directions to Chandrabati's temples, which have attracted much attention from local and international enthusiasts in recent years. We had to ask several people for directions. Secondly, the recent renovation in Chandrabati's temples

confirmed the doubt in my mind regarding the activity of the department. To renovate the medieval structures, the department (or their contractors?) used whatever material was available, without considering its impact on the aged buildings. Moreover, they coloured Chandrabati's temples in white with red borders, which ruined their medieval charm. Emran Hossain' statement on the general activities of the department supported this fact. He said that

Whenever the Department of Archaeology takes an initiative for conservation, preservation or restoration of an archaeological site, the process is inadequate, flawed, and finally wrongly done in violation of existing laws. (Hossain 2009, p.1)



The signboard from the Department of Archaeology is hard to read

Photographed by Sumaya Eku

Morshed Rayhan further added to this issue by stating that,

From the very beginning, this department has been facing the lack of professional archaeologists or expertise with industrial education. Still this department was run with the help of only three or four archaeologists, who had their post-graduation in Archaeology. (Rayhan 2011, p.4)

One of the informants Swapon Bormon expressed his frustration stating that,

The pond in front of the temples was there at Chandrabati's time as well. In recent years people from the Department of Archaeology have found artefacts from the medieval time when they dug that pond further. They know the importance of that place and the artefacts but have not taken proper steps to protect them.



The sitting arrangement that ruined the beautiful view of the temples

Photographed by Sumaya Eku

This tendency of the department has been a concern among archaeologists and professionals for many years. Abu Siddique reported that in a seminar held in Dhaka, Professor Samsul Wares, expressed his concern about the use of inappropriate materials in renovations when there was a lack of original materials and urged that this trend should be stopped (Siddique

2014). In the very same seminar, Professor AKM Shah Nawaz criticised the department stating that,

In most cases, the conservation works in the country's archaeological sites are not being carried out by professionals with knowledge in the sector, resulting in the destruction of historical places.

(Siddique 2014)

Thirdly, the planning of the sitting arrangements for tourists was another example of their poor decision making, as they obstructed the view of the structures. Besides, lack of accountability towards archaeological sites is a common tendency of the masses of Bangladesh. It has become typical of people visiting these sites to act without respect and sometimes deliberately ruining these historical monuments by creating graffiti on the walls and leaving waste at the sites.

End of Secularism, Changed Religious Vision and Increasing Religious Intolerance

In 1971 Bangladesh began its journey as an independent country under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who was widely known as Bangabandhu (The friend of Bengal) and the 'Father of the Nation'. As a leader of the ruling political party Awami League, Bangabandhu mainly focused on principles as democracy, nationalism, socialism and secularism while building the nation (Jahan 1973). These ideologies were the four main principles in the first constitution of Bangladesh.

After the brutal assassination of Bangabandhu in 1975, the new government brought about changes in policies. Secularism as an ideology became one of the first targets, as it created difficulties in setting up relationships with countries like China, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. To ease tensions with these countries and to build a more diverse foreign trade system, the government was inclined to put secularism in the back seat and place more importance on Islamism. Rounaq Jahan said that 'On the ideological front, secularism remained the guiding principle of the state but a more demonstrative emphasis was put on Islam' (Jahan, 1976).

At the time, rapid changes in political power play took place in Bangladesh, which ceased for a period, when in 1977, General Ziaur Rahman took over responsibility for ruling the country. But his ideological point of view was compatible with the previous rulers and secularism

remained an unwanted element and was later removed. A.M. Quamrul Alam stated that General Ziaur Rahman modified the constitution after coming to power. He deleted the articles relating to secularism and incorporated socialism with social justice (Alam 1993). General Ziaur Rahman's emphasis on Islam was accepted and further enhanced by his successor General Ershad. Saleem Samad said that 'General Ershad forcibly changed the constitution and introduced "Islam" as the state religion and took the nation towards "Islamic Nationalism"' (Samad 2009, p.6).

However, the exclusion of secularism made the Muslim population proud, arrogant and authoritative. On the other hand, 'non-Muslims' felt neglected and unappreciated. It also had a great impact on their sense of belonging and confidence. Saleem Samad stated, 'The declaration of Islam as the state religion may not have many institutional or formal ramifications but it has made the minorities in Bangladesh distant from the core of the state' (Samad 2009, p.9).

Choudhury and Kanta stated that,

In Bangladeshi constitutional history, secularism has never meant profanity against religion, but rather inferred a prohibition on the state's ability to grant political status in favour of any one religion. But when the "State Religion Islam" clause is inserted into a political document such as the Constitution, it creates widespread political implications and questions regarding the status of minorities. (Choudhury and Kanta 2015, p.5)

Furthermore, globalisation exposed Bangladeshis to the world vision which changed their religious viewpoint and practice. The local version of Islam which was more adaptive, tolerant, moderate became more rigid under the influence of international events and made 'Islamism' a popular concept. Maneeza Hossain said, "Islamism in Bangladesh has not developed in isolation" (Hossain 2006, p.72). Akhand Akhtar Hossain argued

The resurgence since the 1970s of Muslim identity and religiosity in Bangladesh has been the outcome of a combination of economic, social and political factors. Global revolutions in transport, communication and technology, sometimes spurred by economic shocks, have made Bangladeshis both more mobile and more informed on global issues (Hossain 2012, p.180)

World events like the Iranian revolution, Iran – Iraq war, post 9/11 events also played important roles in the rise of 'Islamism' in Bangladesh. Akhand Akhtar Hossain stated that

An early impetus to the rise in Islamic religiosity in Bangladesh was the Iranian revolution of 1979, which raised the hopes and aspirations of most Muslims. (Hossain 2012, p.177)

These circumstances created more religious intolerance in society and had impacts on the customs, rituals and practices of 'the non-Muslim' population in general. It had an indirect, yet robust impact on Chandrabati's legacy, as eventually it contributed to the decreasing number of Hindus in Bangladesh. In the following section, I discuss the relevance and importance of this issue.

Declining Number of Hindus

I became aware of Bangladeshi society's hidden discrimination towards Hindus when I was a child. In the late 1980s, a rumour that 'Babri Mosque' had been destroyed in India, fired up anti-Hindu sentiments and outraged Muslim fanatics poured into the streets intent on attacking innocent Hindus and destroying their property and temples in Bangladesh. On that day, I was going to my grandparents' house with my mother and younger brother. I still remember that our auto-rickshaw was stopped in the middle of the road by a group of people who seemed very worried and afraid. They asked us to leave the rickshaw and get off the road immediately. I started to cry when I saw a group of men screaming and running towards us with machetes and sticks. My mother grabbed her children and rushed to a nearby home and asked for shelter. A Muslim family, who lived there, let us enter their house. They were very compassionate and helpful and seemed like any other typical Bangladeshi middle-class family. We had to stay there for hours. We could still hear people running and screaming on the road. The situation was horrible, one of the most terrifying experiences of my life.

Eventually, news began to spread that Muslim protesters had destroyed many Hindu temples, houses and other property. News broke out that Hindu women were breaking their 'Shakhas' (red and white bangles that married Hindu women wear as a sign of their marital status) and wiping off their 'Shidurs' (the red mark that married Hindu women put on their head and forehead, as a sign of their marital status) to hide their identities. My mother and I were terrified. But to my utter surprise, the family who sheltered us were delighted and felt a sense of accomplishment. Their remarks, 'Hindus are getting proper lessons, they deserve it' and 'Go, and teach them even more lessons', still echo in my head.

At a very young age, I discovered the ugly reality behind our 'so-called' peace-loving identity. These people obviously did not represent all Bangladeshi Muslims, and certainly not the majority. But at the same time, people with a deep-rooted hatred for minorities existed and still exist. And the inevitable truth is, their number is increasing alarmingly while the numbers of Hindus in Bangladesh are diminishing.

Beside the life-threatening attacks and vandalism, which have become more severe and gained greater publicity in the media and politics, silent discrimination towards Hindus in Bangladesh, is a reality for many, if not all. Interestingly most Muslims are unaware of the humiliations and traumas Hindus (and other minorities) face in their everyday lives. Anirban Choudhury and Priyanka Bose Kanta's statement, 'Discrimination towards the Hindu community in Bangladesh is both visible and hidden' (Choudhury and Kanta 2015, p.1), justifies my view.

Moreover, during my fieldwork, my conversations with both Hindus and Muslims helped me to understand the different shades of this controversial issue. While all Muslim participants asserted that there is no sign of religious intolerance or discrimination in society, the Hindus did not agree or decided to remain silent. One group of Hindu women said that Muslims guard their temples and mandaps (the formal stage where Hindus set their deities and offer worship) during *Durga Puja*. I asked them, 'Why do you need protection if there is no sign of intolerance or violence in the locality?' They hesitated and admitted that there is always a possibility, and no one wants to take the risk.

The school teacher, Swapon Bormon said that no one claims to spread religious intolerance directly, but that does not prove the concept does not exist. As a member of one of the biggest minority groups in Bangladesh, Bormon could relate to the existing problems and issues that Muslims do not experience, and thus are unaware of. Bormon claimed that minorities are facing political, religious and financial pressures. Another educated and culturally conscious Hindu man, who wanted to remain anonymous, said that,

Most of the Hindus still living in the villages are very poor. They are facing problems to retain in their lands. Land grabbers are making syndicates and systematically creating pressures on these poor Hindu villagers to leave their lands and homes. The main agenda of these goons are financial rather than religious. But sometimes they use religion to create

pressure. Even in the areas where Hindus are the majority of the population, experience the same issues.

He further added,

Even educated upper-class Hindus who have a very strong political background, cannot escape these problems and struggle to protect their homes and lands. In some Hindu areas, Muslims create pressures on Hindus by taking initiatives to change the name of their locality into Muslim names because they do not want to use Hindu names on the signboards of graveyards and Mosques.

These discriminatory activities leave a huge impact on the mental wellbeing of Hindus and certainly leave them with a sense of insecurity. They feel outsiders in their own country. In recent years, circumstances such as these have compelled Hindus to leave Bangladesh along with their lands, homes and property, and migrate to neighbouring countries. But the history of this heartbreaking reality is far more complex. The migration of the Hindu population largely started in 1947 with the division of India. It gained rapid and significant pace in 1971, during the Liberation war of Bangladesh. Since then, this trend has gone up and down but has never stopped entirely. Comparatively recent incidents like Hindu Muslim riots regarding the rumour of the Babri Mosque demolition in the late 1980s and post-election violence against minorities in 2001 has accelerated the process. Choudhury and Kanta said that 'The narrative that describes the vanishing Hindu minority, which once comprised 31% of the population in 1947 and dwindled to a meagre 9% by 2002, reflects this sad reality' (Choudhury and Kanta 2015, p.1). Since 2013, the ongoing '1971 War Criminal Tribunal' has executed several 'so-called' religious leaders who were war criminals. These incidents sparked rage against Hindus along with other minorities and compelled even more Hindus to leave their homes. With the rapidly declining number of Hindus, Bangladesh is not only losing its diversity but also the rich culture, customs and traditions Hindus preserved and supplied for centuries. The absence of Chandrabati's songs and memory in present-day Bangladesh can also be attributed to this issue.

Abul Hossain, the elderly teacher at Chandrabati Government Primary School recalled that in the 1950s there were many Hindus in Chandrabati's locality. Bormon said that in the sixteenth century in Chandrabati's village, most of the Hindus were from lower castes and there were

very few Brahman Hindu families. He also added that many Muslims lived in that area at that time. Now in Chandrabati's village, the number of Hindus has diminished to such an extent that they even struggle to celebrate their religious festivals like Durga Puja because of lack of funding. Local cultural activist Khairul said that they do not practise religious or cultural activities as much as they would if they were a bigger community.

It is most likely that Chandrabati's targeted audience was Hindu women, whom she believed would appreciate *Ramayana* more if it were written with jargon-free language and presented simply. She was successful in her mission and was able to attract women through the beauty of her creations. These women memorised her songs and spread them far beyond her locality. Eventually, Chandrabati's songs became an integral part of their lives and prayers. But Muslim women, even if they expressed an interest in Chandrabati's songs and sang them, were unlikely to have practised them on such a grand scale as the Hindus. Moreover, I think Muslim women mainly sang these songs when they were with their Hindu friends and neighbours or joined them in their festivals and ceremonies.

So, when Hindus were leaving in large numbers, it had an immense effect on the practice of singing these songs. The trauma of leaving family and home behind obviously had a huge impact on the lifestyle and practices of the migrants. Even when they reached their new destination, grief and the struggle to survive in a new country had a negative impact on their recreational practices. Such struggles, both mental and financial, would have been passed down through the generations. During the process of resettlement, these generations lost track of their spontaneous practices, including the songs of Chandrabati. Likewise, the Hindus, who stayed back, also lived with trauma. The major changes that took place in 1947, 1971 and afterwards left permanent wounds in their lives and hampered the celebrations of their usual customs and practices.

Insufficient Local and National Initiatives

People are always more interested in new things. This tendency leads them to easily forget what they once adored. Cultural elements are also included in this trend. No matter how popular or important a cultural characteristic once was, if it lacks deliberate, proper and continuous attention, it will be disregarded and eventually forgotten. The absence of Chandrabati and her songs in recent Bangladesh can be attributed to this tendency.

As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, Chandrabati's name was almost unknown before 1972. Even the locals knew little about her. With the encouragement of Swapon Pakrashi, an educated and culturally aware local, youths of Chandrabati's village formed a group using her name. The group, *Chandrabati Shahittya O Shanskritik Shangshad* although incorporated her name, it never really worked on her legacy and literary works, as the founding members Abul Hossain and Arjun Chakrabarti admitted. Their knowledge of Chandrabati and her works was seriously limited. Undoubtedly their most commendable achievement was to establish Chandrabati Primary School. But otherwise, the activities they organised did not mention much about Chandrabati and her works. This has remained the situation in recent times. The modified version of *Chandrabati Shahittya O Shanskritik Shangshad* is now renamed *Chandrabati Smriti Shahittya O Shamaj Kollyan Shangha* but their activities remain similar. The present Chairperson of this group admitted his ignorance of Chandrabati's writings and blamed the absence of resources.

In Kishoreganj town, *Khelaghor Ashor*, *Nobin Mela* and *Chader Hut* (main cultural organisations for children and youths) have introduced young people to Chandrabati for years. But for people who were not involved with these activities, it was almost impossible to gain information about her. National initiatives to promote Chandrabati were almost absent until recent years when the Chandrabati Academy was formed in Dhaka. In the next chapter, I discuss this organisation.

Role of media: Past and Present

From its beginning, print and electronic media have contributed to society not only by keeping people updated and entertained but also by fulfilling their responsibilities as a powerful

medium of communication. In this era of globalisation, media are gaining more power than ever. With multiple national and international options, it is becoming more and more challenging and competitive to fulfil people's expectations. Given the constant pressure to entertain and also retain popularity, media sometimes fail to fulfil their social responsibilities, resulting in the broadcasting of programs designed solely to attract an audience. Although media has tried to portray Chandrabati and her legacy on several occasions in recent years, her past absence from the media has resulted in such a huge gap that much time and deliberate efforts are needed to change this situation for the better.

Changes: Modes of Entertainment and People's Attitude

The easy access to electronic devices like television, radio, computers and smartphones has revolutionised entertainment all over the world. Easy access to these devices, even in the remote villages of Bangladesh, high-speed internet and the countless number of national and international satellite television channels, have opened endless options to entertain the general public. These circumstances have made it even harder for local cultural traditions and customs to retain their popularity and glory. Undoubtedly Chandrabati's songs are one of these struggling cultural elements whose existence faces additional challenges.

One informant, Sathi Das, said that her mother and grandmothers still sing women's songs on various occasions. But the younger generations are no longer interested in these songs. While the older generations sing, the younger ones tend to be involved with different forms of entertainment. They do not usually participate in singing with their mothers and grandmothers, which they would have done if there were no other options.

Moreover, in the past, to celebrate an occasion, people used to sing along with their friends and families. Women who sang women's songs could easily pass their expertise on to the next generation, because of the participation of all. But nowadays people hire professional singers for their celebrations who usually sing modern, popular songs rather than folk songs. Even if people do not hire professional singers, they use a music system to play the songs and music that they enjoy, rather than singing themselves. Sathi Das shared her experience of this matter as a member of the younger generation. She said that nowadays songs are more about dancing than about just singing. The new generation like songs with a strong beat and rhythm

and do not enjoy listening to women's songs anymore, which they regard as monotonous and slow-paced. They feel more attracted to Bollywood songs, Shathi Das admitted.

Shathi Das's statement is a bitter truth that reflects the sad reality of our entertainment industry as a whole. Bangladesh's culture and society are predominantly influenced by neighbouring countries, and as the mainstream entertainment industries like film and television struggle to compete with that, rural and indigenous traditions and cultures are losing their impact on society even more rapidly.

Chandrabati's Home: Controversies and Their Impact on Her History

During my visit to Chandrabati's village, I was aware of a negative atmosphere surrounding the property that people believed to be Chandrabati's home. I felt that I was not welcome there and later my concern proved to be true. I discovered that a huge controversy regarding Chandrabati's house was affecting the preservation of her legacy, even in her own area. The property that is known as Chandrabati's home, is a large two-storied building. The construction, materials and architectural style confirm the medieval age of the structure. But people's claim that Chandrabati's father Dija Bangshi Das built the house, is contested. Building a large two-storied building in medieval Bengal was very expensive. Bangshi Das was a poor Brahmin who roamed far and wide with his singing team (*Bhashan Dol*) to entertain and enlighten people. He received money and other items from them as his livelihood. But locals have established their own logic to validate their point. They argue that Chandrabati wrote her ballad '*Doshshu Kenaramer Pala*' based on the bandit Kenaram who had a great deal of treasure that he had snatched from innocent people. And as the bandit Kenaram is a historical figure, locals believe that when Kenaram relinquished robbery and took an oath to stay on the path of truth and peace, he gave all his treasure to Bangshi Das, who used this wealth to build the house.



Front view of Chandrabati's home

Photographed by Sumaya Eku

Another theory claims that this house was built by Zamindar Neel Kantho Roy. Some people believe that Chandrabati was Neel Kantho Roy's descendant. But there is no documentation showing that Chandrabati was descended from a Zamindar. She was the daughter of a poor singer who struggled to maintain his family. I believe the locals may be confused about the time frame of Neel Kantho Roy. It is possible that Neel Kantho Roy was somehow related to Chandrabati's descendants and built the house after Chandrabati's death. However, although it is uncertain who built the house, it is certain that Chandrabati and her family had a close association with the property.

In recent times, Chandrabati's home has been divided into two parts and occupied by two families. Arjun Chakrabarti, who claims to be Chandrabati's descendant, lives in one part. (although locals doubt the authenticity of his claim. They believe that Tulsi Das was the last descendant of Chandrabati's family who died in 2012). The other portion is owned by a Muslim family who claims that they bought their portion lawfully from Chandrabati's descendants. The founding Chairperson of *Gana Shanskritik Dol* Khairul Alam Badal said that,

These two sharers have problems between them. Both demand that they are the rightful possessor of that property. The Muslim man particularly denies Chandrabati's existence. When I went to Chandrabati's home, that man threatened me. He is like a ghost who fears away people who want to visit Chandrabati's home.



Broken walls of Chandrabati's home

Photographed by Sumaya Eku

Chandrabati's descendant Arjun Charabarti was my first informant and he was not very inclined to talk to me at first. He would not even let me enter his house. He requested that I take pictures from outside only. He also repeatedly said that Chandrabati was a matter of the past and it was impossible to know about her now. At first, I was surprised by his behaviour as it was not compatible with the warm hospitality Bangladeshis show to their guests. Although he did tell me some known facts about Chandrabati, later almost every local person said that these descendants of Chandrabati try to deny her existence in every possible way.

At this point, it became evident that both families occupying the house had their own issues. If it was proven that the property was the home of the first Bengali woman poet Chandrabati, there is a possibility that the government would acquire it as an archaeological site and they

would both lose their homes. Khairul Alam Badal alerted me to this issue when describing how these people were conspiring against Chandrabati's existence. I thought the situation was a power play between these two occupiers and that the Muslim part-owner's main intention was, not to deny Chandrabati's existence and due credit, but to secure his property from the government, non-government organisations, interested intellectuals and local people. But another informant Swapon Bormon did not agree with me. He claimed that they (Muslim residents of Chandrabati's house) indirectly tried to spread religiously biased views and describe Hindu rituals and activities as the act of non-believers.

During my fieldwork, I realised that Chandrabati's home and the controversies associated with it were creating a negative impact on Chandrabati and her legacy in the locality. When I first learnt about the issue, I was surprised because, in the previous literature written on Chandrabati, I had not found any mention of this problem. And still, I remain unsure as to why all the recent writers who went to her village and visited her home, did not find this information worthy of reporting or sharing. These circumstances compelled me to consider whether this issue had become more complicated in recent years. In the past, I had seen pictures of visitors and writers inside the house of Chandrabati, indicating that residents of the house were less strict about people entering their premises. At this point, I asked what had happened that forced them to be more vigilant about outsiders. The answer to my query was that the initiatives taken by the media and the activities of some local organisations had helped to inform people about Chandrabati in the last couple of years. As people learned more about her and her contribution, they realised the importance of Chandrabati's temples, along with her home. The dilapidated condition of the building also made them aware of the need to demand that the Government acquire the property to maintain it and promote the legacy of Chandrabati. This development must have frightened the owners who were worried that they would lose their home and the whole situation has made them more protective towards the property.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I have described the experiences and insights I gathered from my fieldwork in Bangladesh. I indicated the diminishing reputation of Chandrabati and her songs in

Bangladesh and examined both the direct and indirect reasons behind such circumstances. I believe understanding these reasons will aid in comprehending the situation better and handling it more efficiently.

Chapter Seven

Ray of Hope: Story of Retrieving History, Culture and Glory

The previous chapter presented one aspect of my fieldwork, in which I became aware of people's lack of, or limited knowledge of Chandrabati and attempted to discover the reasons behind this reality. In this chapter, however, I explore another side to the story which is full of hope, passion and love for our history and culture. Here I discuss the recent initiatives of local cultural groups and national organisations to retrieve Chandrabati's history and most importantly her works and reintroduce her locally and nationally.

Traditions, especially oral traditions are maintained through constant practice and memory. The absence of these processes along with the slightest neglect can prove fatal. Keeping traditions alive is even more difficult in this modern world where people are moving faster than ever, both physically and psychologically. Their dependence on technology is becoming more evident each day while changing forms of entertainment have created endless choices. Although we can assume that technology and modes of entertainment can also help to make traditions attractive to people, this is not possible without continuous and deliberate attempts. Fortunately, this is what some people have started doing in Bangladesh to recover the memory of Chandrabati and her works. Khairul Alam Badal, the founding Chairperson of *Gana Shanskritik Dol* (The Cultural Group of People), is one such person and interviewing him was a turning point in my fieldwork.

Before describing their activities, I discuss some of the reasons that inspired these people to resurrect Chandrabati's history and reintroduce her to society. Almost every informant was proud of Chandrabati as a local person of renown. Khairul Alam Badal said that he felt proud because Chandrabati was the first woman poet of Bengal, and belonged to his district. This sense of pride and belonging played a prominent role in encouraging activists to further Chandrabati's reputation as their local hero. These activists also realised that, in previous years, collective neglect and lack of awareness had resulted in the loss of prestige for old customs and culture. However, globalisation and the development of technology had broadened their perspective and knowledge of the world and enabled them to rethink and

change their minds. They became more aware and realised that deliberate efforts were necessary to keep these traditions alive. This encouraged them to engage in their projects. An additional motive was the belief that if Chandrabati was accorded her deserved a place at a national level, it would help their locality to attract more tourists and gain greater attention. This would eventually help to improve the infrastructure of their area and boost its economy.

The Activities of *Gana Shanskritik Dol*

Gana Shanskritik Dol is a cultural organisation based in Kishoreganj which is working hard to retrieve their local history and culture. President of this organisation Khairul Alam Badal said that,

In the sixteenth century, culturally, Kishoreganj was one of the richest areas of Bengal, and it flourished with many talented singers, writers, poets, and musicians who created amazing works. Our organisation is trying to feature those works through its activities.

The main intention of this organisation is to collect, preserve and present the cultural features that are in danger of being lost. Chandrabati and her works are part of this process and Khairul Alam Badal acknowledged that the organisation is trying to reintroduce her into the modern era. His interview made it apparent that, urban people are no longer aware of Chandrabati's songs. Khairul Alam Badal and his group are searching for Chandrabati's songs in the villages. But even in the villages, women who sang Chandrabati's songs as part of their prayers, are not aware of her name and did not know that they were actually singing her songs. Besides, local and urban cultural activists who are working on reintroducing her into modern society also do not know much about her work. Activists such as Khairul Alam Badal are working to reinstate lost knowledge and ensure that people become aware of their legend Chandrabati. They want people to know her name and the fact that she was the first woman poet of Bengal, and to feel proud of her.

Gana Shanskritik Dol has followed a particular process in recreating the songs of Chandrabati. At first, they searched for Chandrabati's writing, which proved to be unavailable in Kishoreganj. Her songs were sung as *Palagaan* in the Hindu religious festivals and had been very popular in the past. Associated activists are trying to reintroduce these songs to local

singers. *Gana Shanskritik Dol* has singers of three or four different levels or categories. The higher level is composed of more experienced and capable singers and the lower levels have less experience. Experienced singers pass on their expertise to others. Even children aged eight to fifteen are involved in the process, said Khairul Alam Badal.

One of the problems they are facing in their venture is that the tunes for Chandrabati's songs have been lost. Chandrabati composed the music for her writing herself and Khairul Alam Badal mentioned that most of those who knew the tunes were now dead. However, he added, there are very few people who still know these songs, although he could not name anyone specifically. During my fieldwork, I visited many places in search of her songs but did not come across any of these singers. Khairul Alam Badal argued that a lack of recording facilities at the time was a principal reason for the loss of her songs.

He also admitted that the songs they were producing were not an exact reproduction of Chandrabati's songs. She used to compose her songs in a specific style and rhythm. But the singers, who are mainly male, are singing her songs using their own compositions. They attempt to stick to the main plot, but their words and stories are not identical to those of Chandrabati. Khokon Boyati, one of the main performers and singers in this organisation said that Khairul Alam Badal collects Chandrabati's writings and re-writes them in simple words so the singers can understand them. Then, singers such as Khokon Boyati rephrase the songs according to their personality, understanding and background and compose the music. When Khokon Boyati performed, it was interesting seeing him using English words like, 'bag' in his composition. He also said that Kenaram gave Salam (a greeting usually used by Muslims, whereas Kenaram and Bangshi Das were Hindus) to Bangshi Das to show his respect. The combination of different religious customs and languages was an interesting component of his performance.

Khokon Boyati performed Chandrabati's Ballad *Doshshu Kenaramer Pala* for me. Here is the translation of the first part of his performance that he sang as praise for Chandrabati.

You have influenced my mind

You have influenced my mind profoundly

You have influenced my mind

In Neelganja there is Patuayr village, Brother

Poet Chandrabati was born there

You have influenced my mind.

My life has passed thinking

My thoughts have not ended.

Oral traditions are not static and as a natural process, they change over time. They adopt recent experiences, words, incidents and these are included in the original material. But this constantly changing character of oral tradition can become a distraction, especially to Chandrabati's *Ramayana*, due to its distinct characteristics. In terms of Chandrabati's other ballads like *Molua*, *Doshshu Kenaramer Pala*, if the singers keep the fundamental aspects of the main plot and modify them according to their understanding, they do not harm the essence of the story. But Chandrabati's *Ramayana* is told from Sita's perspective. Chandrabati's Sita is not uniquely strong, although Chandrabati herself was, a fact that as discussed earlier, was evident in her *Ramayana*.

Under these circumstances, my concern is, if the singers stay true to the usual *Ramayana* plot and depict it using their understanding and exclude the language and incidents Chandrabati chose to describe Sita's unique experiences, it will become just another *Ramayana* story, rather than a story told from a woman's perspective. The activists had their reasons and excuses for this. Khairul Alam Badal said that the initiatives they have taken are all recent ventures. He explained that, when they were rehearsing Chandrabati's songs for their performance on the 'Shomoy Television', a popular television channel in Bangladesh, they did not have enough time to recite the ballads written by Chandrabati. And as most of the singers or Palakars are less educated, it was particularly hard for them to read and recite the ballads. So, they first listened to the stories and then recreated the performances according to their personalities. He said that recently his organisation *Gana Shanskritik Dol* was trying to ensure that the Palakars and singers sang the ballads the way Chandrabati wrote them. And their efforts were evident to me when the professional *Ramayana* singer and national award

winner, Gopal Modok, sang Chandrabati's *Ramayana*, holding a book and using the exact words written by Chandrabati.

I wondered if the singers really understood her songs and realised their meanings, or whether they were merely performing according to instructions. In reply to this question, Khairul Alam Badal asserted that every singer is different. Some singers even shed tears when they portray Chandrabati's sorrows through their songs while other singers do not represent them properly and even smile while narrating a sad event. They perform on various local occasions to keep Chandrabati's songs alive and Khairul Alam Badal claimed her songs are gradually spreading among the locals. KISHAS (*Kishoreganj Shahittya Shanskritik Shongstha*) performed Chandrabati's ballad *Molua*. Besides, *Doshshu Kenaramer Pala* by Chandrabati and Chandrabati's own story written by Nayon Chand Ghosh were featured in a documentary on Shomoy Television and was appreciated. But even before the media approached them to make the documentary, they went to villages to perform these songs independently. On national and important cultural days, they organise cultural programs in the 'Jilla Shilpakala Academy' or 'Puraton Court Chottor,' the main cultural centres of Kishoreganj. Khairul Alam Badal informed me, sometimes they organise these events themselves and at other times the local administrative body takes the initiative, and they just perform.

Whenever they perform Chandrabati's songs before a local audience, Khairul Alam Badal said that the people showed interest and love as well as an appreciation for Chandrabati. He has seen people embrace each other, ask for forgiveness, touch the feet of elders to show respect, and even cry during their performances. Their activities have had a positive impact on society. Khairul Alam Badal did not want to take any credit but stated that locals including the administration have become more interested in Chandrabati and *Gana Shanskritik Dol's* activities. Nowadays people are coming from far and wide to know more about Chandrabati and the administration is helping these tourists. Khairul Alam Badal claimed the recent renovation activities that took place at Chandrabati's temple are another example of their success in spreading Chandrabati's legacy.

Distinct Characteristics of the Activists

These activists had at least two distinct and interesting characteristics that I found most attractive. Chandrabati's songs were about Hindu religion, culture and customs. Her characters were mainly Hindus, and her songs were predominantly sung by Hindu women. But interestingly the activists working on reproducing her songs are mainly men and belong to various religions, but mostly Islam.

In a society that sometimes stereotypes men who are associated with dancing and singing (particularly those who sing women's songs), as 'feminine' or 'womanly', I wondered if Khairul Alam Badal and his group had faced any such humiliation or problems. Khairul Alam Badal explained that usually when they performed people became so involved in their performance that these kinds of negative thoughts did not occur to them. He also claimed that he does not think of himself solely as a man, rather as an artist performing his duty. Khokon Boyati, another member of *Gana Shanskritik Dol* expressed the same feeling.

But why the majority of those participating are men? The answer is, although taking part in cultural activities has become normal for urban women, in rural areas, the situation has been quite different until now. Rural women sing with great feeling in their locality but they prefer to stay within their comfort zone. Khairul Alam Badal mentioned that sometimes they fail to find even one woman performer or singer. In the Shomoy Television documentary, a girl named Khuki, who belonged to a distant village, portrayed the part of Chandrabati. But Khairul Alam Badal explained that Khuki was an exception. He added that Chandrabati tried to promote freedom for women and they are trying to follow in her footsteps and include women in their activities.

Secondly, most of the activists promoting these 'so-called' Hindu songs are Muslims. Cultural activists are mainly driven by their sense of responsibility and pride. They intend to promote cultural characteristics and they do not mix this with their religion. But I wanted to know what the general public's response was and whether they had faced any problems or challenges. The activists replied that they have not suffered from any prejudices or humiliation because of their activities. They also added that Kishoreganj is a secular region that is free from any religious intolerance. Although this was a questionable claim given the conversations I had had with Hindus, at the same time, it was also evident that these activists were working

without any opposition and had been able to promote Chandrabati's songs without any difficulty to date. I discuss this issue further in Chapter Eight.

Other Local and National Initiatives

In Kishoreganj local cultural activists have recently requested a hall in the town be named after Chandrabati. They had previously applied to have a building in the local 'Shilpakala Academy' named after her but this was rejected by the local authority. Despite such neglect by the government, some private organisations and companies have been enthusiastically promoting Chandrabati's name in the locality. 'Nehal Green Park' is the only private amusement and recreational park in Kishoreganj and has been gaining popularity. The owner of the park has agreed to name a hall of the Nehal Green Park, 'Chandrabati Milonayoton' (Chandrabati Auditorium). A boat is already named 'Chandrabati Promodtari' (Chandrabati's Recreational Boat). The owners and instigators believe that even the smallest steps will enable people to learn about Chandrabati.

Chandrabati Academy

Chandrabati Academy was founded in the early years of this millennium to promote Chandrabati's name on a wider scale. Kamruzzaman Kajal and Ziaur Rahman, two founders of this academy grew up in Bhoirob, a place not far from Chandrabati's locality. Their belief that Chandrabati's name should be promoted more on a national level, encouraged them to form this academy. In recent years, the Chandrabati Academy has organised various national award ceremonies to show appreciation for deserving candidates from various sectors.

In 2006, Kamruzzaman Kajal published a journal from the Chandrabati academy. This journal included papers, poems and articles on Chandrabati. But this initiative was on a much smaller scale. Later they formed the Chandrabati Publications. Chandrabati Publications, a sister concern of this academy is fast approaching being one of the most successful publication houses in Bangladesh. It is publishing books by distinguished writers and poets. It is also

publishing books from different genres including children's books and working with nationally renowned illustrators such as Dhruvo Esh. In answer to my question, what plans they had to promote Chandrabati further, both Kamruzzaman Kajal and Ziaur Rahman confirmed that they had additional plans to promote Chandrabati's work in the near future and they were also planning to publish an authoritative book on her. They claimed that both their initiatives and their academy's name have succeeded in promoting Chandrabati and encouraged people to learn about her.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have described in detail the cultural activists' attempts to revive Chandrabati's memory and works. I also explained why they were inspired to work on her legacy. Although the activities mentioned in this chapter have undoubtedly had a positive impact, some obstacles remain that are hindering the cultural activists, both directly and indirectly. In the next chapter, I emphasise these obstacles, their impacts on the present and future and possible solutions to these challenges.

Chapter Eight

Challenges of the Present and Future: Possibilities for Chandrabati's Legacy and Her Songs to be Retrieved and Survive in Modern Bangladesh

Restoring the legacy of a forgotten phenomenon is a challenging process in itself. But the people who are working on Chandrabati's legacy are facing additional obstacles. Although they have begun the initial work, their greatest challenge lies in the fact that they must continue the lengthy process of establishing a strong position for Chandrabati and her works. They need to ensure that their works also have a long-lasting impact on the future as well.

In this chapter, first of all, I discuss various aspects of the direct challenges that are particularly affecting the cultural activists. I also point out some possible solutions to these challenges. Later, I discuss recent changes in the social and religious circumstances in modern Bangladesh, which may have an indirect but very powerful effect on the possible survival of Chandrabati's memory and works, especially over the long term. Finally, I discuss the possibility that Chandrabati's legacy might overcome all the obstacles and remain strong in the future.

Direct Challenges for the Present and Future and Their Possible Solutions

Cultural activist and teacher Swapon Bormon admitted that,

Women do not directly sing Chandrabati's songs any more. They sometimes mention her name, demonstrate her sorrows in their songs, but do not sing songs written by her.

I found his statement to be true when I talked to the women of *Shatal Bhattacharya Parha* and asked them if they knew any songs by Chandrabati. In reply, they sang a song 'about' Chandrabati and admitted that they did not know any songs written by her. To fill this gap, as previously mentioned mainly male professional singers have recently started to reproduce and perform Chandrabati's songs. They have been encouraged generally by culturally aware

members of the public and activists, who want to promote Chandrabati's songs locally and nationally. Bormon said that,

Because the efforts of the singers are deliberate, their final performance is often not very spontaneous.

But according to my observations, this was not the only issue. I spoke to some of the singers in person who were very enthusiastic and quite well informed about Chandrabati. One singer Gopal Modok, who is a nationally recognised *Ramayana Gatok*, or *Ramayana* singer, talked to me about the main essence of Chandrabati's *Ramayana*. However, when he performed Chandrabati's *Ramayana*, he sang holding a book in his hand, reading every single word, which had an impact on his performance. Another singer, Khokon Boyati, sang a song 'about' Chandrabati. But I was aware that he made up some of the lines and words which he had forgotten. It was clear that neither performance was well-rehearsed and it was apparent not enough time had been invested in practising. The Chairperson of *Gana Shanskritik Dol* Khairul Alam Badal admitted that they did not or could not invest the necessary time to practice the songs.

I also began to wonder about the lack of women involved in these cultural activities, as it was evident that many women sang songs in their home environment and during community and religious occasions. The women of *Shatal Bhattacharya Parha* proudly declared that they did not accept any help from the men to play their instruments. They played their instruments themselves and collectively sang and danced on various religious occasions like *Durga Puja*, *Kali Puja*, *Dol Purnima*. They even disguised themselves as Radha and Krishna and went from home to home performing. To answer my question, why only male singers were singing these songs and no women, Khairul Alam Badal said that, women in rural areas are not able to participate in cultural activities as enthusiastically as their urban counterparts. He added that they are trying to change the situation and include women in their projects. Bormon stated that, although they have thought about including women in their ventures, they do not have enough people, resources or time to work on their plans.



Women singing and dancing in their front yard

Photographed by Sumaya Eku

The above factors helped me to identify one of the biggest obstacles the activists are facing that preventing them from investing adequate time to enhance their performance and investing resources to execute their plans. The lack of any private or government financial support to run their endeavours is their biggest problem. The Chairperson of *Gana Shanskritik Dol*, Khairul Alam Badal, said that,

Gana Shanskritik Dol has not gained anything rather than applause.

Khairul Alam Badal told me they do not even have a local or small sponsor and have to supply the money for the tea they provide during rehearsal time from their own pockets. And as the activists and singers are working voluntarily without any financial support, and are employed full-time to earn a livelihood, they can only work on these projects in their spare time. Due to the lack of funding, they are not only bound to work for very limited times but also with minimal resources. These obstacles have undoubtedly prevented them from concentrating on their goals and have also slowed their progress.

When I asked whether they have taken any initiative to get help from the government or local influential people, Khairul Alam Badal's response was negative. He added that they do not

have the expertise to apply for financial support. I wondered if they would continue to do this work at their own expense, or would they consider looking for financial help in the future. Khairul Alam Badal explained they had started working on Chandrabati on their own and their hope was that the next generation would learn about the poet and her work from their activities, and be able to continue the work on a larger scale. They may even be able to receive outside help. While I was considering the practicalities of this, he admitted that one or two organisations couldn't carry out such a large task. More people and organisations need to come forward to work on Chandrabati. Government or non-government aid could help them to include more people and devote more time to the task, he said.

But the possibility of receiving any financial help from the government appears slim as the government has shown little interest in investing time, money or people to restore and maintain Chandrabati's legacy to date. Bormon stated that,

The government has responsibilities in retaining Chandrabati's memories and spreading her legacy. Though the government has taken some steps, they failed to sustain the actions to gain proper and long-lasting impact.

To continue the work of restoring Chandrabati's memory and reproducing her songs properly, the activists require large amounts of funding. If they could persuade local influential and wealthy people to donate, they might be successful for a short period of time. But as they need a steady and continuous flow of money to continue this enterprise, they need to ask the government for help and convince them of the importance of investing money in their project.

Bormon informed me that the cultural activists of Kishoreganj wanted to make Chandrabati's village a tourist place where people could visit, stay and learn about Chandrabati. They had also considered introducing a special day to celebrate Chandrabati's works, along with other aspects of the culture. An annual fair including a cultural program is arranged every year on Pohela Boishakh (the Bengali new year) in front of the Chandrabati Primary School. Although the cultural program contains several performances, none includes Chandrabati's songs. This is because people are unaware of Chandrabati's life and work apart from her love story with Jayananda. Bormon declared that if more people were aware of Chandrabati and the significance of her work the literature of Kishoreganj would be much richer. But later he

commented that, even though they had approached the appropriate authority to take action on this matter, they had failed to receive any assurance. The authority, he said, was not interested.

In Chapter Seven I discussed the dilapidated state of Chandrabati's home and although her temples were comparatively well maintained they had been restored with inappropriate materials and colours that ruined their natural beauty. In these circumstances, it is certain that, if the government and local authority do not take this matter seriously and do not invest time, money and other resources, it would be impossible for the cultural activists to gain significant progress on their own. They can make plans, but to execute them, they need help.

After returning from the fieldwork, in June 2016, I saw a Facebook post from the Kishoreganj based journalist Amin Sadi about Chandrabati's home. The post said that an official from the Department of Archaeology visited Chandrabati's village and talked to the residents of her home. To confirm the news, I later talked to Amin Sadi over the phone. He assured me that the news was correct. He added that as the condition of the house was deteriorating rapidly and it was no longer safe to live inside the structure, the Archaeological Department of Bangladesh had decided to take charge of the building. He continued by saying that the residents of the building had agreed to the plan because, firstly, because they realised they were in potential danger living in the house; and secondly, they were aware of pressure from the locals who want to ensure proper care of the house. Amin Sadi added that if the government finally decided to acquire the property, the occupants would be financially compensated. This news was definitely a ray of hope for restoring the history and heritage of Chandrabati.

As I discussed in Chapter Seven, most of the informants agreed that easy access to different entertainment modes and options has created a huge challenge and competition for local cultural traditions and practices to be sustained. Chandrabati's songs are no exception. Reba Bashak, an elderly and witty informant declared that the practice of women's songs had declined dramatically from her time, and she blamed modern technology and music. Bormon expressed the same thought and said that the new generation prefers modern music to the old school women's songs and are not interested in them. Amin Sadi, a local journalist, also agreed and added, in the era of globalisation, local cultures are facing extreme competition in retaining their appeal.

Shathi Das, the young teacher from Chandrabati Primary School was of the same opinion but added one interesting point. She said that sometimes the young generation discourages their older generations from singing women's songs. They regard these songs as monotonous and boring. Sometimes even children discourage their mothers because they think that it would ruin their public reputation; they taunt their mothers for being old-fashioned. Shathi Das blushed while confessing that, she herself had taunted her mother for singing women's songs.

Shathi Das's confession made it apparent that the younger generations not only avoid women's songs but sometimes deliberately discourage their mothers and relatives from performing and singing. Another incident that occurred during my fieldwork, supported my hypothesis. I have known a Muslim family for many years who coincidentally resided near Chandrabati's locality in Kishoreganj. The young girl from this family came to Dhaka to earn a living and stayed in my parents' house as my grandmother's carer for almost six years. When I was in Dhaka conducting my fieldwork, her mother came to visit her from Kishoreganj. I asked both mother and daughter if they knew anything about Chandrabati or her songs. Both of them said that they have heard about Chandrabati's temple, and nothing else. The daughter mentioned she had heard that Chandrabati's temple was a very nice local tourist attraction, and she wanted to visit it someday. The mother declared that she sings women's songs or '*meyeli geet*' and dances with other women on various occasions, especially weddings. She wanted to perform for me but her daughter did not want her mother to sing and dance. She forbade her mother repeatedly and seemed very embarrassed. However, the mother managed to show me her performance while the daughter was absent. She was very enthusiastic and natural while performing and seemed to thoroughly enjoy it. But this incident made it clear that the lack of interest and discouragement of the younger generations have a direct and effective negative impact on this particular practice of women.

This incident made me wonder how this problem could be overcome and how the younger generation's interest in these traditional practices could be stimulated so they would wish to be included. When I asked Khairul Alam Badal for his opinion, he answered that,

Some interested children enthusiastically get involved in the performances and sing with their mothers.

But he admitted that it is particularly a matter of choice. Cultural activists are working to involve the younger generation in their movement and pass their knowledge on to them. Their organisation is trying to make the younger generation feel proud of their local traditions, he added.

Shathi Das, on the other hand, emphasised the role of media and stated that,

If electronic media, takes deliberate steps, they will be able to spread Chandrabati's name and works even in the remotest of places.

Shathi Das had some ideas of how to make Chandrabati's songs popular among the younger generation. She said that,

If someone takes initiatives to transform these women songs and made them suitable for a modern generation with melodious, contemporary music, and try to promote them, these songs will be rescued and will not get lost forever.

Kanchan said that,

No one can deny their own past. If these women songs are modified in a way that can appeal to the new generations, they will welcome these songs.

Later almost all the informants expressed the same opinion and emphasised the possibility of transforming these songs to promote them.

The next challenge is to enlighten people about Chandrabati. I talked to a young girl named Champa, who said that, as Chandrabati was their local girl, they want the opportunity to know more about her life and her songs. Champa continued by saying if they had the chance, they would certainly learn and promote Chandrabati's songs. She believed that it was not true that the younger generation did not care about their local culture. But as they do not have a proper platform from which to learn, they could not express their interest. Shathi Das confirmed that the younger generation had an interest in their past. They had a great many questions, but she explained, as the teachers themselves had little information they were unable to satisfy their students with proper answers. Bormon said that,

It is the responsibility of local people and the authority to know more about Chandrabati and then take proper action.

He emphasised the responsibility of those involved in education. He said that,

If schools take their students to visit Chandrabati's village and educate them about her, students will learn about her. A student's mindset is established when he/she is in high school. So, if the schools can successfully educate them about their local cultural pride, they will be able to carry them for the rest of their lives and pass them on to the next generations.

In a nutshell, investing money and resources would help the cultural activists and singers to do their work properly and efficiently. The deliberate effort and support of the government and the local authority would allow the activists to invest more time and energy in executing their plans. Besides, adding Chandrabati's life and works to the high school curriculum would enlighten the younger generation about her. Continuous and attractive electronic and print media coverage would also help more people to know about her. Modifying her songs would attract the younger generation and they would be able to appreciate their cultural pride Chandrabati.

Indirect Obstacles: Changes in Religious and Cultural Elements

Chandrabati depicted her religious devotion and beliefs in her writing. Her *Ramayana* can easily be categorised as religious writing as it is mainly the story of Hindu Lord Rama and his wife Sita. Her other writings like *Molua*, *Doshshu Kenaramer Pala*, are also filled with Hindu beliefs, culture and traditions.

In a predominantly Muslim country such as Bangladesh, how people react to Chandrabati's writings and songs, and how they are accepted and appreciated in the future is complicated as Bangladesh is experiencing major changes in its religious and social situation. Understanding and tolerance among the public towards other religions have been rapidly transforming. These changes must be taken into account when considering how Chandrabati and her works might be accepted in modern Bangladesh. I was asked at least a few times by Bangladeshis, 'why despite being a Muslim I am studying a Hindu woman and her works?' This indicated that my thoughts were on the right track. Before outlining the discussion on recent changes, I believe a brief discussion of the relationships among Hindus and Muslims, and an

overview of their understanding and acknowledgement of each other can help us comprehend the recent changes better.

In Chapter Six, 'Memory of Chandrabati and Her Creations in Modern Bangladesh: Reality and Reason', while discussing the effect of declining number Hindus on Chandrabati's memory and songs, I mentioned how the Hindus have been subject to discrimination and were indirectly forced to leave the country, even before the birth of Bangladesh. In this chapter, I depict the relationship between Hindus and Muslims, mainly based on my own experiences growing up in a community with Hindus. I believe, as religious festivals are an excellent way to include people from various religions to celebrate and mingle, they can help us to determine the level of religious tolerance in society. For this reason, I have included my own experiences and memories regarding festivals.

I grew up in the old part of Dhaka, which is commonly known as 'Old Dhaka', and most of the Hindu population of Dhaka lived and still live there. I had the opportunity to grow up experiencing the strong bond between the Hindu and Muslim communities, enjoying the religious celebrations of both. My father, who is an artist, had many Hindu friends. I remember my mother cooked specially for them on Eid because they loved to come to our home to celebrate. My grandmother told me that she did the same when my father was younger. The special foods that Muslims eat to break their fast during Ramadan are called 'Iftaar'. My Hindu and Christian friends wait all year to eat these delicacies. I know many Hindus buy new clothes to celebrate Eid with their Muslim friends.

The largest and most extravagant Hindu celebrations were held in 'Old Dhaka'. People from all over Dhaka came there to celebrate. When I was young, I used to visit the puja mandaps with my parents, at the time of Durga Puja, the largest celebration for the Hindus in Bangladesh. The beautifully decorated deity, colourful decorations and bright lights, the mesmerising smell of incense, the priest, the devotion of the Hindus, everything seemed surreal to me and I loved going there time after time. Some Hindus worship Luxmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity, in temples, business places and their homes daily. But on the auspicious occasion of Luxmi Puja, Hindus pay special homage to this Goddess in their own homes and offer her fresh fruits and sweets to receive her blessings. Every year our Hindu friends invited us to their homes to attend their Luxmi Puja and entertained us with delicious food.

Despite living in a religiously harmonious society, some people believed that, as Muslims, they were not allowed to eat the food that was offered to the Hindu Goddesses. I remember a young woman who was our helper at home went to visit the Puja mandap and came back very worried. She said that she had eaten the food offered to the Goddess (*prasad*) and that people had told her that she was not a Muslim anymore. My grandmother, a very devout Muslim woman, assured her that, it was not that easy to lose her status as a Muslim, but if she had any doubts, she could repent by saying '*Tawba*' (the Islamic concept of saying sorry to ALLAH after committing a sin). Similar types of exclusionary behaviour were typical among Hindus who followed and maintained their caste system seriously. They did not willingly mingle with Hindus from other castes, especially lower castes, let alone Muslims. Moreover, their customs of allocating different serving wares (such as glasses and plates) and avoiding touching those of other religions, hurt the feelings of Muslims for years and moulded the behaviour of many.

In a society that appeared to be integrated, these acts of exclusion had been going on for years. And although in the past they failed to destroy the harmonious and secular image of Bangladesh, in recent years, a sudden wave of change has shaken the secular identity of the nation. Although many Muslims gather to the puja mandaps to celebrate with their Hindu friends, it is impossible to overlook the huge number of people who strongly believe that they should not attend any festivals or activities related to other religions as it would weaken their '*imaan*' or beliefs as a Muslim. Alarmingly their number is increasing rapidly nowadays.

These negative attitudes of the general public towards other religions were mostly hidden, at least to those who were always surrounded by like-minded people, and it was difficult to identify any opposite ideology in society, until now. In recent years, the popularity and easy accessibility of social media has made it easier to understand the overall mentality, understanding, and acceptance of society towards other religions. And the result is quite disturbing.

Before continuing, it is important to explain why I have emphasised the attitude of Muslims here. I believe, to determine the acceptance and future of Chandrabati and her songs in Bangladesh, it is more important to emphasise the attitudes of Muslims towards elements of other religions, because as the majority population, their tolerance or lack of, may have a huge impact.

Recently, on the eve of *Janmashtami*, the birthday of the Hindu God *Sri Krishna*, one of my cousins posted on his Facebook wall, 'Ones' religion is ones' own, but the festivals are for everyone' (ধর্ম যার যার, উৎসব সবার). This quote, which is popular among the secular people of Bangladesh, surely represents one of the core elements of our integrated, secular society. While most of his friends appreciated his view, many opposed him aggressively and expressed their strong point of view that it is '*Haram*' or forbidden for Muslims to join the festivals of other religions. The comments on this Facebook post alone exposed our society's diminishing sense of acceptance and tolerance towards other religions and their cultures and rituals. The secular identity of Bangladesh was shattered when not only the celebrations of other religions but any secular celebrations started to face questions and criticism from the 'so-called' conservative Muslims, in recent years. They are using social platforms, like Facebook and Twitter to spread their views. They have dedicated Facebook pages to spread their ideology and the numbers of their followers are increasing alarmingly.

Pohela (pohela means first) *Boishakh* (the first month of the Bengali year) is the festival that welcomes the Bengali new year. It is one of the most important celebrations for Bangladeshis, regardless of their religion or ethnicity. This festival has been the true representation of secular, integrated Bangladesh since its birth as an independent country. But the history of this celebration can be dated back to the 1960s when it was a province of Pakistan, known as East Pakistan. The cultural activists of East Pakistan used *Pohela Boishakh* to showcase the rich culture and heritage of this region and protest against the Pakistani dominance over the Bangla language and culture. *Chhayanot* was one of the main cultural institutions that started the official celebration of *Pohela Boishakh* in 1967 (Huq 2014). And later when 'Bangladesh' gained independence, *Chhayanot* continued to keep this tradition alive. Every year the singers from this institution gather in the Ramna Park, situated in the heart of Dhaka city, and sing songs to welcome the new year. At first only a very small number of people were aware of this particular element of the celebration, although the fairs and cultural programmes have always been an integral part of the tradition to welcome the Bengali new year throughout the country.

The celebration in Dhaka became much larger when the 'Faculty of Fine Arts' at the University of Dhaka started their new year procession or '*Mongol Shobhajatra*' in 1989 (Huq 2014). The procession began not only as a protest against the totalitarian rule of Ershad but also to

encourage and motivate the people of Bangladesh who were attempted to deal with the devastation of a huge flood which had terrified the whole nation in 1988. The procession includes huge sculptures of the birds and animals of Bangladesh, along with colourful masks made by the teachers and students of the 'Faculty of Fine Arts'. UNESCO's declaration of *Mongol Shobhajatra* as an 'Intangible Cultural Heritage' in 2016, proved the importance of this procession to Bangladesh's culture and heritage (Alom 2018). In the past three decades, the popularity of the whole celebration has grown immensely, and it has become one of the largest celebrations in the country.

But in recent years, especially since 2013, a huge number of radical Muslims have started to spread propaganda against this secular and integrated celebration. As I mentioned before, they are making extensive use of social media to express their views in public. I found one particular page on Facebook called 'Pohela Boishakh and Hindu Puja', which created confusion between *Pohela Boishakh* and the Hindu celebrations. It asserted that *Pohela Boishakh* was a celebration for Hindus and it was '*Haram*' or forbidden for Muslims to join the celebration. One of the main arguments put forward by those Muslims who oppose celebrating *Pohela Boishakh* is that the procession '*Mongol Shobhajatra*' contains motifs and sculptures of animals and birds, and is therefore similar to worshipping them. Moreover, they claim the celebration encourage women to dress up, dance and celebrate in public, which again according to them, is *Haram* for Muslims.

Conservative Muslims who did not appreciate and accept other ideologies have always existed, but their presence has never been so visible, widespread and noteworthy. A detailed discussion of the reasons for the sudden rise of hardcore conservative Muslims during and after 2013 is beyond the range of this thesis, but the consequences are important. However, a brief summary of events is necessary to understand the overall situation.

The war criminals in the war of independence for Bangladesh (1971), who were accused of helping the Pakistani army to kill millions of people, along with hundreds of intellectuals, did not face proper trials for their crimes against the nation. After the war of liberation, many of them disguised themselves as religious leaders and politicians and flourished under the Islamist party known as Jamat- E- Islam. Jamat- E- Islam succeeded in creating a huge number of followers. These followers, who were largely comprised of conservative Muslims, considered any action against their leaders to be an act against their religion. The power of

these so-called religious leaders terrified the secular people of Bangladesh. Moreover, the absence of convictions against the war criminals for their crimes, enraged many in the secular population, especially the family members of the martyrs.

In the 2008 election manifesto, Sheikh Hasina promised that she would bring all the war criminals to trial, and those proven guilty would face capital punishment. The people of Bangladesh supported her party Awami League, and Awami League won the election with a landslide. But in 2013, when the assistant secretary-general of Jamat- E- Islam, Kader Molla, despite being found guilty of the war crime, was sentenced to life imprisonment instead of capital punishment, people were outraged and poured into the streets of Dhaka to protest against the verdict. The protesters gathered in Shahbagh, near the University of Dhaka, in a non-violent and peaceful protest and promised they would stay on the road until the verdict was changed.

This movement, which generally known as 'Shahbagh Protest' or '*Ganajagoron Moncho*', moved the whole nation and people from all over the country expressed their solidarity with the protesters. I was in Dhaka at the time and I saw people of different religions, ethnicities, ages and from different social and educational backgrounds coming together with two uniform demands, capital punishment for the war criminals and the banning of Jamat E Islam. Bloggers and online activists were the principal drives behind the movement. To take attention away from the main agenda of this successful and people-driven movement, extremists started to spread rumours about the bloggers and activists. They exploited the religious sentiment of common people by labelling the activists as 'non- believers' and accusing them of writing against Islam and mocking the Prophet. But their propaganda did not stop there. To achieve their goal, they choose a much brutal path and murdered the atheist blogger Rajib Haider for his ideology.

Rajib Haider's death was the beginning of a dark chapter in Bangladesh's history where people were killed simply for expressing their opinion or views that were not aligned to the basic principles of Islam. Though similar incidents happened before which claimed the life of notable writer and scholar Humayun Azad (he was attacked on 27 February 2004). In 1999 one of the most famous Bengali poets, Shamsur Rahman survived an attack which occurred at his home. The trend that started in 2013, however, was more deliberate, desperate and took place at regular intervals. Avijit Roy, Washiqur Rahman, Niloy Neel and Ananta Bijoy Das

were among the many victims who were hacked to death by the Islamist extremists. In 2016 Simon Tisdall reported in *The Guardian* that,

Since 2013, attacks characterised by the assailants' use of machetes and cleavers have claimed the lives of secular bloggers, authors, journalists, academics and teachers of a supposedly liberal bent. The common denominator is the offence their views supposedly cause to hard-line Islamists among Bangladesh's mostly moderate and tolerant Sunni Muslim majority. (p. 1)

In the same year, Gwynne Dyer wrote in *The Japan Times*,

In the current wave of murders, most of the victims have been "secular" bloggers who publicly stated that they were atheists and offered reasons for their lack of belief. They did not criticize or mock Islam directly, but merely insisting that religious faith was not necessary or rational was enough to "hurt religious sentiment." For some people, it was reason enough to kill them. (p. 2)

Mubashar Hasan stated in his article, *Rock n' roll is dying in Bangladesh*,

Religious extremism is also rising in Bangladesh. Since 2013 a string of violent attacks targeting secular bloggers, artists, religious minorities and free thinkers has shown the narrowing scope of civil liberties and acceptable public discourse. (Hasan 2018, p.4)

The list became more diverse with the murder of publisher Faisal Arefin Dipon, who was accused of associating with atheist blogger and writer Avijit Roy and publishing his books. Faisal Arefin Dipon had received several death threats following the rise of the Islamist extremists and was hacked to death at the office of his publication house *Jagriti Prokashoni*. Professor Rezaul Karim Siddique of the University of Rajshahi was killed despite being a 'believer of ALLAH', for his association with cultural activities, which are considered to be 'un-Islamic' by the extremists. He was also accused of "calling to atheism" by the militant group who killed him (France- Presse 2016). Gay rights activist and the editor of the only LGBT magazine in Bangladesh, Xulhaz Mannan and actor Mahbub Rabbi Tonoy were brutally murdered by the extremists in Dhaka inside the magazine's office. These incidents sent a strong signal that any activity that was incompatible with Islamic principles were being scrutinised by the extremists and would be acted upon.

The situation took a turn for the worse when in 2016, just a couple of days before the holy festival of Eid- Ul- Fitr, five 'so-called' Islamist terrorists attacked the Holey Artisan Bakery in Gulshan and all those inside the restaurant were taken hostage. This gruesome incident

claimed at least twenty-four lives. Although most of the perpetrators behind this heinous act were killed by the government law enforcement team, the attack terrified the whole nation and forced the government to take a strong position against terrorism. This resulted in the arrest and conviction of several murderers, including the murderers of Rajib Haider and Faisal Arefin Dipon. However, many of the killers and 'potential killers' remain free today. And although the situation has become more stable, the secular people of Bangladesh have yet to regain their full faith and confidence.

What the Future Holds

When I conducted my fieldwork in 2015, I was aware of the recent situation in Bangladesh and the deep-rooted fear it had created in people who were associated with secular and cultural activities. When I learnt that cultural activists were working to reintroduce Chandrabati's works nationally, I wondered if the activists had received any threats or been subjected to hatred and whether they felt vulnerable because of their activities.

I asked the Chairperson of *Gana Shanskritik Dol* Khairul Alam Badal if they have received any threats or religious pressure from anywhere. His answer was a straightforward 'no'. He added that Hindus and Muslims reside peacefully in Kishoreganj, and there are no issues or tension among them. He said that they had not experienced any pressure and he was proud that Kishoreganj was such a secular place. He also said that Chandrabati was adored by both Hindus and Muslims. Local journalist Amin Sadi, in answer to a similar question, said that rural areas and villages were not affected by religious issues. He stated that, regardless of their religion, people were ready to receive Chandrabati's songs and respect her as a poet.

However, I was not surprised, when a Hindu informant, who wished to remain anonymous, disagreed with the above statements. Even before I introduced this specific issue, he spontaneously said that, along with the whole country, Kishoreganj had also experienced the rise of fundamentalists in the post-independence era (after 1971). Especially after the assassination of Bangabondhu in 1975, the supporters of independent Bangladesh were being suppressed all over the country and Kishoreganj was not an exception. From that time on, the fundamentalist groups had secretly but continuously tried to inject non-secular beliefs in

people. Cultural practices and celebrations were hampered, and the situation remained the same until the early 1990s. He continued by stating that these negative endeavours had scarred Chandrabati's memory and activities as well.

He claimed that *palagaan* and *baulgaan* are in danger even in the rural areas, not because people are losing interest in them but rather because rising religious intolerance was discouraging people from being involved in them. He continued by saying that conservative Muslims deliberately curb the promotion of modern songs, generally referred to as 'band shangeet' 'band songs' or 'rock 'n' roll' in Bangladesh. According to my informant, conservatives consider these songs to be a threat to their religion and culture. His statement was supported by an article written by Mubashar Hashan who maintained that,

Increased religiosity, which rejects all things Western in favour of a traditional lifestyle, has also hurt Bangladesh's rock scene. Some young Muslims I spoke with even see Rock 'n' roll as a sin. (Hasan 2018, p.1)

The anonymous informant continued by stating that the people who oppose band songs, sometimes confuse these songs with *baulgaan* and *palagaan* and try to discourage performances in their locality altogether. He also brought up a sensitive issue, regarding Islamic lectures that are delivered by 'so-called' Islamic intellectuals in Bangla, and commonly known as 'Waz'. He stated that many people try to blindly follow the instructions they receive about lifestyle, ideology and religious beliefs in the waz. Some speakers take advantage of the trust people have in them, and indirectly, sometimes even directly try to spread religious intolerance among people. After my conversation with this informant, I became curious and listened to some of the waz on Youtube, with millions of views. I was astonished to discover that most of them blatantly deliver hatred not only against 'non-believers' or people from other religions but also against women. They even tell lies about 'Islam' and twist the rules of Islam to establish their agenda. Using disrespectful and hateful speech and gestures, these 'so-called' Islamic scholars espouse that women should remain at home and do not need to be educated. They also preach against cultural activities stating that dancing, singing is 'haram' according to Islam and should not be practised. Alarmingly 'waz culture' has taken over the cultural programs and activities not only in rural but also in urban areas. In the winter people of Bengal was entertained with *jatrapala*, *palagaan*, *baulgaan*, *jarigaan* and

shaarigaan. Nowadays, however, a large number of them go to waz mahfils as they believe that waz is not only entertaining but also an easy way to be rewarded by ALLAH.

The waz culture is not a new element of Bangladesh's culture. But in recent years, the downside of this culture became apparent and it became clear that they are destroying religious harmony and preaching against women's education and independence. Online activists started to oppose this trend few years back. However, at the beginning of 2020, online activists and bloggers have become more vocal and active against this trend over social media. They started to appeal to the government to put these waz mahfils under surveillance, rules and regulations. Their continuous efforts proved to be a success when Deputy Minister of State for Religious Affairs, Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah said that the government has noticed debates regarding some waz and that they will take proper actions. He also requested general people to protest against the 'so-called' speakers. (Dhaka Tribune 2020)

My interviews with the informants made it clear that the Muslim informants were in denial about the rise of religious intolerance, and the Hindus, although directly suffering from the changes, were afraid or at least hesitated to express their opinions openly. The interviews, however, made it apparent that, although the rise of religious intolerance is an inescapable truth, the activists, until now, have not faced any direct threats from the radicals. But the question is, what will happen if, in the future, they face obstacles from hardcore Islamists? Will this hamper the progress the activists are making on Chandrabati's legacy and works? Will Chandrabati and her works be lost forever from Bangladesh? To answer these questions, I analysed the conversations with the informants, observed recent events, along with the common tendencies and behaviour of Bangladeshis. And based on these elements, I outline my hypothesis below.

Firstly, it is notable that Bangladeshi Muslims have always been sensitive about their religion. They are commonly known as '*Dharmabhiru*' or 'feared of the religion', and yet their love for cultural activities and festivals, (not all of them are recommended by the basic principals of Islam) has always played an important role in their lives. To celebrate secular festivals like *Pohela Boishakh*, religious festivals like Eid and Puja, they organise fairs that include cultural programs, dramatic shows, dancing doll shows et cetera. Cultural programs are also an integral part of national celebrations such as Mother language day, Independence Day and Victory Day.

These celebrations, which are one of the core elements of Bangladesh's traditional existence, have been the subject of radical attacks many times. One of the most serious incidents took place in 2001 when terrorists attacked the *Pohela Boishakh* celebration by *Chhayanot* in Dhaka and killed ten people. In 2010, an editorial in the national newspaper the *Daily Star* demonstrated the importance of that particular attack by stating that,

There have been bomb attacks on public functions before, and there have been many since then, but this one was quite different from the rest. This was an attack against the very identity of the nation; it was a blow against the very belief on which the War of Liberation was fought; it was a stab at the very ethos in which we take immense pride, both collectively and as individuals. (Daily Star 2010)

The brutal incident was broadcasted live on national television and yet failed to deter the Bangladeshis and destroy their spirit. People kept pouring onto the streets that very day and in the following years, even more people joined the celebration to showcase their protest against the attack. Rubana Huq in her article 'Tradition and Protest' which was also published in the *Daily Star* said that,

Celebration and protest go hand in hand in our lands. As a resilient race, our people have always sung songs when in pain, painted when violated, danced when disappointed and risen from ashes in colours when burnt. 'Pohela Boishakh' is no exception to this rule. (Huq 2014)

Although rural areas and urban areas had different forms of entertainment in earlier times, in the era of globalisation, they have become quite uniform. Rural people now mostly rely on electronic media for their daily entertainment. Yet despite this, the live performances of the *baulgaan* and *palagaan* singers have immense appeal to the general population. One informant, Osman Gani, who has established an entertainment hall in Kishoreganj and named it after Chandrabati, was very keen to explain his point of view. He said that the greater Mymensingh area (districts including Kishoreganj, Netrokona, Mymensingh et cetera) have always been rich in music. *Palagaan*, *Baulgaan*, *Kabigaan*, *Gambhira* are different genres of local music and they are still very popular. According to him, ninety per cent of the people who still adore these songs are from rural areas. To describe the popularity of some singers in rural areas, Osman Gani mentioned a local saying, 'New roads are made for these singers', meaning when a popular singer comes to perform in a locality, thousands of people gather there to enjoy the performance. When these large numbers of people avoid the main roads

and walk along the middle of the paddy fields to reach the performance site their footprints create new paths.

Although Osman Gani was speaking about the popularity of these songs, his following spontaneous remarks indicated that he himself was well aware of the fact that, these activities, if not handled properly, could outrage radical Muslims. He said that it was customary for the ballad singers or palakars to start their songs with praise of the Almighty. The praise, depending on the religion of the singers, would start with the name of Allah or the Hindu Gods. According to Osman Gani, nowadays, Muslim singers who were singing Hindu songs could offend and confuse conservative Muslims if they started these songs by praising Allah. Religious leaders might also become outraged and act accordingly. It can hurt the Hindus as well. To avoid this dilemma and any criticism, Osman said that when Muslim singers sang Hindu songs, they praise *Prabho Niranjana* (The Immaculate God or Supreme Being), instead of Allah.

But Bormon's experience provided a different view of the performances. Although Bormon was aware of rising religious intolerance, he said that, even now, when singers sing Chandrabati's songs, they mix aspects of Hindu and Muslim cultures together, which represents religious integrity. Bormon described how the Muslim singers while singing Chandrabati's songs and depicting her sorrows, cry out spontaneously saying, 'Hey ALLAH'. When singers sing spontaneously and express their inner thoughts through singing, they become so immersed in their performances that they forget to be careful about mixing up religious beliefs. They incorporate their own feelings and their own beliefs in their performances and according to Bormon, the people do not have a problem with this. During my fieldwork, I saw evidence of this aspect of religious integration when Khokon Boyati while singing a praising song for Chandrabati, a Hindu woman, wore a headcover or cap commonly known as '*tupi*', typically worn by Muslim men during prayer. Some men wear this all day long to showcase their dedication and Khokon Boyati was one of them.

Interestingly, despite many examples of rising religious intolerance in the country, stories and incidents of religious integration and harmony remained abundant. Khairul Alam Badal said that Hindus and Muslims have been living there peacefully for many years and they join each other's religious festivals and other celebrations such as weddings and birthdays. He mentioned in particular that in his village, he was a minority. Ten thousand Hindu families

lived in his village, but he had not encountered any problems there as a Muslim. Kanchan, a young cultural activist from Chandrabati's village said that there are no issues among Hindus and Muslims in the villages. They financially contribute to each other's festivals and attend festivals regardless of which religion they belong to. He continued that, Hindus celebrate Durga Puja and other festivals for days. They play songs at a high volume for hours, but no one ever complained. According to him, everyone is completely free to perform their religion. The Hindu women of Shotal Bhattacharya Parha supported this comment and added that Muslims come to visit their Puja Mandaps. Hindu children and even older people go out on Eid day to mingle with Muslims and celebrate. They all agreed that they are aware of Muslim prayer times and keep their volume down during Azan and Namaz while celebrating their religious festivals.

Based on these conversations, Amin Sadi, the local journalist's comment that rural areas are not affected by religious issues, might appear quite reasonable. But the undeniable truth is that most areas of Bangladesh are affected by some form of religious intolerance. If proper steps are not taken immediately to address this, Bangladesh could lose its rich and diverse cultural traditions and its identity as a harmonious, secular country. However, it is equally true that, in a country of 164 million people, there are a large number of people who still respect the religion, culture and lifestyle of people from differing religions. This group exists in the general population and consists largely of academics, writers, artists, singers, cultural activists and journalists. If these people make a collective effort to resist religious propaganda, and deliberately preach religious harmony, they will be able to overcome the damage created by the radical Islamists. Moderate religious leaders can also play an important role by preaching love and respect for people from other religions. The government also needs to be more vigilant of the activities of radicals online and offline.

The divisions the radicals have created will take a long time to heal but continuous and deliberate effort may eliminate these negative impacts. By securing a respectful and safe place for everyone, where everyone can practice their religious and secular beliefs, traditions, cultures and freedom of speech without threat or hesitation, the various aspects of Bangladeshi culture and traditions can be restored and protected, not only now, but into the future as well. However, failing to do so will throw the 'non-Islamic' portion of society along with any secular traditions and culture into Bangladesh into grave danger.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have discussed the challenges faced by the cultural activists, including financial hardship while attempting to revive Chandrabati's memory and her songs. I have also indicated some possible solutions to their problems, including government funding and direct contributions to their efforts, locally and nationally. In the second half of the chapter, to bring attention to the indirect causes that can have a huge impact on Chandrabati's legacy, I described the changes Bangladesh is facing in terms of religion and culture. I also discussed the impact of these changes on Bangladesh's identity as a secular country and its rich culture. Finally, I suggested that without the dedication and contribution of secular-minded people, moderate religious leaders and government, Bangladesh may be unable to retain its identity as a secular country and may also fail to protect its diverse culture into the future.

Chapter Nine

Conclusion

Chandrabati was the medieval Bengali writer, whose literary works contain important knowledge about the social, cultural, religious and economic circumstances of her time. Her ballads and songs are sagas of medieval women, depicting their dreams, love, dedication, sorrows and their eternal struggles against all odds. One of the main reasons her literature is so significant is because, it was one of the first depictions of women's stories, written by a woman, from a woman's perspective. However, her contributions extend beyond these considerations and have even broader importance.

Despite living in a conservative society, Chandrabati did not follow the usual path of matrimony and maternity, which society expected of women. Moreover, she wrote her *Ramayana* from Sita's point of view. She was unafraid of the religious leaders or priests and displayed immense courage by blaming Lord Rama for his misdeeds. By these means, she created a unique addition to Bengali literature. Her personal life was full of dedication to her parents and the Gods, love, betrayal and sorrows. It contained all the elements that could appeal to the masses. Unfortunately, her life story had such appeal it overshadowed her literature. In the present day, people who are aware of Chandrabati, mainly know of her tragic love story, and very few are acquainted with her *Ramayana*. Her other literary works are largely ignored, not only by the masses but also by scholars. The scholars of Bengali literature have generally only mentioned her when discussing her father Bangshi Das's works and did not espouse Chandrabati's literary genius.

In this thesis, I have discussed in detail Chandrabati's life and the distinctive characteristics of her literature. I have also discussed the social, cultural, religious and economic elements of medieval Bengal Chandrabati depicted so beautifully in her Ballads *Molua* and *Doshshu Kenaramer Pala*.

As Chandrabati's *Ramayana* is a unique creation, I have mentioned its special characteristics and also explored its relation to other *Ramayana* retellings from various regions and

languages. I also tried to establish that, though her *Ramayana* is known as an incomplete work, it is, in fact, the complete story of Sita.

Apart from discussing Chandrabati's extraordinary life and works, one of my main intentions was to discover how Chandrabati and her works are remembered in modern Bangladesh and ascertain their present status. To find the answers, I conducted fieldwork in Chandrabati's village and the surrounding areas and also in Dhaka. I spoke to many people, who shared their memories and stories with me. I found that Chandrabati is almost a forgotten name in modern Bangladesh. People know very little about her, let alone about her works. The general opinion of scholars and enthusiasts was that the women of Bangladesh adore Chandrabati and sang her songs in their everyday lives and on special occasions. But according to my findings, the practice of women singing songs together is decreasing day-by-day. Most of the women who sing songs did not know Chandrabati's songs. Even if they sang her songs, in most cases, the women were unaware that they were Chandrabati's songs.

These findings compelled me to discover why people had forgotten such an outstanding figure. Based on conversations with informants, my experience during fieldwork, and previous research on Chandrabati, I have sought to answer the reasons 'why' Chandrabati and her songs have been forgotten. I mentioned that history and literature had been dominated by male figures, while challenges to secularism and the declining number of Hindus in Bangladesh along with many other reasons, played key roles in the disappearance of Chandrabati from people's memories.

However, during my fieldwork, I discovered uplifting evidence of people's love, care and responsibility towards their own culture and traditions. I came across a group of thinkers and activists who were working hard to revive Chandrabati's name, reintroduce her to the younger generation and attempting to retrieve her songs. These activists, both locally and nationally, were trying to establish Chandrabati as a source of pride for Bangladesh. In this thesis, I have depicted their inspirations, their hard works and their struggles on the way to achieving their goals.

I have also indicated what the future might hold for Chandrabati's legacy and her songs in modern Bangladesh. I have discussed the recent religious and cultural changes that Bangladesh is experiencing and their negative impact on Bangladesh's harmonious society

and integrated culture. I have explained that in recent years the 'so-called' Islamic radicals have created religious intolerance against people of other religions and their culture. They are also creating confusion regarding the secular practices, festivals and cultures of Bangladeshis. In these circumstances, I have discussed the challenges that intellectuals, social and cultural activists and atheists are facing when attempting to continue their works. Any set of beliefs or activities that are not aligned with basic Islamic principles (according to the radicals) have been targeted. This may have an impact on how Chandrabati and her songs will be regarded and accepted in the future as she was a Hindu woman and her songs featured Hindu beliefs, rituals and customs.

I discussed that although Bangladeshi Muslims have always been dedicated in their religious beliefs, they have also actively participated and admired cultural aspects of their society. Serious threats, even life-threatening attacks could not destroy their love and interest in the cultural elements of Bangladesh. They have participated in and supported all the protests against these threats. I have also indicated that, although innumerable elements are threatening Bangladesh's religious integrity and cultural harmony, there are also a huge number of people who still hold the secular spirit of Bangladesh in their hearts. I suggested that these people along with the help of moderate religious leaders, secular cultural activists and the government may overcome the struggle Bangladesh is now facing. Their dedication and constant effort can save Bangladesh's identity as a secular country and also save the rich and diverse culture of Bangladesh. In this way, Chandrabati's memory and works would also be secured, and people could be proud of their hero. A forgotten figure whose charismatic works are just beginning to return to people's lives, thus, could be cherished in Bangladesh into the future.

Appendices

Glossary list

Badh: To kill

Bandana: Before starting the main poem poets paid customary homage to Gods and that part is called Bandana or Praise.

Brindaban: A historical and sacred city of Uttar Pradesh, India

Dol: Group

Doshshu: Bandit

Gambhira: A genre of Bangla song

Gana: People, Mass

Geet: Song

Gonojagoron: Uprising Masses

Jarigaan: A genre of Bangla song

Jatiya: National

Jatrapala: A special form of Bengali/ Bangladeshi performance where the performers depict stories with singing, dancing and acting.

Jibone: In life

Jilla: District

Kaal: Time

Kali: The Hindu Goddess. It also refers to someone with dark skin and in Chandrabati's Ramayana, Rama was called Kali because of his skin colour.

Kavya: Poem

KISHAS: Kishoreganj Association of Literature and Culture

Kobi: Poet

Komol: Lotus

Krishna: The Hindu God

Kshatriya: One of the four castes of the Hindu religion. The members of this caste are well-trained soldiers.

Lochon: Eye

Mahakaal: Supreme God

Mahakobi: Great poet

Maloti: One kind of flower

Meghnad: Poet Modhushudon Dutta referred Ravana as Meghnad.

Meyeli: Womanly

Mohila: Woman

Moncho: Stage/ Platform

Mongol: Auspicious

Nayantara: One kind of Flower

Paalagaan: A genre of Bangla Song

Panta Bhaat: Fermented rice

Path: Reading

Prashangik: Related

Prothom: First

Radha: A Hindu Goddess

Sadar: Central area for business, administration et cetera.

Shaarigaan: A genre of Bangla song

Shahittya: Literature

Shanskritik: Cultural

Shobhajatra: Procession

Shundor: Beautiful

Shyamol: Dark-skinned

Topodhon: An adjective Chandrabati used to honour saint Valmiki and saint Baishishtha

Jogini: A woman who usually remain unmarried and worships God

Zamindar: Proprietor/ A title which was given to people with extensive land, property and authority

Certificate of Course Completion

This is to certify that Eku, Sumaya has completed Module 1:
Research Integrity and Code of Conduct

Date: November 4, 2015

Professor Nicky Solomon,
Dean, Graduate Research School,

University of Technology Sydney.

Certificate of Course Completion

This is to certify that Eku, Sumaya

has completed Modules: 2. Plagiarism and Misconduct, 3. Risk Assessment, 4. Risk Management and Health & Safety, 5. Project Management

Date: November 26, 2015

Professor Nicky Solomon,
Dean, Graduate Research School,

University of Technology Sydney.

28/02/2020

Mail - Sumaya Eku - Outlook

HREC Approval Granted

Research.Ethics@uts.edu.au <Research.Ethics@uts.edu.au>

Fri 28/02/2014 4:36 PM

To: Devleena.Ghosh@uts.edu.au <Devleena.Ghosh@uts.edu.au>; Heather.Goodall@uts.edu.au <Heather.Goodall@uts.edu.au>; Sumaya Eku <[REDACTED]@student.uts.edu.au>; Research.Ethics@uts.edu.au <Research.Ethics@uts.edu.au>

Dear Applicant

Thank you for your response to the Committee's comments for your project titled, "Subaltern Voices, Epic Stories: Chandrabati's Ramayana and Bengali Women". Your response satisfactorily addresses the concerns and questions raised by the Committee who agreed that the application now meets the requirements of the NHMRC National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007). I am pleased to inform you that ethics approval is now granted.

Your approval number is UTS HREC REF NO. 2013000565

Your approval is valid five years from the date of this email.

Please note that the ethical conduct of research is an on-going process. The National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans requires us to obtain a report about the progress of the research, and in particular about any changes to the research which may have ethical implications. This report form must be completed at least annually, and at the end of the project (if it takes more than a year). The Ethics Secretariat will contact you when it is time to complete your first report.

I also refer you to the AVCC guidelines relating to the storage of data, which require that data be kept for a minimum of 5 years after publication of research. However, in NSW, longer retention requirements are required for research on human subjects with potential long-term effects, research with long-term environmental effects, or research considered of national or international significance, importance, or controversy. If the data from this research project falls into one of these categories, contact University Records for advice on long-term retention.

You should consider this your official letter of approval. If you require a hardcopy please contact Research.Ethics@uts.edu.au.

To access this application, please follow the URLs below:

* if accessing within the UTS network:

<http://rmprod.itd.uts.edu.au/RMENet/HOM001N.aspx> * if accessing outside of

UTS network: <https://remote.uts.edu.au> , and click on "RMENet

ResearchMaster Enterprise" after logging in.

We value your feedback on the online ethics process. If you would like to provide feedback please go to: <http://surveys.uts.edu.au/surveys/onlineethics/index.cfm>

If you have any queries about your ethics approval, or require any amendments to your research in the future, please do not hesitate to contact Research.Ethics@uts.edu.au.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Marion Haas

Chairperson

UTS Human Research Ethics Committee

<https://outlook.office.com/mail/deeplink?version=2020021701.12&popoutv2=1&leanbootstrap=1>

1/2 28/02/2020

Mail

- Sumaya Eku - Outlook

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P: PO Box 123, BROADWAY NSW 2007

[Level 14, Building 1, Broadway Campus]

CB01.14.08.04

<https://outlook.office.com/mail/deeplink?version=2020021701.12&popoutv2=1&leanbootstrap=1>

2/2

Ref: E11

UTS

UNIVERSITY of

TECHNOLOGY. SYDNEY FASS MEMORANDUM COVERSHEET

TO:	DEAN
DATE:	24 NOVEMBER 2014
FROM:	SUMAYA AFRIN EKU
SUBJECT:	TRAVEL APPROVAL
FORWARD TO:	PLEASE NOTE WHERE THE FORM IS TO BE SENT ONCE SIGNED

MATTER FOR APPROVAL OR ADVICE:

HEAD OF SCHOOL'S RECOMENDATION	NAME:	Production Note: Signature removed prior to publication.
	REQUEST SUPPORTED	C] REQUEST <u>NOT</u> SUPPORTED (add comments below)

	SIGNATURE: Production Note: Signature removed prior to publication.	DATE: 2 7/11/14
Comments:		

Research Topic: Subaltern Voices, Epic Stories: Chandrabati's Ramayana and Bengali Women

Sumaya is enrolled in a Masters by research and is going to Bangladesh to do approved fieldwork. There is no funding from the faculty involved. Postgraduate students doing fieldwork need to complete this form for insurance purposes.

BACKGROUND:

My research is based on Mediaeval Bengali woman writer Chandrabati and her songs. It mainly aims to determine the future of Chandrabati's songs in the current religious context of Bangladesh. In order to achieve the goal, the research requires an extensive field work in Bangladesh (including Dhaka, the capital city and some other parts of Bangladesh) which will include taking interviews, doing archival and Library works. The field work will commence from 15 November 2014 to 6 March 2015.

The study has been approved by the HREC and I am determined to conduct the research ethically and responsibly. I have also finished my first Master's Assessment successfully. My supervisors are aware of my field work plans.

SCHOOL LEVEL AUTHORISATIONS:

EMPLOYEE:	NAME: Production Note: Signature removed prior to publication.	
	SIGNATURE:	DATE: 27/11/14
NEXT STEP: Forward to the School Manager for liaison with the Head of School		

UTS:ARTS & SOCIAL SCIENCES

FASS FILE NOTE

AUTHOR: Sumaya Eku DATE: 13/11/14
 SUBJECT: International Travel FASS FILE NO: _____
Approval

This require explanation about the travel and the activities to be undertaken as per faculty procedures - also needs to be support by HoS.

Blankes

~~AA~~ 17/11/14

Note attached. f 27/11

Email Devkera + Claire regarding procedure +
requested that they fill out a memo worksheet

• Waiting for reply.

JB

TRAVEL APPROVAL



UNIV
OF
TECH
SYDN

AUTHORITY NO.

FINANCIAL SERVICES UNIT

INTERNATIONAL DOMESTIC

Purpose of this form:

1. Financial Approval of Travel Expenses
2. Confirmation that the Traveller is covered under UTS Insurance

This Form must be used for UTS Business Travel and completed to departure (including externally funded travel).

Form submission procedure:

1. Accounts Payable - Forward form only when Travel Advance (Section 1.3-B) Advance) or Prepayments of Conference fees, Accommodation, etc (Section 1.3-C) Payment Requested) is required. Otherwise, the completed form should be filed locally.
2. UTS Internet Expenses (iExpense) attach form for all travel related e*expense reports.

1.1 TRAVELLER'S DETAILS {PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY}

I hereby apply for approval to travel on UTS business as per the details listed.

[3 Staff & Student Visitor Other UTS ID NO.

SURNAME ON PASSPORT FIRST NAME ON PASSPORT

PREFERRED FIRST NAME PHONE

FACULTY/DIVISION TRAVEL COORDINATOR PHONE

Please provide your contact details whilst travelling.

EMAIL PHONE

ADDRESS

Please provide details of your next of kin or contact in case of emergencies.

NAME RELATIONSHIP

PHONE

ADDRESS

EMAIL

ADDRESS

1.2 TRAVEL INFORMATION

PURPOSE OF THE TRIP

EXPECTED OUTCOME

Approved Travel

DEPARTURE DATE	DEPARTURE LOCATION	ARRIVAL DATE	ARRIVAL DESTINATION	JOURNEY PURPOSE	DFAT RISK LEVEL NUMBER/DESCRIPTOR
15/11/2014	SYDNEY	6/1 1/2014	KUALA LUMPUR	FIELDWORK-TRANSIT	
16/1 1/2014	KUALA LUMPUR	16/1 1/2014	DHAKA	FIELDWORK	
06/03/2015	DHAKA	06/03/2015	KUALA LUMPUR	FIELDWORK -TRANSIT	
06/03/2015	KUALA LUMPUR	07/03/2015	SYDNEY	COMING BACK	

Attach your NEO personal/annual leave days approved/submitted TOTAL NUMBER OF DAYS AWAY ON UTS BUSINESS & associated with this travel application

A travel diary is required by tax legislation from employees for domestic travel of more than five consecutive nights and all international travel. If a completed travel diary is not submitted (prior to departure or within 3 weeks of your return) to the Financial Services Unit (FSU), FBT may be imposed at a rate of 96% of the total travel cost. Note: Students do not need to complete a travel diary.

3

1.2 TRAVEL INFORMATION continued

UTS Travel Insurance is provided free for Associated Personal Travel taken as part of approved business travel in the following circumstances:

- * The personal travel is to countries with a security risk rating less than 3- see www.smarttraveller.gov.au
- * Must be approved by your supervisor

Definition of Associated Personal Travel

Private travel undertaken in conjunction with approved business travel where the private travel component is up to 25% of the approved business travel component (for a maximum of 10 days) will be covered under the UTS Corporate Travel Insurance. Any additional insurance required for private travel will be the responsibility of the traveller. If in doubt please contact the UTS Tax and Insurance Unit.

	START DATE	END DATE
ASSOCIATED PRIVATE TRAVEL		
ASSOCIATED PRIVATE TRAVEL		
ASSOCIATED LEAVE		

LEAVE FORM SENT TO SUPERVISOR? YES NO

TOTAL NUMBER OF DAYS ON PRIVATE TRAVEL

Accompanying Family Details (for insurance purposes) - THIS BENEFIT IS ONLY AVAILABLE TO STAFF

NAME	RELATIONSHIP	START DATE	END DATE

NOTE

Spouse and dependent children may be included as accompanying family to be covered under the Vic Chancellor's Travel Directive.

1.3 FINANCES

A) COST FORECAST

This section must be completed. Provide estimates if actuals are unknown,

CATEGORY	DOMESTIC TRAVEL NATURAL ACCOUNTS	INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL NATURAL ACCOUNTS	ORG (several if applicable)	FOREIGN CURRENCY (if applicable)	AMOUNT IN AUD
Air Fares	71030	71 130			\$1234.14
Meals	71020	71 120	339	66,000TK. (approx.)	\$1000.00
Accommodation	71025		1 13	66,000TK. (approx.)	\$10 0.00
Conference/ Seminar Fees	71305	71305	N/A		/
Local Fares	71035	71 140	300	66,000TK. (approx.)	\$ 1000.00
Incidental Allowance	N/A	71 140	N/A		
Other	71045	71 140			
TOTAL					\$4234.4

Are you traveling economy class? Yes No

1.3 FINANCES continued

B) ADVANCE or ALLOWANCE

Complete this section only if you require an advance of funds or an incidental allowance. To cover incidentals, up to \$20/day is available to overseas travellers where acquittal & receipts are not required, irrespective of payment method.

Please read section 5.11,

5.14, 5.15 & 5.17 of the Vice-Chancellor's Directives Travel.

I wish to apply for an advance of funds (for meals & incidentals) as shown in the table below. These funds must be acquitted within 3 weeks of my return. Any surplus or unacquitted funds are repayable to the University.

OR

I wish to apply for an incidentals allowance. The maximum daily allowance is \$20 for staff traveling overseas. Funds are repayable to the University if the actual travel days are less than the number of days stated below.

A request for Travel

Advance or Incidental Allowance must be made P.CiQEto departure using this form.

NUMBER OF DAYS	ADVANCE PER DAY (71215)	INCIDENTAL ALLOWANCE PER DAY (71145)	TOTAL ADVANCE OR ALLOWANCE	MIN TO BE ACQUITTED ON RETURN WITH RECEIPTS
		\$100 (Europe, UK & <u>Japan</u>)		
	\$80 (Rest of the World)			\$60
	\$80 (Australia)			\$80
		\$20 (International only)		SO

O UTS CORPORATE CREDIT

CARD HOLDERS Are you a current UTS Credit Card Holder?

D) PAYMENTS REQUESTED

Please allow at least 5 working days for the payment to be processed.

Where there is a requirement to remit payment overseas, please allow 10 working days as the process may take longer to complete.

SUPPLIER NAME	ADDRESS/OTHER DETAILS	CURRENCY	AMOUNT
TOTAL PAYMENTS			
GRAND TOTAL (Total Payments plus Total Advance)			\$0.

ADDRESS/OTHER DETAILS

(Total Payments plus Total Advance)

NOTE

The grand total, which is the sum of the total advance and the total payments, should not exceed the total amount approved (refer to section 1.5)

1.4 TRAVELLER'S CERTIFICATION

I agree:

a) prior to travel

- * To provide my faculty/division with a detailed itinerary.
- * That any advance payments to myself are made under the condition that if I do not fully comply with UTS requirements, then this advance will be included on my annual earnings summary (former group certificate). No tax will be deducted from the advance, and I will have to justify this amount to the Australian Taxation Office.
- " To complete any Offsite Activities Risk Assessments applicable to the travel.
- * To update your Research Risk Management Plan for research risks relating to the travel.
- * To check the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) travel advice at www.smart.travelfelzæo_v:au prior to travel to confirm the status of the destination country.
- * Not to travel to countries in risk level 4 (DFAT advice is 'advised not to travel' or similar).
- * Not to travel to countries in risk level 3 (DFAT advice is 'reconsider your need to travel' or similar) unless I have an exemption from my Dean/Director (the Risk Management and Approval of Overseas Travel form must be used for this purpose). * To subscribe to the DFAT website, Subscription means you will receive free automatic changes to travel advice via email.
- * To register with the nearest Australian embassy at www.orao.dfatsggv.au as required.
- * To obtain a copy of the International SOS Emergency Card.
- * To read the exclusions to the Vice-Chancellor's Travel Directives.

b) while travelling

- * To keep receipts/tax invoices for business expenses.
- * To comply immediately with any changes to travel advice from DFAT or any directions from my Dean/Director while I am away.
- ' To leave a country if the travel advice is upgraded to risk level 4 (DFAT advice is 'advised not to travel' or similar).
- * To consult my Dean/Director about an exemption to remain in a country if the travel advice is upgraded to level 4 (DFAT advice is 'reconsider your need to travel' or similar).
- * To keep a Travel Diary indicating actual travel and activities.

c) upon my return

- * To forward to the Accounts Payable section of the Financial Services Unit, within 3 weeks of my return, the following:
 - i. completed expense report via iExpenses if you did not request an advance (section 1.3C). Otherwise, a completed Travel Acquittance and Expense Claim Form with a detailed summary of expenses incurred
 - ii. original receipts/tax invoices
 - iii. the unused balance of any cash advance
 - iv. a completed Travel Diary if not previously submitted.

NAME SUMAYA AFRIN EKU

SIGNATURE DATE

1.5 FINANCIAL APPROVAL

I approve this application to travel under the relevant Financial Delegation and, if applicable, the payment of the advance. I have satisfied myself that this trip is necessary, the mode of transport and standard of accommodation are appropriate and the overnight stops are required.

NAME AND INITIALS	AMOUNT IN AUD	COMPANY	ORG UNIT	LOCATION	ACTIVITY	SIGNATURE	DATE
NOT NECESSARY, NO UTR FUNDS BEING SPENT.							
TOTAL AMOUNT APPROVED							

1.6 MANAGEMENT APPROVAL

I approve this travel and I am satisfied that the expenses are reasonable and appropriate.

Head of Department/Supervisor

NAME
 POSITION
 SIGNATURE DATE

Dean/Director

NAME
 SIGNATURE DATE

Senior Executive (required if any air travel is NOT economy class)

NAME
 SIGNATURE DATE

NOTE

* If you require an Advance or have Payments Requested (section 1.3B or C), please send the original to the Financial Services Unit, a copy to the faculty/division and retain a copy for your own records.

* If you do not require an Advance, this form should be retained by the faculty/division until payment or reimbursement is received by the Financial Services Unit.

<http://www.fsu.uts.edu.au/travel/travel-approval-form.pdf>



Consent Form for the Interviewees

Project: Subaltern Voices, Epic Stories: Chandrabati's Ramayana and Bengali Women

Researcher: Sumaya Afrin Eku

Organisation: University of Technology (UTS), Sydney

I, _____, agree to participate in the research project

Subaltern Voices, Epic Stories: Chandrabati's Ramayana and Bengali Women (UTS HREC REF NO. 2013000565) being conducted by Sumaya Afrin Eku of the University of Technology, Sydney for her degree Masters by Research.

I understand the purpose of the study is to find out about poet Chandrabati and her works.

I understand that I have been asked to participate in this research because I have relevant knowledge on the subject. I also understand that this research will take one to two hours of my time and will be held in a place convenient to me. I understand that the study will not include any question that can be uncomfortable to me and though the possibility of any kind of risk is minimal, the researcher will take steps to minimise the risks even more.

As a parent or guardian of a child informant, I understand that, my child will be interviewed as a member of a group, he or she will **never** be alone with the researcher and I can accompany him/her during the interview.

I am aware that I can contact Sumaya Afrin Eku or her supervisors Associate Professor Devleena Ghosh

Email: Devleena.Ghosh@uts.edu.au **Phone:** +61 2 9514 1963 and Professor Heather Goodall **Email:** Heather.Goodall@uts.edu.au **Phone:** +61 2 9514 2284

if I have any

concerns about the research. I can also contact local independent contact person in Bangladesh. And that local contact person is: Professor Naima Haque, Chairperson, Faculty of Graphic Design, University of Dhaka, Dhaka, Bangladesh, contact no +880 1726427110.

I also understand that I am free to withdraw my participation from this research project at any time I wish, without consequences and without giving a reason.

I agree that, Sumaya Afrin Eku has answered all my questions fully and clearly.

The final section asks about your preferences for identification.

PLEASE CROSS ON THE OPTION BELOW THAT DOES NOT APPLY.

EITHER:

I agree that the research data gathered in this project may be published in a form that DOES identify me and acknowledges my authorship of the views I have expressed, on the condition that I am consulted on drafts of the material which identifies me.

OR

I agree that the research data gathered in this project may be published in a form which DOES NOT identify me in any way. I wish the research data to be archived also in a way which DOES NOT identify me.

Overall, I agree to take part in this research interview under the conditions to which I have agreed above.

Signature (participant)

Date

Signature (researcher)

Date

NOTE: This study has been approved by the University of Technology, Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee.

If you have any complaints or reservations about any aspect of your participation in this research which you cannot resolve with the researcher, you can contact local person Professor Naima Haque, Chairperson, Faculty of Graphic Design, University of Dhaka, Dhaka, Bangladesh, contact no +880 1726427110. You may also contact the Research Ethics Officer on +61 2 9514 9772, Research.Ethics@uts.edu.au

Any complaint you make will be treated in confidence and investigated fully and you will be informed of the outcome.



Information Sheet

Project: *Subaltern Voices, Epic Stories: Chandrabati's Ramayana and Bengali Women*

Researcher: **Sumaya Afrin Eku**

Organisation: **University of Technology (UTS), Sydney**

(UTS HREC REF NO. 2013000565)

WHO IS DOING THE RESEARCH?

My name is Sumaya Afrin Eku and I am a Masters by Research student at UTS. My supervisors are Associate Professor Devleena Ghosh and Professor Heather Goodall.

WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research is to find out about Medieval Bengali writer Chandrabati and her songs.

IF I SAY YES, WHAT WILL IT INVOLVE?

I will ask you to be a participant in an interview and ask you some questions.

ARE THERE ANY RISKS/INCONVENIENCE?

The interview will be arranged at a place and time you are comfortable in. It will take place in your locality so it will not involve any travelling and to ensure there is no avoidable risk to you. It will take place in a time reasonable to you and will not include any question that can embarrass you. However, if you feel uncomfortable at any time you can leave the study.

WHY HAVE I BEEN ASKED?

I have asked you to participate in the study because you may be able to assist me to understand more about Chandrabati, her life and works.

DO I HAVE TO SAY YES?

You don't have to say yes to participate in the study.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I SAY NO?

Nothing will happen if you say no. I will thank you for your time so far and won't contact you about this research again.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I AGREE TO LET MY CHILD/CHILDREN PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY?

As a parent or guardian of a child participant I will ask for your consent. If you agree your child to be a participant, he/she will be a part of a study group. You can accompany your child **at all time** and understand that your child will **NEVER** be alone with me.

IF I SAY YES, CAN I CHANGE MY MIND LATER?

You can change your mind at any time and you don't have to say why. I will thank you for your time so far and won't contact you about this research again.

WHAT IF I HAVE CONCERNS OR A COMPLAINT?

If you have concerns about the research that you think I or my supervisors can help you with, please feel free to contact

Associate Professor Devleena Ghosh **Email:** Devleena.Ghosh@uts.edu.au **Phone:** +61 2 9514

1963 **Mailing address:** Dr. Devleena Ghosh, University of Technology-Sydney, P.O Box 123, Department of Communication, Broadway, NSW 2007

Adjunct Professor Heather Goodall **Email:** Heather.Goodall@uts.edu.au **Phone:** +61 2 9514

2284 **Mailing address:** Professor Heather Goodall, University of Technology-Sydney, P.O Box 123, Department of Communication, Broadway, NSW 2007 and

Sumaya Afrin Eku **Email:** [REDACTED]@student.uts.edu.au.

You can also contact Professor Naima Haque at Institute of Fine Arts, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh, contact no +880 1726427110, who has been appointed as an independent contact person.

If you would like to talk to someone who is not connected with the research, you may contact the Research

Ethics Officer on +61 02 9514 9772, and quote this number **UTS HREC REF NO. 2013000565**

Information Sheet in Bangla

সাফাত্কার প্রদানকারীদের জন্যে তথ্য সরবরাহকারী দলিল

প্রজেক্ট: *Subaltern Voices, Epic Stories: Chandrabati's Ramayana and Bengali Women*

গবেষক: সুমাইয়া আফরীন ইকু

বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়/ সংস্থা: ইউনিভার্সিটি অফ টেকনোলজি (ইউ টিএস), সিডনি

আমি, সুমাইয়া আফরীন ইকু, সিডনিতে অবস্থিত ইউনিভার্সিটি অফ টেকনোলজি সিডনিতে (ইউ টিএস), মাস্টার্স ডিগ্রী অর্জনের জন্যে গবেষণা এ নিযুক্ত আছি। আমার এই গবেষণা ইউ.টি.এস কর্তৃক স্বীকৃত(UTS HREC REF NO. 2013000565)। রিসার্চ প্রজেক্ট মূলত মধ্যযুগীয় বাংলার নারী লেখিকা চন্দ্রাবতী, তার লেখনীর ওপর গুরুত্ব আরোপ করে।

আমি জানি যে, আপনারা, কিশোরগঞ্জের লোকেরা চন্দ্রাবতী এবং তার গানের সাথে, লেখনীর সাথে পরিচিত।যেহেতু কিশোরগঞ্জ চন্দ্রাবতীর জন্মস্থান, তাই আপনাদের মতামত এবং অভিজ্ঞতা আমার গবেষণার জন্যে বিশেষভাবে গুরুত্বপূর্ণ।

চন্দ্রাবতী ছিলেন প্রথম বাঙালি নারী লেখিকা। তিনি তার স্বল্পকালীন জীবনে গুরুত্বপূর্ণ অনেক গান, লোকগাথা লিখেছেন।তিনি বিখ্যাত হিন্দু মহাকাব্য রামায়ন এর বাংলা অনুবাদ ও করেছেন।তার রামায়ন এর গুরুত্ব এই কারণে অনেক বেশি যে তিনি রাম এর কাহিনী না বলে সীতার দৃষ্টি থেকে সীতার কাহিনী বর্ণনা করেছেন।আমি জানি যে আপনাদের , বিশেষ করে মহিলাদের জীবনে সীতা এক অনন্য স্থান' দখল করে আছে। সীতার জীবনযুদ্ধের কাহিনী আপনারা বিশেষ ভালবাসা আর করুনার সঙ্গে আপনাদের মননে ধারণ করেন। যেহেতু আমার গবেষণা এ আমি চন্দ্রাবতীর সাথে সীতার জীবনের সাদৃশ্য এবং যোগাযোগ বিচার করতে চাইছি তাই এ বিষয় এ আপনাদের মতামত অনুধাবন আমার জন্যে বিশেষ গুরুত্বপূর্ণ।

তাছাড়া, আমার গবেষণার আরেকটি লক্ষ্য আপনাদের জীবনে চন্দ্রাবতীর গুরুত্ব ও প্রভাব মূল্যায়ন করা। এই লক্ষ্যে পৌছাবার জন্যে আমি জানতে চাইব এই বিদূষী নারীর সাথে আপনারা কতটুকু পরিচিত, তার রচনা ও গানের সাথে আপনাদের যোগাযোগ কতটুকু।এখন পর্যন্ত আপনার তার গান চর্চা করেন কিনা এবং যদি করে থাকেন, কোন পর্যায়ে

আছে সেই চর্চা। এই প্রশ্নের উত্তর খোজার জন্যই আমি আমার গবেষণা কাজ চালাতে চাইছি আপনাদের সাথে এবং আপনাদের অনুরোধ জানাচ্ছি আমার গবেষণা কর্মে যুক্ত হবার।

মূলত আমি আপনাদের সাথে দলীয় পর্যায়ে সাক্ষাত্কার পরিচালনা করব। আপনাদের সুবিধামত সময় ও স্থানে গবেষণা কাজ অনুর্তিত হবে। আমি যদি নিশ্চিত হই যে গবেষণা বিষয়ে আপনার পর্যাপ্ত জ্ঞান আছে এবং আপনি এ বিষয়ে গুরুত্বপূর্ণ তথ্য দিতে সক্ষম তখন আপনার সাথে আরো বিস্তারিত সাক্ষাত্কার এর ব্যবস্থা নেয়া হবে আপনার ইচ্ছে এবং সুবিধার ওপর ভিত্তি করে। আপনাকে আবারও জানানো হচ্ছে যে গবেষণা পরিচালিত হবে আপনার, পছন্দ মত স্থান ও সময়ে। দয়া করে আমাকে জানাবেন যদি সাক্ষাত্কার সংক্ষিপ্ত করার প্রয়োজন হয় বা অন্য কোনদিন স্থানান্তর এর প্রয়োজন হয়। গবেষণার সহযোগী হিসেবে আপনার গোপনীয়তা এবং এর পর্যায় নির্ধারণ আপনার অধিকার এবং আপনি যেকোনো সময় চাইলে এতে পরিবর্তন আনতে পারেন। যদি ভবিষ্যতে এই গবেষণা কর্ম কোথাও প্রকাশিত হয়, আপনাকে সাক্ষাত্কারের নমুনা পত্র প্রদান করা হবে। আপনি যেকোনো সময়ে এই গবেষণা কর্ম থেকে আপনার নিযুক্তি প্রত্যাহার করে নিতে পারেন কোনো কারণ দর্শানো ছাড়াই। আপনার সাক্ষাত্কারের নমুনা ইউ টিএস লাইব্রেরি তে গোপনীয়তা বজায় রেখে সংরক্ষিত হবে এবং আপনার অনুমতি না নিয়ে তৃতীয় কোনো পক্ষ কে দেয়া হবে না।

আপনি যেকোনো প্রয়োজনে আমার সাথে যোগাযোগ করতে পারেন। সুমাইয়া আফরীন ইকু Email:

_____@student.uts.edu.au.

তাছাড়া প্রফেসর নাইমা হক (গ্রাফিক ডিসাইন বিভাগ, ঢাকা বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়, ঢাকা, ফোন নম্বর +880 1726427110) এর সাথেও যোগাযোগ করতে পারেন আপনাদের যেকোনো প্রয়োজনে।

দয়া করে ভিডিও রেকর্ডিং এর শুরুতেই জানিয়ে দিন যে আপনি এই তথ্যগুলো ভালোভাবে পড়েছেন বা আপনাকে পরে শোনানো হয়েছে এবং আপনি এর সাথে একমত পোষণ করেন। আমি আপনাকে আশ্বস্ত করতে চাই যে, আপনার দেয়া তথ্যগুলো কে আমি যথাযথ গুরুত্ব ও সম্মান দিব এবং নৈর্বৃত্তিক মনোবৃত্তি দিয়ে তাদের যাচাইয়ের চেষ্টা করব।

NOTE: This study has been approved by the University of Technology, Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee.

If you have any complaints or reservations about any aspect of your participation in this research which you cannot resolve with the researcher, you can contact local person Professor Naima Haque, Faculty of Graphic Design, University of Dhaka, Dhaka, Bangladesh, contact no +880 1726427110. You may also contact the

Research Ethics Officer on +61 2 9514 9772, Research.Ethics@uts.edu.au and quote this number **UTS HREC REF NO. 2013000565**

Any complaint you make will be treated in confidence and investigated fully and you will be informed of the outcome.



Outline of Questions

Project: Subaltern Voices, Epic Stories: Chandrabati's Ramayana and Bengali

Women

Researcher: Sumaya Afrin Eku

Organisation: University of Technology Sydney (UTS), Sydney

1. Name
2. Age
3. Gender
4. Educational background
5. Religion
6. Occupation
7. Are you familiar with the name and works of Chandrabati? If yes, can you remember from whom you have obtained the knowledge? What sort of information did they pass on to you on Chandrabati? Can you please tell me what is your knowledge and understanding on Chandrabati and her life?
8. Do you know about Chandrabati's Ramayana? As a member of this regional community do you still practice these songs? If yes, can you please indicate some occasions you sing these songs in?
9. What is their importance, if they have any, in your life?
10. Can you sing some songs of Chandrabati? Can you understand the meanings of her songs? If yes, can you please explain them?

11. How do you relate yourself to these songs? As a woman, can you connect yourself with Chandrabati's life and emotions? Are you aware of the fact that, Chandrabati wrote these songs from a woman's perspectives/ point of view?
12. What are your understandings on Chandrabati's women characters? Can you relate with any of them in anyway? If yes, which character and why? Are these characters totally fictional or can you find someone like this in reality?
13. Based on Chandrabati's description of women and their lifestyle, what changes do you think the women of today are experiencing? Can you please indicate some major changes?
14. What is your understanding on Chandrabati's portrayal of the character Sita? Can you relate to her in anyway?
15. Chandrabati was a Hindu woman. In her songs she has basically promoted Hindu religion, cultures and beliefs. Are you aware of this fact? If you are a Muslim, and sing Chandrabati's song, do you face any kind of religious pressure? Do you consider them as songs from another religion? Do you possess any concern about the songs to be Hindu songs? As a Muslim how do you make these two ideas co-exist or how do you relate to these songs? Why do they attract you?
16. Do you teach your children the songs of Chandrabati? Do they learn them naturally seeing and hearing you? Are you interested in passing on your knowledge on this subject to the next generation? If yes, why do you think you are doing this? Is it a general regional practice that you will automatically do? Or have you thought about this and decided to do so. If not, what are your reasons to take such decision? Do you think they are not interested in this rich culture of Bengal? If yes, according to you, what are the reasons?
17. **Questions to the male members of the community:**
- What do you think about Chandrabati's songs? Can you remember your earliest encounter with these songs? Do you listen to these songs when women sing them? Do you know the songs? Have you ever sung them in any occasion or hummed them? Do you understand the meaning of these songs? If yes, can you please explain? Do you want your daughter or any other women relatives to learn about Chandrabati and her songs? Do you have any concern about the songs to be Hindu songs? Have you ever for any reason asked any of your relatives not to sing them? What changes have you

observed during your lifetime regarding performing these songs? Do you have any additional thoughts you want to share?

18. Questions to the children/ younger generation of the community:

- Do you know about Chandrabati? Do you know about Chandrabati's songs? From whom you have obtained the knowledge on Chandrabati and her songs? Can you sing them? If yes, did someone teach you or did you learn them by seeing/ hearing others? Do you find these songs to be appealing and interesting? If yes, what are the reasons? Can you understand the meanings of these songs? If not, what are the reasons? What kind of songs do you like nowadays and why? If you get the opportunity will you learn Chandrabati's songs in the future? As an important part of your culture, what is your overall idea about these songs? Do you think initiatives should be taken to preserve these songs and introduced them to the other parts of the country? If yes, why do you think that so? If not, what is your reason for that?

19. Questions to the religious leaders:

- Are you a local person? If you grew up in this locality, were you familiar with the songs women sing in this area? Do you know who wrote these songs? Do you know which religion she belonged to? When you were younger did you listen to these songs? Have you ever sung them in any occasion? Did any person from your family practice these songs? Does anyone from your family still sing them? As these songs were written by a Hindu and possess Hindu beliefs and practices, what do you think of Muslim people singing these Songs? What is your overall idea about these songs? Do you think they are a rich part of your culture and thus needed to be preserved and practiced? Or do you think it as a women affair and you are not at all bothered/ concerned about this matter? Did anyone ever tried to convince you to take any initiative concerning these songs? If yes, what was your attitude, thought towards the action?

20. Questions to people associated to Chandraboti Academy:

- Can you remember your earliest encounter with these songs? What was your first impression to them? How did your peers or colleagues (if they were with you) react/response to these songs? How and when did it appear to your mind that Chandrabati is an important character of our history and she should be re-introduced to the classes as well as the masses? What was your first initiative?

Have you faced any difficulty regarding your venture? If yes, what were they and how did you overcome them? What were people's reaction /response towards your initiative? What kind of help/ feedback did you get? What do you think about your Academy's current position now? What do you usually do in your Academy? Do you have any fixed schedule/plan? How did you decide your Academy's intention or goal? You have organized some national standard award giving ceremonies. What was people's (both scholars and general people) feedback to them? How did they react to Chandrabati's name and work? Did you receive lots of questions about Chandrabati? People who were already familiar with Chandra and her works, can you categorize them in anyway (e.g. educational background, age, occupation etc.)? What was your experience regarding sponsors? Did you get enough help from them or was it difficult to convince them? Have you taken any initiative to promote her works in urban media or society from your end? If yes, what is your experience? How are people receiving them? What is your experience with our media regarding this? Did they show adequate interest in promoting your programs, or Chandrabati and her works? Are you getting any kind of assistance/ help from the government? Have you ever thought of going to Kishorganj and promote her works there or highlight Kishorganj or the women who still sing her songs in anyway? If you have already done something similar, how was your experience? If you have not yet, can you please explain your point of view regarding this matter? How did you decide your Academy's intention or goal? What are your future plans? What do you think about your Academy's current position now? Please add any additional or further comment on this subject.

Reference list

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