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Sacred Ploughing, Divine Soil: The Agrarian Sovereign in Eastern India

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Soil (in Bengali, *mati*) has recently become an immensely important political signifier in the Indian state of West Bengal. Since 2013, annual 'Mati Utsav' (Soil Festival) events are being held, centred on a 'Mati Tirtha' (Soil Pilgrimage-Place) in Burdwan, near the state capital Kolkata. Why has soil assumed such sacred importance? This paper addresses this issue through a focus on eastern India. Soil or earth has long been sacralised in India, given its importance to agricultural fertility. Across centuries, changing notions and practices of kingship, marriage, reproduction, and property have often used the soil/earth/field as central metaphors. I begin by analysing the late precolonial Shivayan tradition, centring on the god Shiva, and study the ways in which soil-care received renewed attention in contexts of early modern peasantization, state formation, demographic growth, and religious cult-proliferation in frontier areas of Bengal. I also interrogate other strands of early modern Bengali cultural production on soil. I then shift attention to the colonial era to examine how 'lower caste' peasants in Bengal, such as the Rajavamshis, combined premodern-origin notions of ploughing as a divine and kingly activity with modern vocabularies of peasant autonomy, democracy, as well as soil improvement, in order to form hybrid discourses about agrarian reform and peasant sovereignty. I show how new technologies centring on soil-care and agriculture were thus successfully vernacularized by Bengali peasant communities. Elite-Bengali intellectuals, such as the Nobel Laureate poet Rabindranath Tagore, too gave new sacred and intellectual-political meanings to soil and ploughing. In both elite and peasant cases, I show the transregional links, and especially the impact of global capitalism as well as of 'Western' discourses and practices of soil science and technology. Finally, I shift my attention to the postcolonial era, and show how such hybrid discourses retain traction into the twenty-first century. The present resurgence of political interest in 'soil' needs to be contextualized in relation to the attempted dispossession of peasants by predatory land-grabbing industrial capitalism, as well as in relation to political protests by peasants as well as middle-class politicians that have used symbolism centring on the divine nature of soil, on sowing as a sacred and political (as well as gendered) act, on the association of political femininity with soil, and on the protection of small peasant property. My broader argument is that scholars of soil perception need to be sensitive to these regional traditions, and the intrinsic links between cultural



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perceptions of soil and the socio-political demands of subaltern populations, if they are to successfully build solidarities with peasant communities, from areas of soil-care to battles about peasant sovereignty.

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