

Research Article

Translating Innocence: A Critical Reading of the Delta Dalit Juvenile Fiction: *oh priest, give me the seeded banana!*

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Abstract: This research paper examines the complex interaction between source and target cultures in translation, using Priest's work, "*oh priest, give me the seeded banana!*", as a case study. It explores Bengal's tidal landscape and its literature in English translation, focusing on Niranjana Mondal's novel from the Tide Country, which narrates the life of a Sundarbans delta community through the perspective of a young protagonist, Naran. The story highlights socio-cultural realities, including rituals, village fairs, and intergenerational traditions, shaped by the region's tides—reflecting emotional and social currents within the community. The English translation offers insight into how language mediates the complex social, religious, and geographical nexus of Bengal's tidal space. It reveals cultural values transmitted through oral and written traditions, illustrating the intertwining of childhood, social structures such as caste and family, and the natural environment. The novel contributes to Dalit literature, ecological writing, folk narratives, and translation studies, emphasizing the role of language and cultural negotiation in shaping identity within this unique setting.

Keywords: Folk Juvenile Fiction, Dalit Delta Studies, Translation Studies

Introduction

Dalit children's literature is an important part of Indian literature because it gives voice to the lives, struggles, dreams, and experiences of children from marginalized communities. Unlike mainstream children's literature, which often does not have the scope to portray the issues of caste and social inequality, Dalit children's writing presents the realities of discrimination, poverty, and exclusion while also celebrating dignity, resilience, and hope. When these works are translated into English and other languages, they reach a wider audience and contribute to the understanding of Dalit culture, identity, and history beyond regional boundaries. Delta Dalit children's literature, especially from the river delta regions of the Indian Sundarbans, reflects the close relationship between people, land, labor, and caste. These narratives portray the everyday lives of Dalit children, their connection with nature, local traditions, and their struggle for education and social justice. Translation plays a significant role in preserving the cultural richness of these texts while making them accessible to readers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. However, translating Dalit literature is not merely a linguistic process; it also involves conveying the social, historical, and emotional realities embedded in the original language.

The fictional work *oh priest, give me the seeded banana!* by Niranjan Mandal is a vital work of Dalit literature that captures the severe realities of the undaunted peasantry and marginalized communities in the Sundarbans delta. Originally written in Bengali under the title *Thakur Thakur Dayra Kala*, the narrative follows a young protagonist named Naran amid local rituals, village fairs, and the deep-seated friction of the brutal caste system. Translating this text into English required meticulous effort due to the unique linguistic landscape of the Sundarbans. Translators worked extensively with specialized regional glossaries to preserve the social and environmental significance of the original vocabulary, which would have otherwise been lost to standard literary translations. The entire venture was expertly shaped under the editorial guidance of Mrinmoy Pramanick, an academic deeply invested in Dalit narratives, translation studies, and regional community languages. His editorial oversight ensured that the core nuances of the oral tradition and the harsh regional realities survived the transition into English. The book was published in January 2023 by Hawakal Publishers, a prominent indie press known for championing translation and diverse contemporary poetry and fiction.

Literature Review

The emergence of Dalit literature in Bengal has significantly expanded the scope of Indian literary studies by bringing the voices of historically marginalized communities into mainstream academic discussion. Within this growing body of literature, Niranjan Mandal occupies a distinctive position as a Dalit writer from the Sundarbans whose writings are deeply rooted in the lived experiences of the delta region. His children's narrative, *oh priest, give me the seeded banana!* presents childhood through the combined lenses of poverty, ecology, folk imagination, caste, language and cultural memory. Although independent scholarship on this text is still limited, existing studies on Bangla Dalit literature, Sundarbans culture, translation studies and children's

literature provide useful theoretical foundations for understanding the work. Dalit literature should be read as a literature of experience rather than merely a literature of protest. Their writings emphasize that language itself becomes a form of resistance because it preserves memories, oral traditions and everyday social realities ignored by dominant literary traditions. This perspective is particularly relevant to Mandal's work, where ordinary speech, local expressions and oral storytelling become literary devices that represent Dalit childhood in the Sundarbans.

One of the most remarkable features of *oh priest, give me the seeded banana!* is its use of the Sundarbans' regional speech, often described as the Delta Dalit dialect or *Sundari bhasha*. Instead of employing standard literary Bangla, Mandal deliberately incorporates local pronunciation, vocabulary, and idioms that reflect the identity of fishing, farming, and forest-dependent communities. Recent discussions on translating Sundarbans literature note that this regional language carries ecological and cultural meanings that cannot always be reproduced in English without explanatory notes or glossaries. Consequently, translation becomes an act of cultural negotiation rather than simple linguistic transfer.

From a linguistic perspective, the novel demonstrates what Mikhail Bakhtin describes as heteroglossia, where multiple social voices coexist within a single narrative. Children's conversations, elders' folk sayings, ritual language, and everyday village speech together create a polyphonic narrative.

"heteroglossia" [raznoreCie] is a master trope at the heart of all his other projects, more fundamental than other categories associated with his thought, such as "polyphony" or "carnivalization." Heteroglossia is Bakhtin's way of referring, in any utterance of any kind, to the peculiar interaction between the two fundamentals of all communication. On the one hand, a mode of transcription must, to do its work of separating texts, be a more or less fixed system. But these repeatable features, on the other hand, are in the power of the particular context in which the utterance is made; this context can refract, add to, or, in some cases, even subtract from the amount and meaning the utterance may be said to have when it is conceived only as a systematic manifestation independent of context. (xix)

Early Bengali literature on the Sundarbans primarily portrayed the region as an untamed frontier. Among the earliest and most influential texts is Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay's *Sundorbone Sat Batsar*, a classic work of children's literature that blends real environmental wonder with thrilling adventure. It follows the young protagonist Nilu into the dangerous, mangrove-filled delta of the Sundarbans, teaching young readers courage, geography, and a deep respect for the natural world rather than relying on empty fantasy. The author's detailed observations of flora, fauna, and local life turn the adventure narrative into an organic lesson in natural history. It is a masterclass in shaping young readers through the unadorned, majestic truth of the earth.

Another important strand of Sundarbans literature draws upon folk traditions. The anonymous *Bonbibi Johuranama*, published in numerous Bengali editions, remains

one of the foundational texts of Sundarbans culture. It narrates the legend of Bonbibi, the guardian deity of the forest, whose worship transcends Hindu–Muslim religious boundaries and symbolizes ecological balance and ethical coexistence. Post-Independence Bengali fiction shifted attention from mythic landscapes to the lived experiences of marginalized communities. Writers produced memorable stories, portraying honey collectors, woodcutters, and fishermen whose lives are shaped by tidal rivers, tiger attacks, the social consequences of environmental uncertainty, and chronic poverty. The postcolonial narratives reject romantic depictions of nature by presenting the Sundarbans as a contested social space where survival depends upon negotiation with both natural and political forces.

A significant development in recent decades has been the emergence of Dalit and subaltern voices. Niranjan Mondal's *Ujaan Bhatir Kathokata*, later translated by Sucheta Bhattacharya as *A Tale of High and Low Tides*, foregrounds caste, migration, labor, and environmental vulnerability, expanding the literary understanding of the Sundarbans beyond ecological description. The landmark anthology *Writings from the Sundarbans*, edited by Indranil Acharya and Sayantan Dasgupta, introduces international readers to literary traditions previously unavailable in English and demonstrates that Sundarbans literature constitutes a coherent body of writing rather than scattered regional narratives.

...the narratives successfully evoke the emotional vulnerability experienced by the people of the region while powerfully voicing the various issues that enunciate their subjugation. The demographic reality and the cultural appropriations can well be seen as a form of addressing the issues in the narratives chosen by the editors, displaying the lives of the dwellers fraught with perpetual threats, both natural as well as perpetuated by men. (Maiti, 196)

Another influential English work is Amitav Ghosh's *Jungle Nama*, an adaptation of the *Bonbibi* legend into illustrated verse. Although originally composed in English rather than translated from Bengali, the work reconnects traditional Sundarbans folklore with contemporary global concerns about climate change, biodiversity, and environmental ethics. Ghosh's adaptation demonstrates how indigenous ecological narratives can be reinterpreted for transnational audiences while retaining their ethical core.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* serves as the definitive contemporary literary representation of the Sundarbans, uniquely synthesizing ecocriticism, subaltern studies, and the fluid geography of the world's largest mangrove delta. In *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh constructs the Sundarbans not merely as a passive backdrop, but as an active, volatile protagonist. Through an ecocritical lens aligned with the blue humanities, the novel captures an environment dictated by extreme dualities: the life-giving pulse of the saline rivers and the catastrophic, ravenous force of the tides and cyclones. The shifting islands mirror the psychological and physical precariousness of existence in the delta, establishing a space where human agency is constantly humbled by ecological supremacy. The novel profoundly critiques elite, outsider-driven environmentalism by juxtaposing the marine biologist Piyali Roy against the illiterate

local fisherman Fokir. Piya initially embodies a Westernized, clinical conservation ethos that prioritizes endangered Irrawaddy dolphins over human livelihood. Invoking the 1979 Morichjhapi massacre and by weaving the tragic displacement of Dalit refugees from Bangladesh seeking sanctuary in the mangrove islands into the narrative fabric, the novel connects environmental geography with state-sponsored violence and marginalization. The landscape itself absorbs this trauma, functioning as a marginal space where the dispossessed struggle against both natural elements and political exclusion, cementing the text as a cornerstone of eco-subaltern literature.

Nevertheless, considerable research gaps remain. Many regional Bengali authors are still untranslated, comparative studies between Indian and Bangladeshi Sundarbans literature remain limited, and further work is needed on gender, oral traditions, translation, and climate fiction. Future scholarship addressing these areas will continue to deepen our understanding of one of South Asia's most distinctive ecological and literary landscapes. Dalit children's literature has emerged as an important area within Indian children's literature by challenging caste hierarchies and offering young readers narratives of dignity, equality, and social justice. Unlike conventional children's books that often erase caste realities, Dalit children's literature foregrounds the experiences of marginalized children, celebrates Ambedkarite values, and presents education as a means of emancipation. While Marathi and Tamil Dalit children's writing has received increasing scholarly attention, Bangla Dalit children's literature remains comparatively under-researched.

The roots of Bangla Dalit children's literature lie in the broader Bengali Dalit literary movement that developed during the late twentieth century. The representative texts have become valuable resources for young adult readers and educators interested in anti-caste pedagogy. Recent scholarship argues that Bengali Dalit literature should be viewed as a heterogeneous tradition whose themes of childhood, schooling, and identity are central to understanding Dalit literary consciousness. English Dalit children's literature has developed more visibly through illustrated biographies, picture books, and educational publications. Some of the most influential works are *Bhimrao Ambedkar: The Boy Who Asked Why*, which introduces young readers to Ambedkar's childhood and emphasizes questioning injustice through education; *I Will Save My Land*, depicting a marginalized child's struggle to protect land and community; and *Puu*, which narrates the everyday experiences of a Dalit child while challenging caste prejudice through empathy and resilience. These works deliberately replace stereotypical depictions of Dalits with empowered child protagonists who exercise agency and critical thinking.

Dalit Studies forms the ethical and political foundation of this research. Sharankumar Limbale writes,

Is it appropriate to expect pleasure or beauty instead of inspiration for social transformation from a literature that has been written primarily to raise awareness? Dalit writers believe that their literature should be analyzed from a sociological perspective focused on social values rather than on beauty. An

exclusive aesthetic consideration of Dalit literature will disregard the Dalit writer's fundamental role... (19)

Mandal's work similarly challenges caste hierarchy by presenting the voices and experiences of communities historically excluded from dominant literary traditions. The narrative remains hopeful because children continue to imagine, play and dream within difficult circumstances. Folk songs, oral tales, village games, and religious practices become important narrative elements that connect children with their community's collective memory. The Delta Dalit Dialect itself becomes a form of resistance against linguistic standardization. Translating Dalit literature therefore demands social responsibility because translation should preserve the dignity, agency, and cultural identity of marginalized communities instead of domesticating their experiences for mainstream readership.

Analysis

oh priest, give me the seeded banana! is much more than a children's story. It becomes a literary archive of Delta Dalit childhood where every dialogue, proverb, folk belief and local expression reflects the cultural memory of the Sundarbans. The story grows out of oral storytelling traditions, village conversations, local myths and everyday rituals. The narrative reflects the rhythm of *golpo bola*, evening courtyard storytelling, and collective memory. The symbolism of the *doyra kola* (seeded banana) deserves special attention. Within rural Bangla culture, the banana is associated with fertility, ritual, food, and agricultural life. Unlike the commercially cultivated seedless varieties, the seeded banana recalls older agricultural practices and indigenous biodiversity. In the narrative, however, it also becomes a metaphor for aspiration, dignity, memory, survival, resistance against cultural erasure and children's innocent desires. The title itself reflects the intersection of folk belief, material scarcity and cultural symbolism. Rather than presenting poverty through abstract ideas, the story uses familiar objects from everyday village life to communicate complex social realities. The translators of *oh priest, give me the seeded banana!* frequently preserve culturally significant words instead of replacing them with approximate English equivalents. This strategy allows the target reader to enter the Dalit world of the Delta rather than forcing the original narrative into familiar Western categories. The translation demonstrates Eugene Nida's principle of dynamic equivalence only where communicative clarity becomes necessary. Elsewhere, cultural fidelity receives greater importance than linguistic simplification.

For example, *thakur* is more than "priest" or "god". It carries meanings associated with caste authority, ritual power and village hierarchy. Similarly, *pujo* cannot simply become "worship" because it includes ritual performance, community gathering and local belief systems. The text also documents intangible cultural heritage including oral narratives, folk songs, agricultural knowledge and local religious practices. These traditions become educational resources for young readers.

*Thakur thakur doyra kola,
Thakur hante dukorbela;
Ore thakur phire aye,*

Chal kola bhog kage khay.

The above Bangla local rhyme from the source text, having the very title of the fiction in it, is a priceless documentation of childhood in the Delta, its authentic regional dialect and/or sociolect, and portrayal of caste discrimination in the said society. An English Translation of the above rhyme would be- *oh priest, give me the seeded banana!* It is afternoon time, and the priest is going. Oh priest, please come back; the crow will eat away your earned rice and banana, which were originally offered to God as *Prasad*. The relationship between source text and target text is dialogic rather than hierarchical. The target text introduces these elements into English literary space without completely assimilating them. The translation therefore performs what Homi K. Bhabha calls a "Third Space" where meanings are continuously negotiated between languages and cultures. Rather than reading English as superior, the translation allows Bangla cultural epistemology to reshape English itself. *oh priest, give me the seeded banana!* establishes Delta Dalit juvenile fiction as a significant literary category within Indian literature. The work successfully combines folk traditions, Dalit consciousness, ecological imagination and childhood experience. Its linguistic richness demonstrates that dialect is not merely a regional variation but a repository of history, identity and resistance.

Theoretical Framework

The present study examines *oh priest, give me the seeded banana!* by Niranjan Mandal through an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that combines Translation Studies, Ecocriticism, Childhood Studies, Dalit Studies among many. As a work of Folk Juvenile Fiction rooted in the Sundarbans, the text reflects the lived experiences of Dalit children through the close relationship between language, nature, culture, and everyday life. The study also investigates how the Delta Dalit Dialect functions as a carrier of identity and how translation negotiates the cultural and linguistic differences between the source text and the target text.

Translation Studies provides the primary framework for understanding how regional and culturally rich texts move across languages. Lawrence Venuti's theory of "foreignisation" is extremely significant in analyzing the translation of the novel. Venuti argues,

The notion of foreignization can alter the ways translations are read as well as produced because it assumes a concept of human subjectivity that is very different from the humanist assumptions underlying domestication. Neither the foreign writer nor the translator is conceived as the transcendental origin of the text, freely expressing an idea about human nature or communicating it in transparent language to a reader from a different culture. Rather, subjectivity is constituted by cultural and social determinations that are diverse and even conflicting, that mediate any language use, and that vary with every cultural formation and every historical moment. (24)

However, in translating Dalit literature, complete fluency may erase the cultural identity of the source text. Therefore, retaining selected Bangla words in italics allows readers of the target language to experience the linguistic and cultural uniqueness of

the Dalit community. In the English translation of Mandal's work, several Bangla expressions, kinship terms, and ritual references are retained, thereby maintaining the regional flavor of the Sundarbans. Such a translation strategy strengthens interaction between the source-text culture and the target-text culture without reducing local meanings.

Cultural Studies also provides an important framework. Raymond Williams defines culture as an entire way of life rather than simply artistic production. Mandal's work represents this broader understanding through descriptions of *pujo*, *village rituals*, *haat*, *bhati*, fishing practices, food habits, and oral beliefs. Such cultural practices construct children's identities and preserve community knowledge across generations. The Sundarbans represent a liminal geographical space where humans negotiate survival with rivers, tides, and forests. Consequently, cultural identity is always shaped by ecological uncertainty.

Ecocritical scholarship further enriches the reading of the text. Critic Cheryl Glotfelty argues that nature in literature should be understood not merely as background scenery but as an active force shaping human life. Nature becomes both a nurturing and threatening presence. This ecological relationship distinguishes Sundarbans literature from other regional writings because human survival constantly depends upon negotiation with the environment.

The study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment... human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it... literature does not float above the material world in some aesthetic ether, but, rather, plays a part in an immensely complex global system, in which energy, matter, and ideas interact. (xviii, xix).

In Mandal's narrative, rivers, mangrove forests, storms, mud paths, animals, and changing tides are active participants in children's lives. Nature shapes education, imagination, labor, and survival. The ecological setting is therefore not a background but an essential part of the narrative. Translating ecological vocabulary requires sensitivity because many local environmental terms have no direct equivalents in English. Retaining words like *char*, *baor*, or *khal* with contextual explanation preserves the ecological knowledge embedded in the source culture. The text also demonstrates eco-Dalit aesthetics where environmental degradation and caste oppression remain interconnected. Such representation expands traditional Dalit literary criticism beyond social realism towards ecological criticism.

The text may also be situated within the tradition of folk juvenile fiction. Peter Hunt argues that children's literature is never ideologically neutral because it reflects the values of society: "most adults, and almost certainly the vast majority in positions of power and influence, read children's books as children, and it is inconceivable that the ideologies permeating those books had no influence on their development." (1) To critically analyze the reflection of Peter Hunt's children's literature theory in Niranjana Mandal's fiction, *oh priest, give me the seeded banana!*, one must look through the lens of child-centrism and ideological interrogation. Hunt, a pioneering figure in children's

literature criticism, famously argued that children's literature is inherently political and defined by a distinct power dynamic between the adult author and the child reader. Mandal's fiction aligns closely with Hunt's philosophy by positioning Naran, a young protagonist from the rural Sundarbans delta, at the absolute emotional and experiential center of the narrative. Instead of filtering the harsh socio-ecological realities of the marshlands through an adult's sanitized or overly idealized perspective, the text honors the child's eye view. Naran processes complex communal struggles, natural topographies, and regional poverty organically, fulfilling Hunt's ideal of a text that treats the child's perspective as valid and authoritative.

From a literary analysis perspective, *oh priest, give me the seeded banana!* demonstrates that Folk Juvenile Fiction can preserve endangered dialects, document ecological knowledge, and represent Dalit childhood simultaneously. The novel illustrates how language functions as cultural memory, nature acts as a living classroom, and childhood becomes a site where identity is continuously negotiated. Translation serves as a bridge that carries these interconnected meanings across linguistic and cultural boundaries while respecting the uniqueness of the source text. Thus, the interdisciplinary framework of Translation Studies, Ecocriticism, Childhood Studies, and Dalit Studies provides a comprehensive method for analyzing Mandal's work. It highlights the intricate interactions between language, nature, culture, and childhood while emphasizing the importance of preserving the Delta Dalit Dialect and the cultural richness of the Sundarbans during translation.

Delta Dalit Folk Juvenile Fiction

Lawrence Buell observes, "The nonhuman environment is not merely a framing device but a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history (7). In Mandal's narrative, childhood grows alongside nature, making ecology an essential element of the genre. Buell offers a theoretical framework focused on American pastoral traditions, ecocentric ethics, and how literature represents non-human environments. In contrast, Mandal's *Oh Priest, Give Me The Seeded Banana!* presents a localized narrative of the Sundarbans delta, grounding ecocriticism in the lived, marginalized realities and rituals of rural life rather than Western literary theory. While Buell analyzes the abstract cultural imagination of nature, Mandal demonstrates how regional ecology and human survival intertwine in a specific delta landscape.

One of the defining characteristics of this genre is the use of the Delta Dalit Dialect. The language spoken by the characters reflects the everyday speech of Dalit communities in the Sundarbans. Local vocabulary, pronunciation, idioms, and expressions create authenticity and establish a strong sense of place. Folk expressions, ecological vocabulary, and caste-specific experiences must be carefully negotiated so that the translated text remains accessible while preserving its folk identity. From the perspective of Translation Studies, Delta Dalit Folk Juvenile Fiction presents unique challenges. From the perspective of Literary Analysis, the genre successfully integrates language, culture, ecology, and childhood into a unified narrative structure. Childhood becomes a space where cultural knowledge is transmitted through everyday experience rather than formal instruction. Consequently, the novel demonstrates that juvenile

literature can simultaneously entertain, educate, document, and resist cultural erasure. *oh priest, give me the seeded banana!* establishes Delta Dalit Folk Juvenile Fiction as a distinct literary genre that combines the ecological realities of the Sundarbans, Dalit social experience, folk traditions, children's perspectives, and regional language into a single narrative form.

Conclusion

Mandal's fiction in translation occupies an important place in contemporary Indian literature because it brings the voices of marginalized children to a wider readership. These works not only narrate the everyday experiences of Dalit children but also expose the social realities of caste discrimination, poverty, inequality, and exclusion. At the same time, they celebrate hope, courage, self-respect, and the desire for education and social justice. Through translation, such regional narratives cross linguistic boundaries and become accessible to readers from different cultural and academic backgrounds. The translator plays a vital role in ensuring that the voices of marginalized communities remain authentic and meaningful for a global audience. *oh priest, give me the seeded banana!* is a remarkable example of Delta Dalit children's literature in translation. The text presents the world of Dalit children with honesty, simplicity, and emotional depth. It highlights how caste practices influence children's lives from an early age and shape their understanding of society. The story effectively portrays the innocence of childhood while questioning the unjust social system that creates barriers based on caste. The symbolic image of the "seeded banana" represents unequal treatment and social discrimination, encouraging readers to reflect on the values of equality, dignity, and human rights.

Notes

Doyra kola – a traditional seeded variety of banana found in rural Bengal; culturally associated with local food practices and ritual symbolism.

Thakur – deity or priestly figure, depending on the local context.

Pujo – Hindu ritual worship performed at home or in the village.

Haat – periodic rural marketplace.

Bhati – low-lying tidal region of the delta.

Sundari – mangrove tree that gives the Sundarbans its name.

Bhasha – language or dialect.

Lokkotha – folk tale transmitted orally across generations.

Bonbibi – the guardian deity of the Sundarbans, worshipped by both Hindu and Muslim communities as a symbol of protection in the forest.

Char – a riverine sandbar or silt island formed by sediment deposition.

Baor – an oxbow lake created by a meandering river changing its course.

Khal – a natural or artificial canal, creek, or drainage channel

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