The Criterion: An International Journal in English
Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed Open Access e-Journal
(ISSN: 0976-8165) Vol. 17, Issue-V, October 2026
www.the-criterion.com

Samādhi, Human Hibernation, and Bengali Crime Fiction: The Strange Trajectory of an Ascetic Practice

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https://doi.org/10.66376/criterion.v17.n5.19

Abstract:

This paper examines the interrelation between the performative spectacle of hatha yogic *samādhi* in colonial India and its resonances within twentieth-century Bengali crime fiction. The survival of the hatha yogi Haridas after more than six weeks of interment in 1837 attracted widespread attention in England, with echoes discernible even in Stoker's *Dracula*. Colonial attempts to rationalise the spectacle led to its equation with human hibernation, a speculative and scientifically tenuous explanation. Curiously, this quasi-scientific interpretation of *samādhi* was later appropriated in twentieth-century Bengali crime fiction, where it served as a narrative device. Through close reading of selected texts, this paper reveals how ascetic practice, scientific discourse, and literary imagination converged through processes of cultural translation. The works examined are by the popular authors Panchkari Dey and Hemendra Kumar Roy. This study also illuminates the entangled history of colonial episteme and Bengali literary modernity.

Keywords: *samādhi*, human hibernation, Bengali crime fiction, Panchkari Dey, Hemendra Kumar Roy.

Article History: Submitted-30/08/2026, Revised-10/10/2026, Accepted-15/10/2026, Published-31/10/2026.

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Introduction:

In 1837, a *hatha* yogi named Haridas demonstrated his yogic prowess by remaining buried underground for more than six weeks straight. Almost a century later, around 1937, a Bengali crime novel for young adults portrayed criminals who hibernate for years to evade detection. The near-equal interval may appear uncanny, but the deeper question lies in the connections between these seemingly unrelated events. How did one phenomenon influence the other, and what cultural translations made such borrowings possible? This paper explores these questions.

The interrelation between the ascetic practices of *hatha* yogis, colonial scientific discourse, and literary imagination remains insufficiently explored. As a matter of fact, existing scholarship has examined Hindu ascetic practices in Western literary contexts only in fragments. Rianne Siebenga has analysed colonial representations of Hindu and Muslim ascetics in her article "Colonial India's 'Fanatical Fakirs' and their Popular Representations.", though without focusing on any specific practice (qtd. in Chakraborty, "Spike-lying" 207-208). Neil Macara Brown's article "Yogi in the Woods" demonstrates how Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Master of Ballantrae* (1889) was shaped by the celebrated 'live burial' of the *haṭha* yogi Haridas. Ayusman Chakraborty's studies of Western fictional representations of Hindu ascetic practices such as *ūrdhvabāhu* and spike-lying remain foundational. His more recent research on Haridas explores the interconnection between *haṭha* yogic *samādhi*, scientific discourse, and literary imagination, though with greater emphasis on Western interpretations of *samādhi* than on its literary resonances. In that same paper, Chakraborty shows how Stoker's *Dracula* alludes to Haridas - though that connection was presumably first noted by Leslie S. Klinger in his annotated edition of the novel (Stoker 245). Both Alistair Shearer and Mark Singleton have examined Western scientific discourse's engagement with *haṭha* yoga to some extent. Nevertheless, literary engagements with Hindu ascetic practices fall outside the scope of their studies. Significantly, all these works concentrate exclusively on Western constructions and

representations of Hindu asceticism. To my knowledge, representations of such practices in colonial and postcolonial Bengali literature have received little scholarly attention. In particular, the nexus of *samādhi*, scientific discourse, and Bengali crime fiction has not been studied. This paper addresses that lacuna, arguing that early twentieth-century Bengali crime fiction appropriated the colonial trope of 'human hibernation' (suspended animation) – a notion partly rooted in the erroneous conceptualisation of *samādhi* - and transformed it into an indigenous narrative strategy.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to define two of the key terms—*samādhi* and "human hibernation." *Samādhi* carries different connotations across philosophical schools. For the haṭha yogis, it denotes "a death-like trance in which the yogi is insensible to stimuli and even unaware of himself" (Mallinson and Singleton 323). In such a state, the practitioner is believed to become free from karmic bonds. The notion of "human hibernation" partly emerged from a misconceptualisation of *samādhi*. The basic idea was that certain human beings could enter a condition analogous to animal hibernation. While such states might be involuntary and pathologically induced, Indian yogis were thought capable of attaining them deliberately. A modern analogue to this conception is "suspended animation." Further elaboration on these concepts will follow in subsequent sections.

The paper begins by highlighting how Western observers sought to interpret Haridas' *samādhi* through the construction of a pseudo-scientific discourse on human hibernation. Attention is drawn to James Braid's 1850 monograph *Observations on Trance*, a pioneering contribution to this field. It then studies how the colonised Bengali intelligentsia conceptualized *haṭha* yoga, its practitioners, and *samādhi*, focusing on the writings of eminent figures such as Swami Vivekananda, Ramakrishna, S. C. Vasu, the physician N. C. Paul, and the novelist Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay. Particular attention is devoted to two Bengali works: Kaliprasanna Singha's *Hootum Pyanchar Naksha* (1861) and Mahendranath Datta's *Kalikatar*

Purātan Kahini O Prathā (1973)[1]. Finally, the analysis extends to relevant crime fictions by Panchkari Dey and Hemendra Kumar Roy. Close textual readings constitute the core methodology of this study, supplemented, where necessary, by theoretical insights that serve to clarify rather than determine the analysis.

From Hatha Yogi to Hibernating Criminal: The Origin of a Character Trope

How did *hatha yogic samādhi* come to be equated with human hibernation? To trace this development, we must examine the history of Western encounters with Indian austerities. The earliest recorded instance of such engagement occurred during Alexander's invasion of India, when Greek observers documented the practices of Indian ascetics. The Greeks called them *gymnosophists* or "naked philosophers" - *gymnos* meaning naked. Greek and Roman writers have left some "appreciative" accounts of the ascetics' self-mortifications (Oman 92 –93). However, these remain vague regarding their precise religious affiliations. The practitioners described could have been Hindus, Jains, or Buddhists (Chakraborty, "Awkward one-armed" 155). In the medieval period, the Venetian explorer Marco Polo (1254–1324) appears to have been the first European to record Indian ascetic practices in detail - including those of the yogis whom he called *ciuguis*. His descriptions emphasise their extraordinary longevity—claiming lifespans of 150 to 200 years—and their curious dietary regimens, which allegedly included sulphur and quicksilver (Polo 266). Particular attention is given to the yogis of Maabar (the Coromandel coast), apparently belonging to a Śaivite sect, who roamed unclothed and worshipped the ox, though Marco refrains from using sectarian terminology (266–268). Despite the detail of his observations, Marco fails to distinguish among Hindu sects. However, he does recognise yogis as a distinct class. His account, however, is not free from prejudice. He is dismissive of Hindu ascetic practices at times, reflecting the biases of a Christian observer confronting unfamiliar religious practices. Subsequent European reports amplified this aversion, increasingly portraying Hindu asceticism as excessive, irrational, or grotesque.

The seventeenth century witnessed a remarkable outpouring of European travel accounts on India. Many of these described Hindu yogic practices. Nevertheless, these writings were frequently marked by superficiality and misapprehension, reflecting the authors' limited knowledge of, or indifference toward, unfamiliar cultural traditions. A telling example may be found in Jean Baptiste Tavernier (1605–1689), who asserts that Indian ascetics trace their origin to Ravana who was forced into austerity after Lord Rama expelled him from his kingdom (197). This distortion of the popular *Ramayana* narrative shows that the author either did not know or cared little about Indian literature, culture and spirituality. Naturally, such writers emphasised the performative aspects of ascetic discipline, reducing practices to mere spectacles rather than engaging with their doctrinal or metaphysical foundations. One interesting aspect of these writings is that they did not distinguish between Hindu and Muslim ascetics in India, using the word *fakir* (from Arabic *faqīr*, denoting Islamic ascetics) to designate Indian ascetics in general (Singleton 36; Chakraborty, "Spike-lying" 206). Predictably, in such a discursive framework, any recognition of the diverse denominations within Hindu asceticism was entirely absent.

Incidentally, seventeenth-century travelogues also established discursive templates which continue to shape Western perceptions and representations of Hindu ascetics. Marco Polo's account, though marked by censure, was somewhat tempered by moments of admiration. However, from the seventeenth century onward, the tone of condemnation intensified. Within this context, several tropes emerged, three of which are, particularly relevant to the present discussion. These are: first, the ascetic as performer; second, the ascetic as immoral; and third, the ascetic as subhuman, even vegetative. These tropes need to be examined sequentially. For instance, Tavernier observes that wealthy Hindus - whom he disparagingly calls *idolaters* – invite ascetics into their homes and honour them "in proportion to their austerity" (197). His insinuation is clear; ascetic practices are spectacles staged for

amassing financial rewards. The trope of immorality is equally pronounced. Tavernier remarks that the itinerant life of these ascetics "afforded them all kinds of liberty" (196). He suggested that their nakedness facilitated seduction, leading women "to do what cannot be named for shame" (201–202). This motif of Hindu holy men corrupting female devotees gained wide circulation in the colonial period and continues to surface sporadically. Tavernier's contemporary François Bernier (1620–1688) echoes this charge, stating that "everybody knows what takes place between the sanctified visitors and the women of the house" (Bernier 239). Incidentally, Bernier, despite being more vitriolic in his attacks, distinguishes between yogis and fakirs, though he treats the *Jauguis* as a subclass of fakirs.

Finally, Bernier advances the third trope, portraying ascetics as being full of "brutality and ignorance," appearing "*vegetative* rather than rational beings" (236, emphasis mine). These three representational strands - ascetics as performers, as immoral beings, and as subhuman - proved remarkably durable. As subsequent discussion will demonstrate, they provided the conceptual framework through which colonial discourse came to interpret and evaluate *haṭha* yogis and their *samādhis*.

It needs to be noted that foreign observers had been recording accounts of *haṭha yogic samādhis* in their travelogues since the Middle Ages, though they framed these largely as spectacles and did not attempt to grasp their underlying rationale. Marco Polo himself did not mention such practices, but his near contemporary Ibn Battutah (1304 – 1368/69) did. Ibn Battutah states that Hindu yogis reportedly survived extended periods of burial without food and drink, sometimes for as long as an entire year (342). Tavernier too mentions witnessing a yogi undergoing *samādhi* at Surat. On that occasion, European spectators maintained strict surveillance to ensure the ascetic received no sustenance in secret. Although they found no fraud, the yogi endured only seven days, "because the heat stifled him on account of the lamp in the grave" (Tavernier 199–200). Tavernier's narrative illustrates the dual posture of

scepticism and wonder with which Europeans approached such phenomena. Reports of yogic *samādhis* continued to appear intermittently in European writings. By the colonial era, the practice acquired a new designation - "the live burial."

In 1837, a particularly striking demonstration of *samādhi* – then popularly described as "live burial" in the West - was performed by a *haṭha* yogi called Haridas at the court of the Sikh ruler Maharaja Ranjit Singh. According to contemporary accounts, he survived over six weeks of interment without food, water, or access to air, enclosed within a tied linen sack that was sealed inside a wooden box. The box itself was buried in a subterranean cell, secured by a locked room and guarded by Ranjit's soldiers. The event was witnessed by several European observers, among them the British political agent at Ranjit's court, Sir Claude Martine Wade. This was not the only occasion on which Haridas enacted his so-called "live burial." In another instance, a crop of barley was reportedly sown and harvested over his grave - an incident that is mentioned in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (Chakraborty, "Hatha Yoga" 44).

If earlier reports of yogic *samādhis* were already circulating in nineteenth-century Europe as noted, why did Haridas' "live burials" attain such extraordinary prominence - to the extent that Bram Stoker, as Chakraborty notes, invoked his performance of *samādhi* in *Dracula*? Several factors account for this. First, most earlier accounts—such as that of Tavernier—did not identify the ascetic by name. Haridas, by contrast, was explicitly named in multiple works, thereby securing his insertion into discourse, memory, and history. Indeed, as Chakraborty observes, "Haridas" may not have been his actual name at all ("Hatha Yoga" 45). Nevertheless, the very act of naming conferred a sense of reliability upon the reports, rendering them suitable for incorporation into scientific and scholarly discourses. Secondly, Haridas was among the first ascetics whose *samādhis* were examined by European doctors. In 1837, the Scottish surgeon Dr McGregor inspected his body. While McGregor did not believe in Haridas' powers, he was unable to explain away the feat convincingly. Even earlier, *The Calcutta*

Medical Journal had published an article in 1835 detailing his practices (Chakraborty, "Hatha Yoga" 46–47). The testimonies of European medical practitioners added a further layer of credibility to the reports, ensuring Haridas' prominence. Thirdly, several European observers recorded his feat in their writings - a rare distinction for any *haṭha* yogi of the period. The earliest reference appeared in *The Calcutta Medical Journal*, followed by Lt. Boileau's *Personal Narrative of a Tour through the Western States of Rajwara in 1835*[2] (Chakraborty, "Hatha Yoga" 47-48). Although Boileau did not supply a name, his contemporary Sir Claude Martine Wade identified the ascetic as Haridas—a proposition Chakraborty finds highly plausible ("Hatha Yoga" 48). In 1840, the British officer W. G. Osborne published *The Court and Camp of Runjeet Sing*. Though he attempted to expose Haridas as a fraud (170-175), Osborne inadvertently popularised his performance. Wade's testimony was later reproduced verbatim by James Braid in his 1850 book *Observations on Trance: or, Human Hibernation* (Braid, *Observations* 10–17). In 1851, the German edition of the Transylvanian surgeon Johann Martin Honigberger's memoir appeared, followed by its English translation in 1852 as *Thirty-Five Years in the East*. Although Honigberger himself did not witness Haridas's *samādhi*, while in India he met General Ventura who had. Honigberger recorded Ventura's testimony, which carried considerable weight (130-135). Collectively, these memoirs and testimonies ensured Haridas' wider renown in Europe than any of his contemporaries. Finally, James Braid's scientific discourse on trance and human hibernation secured Haridas a lasting place in history. It is to his works that we next turn.

James Braid (1795–1860), a surgeon by profession, was widely recognised as a distinguished figure within the scientific community of his times. He has secured his place in history by popularising the term *hypnotism*, coining the expression *neuro-hypnotism* to denote "nervous sleep" (Kravis 1193). It was in connection with his research on hypnotism that Braid became interested in *yogic samādhis*, though he never observed one in person, having never

visited India (Chakraborty, "Hatha Yoga" 55). As Bramwell notes, "Hypnotism, he thought, explained the prolonged trance of the fakirs" (96). Predictably, in reaching such a conclusion, he dismissed the yogis' own explanations with characteristic colonial haughtiness. Nevertheless, he was the first to insert *samādhi*—or "live burial," as he understood it—into scientific discourse, thereby treating it as more than a miracle or a trick. Since Haridas was already famous in Europe, it is unsurprising that Braid's attention was drawn to him. A significant portion of his monograph *Observations on Trance* discusses Haridas' *samādhi*. Even before that, he had referred to Haridas in an article entitled "Magic, Mesmerism, Hypnotism, &c., Historically and Physiologically Considered" published in *The Medical Times* in instalments in 1844-45 ("Magic, Mesmerism" no. 277: 318–320; "Magic, Mesmerism" no. 281: 399–400; "Magic, Mesmerism" no. 283: 439–441). Chakraborty has shown that interest in Haridas' *samādhis* was also fuelled by the pervasive fear of premature burial that haunted European minds during this period ("Hatha Yoga" 54–56). Haridas appeared to demonstrate that it was possible to enter a death-like trance, which Braid explained as 'self-hypnosis' (*Observations* 26). As Chakraborty observes, Braid's arguments rested entirely on conjectures ("Hatha Yoga" 55). Having never physically examined a *yogi*, his inferences were drawn from mere hearsay. More important for this paper, however, is the reiteration of several tropes—already detected and discussed—that recur in Braid's work. The first of these concerns the yogi as a performer. Braid's explanation of *samādhi* as "trance-induced human hibernation" effectively demystified and desacralized the practice (Braid, *Observations* 8; Chakraborty, "Hatha Yoga" 55). If it could be induced by hypnosis, then it was accessible to anyone and no longer a miracle. Stripped of its religious character, *samādhi* was transformed into a mere spectacle. Moreover, Braid extensively cited reports from observers such as Sir Charles Trevelyan and Lt. Boileau, who portrayed Haridas as a performer earning his livelihood by

travelling from one Indian court to another and displaying his skill (*Observations* 18, 20, 26). In this way, Braid's book reduced the *haṭha* yogis to mere performers.

Closely related to the first is the second trope—that of the ascetic as immoral. Notably, James Braid did not impute sexual misconduct to Haridas, even though accusations of immorality were a recurrent feature of colonial representations of Hindu ascetics. That was done instead by his contemporary Honigberger, who alleged that Ranjit Singh was compelled to banish Haridas from his dominion owing to complaints lodged against him and that he eloped with a "Katrany" (possibly Khatri) woman (132). However, while Braid did not level accusations of licentiousness, his narrative nevertheless insinuated that ascetics such as Haridas were performers masquerading as holy men. In effect, Braid's account implicitly cast Haridas—and *haṭha* yogis more broadly—as impostors or frauds. The third trope concerns the yogi as subhuman. This is where the blow to the prestige of the *haṭha* yogis was most severe. Braid explicitly equated yogic *samādhi* with animal hibernation (*Observations* 27), thereby reducing a complex spiritual practice to a zoological phenomenon. The idea that Hindu ascetics were somehow animal-like now received the sanction of scientific discourse, transforming opinion into accepted fact. He also likened it to catalepsy (*Observations* 28-29). Influenced by him, nineteenth- and twentieth-century medical discourses turned the *haṭha* yogi—or "Hindoo fakeer," as they were then called—into one who belonged to the same category as animals or infirm human beings. In effect, *haṭha* yogis were reclassified from revered ascetics to figures construed as subhuman.

Taken together, these three tropes generated an image that was altogether unflattering: that of an unscrupulous performer, skilled but devoid of higher human feelings, who could enter hibernation at will to cheat death and serve his or her nefarious purposes. As the earlier discussion has shown, Braid's insinuations of imposture, Honigberger's allegations of immorality, and the reduction of *samādhi* to hibernation collectively produced a discursive type

- the ascetic as performer, immoral, and subhuman. In this trajectory, the imputation of immorality gradually widened into the charge of criminality. European colonial discourse widely deployed this composite personality to categorise Hindu ascetics, but it also proved equally adaptable to literary contexts. The first literary work to employ this character trope appears to be Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Master of Ballantrae: A Winter's Tale* (1889). A detailed analysis of the novel is not necessary here; a focus on the character of James Durie, the eponymous Master of Ballantrae, will suffice. James is cast squarely in this personality type. He is a thoroughly unscrupulous man - a criminal who betrays his country, friends, and associates, including his father, fiancée, and younger brother. His skill at manipulating people makes him comparable to a performer, while his vengefulness towards his brother Henry, utter selfishness, and disregard for morality or propriety expose him as subhuman. Towards the end of the novel, James undergoes "live burial" with the help of his Indian servant Secundra Dass to escape the murderous intentions of his associates. As Neil Macara Brown has shown, Stevenson was indebted to accounts of Haridas' internment for this episode - perhaps to Osborne's *The Court and Camp of Runjeet Sing* (130). In the novel, Secundra Dass details the burial and revival process, which closely mirrors that of Haridas (Stevenson 328-331; Brown 127–130). Here, for the first time, we see *samādhi* or human hibernation explicitly linked to the activities of a criminal - a connection that, as we shall find, reappears in early twentieth-century Bengali crime fiction.

How Bengali Perception of Hatha Yoga Changed: The Case of the Yogi of Bhukailash

Before turning to the Bengali crime fictions, it is instructive to consider the intellectual climate in early twentieth century Bengal in relation to the perception of *hatha yoga* and its practitioners. The nineteenth and early twentieth-century Bengali intelligentsia, deeply conditioned by colonial discourses, inherited the Europeans' suspicion and distaste toward these ascetics. This climate of hostility shaped reformist projects such as those of Swami

Vivekananda (Narendranath Datta, 1863–1902), whose reconceptualisation of yoga was explicitly inimical to *haṭha* yogic practices (Singleton 4; Shearer 137). In his *Raja Yoga* (1896), for instance, he compared the *haṭha* yogi to a banyan tree—thereby echoing Bernier's trope of the yogi as a subhuman, vegetative creature. The relevant passage reads:

> Hatha Yoga … deals entirely with the physical body; the aim … is to make the physical body very strong … The result of this part of Yoga is to make men live long; health is the chief idea, the one goal of the Hatha Yogi … He lives long; a hundred years is nothing to him … A Banyan tree lives sometimes 5000 years, but it is a Banyan tree and nothing more. *So, if a man lives long, he is only a healthy animal*. (Vivekananda 24, emphasis mine).

Vivekananda's antipathy is often attributed to his formative exposure to Western education and rationalist critique. Much has been written on his reformulation of yoga. Less frequently examined, however, are the strictures of his master Ramakrishna (Gadadhar Chattopadhyay, 1836–1886) against *hatha* yoga. Despite his limited formal education and his reputation in the West as a traditionalist - owing to his devotion to Goddess Kali and participation in Tantric rituals - Ramakrishna also articulated reservations about *haṭha* yoga and its practitioners. For example, on one occasion he reflected:

> There are two kinds of Yoga: hatha yoga and raja yoga. The hatha yogi practices physical exercises. His goal is to acquire supernatural powers: longevity and the eight psychic powers. These are his aims. But the aim of raja yoga is the attainment of devotion, ecstatic love, knowledge and renunciation. Of these two, raja yoga is the better. (M 183)

On another occasion, he observed:

> The hatha yogis identify themselves with their bodies. They practice internal washing and similar disciplines, and devote themselves only to the care of the body. Their ideal is to increase longevity. They serve the body day and night. That is not good. (M 542)

While these pronouncements may be read as idiosyncratic, they arguably reflect a broader cultural prejudice against *haṭha* yogic disciplines, a prejudice that seems to have filtered down from colonial masters into the sensibilities of the colonised masses.

A telling instance of the colonised Bengalis' hostility towards *haṭha* yogis is furnished by Rai Bahadur Srisa Chandra Vasu (S. C. Vasu). A disciple of Haridas, Vasu was among the earliest translators of seminal *haṭha* yoga texts such as the *Śiva Saṃhitā* and the *Gheraṇḍa Saṃhitā*. And yet, as Singleton points out, Vasu expunged the dedication to his master Haridas, which appeared in his 1895 edition of the *Gheraṇḍa Saṃhitā*, from the revised 1915 edition (Singleton 47–48). This editorial omission, combined with Vasu's subsequent condemnation of the *haṭha* yogis and certain of their practices (Singleton 47), illustrates a discernible shift in Bengali attitude towards *haṭha* yoga, one that increasingly aligned with colonial denunciations of the tradition.

The paper ultimately turns to Kaliprasanna Singha's *Hootum Pyanchar Naksha* and Mahendranath Datta's *Kalikatar Purātan Kahini O Prathā* to examine how nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengali intelligentsia conceptualized *haṭha* yogic *samādhi*. The authors belonged to successive generations of the Bengali intelligentsia, Singha (ca.1840–1870) being the elder of the two. A student of the Hindu College (now Presidency University), he was deeply influenced by the rationalist and reformist ideals of the Bengal Renaissance. His *Hootum Pyanchar Naksha* - celebrated as a compendium of social sketches, often satirical and acerbic - includes a chapter devoted to the famous *haṭha* yogi of Bhukailash (Singha 55–57). The identity of this yogi and the precise date of his appearance remain uncertain. Published

first in 1861 - when Singha must have been twenty or twenty-one - the text notes that he was still a schoolboy when the yogi was discovered (Singha 55). From this, one may infer that the yogi was awakened from *samādhi* in the late 1850s – most likely 1859-1860 - when the author was still a teenager. Yet, Datta's testimony complicates this chronology. Born in 1868, he recalls hearing of the Bhukailash yogi during his childhood (43). This suggests that the ascetic lived from the 1850s until at least 1870–71, when Datta would have been old enough to take interest. However, Datta also records that the yogi died only a few days after being forcefully awakened from *samādhi* (44). This claim is anachronistic, for Singha's account of the awakening was published seven years before Datta's birth—implying instead that the yogi survived for eight or nine years after his emergence from *samādhi*. Despite these discrepancies, the accounts of these two authors converge on certain core details which may be summarised as follows. Bhukailash, an estate belonging to the Ghoshal family in Khidderpore, Kolkata, became the locus of widespread rumour sometime during the mid-nineteenth century. Contemporary accounts report that the landlords had discovered a *haṭha* yogi in *samādhi* within the estate grounds. The yogi appeared entirely insensible to external stimuli, exhibiting no need for sustenance in the form of food or drink. In their attempts to rouse him from his state of *samādhi*, the landlords resorted to various measures, including the infliction of physical pain. Nevertheless, the *haṭha* yogi remained wholly unperturbed, maintaining his absorption in *samādhi*. This condition persisted until a physician administered a pungent solution for him to inhale, which finally awakened him. The ascetic thereafter resumed an ordinary existence until his eventual demise.

Singha's narrative of the yogi of Bhukailash registers a perceptible shift in Bengali attitudes toward *haṭha* yogic *samādhi* by juxtaposing the credulous reverence of earlier generations with the scepticism of his contemporaries. The narrator recounts how his grandmother, upon hearing of the yogi of Bhukailash, dispatched a servant to collect the dust

of the ascetic's feet, to be enshrined in talismans as a safeguard against evil spirits (55-56). This gesture, grounded in a simple-minded faith in the yogi's omnipotence, epitomises the devotional disposition of the older generation. By contrast, his schoolmaster embodies the emerging rationalist scepticism. The master informed the young narrator that, upon awakening from *samādhi*, the yogi comported himself like any ordinary man, devoting his energies to pecuniary gain by dispensing religious consolation to the credulous (Singha 57). This anecdote thus dramatises a generational divide: the grandmother's uncritical veneration versus the master's disenchanted appraisal. One may also note that Singha invokes the trope of the *haṭha* yogi as fraud, thereby reinforcing the association of ascetic practices with deception and social deviance. His account thus situates the yogi within the discursive field where Hindu asceticism was construed as immoral or criminal.

A comparative reading of Kaliprasanna Singha's account of the *haṭha* yogi of Bhukailash alongside that of Mahendranath Datta discloses significant similarities, as well as differences, in interpretive stance. Mahendranath Datta (1869–1956), the younger brother of Swami Vivekananda, was a prolific writer. His fame, however, has long remained overshadowed by that of his siblings—Vivekananda, the celebrated spiritual reformer, and Bhupendranath Datta (1880–1961), the youngest, who embraced communism in marked contrast to his elder brothers. Mahendranath's intellectual orientation was broadly rationalist, though less uncompromising than the sceptical rigour of Kaliprasanna Singha. His writings reveal a willingness to admit the possibility of the miraculous, a concession arguably shaped by his reverence for Ramakrishna, the preceptor of his elder brother. His account of the *hatha* yogi reveals less scepticism than that of Singha. It is also more detailed, revealing how the ascetic was allegedly discovered in *samādhi* within a buried temple by labourers excavating the ground for the construction of the railway line from Kolkata to Port Canning (present-day Canning in South 24 Parganas, West Bengal). In describing the yogi's condition, Datta appears

to accept the marvellous: he notes that the ascetic remained without food and without the need to relieve himself, and was consequently venerated as a deity, with flames ceremonially waved before him in reverence (Datta 44). The allegation of fraudulence is also markedly absent from Datta's account. However, he tempers this credulity by reflecting that the stories narrated by elders may have been exaggerated, thereby juxtaposing the reverence of the older generation with the scepticism of the younger (Datta 44). In this, he follows the narrative stance of Singha. A further point of convergence between the two accounts lies in their medical framing of *samādhi*. Both authors note that English doctors could terminate the yogi's trance by administering a pungent solution (Singha 57; Datta 44). This seems to indirectly corroborate James Braid's theory equating yogic *samādhi* with cataleptic trance. In this respect, both Singha and Datta participate in the nineteenth-century discursive tendency to assimilate yogic austerities into categories of Western medical science, even as they diverge in their interpretive stance toward the miraculous – Singha foregrounding fraudulence and social deviance while Datta conceding the marvellous but tempering it with caution about exaggeration.

From the foregoing examination, it becomes evident that nineteenth- and twentieth-century colonised Bengalis had assimilated the three tropes previously identified: the *haṭha* yogi as subhuman, discernible in the writings of Vivekananda and Ramakrishna; the yogi as immoral deceiver, articulated by Kaliprasanna Singha; and the yogi as performer, a motif present in both Singha and Mahendranath Datta. Moreover, we have observed how *samādhi* was consistently interpreted according to a Western interpretive framework in Singha and Datta's works. Finally, attention must be directed to the contribution of N. C. Paul (Nobin Chandra Pal). A surgeon by profession, he authored *A Treatise on the Yoga Philosophy* in 1851.[3] In this text, he explicitly identified both yoga and *samādhi* as "human hibernation" (Chakraborty, "Hatha Yoga" 55). He also defined *samādhi* as the "last stage of self-trance" during which "the yogis, *like the bat, the hedgehog, the marmot, the hamster, and the*

dormouse, acquire the power of supporting the abstraction of atmospheric air, and the privation of food and drink" (Paul iv, emphasis mine). Paul's formulation is significant on two counts. First, it perpetuates the dehumanization of the *haṭha* yogi, thereby echoing the discursive strategies of both European colonizers and their Bengali interlocutors. Secondly, his book was published in 1851 - merely a year after James Braid's publication of *Observations on Trance* in 1850. This demonstrates the rapid transmission of Braid's ideas eastward and highlights their immediate influence upon colonial medical and intellectual discourse.

From an early stage in the evolution of the Bengali novel, yoga was imaginatively linked with hypnotism. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (1838–1894), one of the pioneering figures of Bengali fiction and the composer of the national song *Vande Mātaram*, provides a striking example of this association. In his novel *Chandrasekhar* (1875), a chapter is explicitly entitled "Yogbol na Psychic Force?", which can be translated as "the power of yoga or psychic force" (Chattopadhyay 209). In that chapter, the protagonist Chandrasekhar hypnotises his mentally unstable wife Saibalini under the guidance of his preceptor, the yogi Ramananda Swami (Chattopadhyay 209–215). The technique described—passing the hand over the patient's eyes and face—closely resembles the "hypnotic passes" familiar from contemporary European accounts of hypnotism. Nevertheless, Ramananda Swami interprets the act as an instance of transfer of yogic power, thereby revealing Bankim Chandra's tendency to conflate yoga with hypnotism - a conceptual overlap characteristic of his times. However, none of Bankim Chandra's novels describes a yogi in *samādhi*, nor does he mention "human hibernation". That motif of 'human hibernation' appears only later in the detective fiction of writers such as Dey and Roy, where it becomes central to the plot.

The Hibernating Criminal in Bengali Crime Fiction

Panchkari Dey (1873–1945), also spelt Panchkori Dey, occupies a formative place in the genealogy of Bengali detective fiction. As Kasturi Roy Chatterjee observes, "While Dey frequently drew inspiration from Western sources, he was instrumental in domesticating the genre, providing his stories with local settings and cultural nuances that resonated with a growing Bengali middle-class readership" (107). However, despite his pioneering role in adapting and indigenizing the conventions of detective narrative, Dey's literary reputation has suffered a gradual eclipse. The prominence of later figures in the field has consigned him to relative obscurity, and his works remain as yet underexplored. For instance, the eminent linguist Sukumar Sen devotes a mere three pages to Dey in his *Crime Kahinir Kalkranti* (181–183). Similarly, contemporary critic Pinaki Roy accords him only three pages of discussion (101-103). Such brevity of treatment underscores the marginalisation of Dey within the canon of Bengali detective fiction. A comprehensive catalogue of his works is still unavailable, thereby rendering any exhaustive study impossible. This paper therefore restricts itself to those texts that are currently available.

The first in order of importance is *Jibanmrita Rahasya* (*"*The Mystery of the Living-Dead*"*), originally published in 1903.[4] Dedicated to Rabindranath Tagore, it was published by Gurudas Chatterjee. In his original preface, Dey introduces it as being a "sensational novel" as well as a "hypnotic novel" – the first of its kind to be published in Bengali (*Jibanmrita* 5).[5] By "hypnotic novel," Dey appears to have meant that the narrative turns upon the theme of hypnotism, rather than implying any hypnotic effect upon its readers. The text also engages directly with the notion of human hibernation. The plot may be briefly outlined. The unscrupulous British physician Bentwood seeks to increase his fortune by marrying the wealthy heiress, Selina. He enters into rivalry with two Bengali cousins, Surendranath and Amarendranath, both of whom aspire to win Selina's affection. She, however, favours

Surendranath - a choice opposed by her mother, Mrs Marson, and her governess Julekha. Julekha, a Kharia tribal woman from the Chotanagpur plateau, is depicted as a witch skilled in hypnotism and the preparation of poisons and drugs. Bentwood, himself a seeker of occult knowledge, gains control over Julekha through his possession of the sacred totem-stone *tambaru*, allegedly revered by the Kharias. He employs Julekha to hypnotise Selina and compel her to stab Surendranath with a poison that induces hibernation or suspended animation. The victim appears lifeless in all external respects but may be revived with a special antidote. Bentwood's scheme is to blackmail Selina into marriage and subsequently restore Surendranath to life. His plan, however, is thwarted by the aged Rashbehari Datta, maternal uncle of Surendranath and Amarendranath, who exposes Bentwood as the would-be murderer. Confronted with failure, Bentwood abandons his designs upon Selina and revives Surendranath. Julekha absconds to Chotanagpur with the stolen *tambaru*, though it is later suggested that Bentwood kills her. Selina's engagement with Surendranath is broken, and she ultimately marries the steadfast Amarendranath. Surendranath, in turn, weds the Muslim heiress Amina, who had long been enamoured of him. The novel thus ends on a happy note.

A brief examination of the plot reveals that hypnotism and human hibernation constitute the twin foundations of the novel. Indeed, the very title, *Jibanmṛta Rahasya* ("The Mystery of the Living-Dead"), gestures toward the theme of human hibernation. Significantly, however, in this text hibernation is not achieved through yogic practice but induced by poison. It is thereby construed as a pathological condition rather than a self-willed trance. The conjunction of hypnotism and human hibernation within a single narrative strongly suggests Dey's engagement with contemporary colonial discourse on human hibernation. More importantly, the novel is accompanied by a short essay entitled "Hypnotism ki?" ("What is Hypnotism?"), appended as a postscript. As the title indicates, Dey undertakes to explain the phenomenon to his readers, explicitly equating hypnotism with the yogic force described in Indian texts. In

doing so, he invokes the episode from Bankim Chandra's *Chandrasekhar* discussed earlier ("Hypnotism" 2–4). He also refers to the celebrated interment of Haridas at Lahore for forty days ("Hypnotism" 8). These references underscore the novel's reliance upon the trope of human hibernation and its conceptual assimilation of *haṭha* yogic *samādhi*, though reimagined here not as trance but as a chemically induced comatose state. Equally noteworthy is the construction of Bentwood and Julekha, who embody the figure identified earlier: a skilled yet unscrupulous manipulator capable of defying or controlling death for nefarious ends. However, unlike the yogi who enters self-induced hibernation, Bentwood and his associate inflict suspended animation upon their victim, thereby transforming a practice associated with ascetic mastery into an instrument of coercion and crime.

Even before Bentwood and Julekha, Panchkari Dey had created another character of the same mould: the "superhumanly-powered *femme fatale* Jumelia", as Jess Nevins aptly calls her ("Women in pre-1947"). She appears in the novels *Mayabee*,[6] *Monorama* and *Mayabini*, as the arch-nemesis of detective Arindam Basu, and later, detective Debendra Bijoy Mitra. Jumelia is a striking creation of Dey. Scarcely any female character of such complexity had appeared in Bengali fiction before her. Not only a consummate actress capable of beguiling even the most astute opponent like Arindam with her charm and stratagems, she is also endowed with esoteric knowledge and almost occult wisdom. Though extraordinarily cunning, her complete absence of moral compunction renders her almost subhuman. Indeed, both protagonists and the omniscient narrator frequently describe her as a *piśācī* (ghoul) or *ḍākinī* (witch). Although she exhibits no extraordinary powers in *Mayabee*, Dey hints at her latent hypnotic abilities when she effortlessly seduces and subsequently murders the police constable Lankeshwar Singh. The description of the effect of her "electrifying gaze" on the hapless policeman is telling: "his legs trembled, chest began to heave, his vision was clouded, his ears drummed, and even the hair on his body stood erect" (Dey, *Mayabee* 150, translation mine).

The physiological detail parallels the symptoms of a subject under hypnotic trance. The full extent of Jumelia's powers is revealed in *Mayabini* - originally serialised under the title *Jumelia* in the periodical *Goyendar Greptar* (1897–98).[7] Here Debendra Bijoy discloses that Jumelia had feigned suicide in *Monorama*. Though buried under his own supervision, with the detective keeping vigil over her grave for an entire week, Jumelia escapes by performing a "live burial" trick. Strikingly, in explaining her revival, Debendra Bijoy does not invoke the precedent of *haṭha* yogis. Instead, he attributes the practice to Arabian fakirs (Dey, *Mayabini* 11)—even though such feats were not characteristic of Arabian ascetic traditions. He further rationalises the phenomenon through *dravyaguṇa*, or the "medicinal properties of matter," rather than through self-hypnosis or yogic discipline. One naturally wonders, why did Panchkari Dey ascribe the practice to Arabian fakirs rather than Indian yogis, especially given that he had written about the interment of Haridas elsewhere? One explanation might be that he sought to exonerate the yogis from association with a morally dubious character. More plausibly, however, he had Jumelia's Muslim identity in mind. It would have been implausible to portray a Muslim woman of that period as being an adept in a Hindu ascetic practice. By relocating the practice to an Islamic milieu, Dey thus preserved narrative realism. Whatever the case might be, Jumelia's powers extend beyond self-induced hibernation. She is also capable of imposing trance upon others. In *Mayabini*, she subjects Debendra Bijoy's wife Revathi to a death-like state in order to coerce the detective into living as her paramour for a year. Though Debendra Bijoy ultimately rescues his wife and compels Jumelia to commit suicide, she elicits his pity in her final moments. Jumelia thus epitomises the discursive type of the performer, criminal, and subhuman figure who manipulates death and trance to further her own nefarious ends.

Finally, one turns to Hemendra Kumar Roy's (1888 – 1963) works. The author, whose real name was Prasad Roy (Chakraborty, "Review" 412), occupies a distinctive position in the landscape of modern Bengali literature. A true polymath, he produced poetry, songs, prose,

and drama for both adult and juvenile readers. However, his reputation rests primarily on his contributions to children's literature. Although he remains comparatively neglected, his obscurity is less pronounced than that of Panchkari Dey.[8] Like Dey, Roy is remembered above all for his detective fiction; though in his case, it is for the works directed towards adolescent readers.

As a writer of adventure and detective fiction for adolescents, Hemendra Kumar Roy displayed a sustained interest in the possibilities of science fiction. In a recent study, Prodosh Bhattacharya offers a detailed account of the influence of H. G. Wells upon Roy's works (20, 136–139, 147–165). Bhattacharya (144) further notes Roy's preoccupation with themes of resurrection and medical rejuvenation, which constitute the central motifs of two detective narratives for young readers: *Jayantar Kirti* (Jayanta's Feat) and "Kacher Coffin" (The Glass Coffin). Of these, the former takes the form of a novel, while the latter is a short story. Both belong to the celebrated Jayanta–Manik series, featuring the detective Jayanta, his assistant Manik, and the police officer Sundar Babu.

Jayantar Kirti is the inaugural novel in which the detective Jayanta and his companion Manik make their first appearance. This novel turns upon the theme of "human hibernation", though this is not achieved through yoga, hypnotism, or esoteric medical knowledge, but rather through scientific discovery. In this novel, Bhabotosh Majumder, a brilliant yet renegade scientist, devises a method of inducing hibernation in human beings, during which the body ceases to age and youth may be indefinitely preserved. Instead of disclosing his invention to the world, Bhabotosh exploits it for criminal ends. He subjects escaped convicts - men condemned to execution - to hibernation, later reviving them to serve as accomplices in organised robberies. As Jayanta explains, this arrangement benefits both parties: the convicts evade death, police pursuit, and the ravages of time, while Bhabotosh secures the assistance of seasoned criminals whose periodic disappearance shields him from suspicion (H. Roy,

Jayantar 54). Clearly, Bhabotosh exemplifies the archetype identified in this paper - the cunning, morally degraded deceiver who arrogates to himself the power to cheat death. Significantly, hibernation in the novel is chemically induced, and in one of the chapters Jayanta delivers a long lecture on hibernation and reverse ageing (H. Roy, *Jayantar* 51 – 54). This lecture reveals Hemendra Kumar Roy's considerable familiarity with contemporary scientific discourse. Jayanta cites the rejuvenation therapy of Eugen Steinach, the anti-ageing experiments of Serge Voronoff, and the views of Alexis Carrel, Nobel laureate in physiology (1912), on human longevity. Strikingly, near the conclusion of his discourse, Jayanta invokes yogic *samādhi* to persuade the sceptical Sundar Babu. He expostulates:

> Why won't you believe? That human bodies remain undestroyed even where there is no sign of life, evidence exists to prove it. Have you heard about *samādhi*? The bodies of some yogis in *samādhi* have been buried underground even in our times. After nearly forty days, such a corpse-like body was exhumed, and life had returned to it afterwards. (H. Roy, *Jayantar* 53; translation mine).

Two points emerge clearly from Jayanta's words. First, Hemendra Kumar Roy unmistakably had Haridas in mind, since he alludes to a forty-day interment. Though he did not explicitly name the yogi anywhere in the novel, it was thus partly inspired by Haridas' celebrated "live burial". Second, by juxtaposing Steinach, Voronoff, Carrel, and *haṭha* yogis within a single lecture, Roy implicitly inserts yogic *samādhi* into the framework of contemporary scientific discourse. In doing so, he positions the ascetic practice alongside modern theories of rejuvenation and longevity. He thereby almost acts as the successor of Braid, extending a practice inaugurated by him. To the best of my knowledge, no other Bengali novelist prior to Roy had done something like this.

"Kacher Coffin" constitutes Hemendra Kumar Roy's subsequent exploration of the motif of "human hibernation." In this tale, Jayanta and Manik are summoned to investigate the mysterious disappearance of two septuagenarians—a gentleman and a lady—suspected to have been abducted by the physician Dr Monohor Mitra. The narrative ultimately discloses that Dr Mitra has devised a rejuvenation therapy, successfully restoring youth to the elderly couple. During the process of rejuvenation, the subjects enter a state of hibernation, and their bodies generate a glass like enclosure to protect them till they wake up. Unlike *Jayantar Kirti*, this work does not refer to yogic *samādhi*, though Roy carefully elaborates the scientific rationale underlying the rejuvenation process. The precise date of its publication remains uncertain, but it is certain that the story was composed well after *Jayantar Kirti*, in which Jayanta and Manik first appeared. Prodosh Bhattacharya notes that *Kacher Coffin* was written after India's independence (144). Chakraborty observes that by the mid-twentieth century the reputation of Haridas and other *haṭha* yogis had suffered considerable damage in the West, owing to the exposure of numerous impostors ("Hatha Yoga" 59). Even within India, contemporary intellectuals had begun to ignore such figures. It is perhaps for this reason that Roy refrains from invoking *samādhi* in "Kacher Coffin". His silence may reflect a broader cultural shift: whereas earlier Bengali fiction had appropriated yogic burial as a theme, by the post-independence period such references had lost credibility and were therefore omitted.

Conclusion

Nearly two centuries have elapsed since Haridas displayed his celebrated yogic *samādhi* at Ranjit Singh's court. Despite subsequent governmental prohibitions, such feats continue to be occasionally performed in contemporary India (Chakraborty, "Haṭha Yoga" 49) - even as modern medical science engages seriously with the phenomenon of suspended animation. However, the discursive connection between these two separate domains has largely receded from public memory. Literary texts, like those studied here, function as repositories of cultural

memory where the interconnection between these distinct areas lies embedded. For this reason, the study of such texts remains essential for understanding cultural connections of the past.

This paper also highlights the curious distortions that arise when cultural translation mediates meaning. A striking instance is the rendering of *samādhi* as "live burial." The words of Walter Benjamin are pertinent here: "the relationship between content and language is quite different in the original and the translation" (258). In seeking a linguistic analogue for *samādhi*, European translators coined "live burial"—a phrase devoid of the ascetic resonances embedded in the original. Detached from its Hindu religious framework, the term was quickly absorbed into Christian imaginaries of death and resurrection, thereby re-inscribing the practice within a theological structure familiar to Europeans. However, the semantic displacement did not end there. A pivotal moment came with James Braid's appropriation of "live burial" into medical discourse. He aligned it with phenomena such as hypnosis and catalepsy, making *samādhi* enter the domain of science for the first time - though only in its translated and re-signified avatar. Braid effectively transformed it into a pathological curiosity, making possible its subsequent insertion into literary discourse. Translation here functioned as an epistemic intervention, transforming indigenous practice into colonial knowledge. What, however, adds a further twist is the reappropriation of *samādhi* as a trope in colonial Bengali detective fiction. Mediated through colonial epistemology, *samādhi* became less a spiritual attainment than a device of mystery and rationalisation. This curious trajectory of *samādhi* – from ascetic practice to "live burial", from human hibernation to detective trope - exemplifies how colonial translation not only displaced meaning but also generated new discourses in which indigenous practices were reconstituted as objects of science, spectacle, and fiction.

It is necessary to end the paper with an acknowledgement of its limitations. This paper has confined itself to a selective analysis of exemplary texts. The nexus between *samādhi*, colonial epistemologies, and Bengali detective fiction has scarcely been examined prior to this.

A more comprehensive account of the topic must await future scholarship, which may extend the present inquiry into broader disciplinary frameworks.

Acknowledgement:

The author gratefully acknowledges indebtedness to Dr Kisalaya Jana, eminent Bengali novelist and Assistant Professor of Bengali, W.B.E.S., for drawing attention to the *haṭha* yogi of Bhukailash and to Mahendranath Datta's book. Likewise, gratitude is expressed to Mr Sambuddha Basu, Assistant Professor of English, W.B.E.S., for pointing out the references to *haṭha* yoga in Ramakrishna's teachings.

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[1] For this study, I use the 1975 edition of Datta's book.
[2] Published in 1837.
[3] For this study, I use the 1882 edition of the work.
[4] Sukumar Sen notes that the title of the novel was changed to *Selina Sundari* ("The Beautiful Selina") in its fifth edition, which was published in 1340 BS or 1933–34 CE (182).
[5] Surprisingly, Sukumar Sen asserts that the novel contains little of Western "occult spices" like hypnotism—a claim contradicted by the summary in this paper (182). He further contends that Doctor Bentwood serves as the detective (182), though the text clearly presents him as the chief conspirator, with Rashbehari Datta occupying the detective's role.
[6] The publication dates of *Mayabee* and *Monorama* remain indeterminate. Pinaki Roy only notes that they appeared "between the 1910s and 1920s", while Sukumar Sen erroneously assigns *Mayabee* to 1901 (P. Roy 102; Sen 182). This dating is untenable, since *Mayabini* (1899) explicitly references both *Monorama* and Phool Saheb, the mentor and lover of Jumelia, from *Mayabee* in its opening chapter (Dey, *Mayabini* 3–4) - thereby confirming that *Mayabee* and *Monorama* must have been composed and published prior to 1899.
[7] It was republished in book form in April–May 1899, under the revised title *Mayabini* (Sen 182).
[8] Sukumar Sen devotes only four pages to Hemendra Kumar, while Pinaki Roy restricts his discussion to a few brief paragraphs (Sen 187, 189–191; P. Roy 104–105). Nevertheless, other writers have occasionally turned their attention to Hemendra Kumar, with Prodosh Bhattacharya's monograph being perhaps the most recent contribution in this field.

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