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The Age of Bhadrakok: Bengal's Long Twentieth Century



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16 Phalgun 1424

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Spring Issue

The Age of Bhadrakalok: Bengal's Long Twentieth Century

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Editorial

We made the following statement in our call for papers, and as we publish this issue on Bengal's Long Twentieth Century, it is pertinent to look back:

Eric Hobsbawm named his study of the twentieth century history of the western world as the Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century. He defines the twentieth century as having been inaugurated with the beginning of the first world war in 1914, and to have lasted till the fall of Soviet Union in 1991. He also defines the nineteenth century as the long nineteenth century, lasting from 1789 to 1914, in his trilogy Age of Revolutions 1789-1848, Age of Capital 1848-1875 and Age of Empire 1875-1914.

*Applying the same logic, one can propose that the Bengali twentieth Century rather was a long century, and it has been **an age of intense movements in politics, literature, culture and society dominated by the towering presence of the Bengali bhadralok**. In Case of Bengal, applying Hobsbawm's paradigm, we can state that the twentieth century came to an end with the fall of CPIM led regime in 2011.*

And the beginning of this long twentieth century can loosely be traced back to the Hindu Mela in 1867, or the formation of Surendranath Banerjee's Bharat Sabha in 1876, while it can be definitively argued that the dawn of Bengali consciousness characterising the age of bhadralok was crystallised with the Bengali response to the anti-Ilbert bill movement launched by the white colonialists in 1883, which made the Bengalis aware of the power of organised movements and this was when Bengali babu (a comprador) was steadily transformed into the Bengali bhadralok (a

conscientious objector to British imperialism), armed with the writings of Bankim Chandra, the Ramakrishna Vivekananda movement, the intense intellectual and cultural ferment of Bengal Renaissance and Bengali Revival, and the spirit of nationalism.

The Bengali bhadralok started to assert himself and aimed for political power, and this is how the journey towards India's independence began. It later culminated in the British [counter-]agenda of partitioning Bengal in 1905 and the subsequent transfer of Capital from Kolkata to Delhi in 1911, a process that continued till the decimation of the bhadraloks took place.

Bengalis responded by fierce anti-colonialism. There was the rise of Ognijug, which was simultaneously accompanied by constitutional struggle of C R Das's Swarajya Party. The emergence of Subhash Bose, [followed by] the formation of Forward Bloc in the late 1930s was followed by the first appearance of communist party among educated Bengalis, greatly aided by the favourable reception of communist ideology among erstwhile nationalist revolutionaries. The great Calcutta Killing and Noakhali Genocide of 1946 ... followed by the partition of 1947 which brought tremendous human displacement in its wake. Then 1950s saw several waves of communist movements, while the intensification of communist movement was followed by the splits of 1960s, a decade that also saw the first United Front governments. During the 1950s and 1960s, the Bengalis of Assam suffered tremendous hardships. 1947 could be considered a watershed that earmarked the dissolution of Bengali power in India, which was followed by a series of unmitigated disasters. 1970s saw the Bangladesh war and the flow of refugees, emergency regime of Congress, formation of the first elected communist regime in Bengal. 1980s witnessed the overall stagnation of West Bengal and the beginning of Bengali decline. 1990s as a decade saw the emergence of Mamata Banerjee and Trinamool Congress which finally dislodged CPIM led left front regime in 2011 through a series of movements centred around Singur and Nandigram. The fall of CPIM can be considered to have concluded the age of Bhadralok.

The year 2011 can be considered to have brought Bengal's Long twentieth century to a close, given that what 1991 was to western history, 2011 is to our history. And though we primarily talk in terms of the political scenario, we cannot forget that these decades of the long twentieth century saw tremendous flourish in all segments of cultural life, earning Kolkata the sobriquet of the cultural capital of India. Bengali theatre and cinema during the long twentieth century made their marks, and so did Bengali literature and other art forms.

In conclusion, the call for papers summed up the outline of this issue as a desire to map *Bengal's cultural, political, social ... historical journey during this period. This period from 1867 to 2011 has seen the rise and fall of the Bengali bhadralok's power...*

The preparation for this issue was delayed owing to a number of unavoidable circumstances. We were supposed to publish it by the end of 2016 and we are publishing it finally in the beginning of 2018, which is a delay of more than one year. We regret the inconvenience caused to the readers, contributors and well-wishers of *Journal of Bengalis Studies* from all over the world. While we have been able to cover some of the crucial areas of Bengal's long twentieth century, we are aware of the areas which are left out, as this issue sees the light of the day. Nevertheless, this issue on the age of bhadralok, like all other issues of *Journal of Bengali Studies*, truly remains a *collector's item*, a rare compilation of contemporary studies on the long twentieth century of Bengal.

On the occasion of the publication of JBS Volume 6 No 1 on the theme of the **Age of Bhadrakok: Bengal's Long Twentieth Century** on this day of Dolpurnima, 16 Phalgun 1424, *Journal of Bengali Studies* renews its commitment to the development of Bengali nationalistic methodologies to study the history and culture of the Bengali people. Our editorial board and our contributors can be reached at shoptodina@gmail.com, editjbs@gmail.com and bengalistudies@gmail.com

Bankim and Rabindranath:

Dialectics in the Dawn of the Age of Bhadrakalok

Tamal Dasgupta

Abstract: This article speaks of certain landmark conflicts and clashes of ideas involving Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and Rabindranath Tagore, which shaped the trajectory of our history, marked the end of the Bengali Babu (also spelt as baboo) and marked the birth of the age of Bengali Bhadrakalok. This article revisits the respective legacies of Bankim and Rabindranath for Bengal's long twentieth century. This article will observe in Bankim and Rabindranath – in each of them – some defining moments of conflicts, which are rich sites of dialectics, and which, as this article will argue, facilitate a strange mutation of history and transform the obviously comprador motif of babu into an ambivalent figure of bhadrakalok. These conflicts come to shape the history of the age of Bengali bhadrakalok. We shall see how the cultural, political and historical dimensions of the bhadrakalok, and the forces of historical contradictions in the twentieth century Bengal were shaped by the respective strategies, positions and ideologies of these clashes, centrally involving two of the greatest cultural icons of modern Bengal, Bankim and Rabindranath, who very often were polar opposites in these significant clashes of ideas.

Keywords: Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Rabindranath Tagore, Bhadrakalok, Nationalism, Bishshomanob, Universal Human(ism), Bengali People, Bengali History and Culture in the Long

Twentieth Century.

A Note on Transliteration: In this article I have tried to adhere to transliterations which faithfully reproduce the sounds of Bengali words, unless a familiar transliteration rules out the possibility of such adherence, e.g. Rabindranath and not Robindronath, owing to reasons of familiarity. While a person (or entity, event, organ etc) not already very well-known in a certain spelling in English will have his or its name transliterated in the Bengali way (and not in the received Sanskrit way), the same person's surname might have been spelt traditionally, again owing to reason of familiarity, e.g. Chondi Choron Sen. On the vexed issue of a Bengali standard of transliteration (or the lack thereof), one can see my article "Spelling of Ognijug: A Case for a Bengali System of Transliteration" in the site of Journal of Bengali Studies, which I wrote as a response to the controversy arising out of our spelling, Ognijug (and not the Sanskrit Agniyuga or the hybrid Agnijug/Agniyug). Finally, let me express my regret at any inconsistency in transliteration which might persist in this article. My individual attempt is no compensation for the general lack of any Bengali standard of transliteration to this date.

A Note on the Scope of the Study: I have not been able to chronicle all the debates, arguments and conflicts which involved Bankim and Rabindranath, because that would require much larger space, and the study would assume encyclopedic proportions. So, I have tried to limit myself to some of those clashes which I consider to be **representative** conflicts. Further, compared to Bankim, Tagore is usually much more minutely documented in a plethora of studies undertaken by our scholars, and while Tagore's opponents have been generally unfavorably dealt with by our critics, commentators and cultural historians, the histories of such conflicts are nevertheless well preserved, something that we cannot always say about the life and times of Bankim. Let me reassert that this study is not a comprehensive documentation of all the clashes of ideas which concerned Bankim and Rabindranath. For example, one significant exclusion, owing to time-space constraint, which I regret, is that I have not dealt with Rabindranath's debate with Bipin Chandra Pal, who stood by

nationalism as a political ideology and criticized Tagore for what he perceived to be the escapism of a political self—development. As Bipin Pal during this conflict belonged firmly to the camp of C R Das, and I have dealt with other important members of that camp who clashed with Tagore, that probably compensates this exclusion, no doubt in a very insufficient manner though. Then, I have not been able to deal with Rabindranath's clash with Jadunath Sarkar, who criticized Tagore's workings in Visvabharati and Tagore responded with extreme aggressiveness to Jadunath's criticism, which remains one of the few instances when Rabindranath launched a vitriolic attack against his opponent publicly (Ghosh 1: 121-2). Tagore's inner-contradictions and his conflicts with the luminaries of his age are well documented by Nityopriyo Ghosh in his three-volume study, and that should be used for further reading by anyone who is interested in this matter. One major exclusion in case of Bankim (due to time-space constraint, again) is that I have not discussed Bankim's debate with Reverend W. Hastie, Principal of General Assemblies Institution. Hastie was a Christian missionary who attacked the idolatry of Hinduism following the newspaper report of a massive *shraddho* ceremony at Shovabajar Rajbari in 1882 which was attended by all sections of educated Bengali gentlemen, a fact that scandalized Hastie who then launched a vituperative against the importunate idolatry of western educated Bengalis. Hastie's article spoke of Hinduism as a "monstrous system" and its gods and goddesses as "personations of evil" and Hindu spirituality as "psychological conditions of disease"; Bankim, then serving as deputy magistrate in Cuttack produced his rejoinder under the pen name of Ram Chandra. Hastie responded back, and the debate was lengthy. Though Bankim wrote letters under a pen name, his authorship of these letters was not a secret, and later Rev K M Banerjee who entered that debate directly spoke of Ram Chandra as author of *Kapalkundala*. The debate was carried out in the *letters* section of *The Statesman*. Bankim's last letter in this debate did not use a pen name and was signed by himself (*Essays and Letters* xiv-xxii).

In discussing these conflicts, I shall not strictly stick to chronology, and will move to and fro,

because analogies inherent these battles and connecting patterns underlying these ideological clashes are far more interesting than any tedious categorization by dates. This article deals with **contemporary** clashes of ideas which involved Bankim and Rabindranath, and does not deal with any challenges posed to these icons by future writers.

One major reason why I feel the necessity of producing this article (apart from the willingness to revisit and re-interrogate the respective legacies of Bankim and Rabindranath) is that the very idea of clashes and conflicts becomes an anathema to bhadralok sensibility which generally wants to transcend all divisions which separate one set of humanity from another, and though that age is arguably over, we still are saddled with its characteristic prejudice which prohibits us about talking conflicts even when we are surrounded by them.

I own the sole responsibility of translations of Bengali sources into English.

The figure of the babu should not be simply dismissed as a mere collaborator of the British, as the babu was also a preparatory process of history that paved the way for Bengal Renaissance. David Kopf quotes from Bhabanicharan Bandyopadhyay to exhibit that the babu had some noteworthy qualities apart from being a mere pawn of the empire. While his western education aimed at dissociating him from his ancestral customs and his community, he was richly exposed to the intricacies of world history, politics, philosophy and literature. The babu had “modern, cultivated habits evidenced by his support of educational and cultural reforms. ... Because of his patronage of printed works, bookstores had multiplied in Calcutta” (213).

Against the Triumvirate: Bankim clashes with Brahma, Ancien Regime and Comprador

The babu was by no means the lone inhabitant of the colonial world, and he existed within an ecology of diverse interests. The westernized Brahmo existed by the side of Hindu ancien regime, for example. Such forces existed together in nineteenth century Bengal; they contributed to the perpetration of the empire and to the deferral of the rise of nationalist resistance. I shall proceed to discuss a set of minor and unrelated clashes that Bankim was involved in, with three minor and unrelated figures: three very minor figures who were fortunate enough to become the subject of Bankim's criticism, and they together constitute an interesting triumvirate, in my opinion. I propose to discuss these clashes briefly because these clashes and these figures have a *representative* quality. Together these three figures could almost constitute a three-headed hydra, albeit on a very miniscule level. Such a hydra ultimately nurtured the interests of empire and deferred the rise of Bengali nation-consciousness. Bankim's life-long project was national awakening of the Bengali people, so these clashes have an air of inevitability.

Minor and trivial in themselves, these three figures represent three important power centres of contemporary Kolkata.

1. Chondi Choron Sen, a Vaidya by caste and a justice in the colonial judicial system. We take him as a representative comprador.
2. Ramgoti Nyayrotno, a Brahmin by caste and a voice of Sanskritist conservatism. We take him as a representative of Hindu ancien regime during colonial times.
3. Koilash Chondro Singha, a Kayastha by caste, an employee of Jorasanko Tagores and a spokesperson of the Brahmos.

I shall start with Koilash. Bankim is known to be economical in his critiques. His critical economy straightaway called Koilash a servant of the Tagores of Jorasanko. Koilash indeed was a *Nayeb* or zamindar's deputy for the Jorasanko Tagores. Koilash was also the assistant secretary of *Aadi Brahmo Shomaj*. In that **truth** debate with Rabindranath, to the details of which we shall turn our

attention shortly – that direct battle which took place between Rabindranath and Bankim – Koilash was the first one to fire a salvo at Bankim (Tagore then followed suit, but more of that later).

Bankim is brief and devastating towards Koilash in his article “Aadi Brahmo Shomaj O Nobo Hindu Shomproday” (2: 764). Koilash’s name was known to Bankim, as he sporadically used to write against the Bankim in Brahmo periodicals. But the one which drew Bankim’s wrath was an article by Koilash in the Brahmo mouthpiece *Tottwobodhini* which alleged that Bankim was thieving (*toshkorbritti*) from the works of the likes of Bhau Daji, Mitra, Hunter and other researchers. Koilash decried Bankim’s supposed lack of originality and denounced his allegedly “blind” dependence on translations without any ability to go through the originals. Koilash also warned Bankim to refrain from mentorship (*Gurugiri korio na*). Bankim does not care to respond to these insulting charges coming from a nondescript Brahmo employee, but just scathingly calls Koilash a servant (*bhrityo*) and calls his language *nayebi* (nayeb-like). *Nayeb*s were a stock motif in popular literature culture as sycophants of their bosses and offensive to the common people.

The Brahmo panic at Bankim’s project of Hindu/Bengali nationalism was understandable and the eventual Brahmo decline is forewritten in this minor clash. Bankim would emerge victorious, and Hinduism will rapidly dethrone Brahmoism in the age of bhadralok.

Now, we come to Ramgoti Nyayrotno. He is taken to be an exemplary representative of the Sanskritist school of Bengali writing by Bankim in his article “Bangala Bhasha” (2: 322-3). Ramgoti was a crusader against the intrusion of colloquial in written script, and wants to banish the language of *Aalaler Ghorer Dulal* (the masterpiece by Peary Chand Mitra) from Bengali literature. Bankim examines Ramgoti’s own prose style used in that Sanskritist proposition, and observes that Ramgoti himself writes in colloquial language to reach the readers. Bankim further exposes the paradox of Ramgoti’s position that advocates prudery and wants to banish the colloquial on the pretext that the same is not suitable for discourse between the elder and the younger members of the family. Bankim lampoons this position by giving some imaginary examples of mother-child and

father-son conversations in chaste Sanskrit. That the linguistic ancien regime represented by the likes of Ramgoti wants to banish jolliness and mirth from the language of literature was obvious to Bankim, whose brief critique also mentions that Ramgoti's sole forte is Sanskrit, and though he is without any knowledge of western literature, he nevertheless tries to show some scholarliness in English which has the effect of creating unintended humour. Ramgoti wants "Bidyashagori Bangla" (Bengali of Vidyasagar, heavily laden with Sanskrit) and Bankim's act of taking a firm position against that language had a lasting effect on the medium of literature of the age of bhadralok (we shall come back to that ideological conflict between Bankim and Vidyasagr). Further, it had the effect of freeing Bengali from the clutches of Sanskritists, as in his article, Bankim mostly supports the position taken by Shyamacharan Gangopadhyay, whom Bankim takes as the representative of the Bengalist school (demanding greater closeness of Bengali literature to Bengali people's language of everyday use).

Now, the last man of the triumvirate, Chondi Choron Sen. Sen was a munsef of Krishnanagar, as Bankim tells us, and in a judgment Sen wrote that 99% of Hindu widows are unchaste (*oshoti*). Bankim was brief in his rejoinder (2: 769), and in his response he offers an anecdote. A guru came to the house of his disciple, who then got ready a curry of ten big koi fishes as a welcome lunch. Guru ended up eating all the nine fishes and the disciple was rather frustrated at this economy of leaving just one fish as proshad (the remnants of food served to the guru, known as proshad, is traditionally meant for consumption by the disciple). Bankim compares the economy of Chondi Choron's judgment with the anecdotal guru's gluttony and mocks the logic behind sparing the last one out of a hundred; Bankim advises Chondi to write a fresh judgment that would include the remaining one percent. Here Bankim's brief castigation of an Anglophile, Bengaliphobic member of colonial baboodom is memorable as a part of his strategy of attacking the comprador classes. It is this strategy of Bankim which was instrumental in the transformation of the baboo to bhadralok. The bhadralok will not hate his roots, but the babu often did.

While Bankim acted as the cultural and intellectual fountainhead for Ognijug and the revolutionary fervour of the age of bhadralok, Rabindranath Tagore could be seen behind the universalist turn of bhadralok and the subsequent dream of a world community, and such worldviews during twentieth century were the forte of left and liberal ideology.

Tagore was also the fountainhead of a significant trend in the age of bhadralok: a denial of the local and a desire to move to the universal. Whenever, for example, conflicts between Hindus and Muslims or between Bengalis and non-Bengalis took place in the twentieth century, there has been a marked bhadralok tendency to disregard such petty clashes. By aligning himself with the universal brotherhood of man, the bhadralok manages to escape his responsibility to stand by his community, his people. As a result, whenever Bengalis were at the receiving end, rarely a Bengali intellectual spoke up for his people, because he is primarily fueled by an anxious aspiration to claim the status of bishshomanob. Let us take an example.

Liberal Rabindranath versus the Partisans of Religion

Kolkata experienced a violent riot on 2 April 1926. At the end of the day, official estimate of death was 45, wounded 584. It all started when a Hindu religious procession was passing by a mosque in Jorasanko. In response to that event, Tagore wrote his famous poem “Dhormo Moho” (Illusion of Religion): *Dhormer beshe jaare moho eshe dhore/ Ondho she jon maare aar shudhu more...Je pujar bedi rokthe giyeche bheshe/Bhango bhango aaji bhango tare nihsheshe/Dhormokarar prachire bojro haano/E obhaga deshe jnaner aalok aano.* (roughly translated as: One who is grabbed by illusion in the guise of religion/That blind man only kills and gets killed.../The altar of worship that is flooded with blood/Break, break, break that today till it’s finished/Strike the walls of the prison of religion with thunder/Bring light of knowledge to this unfortunate land). Tagore also delivered a speech during this period where he made some interesting propositions: that religion is personal, and it should never be used as a public instrument, and it should never be used as the basis of

forming a community, and that religion needs to be countered with atheism. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya gives a detailed account of Tagore's response to the 1926 riots and tells us that this speech was never compiled in Tagore's collected works, probably because of that open advocacy of atheism to eradicate religion (*Shobhyotar Shorup* 73), which might have been an embarrassment for Brahma establishments. However, the poem quoted above indeed gives a similar kind of impression. The poet offers Enlightenment as a solution to the problem created by religious conflicts.

The nature of what Tagore proposed here was quite striking: he wanted to live in that futuristic utopia when Enlightenment has replaced religious clash, and he did not want to take any stand in the present, when he might have some obligation to speak out against the initial violence started by a particular party.

Here we may contrast that approach of Tagore with Satin Sen's Satyagraha movement in Potuakhali, Barisal, which experienced a communal clash of an exactly similar nature: Hindu procession passing by a mosque leading to unrest. Waiting for the dawn of enlightenment which will eventually banish religion from public life is a liberal's futuristic utopia that absolves him to take a side *in the present*, here and now. As opposed to that Tagorean approach, Satin Sen began a painstaking movement of Satyagraha demanding the right of the Hindus to carry out religious processions. Further, when Saraswati Pujo was being banished in some of the schools of Potuakhali, Satin Sen fought for the right to conduct worship of the Goddess of learning in the schools. Strikingly, Tagorean approach brings us to a very awkward moment when City College came to a standstill regarding Saraswati Pujo in 1928. Tagore, maintaining his Brahmoist, anti-idolatrous as well as pro-Enlightenment stand, was against Saraswati Pujo in the Rammohan Roy students' hostel

of City College, and Satin Sen, along with Subhash Bose during this period stood by the students.¹

Nityopriyo Ghosh also gives an account of this incident. When a fees boycott movement by students left City College financially vulnerable, Tagore sent one lakh rupees from the resources of

Visvabharati. He also denounced the ‘biased’ stand of politicians like Subhash Bose in this matter (1: 127). While Tagore himself was not always free from bias on most issues, he had a penchant to imagine himself to be above all petty strife while he perceived those who disagreed with him to be partisan. His own anti-Saraswati bias remains questionable, and perhaps his Shantiniketan, remaining true to his legacy, till date does not allow Saraswati pujo inside its campus.

Tagore’s approach had a long-term implication for the age of bhadralok. While his idea of an idol-free, religion-free utopia could never sufficiently dislocate the religious and cultural anchorings of the Bengali community which continued to celebrate Saraswati Pujo and other festivals, it indeed helped to subdue them to an extent where any partisan stand in response to an attack on the idols, culture or members of one’s community, an attack on religion and identity is deemed slightly embarrassing, if not outright offensive. The ethnic attacks on Bengali speaking Hindus in Assam or Bangladesh never elicited any substantial response from the bhadralok. Odia onslaught on Bengal’s history was likewise overlooked. What the bhadralok was supposed to do under such circumstances was to theorize the events to some universal import and suitably undermine any partisan membership of one’s own community. Such tendency might lead to the dissolution of a community, as common sense would say. Such a bhadralok tendency with Tagore at its source is not the result of any isolated stance of Tagore, but a consistent position which he often (though not always) maintained from his early career.

The Pratapaditya Debate: Rabindranath vs Sarala Debi

A striking feature of the impending clash of ideas which will shape the outlook of the impending age of bhadralok is that the two iconic thinkers of this age were writing two of their representative works simultaneously as the dawn of this age was looming large on the horizon. Bankim’s *Anandamath* was being serially published in *Bongodorshon* between 1287 and 1289 (Bengali Years), and during the same period Tagore’s *Bou Thakuranir Haat* was being published in *Bharoti*,

and then both the novels were issued in book format in January 1883, as Nepal Majumdar tells us (1: 62).

Nepal Majumdar throughout his multi-volume study of Tagore maintains an avowed Tagorean stance, and his criticism of Bankim is audibly loud: “Bankim already authored *Durgeshnandini* (1865), *Mrinalini* (1869), *Chandrashekhara* (1875), *Rajsingha* (1882) etc which are fundamentally nationalist and valorizing texts of historical romance. In literature that was an age of extreme nationalism” (1: 62). In the same vein, Majumdar declares: “In that age of pungent nationalism, instead of painting Pratapaditya as an ideal warrior hero Rabindranath painted him as cruel and malicious. ... Rabindranath was not possessed by the ghost of historical romance of warrior heroes. Rabindranath wanted to create a novel. He never fabricated history by colours of imagination and falsity to search for national valour, bravery, love for freedom and military superiority” (1: 63).

Tagore observes in his preface to his collected works: “The emotional flood of Swadeshi movement wanted to paint Pratapaditya as the ideal hero of Bengal, and that flood still has not receded. Whatever information I gathered from history about him gave me proofs that he was an unjust, tyrannical and cruel person, and though he had the inexperienced arrogance to disobey the God of Delhi (*Dillishwar*), he lacked power” (qtd. in Nepal Majumdar 1: 63). It is interesting to observe that Tagore diligently stuck to this agenda of demolishing Pratapaditya; after thirty years of publication of *Bou Thakuranir Haat*, wrote a play titled *Prayoshchitto* based on the same story.

However, Nepal Majumdar’s claim about Tagore’s strict observance of historicity (a claim Tagore himself made too, as we can see) lacks substance. Tagore’s statement that Pratapaditya was merely driven by inexperienced arrogance is severely ahistorical. Pratapaditya spent many years in the court of Akbar where he was kept as a collateral guarantee so that revenues would be sent to Fatepur Sikri by the kingdom of Jessore. It was in the Mughal court that Pratapaditya learnt the intrigues of the empire and learnt about many successful rebellions against Mughal authorities from different parts of India which inculcated in him a desire for freedom, as Satish Mitra’s book attests

at length. Pratapaditya was a crafty and able politician and was anything but inexperienced in the skills of warfare and administration.

Tagore comes from a clan of Bengali Brahmins called *Pirali*, some of the ancestors of whom were collaborators of the Muslim rulers in the medieval period and were converted to Islam. While in Bengali we have no synonym for the word comprador, *Pirali* could be a close equivalent. Tagore might have inherited a softness to foreign rulers, and his celebrated idea of *bishshomanob* might have stemmed from that *Pirali* inheritance, as we shall see later: imperialism loves *bishshomanob*. Tagore authors a celebrated poem about Shah Jahan where he paints the Mughal emperor as an ideal lover-poet, but in personal life Shah Jahan was not any less cruel or tyrannical compared to Pratapaditya. While the humble ruins of the empire of Jessore is no match for the grandeur of a Mughal Tajmahal, and Dillishwar has a mighty ring to it that Joshoreshwor utterly lacks, Tagore's hostile treatment of an indigenous Bengali fighter against Mughal supremacy leaves much to be desired.

However, so far as Rabindranath's claim of strict observance of historical accuracy in portraying Pratapaditya is concerned, it is saddled with problems, as we have already seen. While Tagore continues his Pratap-bashing in *Prayoshchitto*, his play of 1315 (Bengali Year), in that he adds a new element: a non-violent rebellion of the subjects against Pratapaditya led by a saintly character named Dhananjay Bairagi. This was Tagore's fabrication of history. It goes without saying that no such rebellion against Pratapaditya is historically known. Tagore's portrayal of Mughal collaborator Basanta Ray as a benign figure is sentimental and ahistorical, and Satish Chandra Mitra in his magnum opus *Jessore Khulnar Itihash* contends that Rabindranath's depiction of Jessore kingdom and Pratapaditya had serious historical anomalies (2: 722).

When Sarala Debi starts Pratapaditya festival in 1903, Tagore is reputed to have said: "Sarala is enthusing and stamping her feet about a murderer" (সরলা একজন খুনিনী ললাককক লইয়া মলাতলামলাত ও

দলাপলাদলাতপ কতরকতকছ). In her response, Sarala says that she is worshipping the valour of Pratapaditya. (Nepal Majumdar 1: 323). A detailed description of the Pratapaditya *utshob* (held on 1 Boishakh, the day of Pratapaditya's coronation) is recorded by Sarala in her autobiography *Jiboner Jhorapata* (121-2). Sarala is candid in her admission that it was a strategy arising out of necessity and quotes Bipin Pal who quipped: "As necessity is the mother of invention, Sarala Devi is the mother of Pratapaditya to meet the necessity of a hero for Bengal" (122). Sarala further writes that Tagore was "extremely angry" at Sarala for starting Pratapaditya festival that undid Tagore's depiction of Pratapaditya in *Bou Thakuranir Haat*, and to convey his anger, Tagore sent Dinesh Sen as an emissary to her. Sarala stood by her position. She was clear on this: Pratap was not a moral ideal, but a political ideal. In his declaration of independence, in his valour, Pratap was "politically great". Dinesh Sen never came back with Rabindranath's response to that position of Sarala (123).

However, that would not be the only instance when Tagore was displeased at Sarala. In certain respects, Sarala was one of the earliest legacy-bearers of Bankim Chandra in Bengali public life, and a clash with Rabindranath was bound to take place. Sarala laments in her autobiography that "there is no establishment to preserve an ever vigilant memory of Bankim in the minds of the Bengalis," while Tagore is propagated by VisvaBharati (41). She also responds to the **truth** debate between Bankim and Rabindranath in the beginning of *Jiboner Jhorapata* with clear sympathies for Bankim, granting only the benefit of a children-friendly ideal of morality to Tagore's position (that Tagore's moral position in favour of absolute truth was only suitable for children, and that it could not be a matter of ethics for grown-up people).

When Sarala registered her affinity for Hinduism, in spite of being a Brahmo herself, and attended the ritual of evening *Arati* at the Vishweshwar temple of Varanasi, Rabindranath Tagore was mortally wounded; he was agitated and angry, and asked Sarala: "This is how you indulge in idolatry? Indulge in falsehood?" (*Jiboner Jhorapata* 73).

At the time when Bankim was no more, and someone had to provide intellectual leadership to the

rising nationalist aspiration, Sarala boldly took on the mettle. It was a difficult task for her, because it meant that she had to face the personal wrath of the greatest living intellectual of her age, her own uncle, Rabindranath Tagore, but nonetheless, she did not step back. History might attest that Sarala's courage and her ability to challenge Rabindranath did not go in vain. The slogan Vande Mataram became the chant of revolution, thanks to Sarala's leadership. While Sarala was close to Vivekananda. She was also the first choice for Vivekananda to propagate the message of a resurgent Hinduism in India and abroad (when her parents did not agree, then Vivekananda went for sister Nivedita), as Sarala records with some details in her autobiography. Sarala's personal acquaintance with two of the greatest icons of Hindu revival, Bankim and Vivekananda, and the icon of Bengali liberalism, Rabindranath Tagore, places her in a very unique position.

Mousumi Biswas Dasgupta wrote in her review of Sarala's autobiography that Sarala was both the Maud Gonne and Joan of Arc of early Ognijug (154). While the subtextual irony of such an evaluation of Sarala cannot be missed (Maud was socialite and Joan was warrior; and these different qualities from different periods could not be conjoined without some irony of history), and that Sarala herself acknowledged the political nature of her project of inventing a hero, her role in this clash of ideas shaped the ethos of Ognijug and helped nurture a military spirit among Bengalis. Vande Mataram was a war cry, and the Pratapaditya debate shaped the moments of the birth of that war cry to some extent.

***Nyakami* and D L Roy's Farce: Tagoreans in Action**

In Bengali there is a word, *nyaka* which is an adjective; it signifies the quality of pretending. The word seems to have come from *neki*, which is virtue in Islamic parlance. It probably originated as a derision on someone who pretended to be virtuous. This word, *nyaka* and the noun formed by adding the suffix -mi to it, *nyakami*, together constitute a set of pejorative criticism of anything that

is not just pretension, but might also lack the manly qualities of straightforwardness, and might indulge into a sort of effeminate behavior. D L Roy considered Tagore and his brand of poetry to be *nyaka*.

This is one familiar objection against a type of modern poets and poetry that was repeated in the short story *Kochi Shongshod* by noted humorous writer Parashuram (Rajshekhar Basu), so D L Roy was not alone in considering a certain brand of contemporary poetry *nyaka*. While gender stereotypes offer a sense of comfort to patriarchy in general, and therefore a conservative panic at Tagore's supposed poetic *nyakami* might not have any sympathy from us today, we need to remember that Bengalis were long berated as non-martial and effeminate by the British, and that the nascent nationalist struggle wanted to challenge that stereotype. While we think of stereotype, let us remember that there are many stereotypes; the effeminate stereotype of the Bengali babu was an imperial construct, and Bengal's newfound valour in the Swadeshi era might have looked at the trend of Tagore's poetry with some amount of apprehension and disapproval. Because what patriotic writers like D L Roy perceived to be *nyakami* would precisely confirm the imperial stereotype of Bengalis as an unworthy and unmanly people lacking virility and only good enough to write meaningless gibberish passed as poetry.

As per the preface to the collected works of Dwijendra Lal Roy, *Anondo Biday* (Goodbye to Anondo) was the last farce that Dwijendra Lal Roy wrote and it is assigned to the date of 16 November 1912 (2: 28). However, Nityopriyo Ghosh tells us that it was originally written and published in the *Bongobashi* magazine in 1904 as a response to Tagore's *Kori O Komol*. It was eventually re-published in a revised format in November 1912, and was staged on 16 December 1912 (1: 50). This was considered to be a personal attack against Tagore, but D L Roy himself maintained that it was not a personal attack and was an attack against certain trends:

There is no personal attack in this small play. ... Feigning, precociousness and stupidity

(*nyakami*, *gyathami* and *bokami*) have been sufficiently ridiculed. If anyone has an inner inflammation (because of my play), he is responsible for that himself, not me. ... If a poet considers a type of poetry malevolent, it is his duty to whip such poetry and throw it out of the field of literature. Browning whipped the great poet Wordsworth once. (qtd. in preface to *Dwijendra Rochonaboli* 2: 28)

D L Roy castigates what he perceives to be a corrupting, lascivious and feigning trend in Bengali poetry indulging in mindless obfuscations. *Anondo Biday* still was felt to be a personal attack on Tagore, as Dwijendra Lal Roy publicly criticized Rabindranath on similar charges already. There were mainly two accusations: obscurity and lasciviousness; D L Roy said that vagueness is not depth, because even the water of a pit is usually opaque, and that Rabindranath's poetry had only the libido (*lalosha*) but not devotion (*bhokti*) of Vaisnava poetry (Ghosh 1: 51).

D L Roy castigated Rabindranath on these charges for the first time in his article "Kabyer Obhibyakti", and that in 1906, a caricature of Rabindranath's supposed effeminate style of recitation was performed at a meeting of D L Roy's *Purnima* Club (Ghosh 1: 46).

The followers of Tagore exacted revenge on the day of performance of *Anondo Biday*: "Tagore-admirers collectively went to Star theatre and sat strategically scattered in the auditorium, in the second scene Satyendranath Dutta threw his shoes at the stage, then the Tagoreans chased D L Roy himself and force-stopped the performance" (Ghosh 1: 51).

In his response, D L Roy claimed that the correctional criticism of his play of 1904 already showed its results and that Tagore's contemporary poetry was comparatively free from the excess of libido; further, he asked in agony: "Is Rabindranath God, and is any criticism of his books religiously proscribed?" (Ghosh 1: 50).

A familiar conservative position against effeminacy, the ideological stance of Roy against Tagore

is creatively expressed through a lampoon of lyrical love poetry in *Anondo Biday*. As a noted maker of heroic and patriotic drama, D L Roy probably considered it to be his poetic duty to purge elements which he considered undesirable in Bengali literature in that age of national awakening. However, the very preface to D L Roy's collected works bear the brunt of the lasting grudge of Tagoreans who dominate the Bengali scholastic industry; apart from very casual errors of factual details, the preface goes on to declare that *Anondo Biday* is unsuccessful as art, that there is no dramatic unity and inevitability in the play (though the preface writer does not make it clear what is meant by inevitability, *onibarjota*), that there is nothing noteworthy in the play barring a few comic songs and that it does not carry any new artistic promise in D L Roy's career; the preface mentions in a casual tone that the spectators of the play could not *tolerate* (italics mine) the personal attack (2: 29).

In the beginning of the play *Anondo Biday*, Anondo laments about his son Nepal who speaks in a nasal tone, keeps long hair, and maintains a melancholic gaze at the sky. He keeps poetic company, all of whom have the same features. Nepal plays flute and has a theatre group where he is planning to stage a play titled "Up-to-date Krishnaleela."

The charge of effeminacy was a haunting experience that the Bengali babu had to face. Bankim himself turned a crusader against effeminacy in "A Popular Literature for Bengal": "And it would be difficult to conceive a poem more typical than the *Gitagovinda* of the Bengali character as it had become after the iron heel of the Musalman tyrant had set its mark on the shoulders of the nation. From the beginning to the end it does not contain a single expression of manly feeling – of womanly feeling there is a great deal – or a single elevated sentiment" (*Essays and Letters* 17). His evaluation is questionable, but understandable in the context of his age. However, Bankim was not blind to the significance of the feminine principle, *prokriti*, as a scholar of Samkhya.

Coming back to *Anondo Biday*: it is called a parody: there is a musical play named *Nondo Biday* by Atul Krishna Mitra (1888) and this play by Roy is a parody of that play. Interestingly, nobody

considered it to be an attack on Atul Mitra, and though there is only one explicit mention of Rabindranath's name, along with other poets like Michael, Hem and Nabin (D L Roy 2: 537), which is by no means offensive, still there is absolute consensus among the contemporary and present day critics that the play is an attack on Tagore. If Tagore's poetry is not *nyaka*, which it is not indeed, barring some exceptions, then this play should not be considered to be a **personal** attack on Tagore. However, Tagore's admirers themselves might have responded to this play with a conviction that the play was a lampoon on them, and in this regard, D L Roy cleverly ended up proving his point: the poetry which he attacked to be full of pretension readily owned up the charge and since then got into a mode of counter-attack. The preface to D L Roy's collected works is marked by the same counter attack that continues till date: Roy is castigated in the preface of his own collected works by the preface writer.

Roy in his farce critiqued the vain and concocted expressions full of mindless abstraction in what he considered to be *nyaka* poetry. The counter-attack against Roy keeps on emphasizing that it was in fact a personal assassination of Tagore. This challenge that was posed to what D L Roy perceived to be decadence in poetry, was moral in nature, and perhaps not personal.

The sentimental individualism of Tagore's poetry eventually won, and the likes of D L Roy lost. The age of *bhadralok* had a lyrical, individual, non-narrative and non-heroic sensibility in poetry. Tagore's absolute dominance in poetry was the force behind that sensibility. Heroic and historical sensibility, which propelled D L Roy to attack the poetry of pretension, soon would become a thing of the past, but not before it would motivate Haraprasad Shastry to pass his dismissive remark on Tagore's *Gitanjali* to which we now turn our attention.

Chutki: Haraprasad Shastry Assails Tagore's Nobel Winning Gitanjali

There was some consternation when Tagore was awarded Nobel prize for the text *Gitanjali* and

Haraprasad Shastry remarked that it's a book of trivial sketches. The Bengali word that Haraprasad used in his presidential address in the *Bongiyo Sahityo Shommeloni* of 1321 (Bengali year) was *chutki* which variously means the snapping of fingers, comic sketches, and small pieces of anecdotes. This constituted a grave offence for the Tagore supporters, and Satyendranath Dutta, Tagore's loyal follower wrote a poem lampooning Haraprasad. The entire episode is noted in Sukumar Sen's introduction to the first volume of Haraprasad Shastry's collected works (19). While this episode of history itself is just a brief sketch, *chutki*, because no lengthy battle directly took place between Haraprasad and Rabindranath, but Haraprasad's historical imagination, which makes him the worthy disciple of Bankim's quest for a history of the Bengali people, was probably behind that remark. Ahistorical, individualistic lyricism of Tagore earned international accolade, but did not earn appreciation from the likes of Haraprasad who were searching for the roots of Bengali identity.

The Nationalism Debate

One of the first registered protests against Tagore's speeches on Nationalism, first in America and then in Japan (in 1916) came from Chittaranjan Das, and we shall presently come to that. It should be mentioned that Tagore's lecture on nationalism in Japan offended the Japanese people, and he was henceforth cold-shouldered by the Government and boycotted by the Japanese Press which denounced him as a "poet of a defeated nation" as Nepal Majumdar chronicles (1: 409). Not to be subdued by such adversity, Tagore went on to deliver his nationalism speeches in America where he declared that "nationalism is a great menace", and air was rife with rumours that the members of the Hindustan Gadar Party based in America would assassinate the poet for betraying the Indian struggle for independence, as Nepal Majumdar records. (1: 413)

Nepal Majumdar, in spite of being the avowed Tagorean that he is, correctly observes that Tagore's critique of nationalism is as widely off the mark as possible. For example, it is capitalism and not nationalism which should have been at the centre of Tagore's vitriolic attack when he says:

“the living bonds of society are breaking up, and giving place to merely mechanical organization ... man is driven to professionalism for producing wealth” (1: 418). Further, in the same vein, Tagore’s statements criticize imperialism, but he tries to pass it off as a critique of nationalism. Throughout his nationalism treatise, we find that Tagore tries to proceed in an unscientific and sentimental manner. Nepal Majumdar comments:

Tagore was not habituated in thinking along the lines of modern social science and politico-economical perspectives... while he is out there to attack capitalism and imperialism, he ends up claiming that nationalism is at the root of all evil. ... Rabindranath did not properly realize the progressive role played by nationalism in the anti-imperialistic struggle in the colonized countries including some of the European countries” (1: 420-1).

In his enthusiasm to criticize nationalism, Tagore even announced that it was also responsible for the growing separation between man and woman: “It is owing to this that war has been declared between man and woman, because the natural thread is snapping which holds them together in harmony; because man is driven to professionalism producing wealth for himself ... leaving woman alone to wither and to die or to fight her own battle unaided” (qtd. in Nepal Majumdar 1: 418). In this slightly eccentric way, Tagore could have blamed nationalism for cancer, diabetes and asthma as well; the sinking of Titanic and the growing number of road accidents and the air pollution in the industrialized cities – they all could be attributed to nationalism, if we extend Tagore’s whimsical logic.

In the present researcher’s opinion, Tagore’s identification of nationalism with capitalism and imperialism is question-begging to say the least, and is not fit to be considered as social science or philosophy. However, Tagore’s *Nationalism* still remains a guiding light of liberal spirit among Bengalis and Indians. One of the most oft-quoted works of Tagore, *Nationalism* has been repeatedly used as the ultimate and final word on this subject. That the age of bhadrakal could be successfully

weaned from revolutionary nationalism and brought to communist internationalism could be argued to be a result of Tagore's relentless onslaught on nationalism. It might not be a mere coincidence that in Lenin's library, Tagore's *Nationalism* in German and Russian translation was available, with some passages personally underlined by Lenin (Nepal Majumdar 1: 422).

Chittaranjan Das in his speech titled "Bangalar Kotha" registered his protest against Tagore:

In Europe, some scholars supposedly have decided that the Nation-idea is completely imaginary and its foundation lacks any substance. A specific nation has no independent value. ... To nurture a sense of nationality is to increase the clash between nations which will harm mankind. This is an old theory, but currently it is being propagated anew, so a few pundits in our country have grabbed that theory and are trying to laugh away our nascent nationalist aspirations. This theory coming from Europe was disproved by great scholars of Europe in the past, and I hope they will do the same this time. They will solve their own problems. But the sand is hotter than the sun. These fake pundits in our country have so much of scholarship that their propositions can never be disproved. So much so, that the Rabindranath who prayed to God for the soil and water of Bengal to be made true during the Swadeshi movement, that Rabindranath is now Sir Rabindranath – this time in America has stood by that theory with a lot of gusto. His complete speech has not been published in any paper. So, we could not read that, but in *Modern Review* some of the excerpts were quoted, and we have read that, and may be we are under a wrong impression for not having access to the whole, but whatever has been published, that proposition, in this case, in my opinion, from this position of this great assembly of the Bengali nation should be opposed.

This proposition is fully based on the immaterial shadow of the *bishshomanob* (universal human). In order to raise a true sense of fraternity in humankind, all different nations must be developed. Prior to that, this idea of fraternity is fanciful imagination. If you abolish

nations, where does the *bishshomanob* stand? (20-21)

C R Das in his presidential speech to the Gaya Congress again spoke about the same idea of nationalism as an indispensable step towards universal humanity:

Now what is Nationalism? It is, as I conceive, a process through which a nation expresses itself and finds itself, not in isolation from other nations, not in opposition to other nations, but as part of a great scheme ... I contend that each nationality constitutes a particular stream of the great unity, but no nation can fulfil itself unless and until it becomes itself and at the same time realize its identity with humanity” (qtd. in Nepal Majumdar 2: 161)

While C R Das repeatedly evokes the necessity of the flourish of all nations as a pre-requisite for universal humanity, he does not state the obvious (apart from dropping a mild hint, when he says *Sir Rabindranath*); that such idea of universal human will only help the empire and will further debilitate the colonized Bengali people.

A Marxist perspective on the debate between universalism and nationalism is offered by Terry Eagleton, which similarly manages to reconcile nationalism with the eventual objective of universal humanism, taking cue from the Marxist idea of class struggle eventually paving the way for a classless society. But in addition, it adds a cautionary note that any premature abandonment of nationalism will make one’s nation vulnerable to oppression by other nations.

“Nationalism,” remarks an African character in Raymond Williams’s novel *Second*

Generation (London 1964), “is in this sense like class. To have it, and to feel it, is the only

way to end it. If you fail to claim it, or give it up too soon, you will merely be cheated, by other classes and other nations.” Nationalism, like class, would thus seem to involve an impossible irony. It is sometimes forgotten that social class, for Karl Marx at least, is itself a form of alienation, canceling the particularity of an individual life into collective anonymity. Where Marx differs from the commonplace liberal view of such matters is in his belief that to undo this alienation you had to go, not around class, but somehow all the way through it and out the other side. To wish class or nation away, to seek to live sheer irreducible difference *now* in the manner of some contemporary post-structuralist theory, is to play straight into the hands of the oppressor. (23)

In Ireland too, the empire promoted universalism. In his study on Irish cultural history, *Crazy John and the Bishop and Other Essays on Irish Culture*, Eagleton mocks the colonized subject who attempts to sublimate his concrete humiliation within the empire into the abstraction of universal humanism: “If you are a second class subject in Britain, you can always compensate by becoming a citizen of the world, which is a grand way of being a citizen of nowhere” (104). In fact, it has been observed that all empires since antiquity have promoted universal humanism. Tagore’s *bishshomanob* is thoroughly fit to be an imperial construct. Steven Grosby observes: “Furthermore, throughout history, empires, such as the Roman and Ottoman, have sought to unify their people as a political alternative to nations. Thus, while an individual often understands himself or herself as a member of a particular nation, one may also recognize oneself as a part of humanity” (4).

One major charge that Tagore repeatedly brings against nationalism is that it is a foreign import, that it does not belong to India, that the word or the concept has no equivalence in our languages, and that our history, religion, ethics, society, home – they do **not** accept the dominance of nation-making (Nepal Majumdar 1: 196). C R Das responds:

Some are saying that it is improper for us to take any pride in nationalism. Because this idea of nation is completely an import from the West. ... the eternal relation of a certain country with its countrymen, only on that foundation the nation can be established, the relation which is eternal and will be forever, it's just that so far, our attention was not drawn to that. May be in our civilization and in our flourish no specific name was given to this relation. It may also be that if Europe's civilization and flourish, their education and initiation, their science and history did not come upon our heads so rapidly, we would not have been conscious so early and easily – but does that mean what is our own, what belongs to our country, what is attached in every particle of Bengal's soil and water, we shall call that a western import and insult the entire Bengali nation? (24)

Tagore's universalist position disregards the local, and in many respects. While he dismisses the nation in favour of the *bishshomanob*, he also dismisses the local possibilities of exceptions to his universalizing theory. The imposition of the universal and the dismissal of the local, the celebration of the eternal and disregard of the historical, the denunciation of the relative and an upholding of the absolute, the denial of the concrete and a faith in the ideal – these are repeated motifs in Tagore (though it would constitute a familiarly Tagorean injustice if we universalize Tagore in this manner; let us acknowledge that he sometimes took the other side too). Such a trend was visible in the early career of Tagore. We shall now turn our attention to a very important clash of ideas, what I call the **truth** debate.

The Truth Debate: A Direct Battle That Bankim and Rabindranath Fought with Each Other

Bankim in his article “Aadi Brahmo Shomaj O ‘Nobo Hindu Shomproday’ ” (published in *Prochar* Ogrohayon 1291) responded to an invective of Rabindranath Tagore directed at Bankim that was

first given as speech in an Aadi Brahmo Shomaj meeting, and published in the Brahmo mouthpiece, *Bharoti*. The issue of contention was centred on Bankim's statement that truth is relative and not absolute, and that virtue lies not in external propriety but the intention behind an action. Bankim was founding an ethical ideal in Krishna, and came up with some interesting instances where the person strictly speaking the truth or strictly adhering to codes of religious rituals can actually be harmful while a person who utters a lie for saving a life or saving a situation, or who casually violates the ritualistic codes, is actually virtuous. Bankim might or might not have the Brahmo cult and fan-following for absolute truth in his mind. As an emergent Hinduism needed to uphold its Puranic ideals, so mercilessly dismissed by a semi-Abrahamic Brahmo cult of monotheism/monism, Bankim probably had that Brahmo cult of truth in his mind when he was offering an alternative idea.

He might have the same motive when he was establishing the dualism of Samkhya at the root of Hinduism, while the Brahmos celebrated the non-dualism of Vedas. It might have been a veiled challenge to the Brahmo cult of truth, when Bankim charted his discourse about the relativity of truth, but we cannot be certain about that.

Certainly the Brahmo leadership was apprehensive about Bankim's agenda of Hindu revivalism in *Krishnacharitra*, and the attack on Bankim carried out by Tagore takes place within that context of anxiety. Bankim comes across as someone remarkably free from dogma in this entire debate. Bankim aims at ethical and moral codes which are both compassionate and pragmatic, not impersonal and idealistic. Bankim emerges victorious out of this battle of ideas. The Brahmo side is not known to have been able to have responded properly to Bankim's arguments.

Here Bankim comes across as a leader of Hindu revival, and Rabindranath Tagore in this argument is the cogent face of Brahmo reaction following a volley of personal attacks hurled at Bankim by Koilash Singha, an agent of Thakurbari (the Tagore house, the supreme family of Aadi Brahmo Shomaj). Bankim's article repeatedly refers to the cordial relationship that he shares with

the young Tagore, and does not reveal any great sense of injury following Tagore's attacks. In the beginning of his article, Bankim says that he has been subject to such attacks even before Rabindranath Tagore learnt how to read and write, and that he is no longer agitated by such personal onslaughts.

While this battle of ideas in itself might not have any great significance beyond the immediate moment of challenge posed by an emergent Hinduism (as Bankim was evoking the ancient Indian idea of *Satya* that is closer to the archaic English word truth, and not the limited, restricted and narrow concept of truth) to the Brahma hegemony, it is nevertheless imperative for us to note that that it creates a template for the age of bhadrakal. Less abstract and more sensual, less impersonal and more compassionate, less idealistic and more pragmatic, less universal and more historical – this template probably was too close to perfection to be followed. Power relations within a society will always dictate ideological terms, and Bankim does expect too much from human agents who are not sovereign authors of their action. Bankim's article indeed suggests that Tagore was merely acting as a mouthpiece of Brahmos in this debate. Sarala Debi thinks otherwise though; she says Tagore's elder brothers Dwijendranath and Jyotirindranath were opposed to him in this issue and had sympathies with Bankim (41); nevertheless, a sizable section of Brahmos believed in the cult of absolute truth, it cannot be denied.

It can be argued that the Brahma cult of truth had a certain Anglocentric Protestant ethos at its kernel (at least the similarities are striking). Bankim observes that there is just a lip service to truth while the heart is full of untruth in this western cult imported from England. While the verbal "lie direct" is objected to, but a sea-load of sins are allowed within this western paradigm. Brahma cult of truth at the end of the day was a colonial idealism.

Tagore's vociferous opposition to nationalism, we have already seen, had the same impersonal, ahistorical, universalist, idealist dogma which he first exhibited in this debate with Bankim. In the nationalism debate too, just like in this truth debate, Tagore acts as a mouthpiece of liberal

intelligentsia which was panic-stricken at the rise of revolutionary and violent nationalism in Bengal. The age of *bhadralok* eventually had to abandon the nationalist template offered by Bankim, and gradually came to be dominated by the idealist template offered by Tagore.

Tagore vs Sharatchandra: The Anti-Colonial Debate

This constitutes a matter of common knowledge in Bengali literary history that *Pother Dabi* became a bone of contention between Sharatchandra and Rabindranath after it was banned by the British government (Tagore refused to condemn the banning and considered the British regime to be quite liberal in allowing voices of dissidences to be heard; Shishir Kar chronicles in details). But before venturing into that, we should briefly discuss about the antecedents and aftermath of the publication of *Pother Dabi*, though not necessarily in that order.

Gopalchandra Roy in his celebrated biography of Sharatchandra notes that the text ended up having a soaring popularity after it was banned, and single copies were sold at princely sums of one hundred rupees (the printed price was three rupees), and even handwritten copies came into existence owing to the popular enthusiasm around *Pother Dabi*. Further we know from Gopalchandra Roy that every raid at the dens of revolutionaries of Bengal was sure to yield copies of two particular books during this period, as the police commissioner seems to have admitted: *Gita* and *Pother Dabi* (146).

Pother Dabi reportedly had an interesting history of genesis. The aforesaid biography, *Sharatchandra* threw some interesting light in this regard. Let us take an excerpt:

Shailesh Bishi in his *Biplobi Sharatchandrer Jibon Proshno* (The Life Enquiry of

Revolutionary Sharat Chandra) further recounts – “Sharatchandra said, ‘While you were not here, Mr Caulson, Police Commissioner of Kolkata, came to meet me. He invited me for tea at his residence. When I went, his wife made tea herself. Mr Caulson requested me to write a book like Tagore's *Chaar Odhyay*’ (a novel of Tagore that showed the revolutionary nationalists in a negative light).

I (Shoilesh Bishi) said, ‘if you write a novel like *Chaar Odhyay*, you better burn down *Pother Dabi*’.

Dada (Sharatchandra) said, ‘you will get to see’.

This was probably the time when he wrote *Bipradas* – but *Dada* couldn’t do a *Char Odhyay* and ended up erecting a zamindar figure to offer a hotchpotch.”

This account of Shoileshbabu creates an impression as if Sharatchandra agreed to write a novel like *Char Odhyay*. But that is obviously not the case. Because, in this regard another information is known from Surendranath Gangopadhyay’s account. Surenbabu has written – “one day some Mr Prentice called on Sharatchandra and asked – you write a book like *Pother Dabi* on the Government’s behalf (that is, an inverted image of *Pother Dabi* that denigrates the revolutionaries). You will get a handsome amount of money.

Sharatchandra replied – *Shaheb*, my childhood was spent with flying kites and spinning tops. My youth in cannabis and opium. Then I went to Rangoon for job. I no longer have the acumen to write *Char Odhyay*. You pardon me.

Far apart from writing a book like *Char Odhyay*, we get to know from the account of Charuchandra Roy, the revolutionary of Chandernagore, that Sharatchandra wrote *Pother Dabi* precisely as a protest because Rabindranath wrote *Ghore Baire*. Sharatchandra himself told that to Charubabu, as Charubabu records in his discussion of Sharatchandra’s *Shesh Proshno*. (423)

In this connection, we remember Tagore's foreword to *Char Odhyay* where he recollects a private interview with Brahmabandhab Upadhyay who allegedly expressed regret for his role in the swadeshi movement. It created controversy, because Brahmabandhab was dead by then, and there was no way to establish the veracity of such an encounter; raising a dead man as witness, and using a private conversation with him to score a point against the revolutionary movement in Bengal might not have been in good taste on Tagore's part, and that was probably the reason why he removed that foreword in the next edition (Kar 118).

Renowned Hungarian Marxist critic Georg Lukacs called Tagore's novel *Ghore Baire* (The Home and the World) a propaganda of British police in his celebrated review of *Home and the World* titled "Tagore's Gandhi Novel". When the imperial machine was leaving no stone unturned to blemish the revolutionary movement in Bengal, Tagore's novel did a considerable damage by playing straight into the hands of the British. In fact the timing of Tagore's novel itself had a damaging effect, as Nepal Majumdar notes: "When *Ghore Baire* was being serially published in *Shobujpotro*, at that time (9 September 1915) five Bengali boys under the leadership of Bagha Jatin faced the innumerable strength of British Police and Military with unmatched courage" (1: 403).

While Tagore was idealistic in demanding a flawless social revolution, and ended up aiding the empire, Bankim too might have been idealistic in demanding a pure literature and unwittingly ended up imposing the contemporary Victorian ideal in our literature. We shall now turn to that.

Bankim's Aversion of BotTola: Where Does the *Chhotolok* stand in the Age of Bhadraklok?

Bankim's Kamalakanta visited a bazaar in his opium induced dream, and saw the cultural products of his day in the shape of fruits; in that market, Bengali books were green plantains (*kanchkola*, and the word is also used idiomatically to imply nothingness or worthlessness).

This was largely the shape of things as perceived by the educated Bengalis. Bankim in his articles “A Popular Literature for Bengal” and “Bengali Literature” gives us a very clear impression of his dismissal of a large part of the existing Bengali literature as uncouth and not fit for educated society. This was the dominant attitude of his day: the learned Bengali babu were particularly hostile to what he perceived to be the immorality and obscenity of a large part of Bengali literature. As a result, what was otherwise to be judged by indigenous standards, and not by standards borrowed from the west, ended up being removed and obliterated from the fields of Bengali literature following strict Victorian moral codes. Bankim’s unsympathetic castigation of his own mentor Ishwar Gupta in the article “Bengali Literature” is a case in point, and Bankim’s sympathetic foreword to the selected works of Ishwar Gupta is another interesting case in point. In both of them Bankim emphasizes the identification of Gupta’s quality of writing with a bygone era that has gone away for good. In his foreword Bankim says: “*Ekhon aar khanti Bangali kobi jonme na – jonmibaar jo nai – jonmiya kaaj nai*” (“the pure Bengali poet is no longer born now – his birth is no longer possible – his birth is no longer of any use”) (*Rochonaboli* 2: 706).

Bankim might not have realized, but it was a surrender to the ideology of British empire, submission to a sensibility which was a foreign and imperialistic implant. This single statement probably encapsulates the Achilles heel of Bengal renaissance, as the dissociation with the roots was bound to manifest itself in a number of cultural maladies, one of them being a growing isolation of the elite from the masses, a rift which is perhaps one of the major factors which brought the final end to the age of bhadrakal in 2011, as future ages will probably argue.

In the article “Bengali Literature” Bankim makes the following observations on Ishwar Gupta:

He was a very remarkable man. He was ignorant and uneducated. He knew no language but his own, and was singularly narrow and unenlightened in his views; yet for more than twenty years he was the most popular author among the Bengalis. As a writer of light satiric

verse, he occupied the first place, and he owed his success both as a poet and as an editor to this special gift. But there his merits ended. Of the higher qualities of a poet he possessed none, and his work was extremely rude and uncultivated. His writings were generally disfigured by the grossest obscenity. (*Essays and Letters* 32)

However, Bankim qualifies his critical assault on Gupta with some riders: “Strange as it may appear, this obscure and often immoral writer was one of the precursors of the modern Brahmists. The charge of obscenity and immorality mainly applies to his poetry. His prose is generally free from both vices, and often advocates the cause of religion and morality.” (*Essays and Letters* 33)

Obviously, a filtering process is at work here. This is not just about filtering Ishwar Gupta, and the legacy that he left behind, but about filtering the good from the bad; the uncouth from the polished; the approved from the censored; the native from the cosmopolitan, the hybrid Bengali from the pure Bengali. The latter has to go, the former has to stay. This process robbed Bengali language and literature some of its popular, precious legacies. This process disinherited us and disempowered us to a great extent. Losing our past, and losing our roots and losing significant methods and genres and formats of cultural production left us anemic. While Europe celebrated the vulgar and the popular, the age of bhadrakok lacked its Rabelais. It lacked colour and it lacked wildness. It lacked the ability to revive the spirit of the predecessors. It failed to discuss ancient and medieval Bengal without projecting its own westernized aspirations and dimensions. Chaste and politically correct, the age of bhadrakok thus begins its long trek towards a dissolution of the **chhotok** (literally small folk; it also means vulgar people, plebian people; it is the antonym of bhadrakok). It was not necessarily a class offensive against the downtrodden, though. The elite cultures of indigenous origin were equally disrupted and mutilated. Any indigenous culture, be it mass or esoteric, elite or poor, which did not conform to colonial norms could be chhotok culture. Sadly, as the age of bhadrakok began, what was a gain in terms of sophistication, was a loss in terms of virility and

versatility of the Bengali soil. Bankim in this case was bound by zeitgeist of his age, which was heavily tilted in its judgment in favour of high culture as opposed to the low. Bankim continued in his aforesaid article in the same vein:

Ishwar Chandra Gupta is now fast falling into oblivion and we must proceed to notice the class of writers who have superseded him. But before doing so, we must premise a few words on the present general condition of Bengali literature.

One of the most noticeable characteristics of Bengal at the present day is the large amount of literary activity to be found there in comparison with other parts of India. But while books and newspapers are daily pouring in from our press, the quality of our current literature is by no means proportioned to its bulk. In fact, by far the greatest part [of] what is published is absolute rubbish. There are several modern Bengali books of which we shall have to speak in terms of high praise, but the number of these is so small in comparison with the mass of publications yearly vomited forth by the Bengali press... (*Essays and Letters* 34)

This attempt to separate the wheat from the chaff ended up as a process of getting severed from the indigenous roots, styles, forms and modes of writing. The age of bhadrakalok thus lost some valuable resources which could have enriched us. Bankim was a prisoner of his age in this regard. The age of bhadrakalok, thus born with a lopsidedness and an unresolved dialectics, since then has grappled with the problem of elitism.

Where does the **chhotolok** stand in the age of bhadrakalok? This is an important question, though searching for an answer of that question is beyond the scope of this article. But the tremendous tragedies of displacement and ethnic cleansing which befell the plebian members of the Bengali nation in the twentieth century have generally been overlooked by the bhadrakalok, whose elitism

might have facilitated his indifference. The dominant ethos of the age did not favour the rise of any sturdily indigenous pen with its arsenals of popular idiom and political incorrectness which could rectify the elitist bias of our Victorian codes and Enlightenment-derived worldview of the age of bhadralok.

Babu was a comprador. While the bhadralok challenged the empire in many respects, he still could not sufficiently rescue the pre-Christian (and pre-Islamic) voices of his ancestors in their pristine entirety (scholars like Haraprasad are notable exceptions, and even in Haraprasad, Victorian prudery is at work at times, when he denounces the vulgarity and decadence of our Tantric Buddhist past). A course correction of the trajectory of bhadralok in this regard was much required, but never adequately took place. True, the age witnessed some attempts to recover the folklores and folksongs, and became interested in baul etc, but these were often addled with projections of liberal western aspirations. Sincere attempts to revisit the pre-colonial indigenous roots of our culture are rare, though Ishwar Gupta's project of preserving *Kobigaan* was one such pioneering work which provided a template for the later ages to follow. Barring few brilliant exceptions, the age of bhadralok ultimately surrendered to imperial aesthetics.

To be fair on him, while Bankim could not salvage this situation, he did the best to preserve whatever remnants of the past that he could preserve. He was ready to let the past perish, as it was beyond his ability to find a way to keep the past alive, as the dominant sensibility of the Victorian-imperial complex was against that, but he was **not** ready to let it perish **unstudied**. Like Ishwar Gupta tried to retrieve *kobigaan*, Bankim tried his best to retrieve the works of Ishwar Gupta. Forces at work in our colonial history were hostile to the development of an indigenous Bengali aesthetic sensibility. The resultant loss to Bengali literature is heavy, no doubt. When we discard the low, we also discard a whole part of our body of legacy that lies beneath.

Nevertheless, Bankim's crusade against the epistemology of the empire is a fascinating topic of study, to which we now turn our attention.

Bankim Versus British

In irony and in earnest, Bankim was a nineteenth century personality. Rabindranath Tagore, on the other hand, for a little more than half of his life belonged to the twentieth century. The fact, that Babu Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay acted as the midwife of Bengali nation-consciousness at a crucial juncture of our history, that he helped the Bengali babu garner an escape velocity from the giant gravitational pull of the British empire and set him free to imagine a nation in a state of independence, might be one of those commonplace hypotheses about which general agreement runs to such an extent, that it becomes mildly boring to re-examine the case and putting the hypothesis to fresh analytical test. We shall not do that, instead we shall have observe some important moments of clash between Bankim's project and the British empire.

In India, government services are still sometimes referred to as baboodom, thus remembering a not-so-remote past when the Bengali in his avatar as babu was ubiquitous as a motif of administration. The babu of the empire refers to the meaning of babu in Bengal, because throughout rest of India this word had multiple other meanings, the most common of them being a diminutive of father, which is evident in the Hindi word *babuji*, or in the use of babu as a middle name in different parts of north and south India. Only in Bengal, babu had this specific meaning: an official, a government executive, a position of authority, an elite class with western orientation.

The Bengali babu constituted an "intermediate ruling class" and as such came under fire from the neighbouring state of Orissa, as Suniti Kumar Chattopadhyay records an instance from twentieth century (198). Suniti Chatterjee missed an irony: such hateful reactions came to directed against Bengalis at a time when the Bengali elites in their collective political consciousness moved beyond baboodom, and were no longer a loyal British ally. Clearly, an imperial design against the Bengalis cannot be ruled out behind such xenophobic hatred, more so, from such peoples who continued to remain loyal to British.

Bankim's ghost continued to haunt the empire long after he was gone. A case in point is the British reaction against Bankim's song *Vande Mataram*. Sir Henry Craik, Head of the Home Department and member of the Viceroy's Executive Council made the following observation in 1937:

For many years the phrase 'Vande Mataram' has been literally the war cry of the terrorists in Bengal, and although the words simply mean 'Hail Mother' they are commonly shouted as a slogan by terrorists when committing outrages, and by others as an outward sign of sympathy with revolution and of defiance against Government. The song has really no claim to be regarded as a national song... (Sabyasachi Bhattacharya: 2003: 10)

Craik realized that it was not sufficient to negate the song on the grounds of sedition alone, and therefore significantly harped on the Muslim angle. He argued that *Vande Mataram* “actually originated as 'hymn of hate' against Muslims” (Sabyasachi Bhattacharya: 2003: 10).

The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in its 1910 entry on Bankim Chandra notes that the novel *Anandamath* came in the wake of the Ilbert Bill agitations, and also observes that *Vande Mataram* was not used as a slogan during Bankim's lifetime, and only attained an “evil notoriety” after the emergence of anti-Partition movement (Sabyasachi Bhattacharya: 2003: 49-50). A Police report prepared by J E Armstrong in 1917 observes that “there is scarcely ever a revolutionary document that is not headed with Om Bandemataram” (Sabyasachi Bhattacharya: 2003: 49)

Sabyasachi Bhattacharya's study *Vande Mataram: The Biography of a Song* is a weak analysis of the fervour and the turbulence surrounding this song. He, for example completely missed the crucial role of Sarala Devi in mothering the political significance of *Vande Mataram*. Bhattacharya introduces Sarala in his study as “a Bengali lady” who was requested by G K Gokhale to sing *Vande*

Mataram at the Congress session at Benares in 1905: “The president of the Congress G K Gokhale requested a Bengali lady Saraladevi Chowdhurani to sing Vande Mataram. She was Rabindranath Tagore's niece and the wife of Rambhuj Dutta Chowdhury of Lahore, the editor of a nationalist Urdu weekly” (23). Curiously, Bhattacharya seems to have read Sarala's autobiography and he also quotes from there. Bhattacharya does not take any cognizance of the facts which Sarala records in her autobiography: that the members of the Suhrid Samiti, Mymensingh district, for the first time used Vande Mataram as a slogan and political cry for the first time in Bengal and in India, in a procession, when they came to receive Sarala from the rail station (53).

A relentless crusade against Orientalism is an important aspect of Bankim's writings. Kamalakanta in his opium induced dream observes the assault of the white men on the Sanskrit resources, and the assault is named Asiatic research by the white colonizers. As an employee of the colonial system, every battle that Bankim fought was an insider's battle. When he resisted British encroachment in discourses of history and culture, he was fighting from within: he was a part of colonial set up, first as a student of colonial education, and then as an employee of colonial administration. Further, when Bankim clashed with the babu in his satiric writings, he was putting up a challenge against his own tribe of western educated Bengalis. Moreover, when he was fighting against certain dubious strains of Hindu emergence, he was again fighting as an insider. Bankim belonged to a family of worshippers of Radhaballabh, a Vaishnava deity installed in the Chattopadhyay household for centuries. Fine details of the Radhaballabh temple, rituals and festivals of worship are given by Hemendrakumar Dasgupta in his biography of Bankim. Bankim's novel *Poison Tree* in its description of the *Thakurbari* (house of worship) of Nagendra Dutta was perhaps influenced by the memory of the Radhaballabh temple, as Jyotishchandra, Bankim's nephew (Bankim's elder brother Sanjibchandra's son) observed (Hemendranath Dasgupta 14-16)

An insider's struggle yields certain dividends while it also forces certain handicaps. Bankim was a product of colonial education; he was shaped by the contemporary West even as he waged a

relentless war against the same forces which had formative influence on him. Hemendranath Dasgupta observes that by the age of eleven, Bankim finished reading all the major histories of Europe available those days (“রররোললিয়রোস সরোরহহেহবের সমস পরোরচচীন ইলতিহেরোস, লহেউহমর ইংলিলরোরহন্ডের ইলতিহেরোস পভভলতি পপুসকঅলতি যত সহেররোরহর আদলন পরোরঠ কলরয়রোলছিহলিন”). Hemendranth notes in the same vein that Bankim exhibited “excellence in English and History” (68).

He was surrounded by the epistemology of the empire from an early age, yet he developed an ironical reflection on those surroundings. One of the earliest critical responses to the empire coming from the childhood of Bankim as recorded by his biographer Shachishchandra Chattopadhyay takes us back to a six-year-old Bankim. Bankim's father was promoted to be a Deputy Collector in Medinipur district in 1844, and Bankim was admitted to the District English school. One day, a street performer was passing by the school with his pet monkey. Bankim went to see the monkey and then he reported to have remarked, “If only that monkey could be admitted to our class, I’d like to see if it could pick up some English” (24).

Bankim’s attempts to revisit his indigenous legacy and recover his roots (no doubt influenced by trends on contemporary Europe) elicit our gratitude. No analysis of the possible indebtedness of Bankim's *Vande Mataram* to his predecessors from the perspective of cultural history has been produced till date, and we shall not try to attempt that here, as it is beyond our present scope. But it should be a crucial area of study because through such influences, the bygone era continued to communicate with the future, Bankim's pen acting as the medium. While the song might have been indebted to the lyric of a then popular hymn to the Goddess of the River Ganges that children used to recite from a primer named *Shishubodhok*, as a memoir of Amritalal Basu notes. The hymn went like this: *Bondo Mata Surodhoni, Purane Mohima Shuni, Potitopaboni Puratoni* (বেন মরোরতিরোর সপুর্ধনচী, পপুর্ধরোরহণ

মলহেমরোর শুলন, পলতিতিপরোরবেনচী পপুর্ধরোরতিনচী), roughly translated as all hail mother, the divine river, we hear about your greatness in the *puranas*, you are ancient and salvation of sinners). Basu used to chant this hymn

which formed a part of his childhood lesson, and of numerous other children of that generation prior to the emergence of the monopoly of the primer text authored by Vidyasagar, *Bornoporichoy*. Basu believed that *Bondo Mata* (literally meaning “all hail the mother”) was the ancestry (*adipurush*) of Bankim's Vande Mataram (39).

I shall suggest that a specific line of Vande Mataram song, *Obola Keno Ma Eto Bole* (why powerless, mother, with so much power), the revised version of which runs as *Ke Bole Ma Tumi Obole* (who says mother you are powerless) exhibits an obvious influence of Ishwar Gupta, whose poetry was precisely known for such alliteration and repetition of sounds. The Sanskrit lyric evokes an ambiance of the ancient, apart from bestowing the song with a unifying contemporary impetus. As such, through Bankim's Vande Mataram, the past generations successfully interacted, connived and conspired with the future generations against a common enemy: colonization. It is not the focus of our present study, again, but the indebtedness of the Vande Mataram song to Bankim's early poetic training under Ishwar Gupta's tutelage can be an exciting area of close analysis, something which has not been attempted yet.

Bankim fought the empire on many fronts, and epistemology was the most crucial of them. The might of the empire was manifested in its modern experimental science. and Bankim realized that it was important to appraise the Bengalis about modern developments in science. He undertook a lengthy project to write about popular science.

Very few nationalities of the world in their history can boast of a revivalist icon who also aggressively pushed for scientific awareness among masses, familiarizing them with latest developments in science and technology. I cannot think of a comparable figure from Irish revival, for example.

Bankim was aware of the limited benefits of the empire as well. He did not deny that the British advent has been an instrument of progress in Indian history (as he observed, British taught new things and brought down old structures of prejudice, inequality and superstition prevalent among

Hindus). However, there was a steep price that India had to pay for that progress-by-colonization. The bloodshed, the humiliation and the exploitation constituted a huge landscape which became the canvass for an emerging nation-consciousness challenging foreign domination. But unlike, for example, a Gandhian aversion to modern science, Bankim embraced science whole-heartedly.

Bankim's increasing bitter experience in service following the publication of *Anandamath* is chronicled in details by Shishir Kar's study. Bankim was demoted in service, he was harangued. Throughout his life within the colonial apparatus, there were plenty of incidents when he was insulted – even physically abused – and under consistent attacks by the white colonizers. When his literary endeavours were deemed dangerous by the authorities, he was given extra burden of work, precisely because his writings as well as publication of *Bongodorshon* were sought to be stopped by the imperial administration (Kar 67).

Quite humiliatingly, Bankim had to go asking for a certificate from Keshub Chunder Sen's brother Krishnobihari to the effect that the text of *Anandamath* did not inspire treason against British, else its publication and Bankim's career – both were facing imminent doom (Kar 69). Bankim's premature retirement at the age of fifty-three owes to this continuous pressure in his working life which left him drained out. This life full of stress could have been the reason behind his diabetes and early death.

Age of bhadralok would be a movement of the Bengalis away from civil services, a development epitomized by Subhash Bose's abandonment of ICS. No comprehensive data analysis in this regard exists, but during this period Bengalis continually valued independent intellectuals: be it writers, professors, doctors, engineers, artists. Bankim's career was probably a lasting lesson for the impending age of bhadralok. Civil services would not be a preferred vocation for the bhadralok who would value his independence, because he carried Bankim's memory within his political unconscious; that memory knew what it was like to be in chains.

Bankim's Clash with Vidyasagar

We have two known occasions when Vidyasagar was examiner (i.e. paper-setter and checker of answer scripts) and Bankim as a student performed poorly in the Bengali paper: in the first graduation examination after the establishment of Calcutta University in 1857; and even before that, in the Hooghly College Senior Division Examination of 1852. Records tell us (as reported by Bankim's biographer Amitrasudan) that on both the occasions, Vidyasagar was the examiner of the Bengali paper, and that he did not like Bankim's Bengali to the point where he chose to fail him. Bankim was known to excel in all his examinations otherwise (in Hooghly College he passed all the examinations with scholarly distinction, barring 1852, as Bankim's biographer Hemendra Dasgupta attests: the examination of 1852 he passed nonetheless, but without scholarship, owing to the debacle in the Bengali paper).

The only known instances of Bankim's "failure" as a student come from these two papers of Bengali. Barring Bankim's poor performance in the combined language paper of Calcutta university (which had English and Bengali; W Grapel was the examiner of the English paper where Bankim performed very well, but he had to pass with grace marks in the Bengali portion that was checked by Vidyasagar), he performed brilliantly in all other papers (including History, Mathematics, Natural History, Natural Philosophy and Physical Science).

Bankim was already a published poet by 1853 in Ishwar Gupta's *Shongbad Probhakor*, so his Bengali could not have been that weak so as to deserve a failure. Bankim's Bengali was perhaps different from the conservative style of Vidyasagar. We have already seen that Bankim was opposed to Bidyashagori Bangla.

Bankim has been blamed for opposing Vidyasagar's social reforms, though that might not constitute a valid allegation. A character of *Bishbrikkho* (Poison Tree), Surjomukhi, speaks out against Vidyasagar and widow remarriage, but that cannot be construed as a political statement of the writer himself. Bankim in fact registered his support for widow remarriage in unequivocal terms

in his article *Samyo*. Then, there is a widespread misconception that Vidyasagar's movement against polygamy was opposed by Bankim. Bankim, on the contrary, supported it in his concerned article on polygamy, albeit with some riders. He criticized Vidyasagar's movement to be Quixotic which was charging at a windmill: polygamy was dying out as a practice in any case, and Vidyasagar's account of it was inflated, Bankim maintains. Then Bankim added something which was far more significant than the first rider: scriptural justification is not required for social reform. If a reform needs to be done for the benefit of society, it should proceed without looking for scriptural justification.

This was a revolutionary proposition in all its dimensions, and I want to argue that it was a signal contribution of Bankim towards the freedom of thought in the intellectual orientation of the age of bhadrakalok. That the bhadrakalok was remarkably freed from Hindu religious dogma was attributable to that courageous pronouncement of the man who himself was the greatest intellectual icon of the Hindu revival of nineteenth century. Prior to Bankim, major intellectuals like Rammohan and Vidyasagar always submitted to the authority of the book.

The challenge to the authority of Vedas in Bengal posed by Samkhya and Tantra must have been a close topic of study for Bankim. Under such circumstances, the polyphonic nature of Hinduism does not allow a rigid scriptural regime. Further, customs and conventions always have taken precedence over scriptural texts in Hinduism. Moreover, as a cumulative result of Bengal Renaissance, the nascent class of middle class intellectuals increasingly supported atheism. Bankim was a part of the momentum of the new middle classes who will no longer be unquestioningly shackled to the authority of scriptures.

Bankim continued to maintain this position. Towards the end of his life, when he was asked about the propriety of sea voyage for Hindus, Bankim, in his letter to Binoykrishno Deb, said:

I am not a theologian, and I am not ready to take the place of one. But I have no objection to speak a word or two about the agitation that has come up regarding sea voyage.

Firstly, I do not believe that any social reform can be or should be done by evoking the authority of religious scriptures. When the late *Mahatma* Vidyasagar started a movement against polygamy by evoking the authority of scriptures, I raised the same objection, and I have no reason to change that opinion till now. There are two reasons behind my consideration. First, *Bengali* society is loyal to folk customs or customs of the land, and not loyal to scriptures. It's true that folk customs sometimes follow scriptures. But more often they do not follow scriptures, and when there is a conflict between custom and scripture, custom prevails.

The second reason behind my aforesaid conviction is that it is doubtful whether society will benefit, if it always follows the ruling of the scriptures. (*Bankim Rochonaboli* 2: 858)

We need to remember here that Bankim wanted uniform civil code in his article on polygamy. He said that if there is a social reform, then it should be applicable for every inhabitant of Bengal, and not just Hindus alone, and that constituted a part of Bankim's objection to evoking Hindu scriptural authority in social reforms.

The clash between Bankim and Vidyasagar, when closely studied, reveals that there can be only one possible objection against Bankim: but that would be a little subtextual, and will require reading between the lines. It could be the case that Bankim was opposed to these imperially aided social reforms. Law-making was a domain entirely and exclusively controlled by the British imperial government, and Bankim might have tried to resist Vidyasagar's attempt to bring the colonial administration to yet another intervention into Hindu social life. If that subtext was there, then Bankim was being a crafty advocate. But that possibility of a subtext is cancelled by Bankim's

consistent, continuing stand of opposing scriptural authority vis-à-vis reforms, as displayed by his stand regarding sea-voyage, which establishes it beyond doubt that his position was sincere: that he objected to Vidyasagar from a position of sincerity and not obfuscation.

It is interesting that the process of colonial history was dissolving the authority of Hinduism as a whole. Not just scriptures alone, but folk customs too were losing grounds. There is one much maligned line from Ishwar Gupta which is very often quoted as a proof of Gupta's misogyny and opposition to female education (he was *not* opposed to female education, and was in fact an enthusiastic supporter of the same, as multiple contemporary accounts show: I discussed that in details in my article on Ishwar Gupta in JBS Kolkata issue), the translation of which reads like this: "As the young girls pick up books in their hands and learn A and B, they will soon turn into replicas of European women and will roam freely in the open field adjacent to the British fort in Kolkata" (my apologies for this thoroughly unpoetic translation).

What is usually given a miss is that Gupta's poem records a lamentation: that the English education will deprive the girls from their roots, from the *broto*s which formed an integral part of Bengali feminine customs (feminine ritual chants to commemorate certain celestial, mostly solar and some lunar events of the calendar, worship of deities etc). Gupta asks: will the educated girls ever again sing the *broto* of *Shanjh-Shejuti*?

The intellectual colonization inherent in Macaulay's education system – and we need to remember that Vidyasagar himself was an integral part of that system – was already showing its results. Bankim writes in his "Confessions of a Young Bengal":

Our Deism, our Theism, our Brahmoism, progressive or ultra-progressive, our Comp[sic]teism – apparently an indigenous religious development, the morality of which was recently discussed, under that strange designation, with equal ability and learning in

more than one issue of a Calcutta newspaper – what are all these *isms* at bottom but merely so many different embodiments of a strong desire to exempt ourselves from the obligations of Hinduism. (*Essays and Letters* 93)

This is a Janus-faced paradox, a strange hypocrisy that lies at the heart of the genesis of the age of *bhadralok*: the social reforms of Vidyasagar evoked the authority of scriptures whereas Bankim, the Hindu revivalist advocated for a freedom from scriptures.

In this regard, an interesting observation was made by Rakhhal Chandra Nath in his article “Bankim Ki Protikriyashil Chilen?” compiled in *Poshchimbongo* Bankim issue of 1995. He records a lengthy list of hypocrisies of the liberal-*bishshomanob* icons of Bengal Renaissance, like Rammohan and Vidyasagar. Nath proceeds in a rather iconoclastic manner, and then contrasts Bankim with them. I shall not go into the details, as that would be outside our focus in this article, but Nath makes some valid observations, and truly, if Bankim was remarkably free from one single vice, then it was a complete abstinence from hypocrisy. He knew how to reconcile pragmatism with ethics, compulsions of history with the necessities of community. A continuous ironical impulse ensured that he even maintained a critical distance from the ideologies which were prevalent, including those of his own class, and like a giant whose strength was immense, Bankim did not need to resort to hypocrisy and could always afford to be straightforward in his non-fictional writings.

Bankim’s Clash with Hinduism?

An anxious question that Bankim’s “Confessions of a Young Bengal” asks in its conclusion, is this:

[S]ound logic compels us to cry with one voice, Hinduism must be destroyed. Agreed. But

the spiritual nature of man abhors a vacuum. Between our various *isms*, the Hindu code of personal and social ethics has been well-nigh wholly repealed, and its precepts are universally seen and felt to be more honoured in the breach than in the observance. Where is our new code of morality? Where is the new public opinion to enforce its rules? (*Essays and Letters* 93)

Bankim himself did exhibit an indifferent, and mildly hostile attitude to Hinduism in his early career at least on one occasion. *Rajmohan's Wife* while describing the interiors of the bedchamber of Mathur Ghose, casually observes: "Two paintings of the largest size, from one of which glowered the grim black figure of Kali, and on the other of which was displayed the crab-like form of Durga, faced each other from high positions on two opposite walls" (77).

The obvious threat coming from an Anglocentric worldview was that it would make the educated Bengalis see their own culture from the white colonizer's viewpoint. Bankim inhabited the belly of the beast during this period, but he would eventually come out of that.

The legendary interview between Bankim and Ramakrishna Paramahansa which took place in 1884 (as recorded in the *Gospels of Ramakrishna*) did not go well. The description does not do justice to Bankim's viewpoints. A reader of the *Kathamrita* might end up forming quite negative opinions about Bankim. However, it cannot be disputed that *Kathamrita* is very often one-sided. It is written to give the perspective of the Ramakrishna movement. While we do not have Bankim's account of that encounter, a few points should be considered.

When Bankim meets Ramakrishna, the saint makes a joke out of Bankim's name: "What weight has caused you to bend?" (Bankim literally means bent or curved, and hence the joke). Bankim responded that the weight of the shoes of the British.

Bankim's quest for the answers to the fundamental riddles of life did not lead him to spirituality.

Bankim in his memoir recorded his anxious search for the meaning of life in his early youth when he used to ask: *E Jibon Loiya Ki Koribo, E Jibon Loiya Ki Korite Hoy?* (What shall I do with this life? What is one supposed to do with this life?). When Bankim responded to Ramkrishna's question about the purpose and meaning of life with the answer *aahaar, nidra, moithun* that is, food, sleep and sex – it caused consternation, embarrassment and scandal. *Kathamrita* tells us that Ramkrishna asked for meaning of human life and not just any life, but to my eyes it looks a little doubtful. A rhetorical question about the purpose of life, in anticipation of a lofty answer (Ramkrishna in all likelihood wanted to hear that the purpose of life is a quest for God, or Divinity, which would be evident to any sincere reader of *Kothamrito*) would surely draw some satire from Bankim, the keen observer of human nature. Bankim's answer would have a bare factual correctness, even if the question was about human life. Human life as a form of animal life abides by the basic universal principles of living organisms.

Further, Bankim was answering to the question about purpose of life in a solidly materialistic, blasé and nonchalant way. Humans are different from the rest of the animal kingdom in certain complex ways, and Bankim was aware of that. However, Bankim's intellect resisted all forms of idealism, while the Ramakrishna movement was founded on idealism. It is also significant that Bankim never sought the meaning of life in a spiritual solace, abandoning reason, history and community.

To that extent, the political ideology of Vivekananda is more indebted to Bankim than to his mentor Ramakrishna himself. Vivekananda's brother Bhupendranath Dutt acknowledged that in his account of Vivekananda's political thought. It can be argued that Vivekananda's conception of Ramakrishna Mission as an organization is indebted to Bankim's *Anandamath*. Ramkrishna in any case was concerned with the individual's spiritual salvation in the fashion of classical Samkhya philosophy. *Kathamrita* makes it obvious at a number of places that Ramakrishna viewed a dissociation of purush and prakriti as a prerequisite for salvation.

Ramakrishna's idea of collective education for the folks was supposed to bring spiritual salvation, and not national or collective empowerment. Ramakrishna was not concerned about any collective entity called nation, folk, people, community. Ramakrishna was not known to be critical of the empire and colonization. Vivekananda the nationalist is a creation of Bankim's legacy, it can be argued. Hemchandra Ghosh, the founder of Bengal Volunteers reminisces of his meeting with Vivekananda in 1901 when the latter told him: "Read Bankim Chandra – Bankim Chandra – and Bankim Chandra only" (Dey 1: 2)

But let us go back to that celebrated conflict of ideas. We need to realize that Ramakrishna did not just meet Bankim, but over a period, he held interviews with a number of Kolkata dignitaries. The interview with Keshub Chunder Sen was highly successful and it led to a number of future meetings between these two. But Ramakrishna's interviews with Vidyasagar and Bankim ended disastrously, and they never met again. Ramakrishna had a spiritual agenda and these two were men of intellect. This can be seen as a conventional clash between Jnanamarga and Bhaktimarga, the path of knowledge and the path of devotion. Bankim's choice for the path of knowledge over the path of devotion influenced the future course of the age of bhadrakalok.

Language of reason has a universal applicability, transcending the barriers of limited and esoteric languages of idealism which are limited to specific groups. The spirituality of Ramakrishna movement is a unique language of that movement, and might not be acceptable to those who are outside it. It has been suggested that human beings invented the faculty of reason in order to speak with strangers. It would be an interesting hypothetical spectacle of anthropology to behold early humans developing reasoning and arguing faculties as a method of communicating with others who did not belong to the same bloodline, same tribe and same culture.²

Bankim's project is marked by an emphasis on reason and a denial of idealism. This might have paved the way for the age of bhadrakalok to have its international reach. Bengalis have frequently been the international face of India throughout modern history. They have communicated with the

rest of the world with an effortless ease, and the reason why Bengalis were able to do so, might, at least partially, lie in Bankim. In choosing reason and knowledge over spiritual salvation, Bankim made a choice, and it influenced the following generations. Through his seasoned reasoning, as the literary monarch of his era, Bankim shaped the consciousness of educated Bengalis like nobody else. The age of bhadralok was the age of reason. And it was this legacy of reasoning which made the bhadralok an internationalist in outlook and exposure, just the way a language influences our ways of seeing the world.

Bankim's brief encounter with Shoshodhor Torkochuramoni (a vocal proponent of Hindu revivalism, who absurdly observed that all Hindu rituals, myths and customs had their support in modern science) is an excellent example of his clash with Hindu dogmatism. While Bankim himself was an enthusiastic proponent of reconciliation between science and Hinduism (his article "On the Origin of Hindu Festivals" compiled in *Essays and Letters* deals with the impeccable astronomy of the Hindu festivals of antiquity), he soon became wary of Torkochuramoni's fanciful ideas of scientific Hinduism. An anecdote from contemporary sources narrates how Agastya's evaporation of the sea was described by Shoshodhor Torkochuramoni as the breaking down of water into hydrogen and oxygen by the electric current emanating from the sage's eyes. The fact that the bhadralok abandoned any belief in such absurd things which the rest of India still sometimes subscribes to this day (Ganesh's elephant head claimed to be an example of plastic surgery is a contemporary re-incarnation of Shoshodhor's methodology) is attributable to Bankim as the architect of the age of bhadralok. Bankim was initially enthusiastic about Shoshodhor and he also took the troubles to introduce Shoshodhor to the people of Kolkata. Shoshodhor was a good orator, and Ramakrishna is said to have remarked after meeting Shoshodhor that he has been able to see the second moon (that is a meaning of the name Shoshodhor). Shoshodhor insisted that Hindus must carry the external insignia of devotion: the sacred mark on forehead (*tilok*) and the tuft of hair on rear-head (*tiki*) must be worn. Shoshodhor gave fantastical explanations in favour of such Hindu practices, which were

now touted to be scientific. Bankim disagreed and dissociated from Shoshodhor. Bankim was never a dogmatic Hindu, and the age of bhadrakalok would carry that legacy. As if his absurd claims about science were not enough, Shoshodhor in his revivalist zeal wanted to reduce Hinduism to a set of restrictions and commandments about food, dress, get up and everyday life. Bankim looked forward to a Hinduism which was worthier than that.³

Coda

Bankim was not a figure like imperial Russia's celebrated historian Nikolai Karamzin, whose twelve-volume history of Russia remains a beloved work to this day, and yet Bankim is considered to have fathered modern Bengali historiography. In spite of his authorship of *Vande Mataram*, Bankim was not a legendary poet like Goethe or Shakespeare or Tagore, for whom the status of a seer is usually reserved. Still, Bankim is known among common Bengalis with the appellation rishi, or seer, who witnessed the revelation of the śloka *Vande Mataram* (the hymns of Rigveda manifested and revealed themselves to the rishis who then uttered them as chants, as per the Vedic legends). Bankim had a short life, and his job as deputy magistrate did not allow him to devote his time completely to literature, and yet he remains an infinite source of our cultural history. Rabindranath's greatness is writ large on the wall of fame: he was Brahma, he came from the Tagore clan, he was awarded Nobel prize in literature, he founded the establishment of VisvaBharati, he was one of the most prolific writers of world literature; Bankim's greatness is not so much favoured by his circumstances (which were often adverse to him), but by his sheer commitment to his people against insurmountable odds.

Bankim and Rabindranath ruled Bengali culture in succession; they were the two iconic figures who dominated Bengal Renaissance. However question-begging the term Bengal Renaissance might have become as a category, as a period of our modern history stretching from Rammohan to

Rabindranath, as a period of fermentation and mutation, it primarily remains a site of dialectics. At the end of the day, it was an intense period of clash of ideas. When we try to understand the long twentieth century of Bengal, the early part of which overlaps with Bengal Renaissance, we need to remember that it was primarily shaped by the legacies of these conflicts. The conflicts involving Bankim and Rabindranath left behind very important legacies which the age of bhadrakal was made of, as this article has tried to show.

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2. See Paul Rabinow's *Essays on the Anthropology of Reason* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

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Dr Tamal Dasgupta is founder editor of Journal of Bengali Studies (ISSN 2277-9426) and Shoptodina (ISSN 2395-6054). He is founder of Shoptodina Foundation. He did his PhD on Terry Eagleton from the Department of English, University of Calcutta. He is working as Assistant Professor of English at a Delhi University College since 2008.

The Fallen Woman Who Would Be Lost into the Long

Twentieth Century: Thakomoni from *Those Days*

Mousumi Biswas Dasgupta

In examining the life of Sunil Ganguly's fictional character Thakomoni from *Those Days*, the fallen woman who whored and lived in the dark underbelly of Bengal Renaissance, this paper will launch a query into the faultlines of the impending age of bhadrakok. Thakomoni is a motif of the disempowered **chhotok** within the scheme of Bengal Renaissance, and she is a premonition of the ways in which the chhotok will be further lost in the age of bhadrakok.

Sunil Ganguly's Sahitya Academy Award-winning novel *Shei Shomoy* was translated into English by Aruna Chakraborty as *Those Days*. In Ganguly's novel, Thakomoni is the wife of an evicted farmer from a remote area of Bengal. She serves as a prototype of the subaltern woman. Her very name literally means in Bengali 'stay, jewel', a name that used to be given to a child by parents whose other offsprings died young and who now desperately wanted that child to survive.

This novel is set in the 19th century, in the background of the British colonization in India. That will in turn imply a triple set of oppression for a woman: in the hands of the patriarchal system, the Zamindari system (fundamentally altered because of the Permanent Settlement Act brought by the British)¹ and the urban elites who became affluent owing to their agency of the British. The last class became the absentee landlords, heavily investing in Zamindaris. Their deputies (called Nayeb in Bengali) were given an absolute free hand in exploiting the peasants even to the point of eviction.

Ironically, Thakomoni is an evacuee because of such urban elites, and when she comes to the city as a refugee, she enters into the servitude of that very class. The conditions created by the Permanent Settlement Act and Sunset Act turned her (and innumerable others like her) into a servant from a poor but independent peasant woman.

Thakomoni's status and identity undergo a massive change as she moves from the margin of her village, Bthinkuri,² to the centre of Raj, Calcutta.² Due to two consecutive droughts, her husband is not able to pay the required amount of tax and as a result, their house is looted and burnt down by the Naayeb. They come to Calcutta searching for their landlord whose name he does not even know, to make their plight known to him and get justice. They are not aware that circumstances have changed, the nature of landlordship has changed and an absentee landlord does not care to exempt taxes when the farmers went through bad weather conditions. Thakomoni's husband Trilochan thinks that the landlord will have a big mansion, and therefore it will be recognized very easily. The image that he has in mind of a zamindar is the traditional one who lived amongst the farmers and shared their interests. Though necessarily exploitative, he protected them in the harsh times.

The novel speaks of the native agents of British business interest, who had “grown wealthy on salt, cloth and cork, bought up estate after estate and set up as zamindars. But they did not live among their tenants. They built mansions in Calcutta and lived lives of sloth and luxury, while their agents squeezed the life blood out of the peasants and, in case of default, seized their land”.³

When Trilochan reaches Calcutta, it overwhelms and intimidates him. It is a different world altogether, run along a different set of rules which he does not comprehend. Then as he goes searching for water for his thirsty family, as soon as he finds a lake and fills up his pot, he is arrested by two British sentries and taken to the Police Station. It so happens that the lake he was

taking water from was the Great Tank or Lal Dighi which was used by the Sahibs to fish and stroll. Natives were not allowed to use the lake for any purpose whatsoever, though the officer's horses could have their fill in it. When the sentries beat Trilochan, he does not understand his crime, but he is still happy because he thinks they are the zamindar's guards and would soon lead him to his master.

Trilochan is forever lost from his wife and family, and Thakomoni is reduced to a proletariat in the original etymological sense of the term. The proletariat from the Latin word *proles* implied those people, according to the constitution of the roman republic, who had no wealth other than their children. Thakomoni is now left with no other asset than her son Dulal. Her little daughter, inflicted with cholera, dies a painful death in the darkness of night. Eventually she enters into the domestic service of the Singhas of Jorashankho after she is noticed by the lady of the house, who takes pity on her. However, after entering into this service, her son becomes separate from her as he becomes an attendant to the young scion of the family. While Dulal becomes a child labour, Thakomoni herself becomes a cook. Soon she has to become a part time sex servant for the steward of the household, Dibakar. She has to endure the ignominy of being raped by the steward in front of the eyes of the steward's wife, who by the way has full consent in the exploitation of this helpless woman by her husband Dibakar.

Partha Chatterjee writes that there are three modes of political power: the communal, the feudal and the bourgeois. Thakomoni is landless and now comes under the category of urban proletariat, but she is still within the ambit of feudal relationships of power, since she is a domestic servant and not an industrial worker. Partha Chatterjee points out, “The feudal mode of power is characterised fundamentally by sheer superiority of physical force, i.e. a relationship of domination. It is founded on conquest or some other means of physical subordination of a subject population.”⁴

Dulal is six years old when he engaged as a servant and playmate to Nabin, the young scion of the Singha family, but he is mature enough to understand the relationship to be that between master and slave. Nabin would do just as he wished with Dulal like making him drag his nose all round the verandah, riding him as a donkey or standing on his chest posing like Kali while Dulal gasped for breath. The ordeals sometimes brought tears to his eyes but he kept a smiling face, because he understood that staying with the youngest babu of the household had its own advantages. He could eat some of the food that Nabin threw away and also enjoy some other benefits.

A city usually reveals all its wilderness to the disempowered, more terrifying than a jungle where wild beasts roam. In the absence of any substantial industrialization, the farmers who were the victims and refugees of the Permanent Settlement Act, were not turned into industrial workers. Instead they entered into several forms of master-slave relationships in feudalistic modes. Thakomoni is an example of this urban proletariat created directly or indirectly by British Colonization of India.

In this novel, we see that the servant women are regularly tortured and exploited by male servants, and the stigma of the fallen woman is attached to a young widow named Matu who also works in the Singha household's grand kitchen with Thakomoni. She becomes pregnant, and when numerous brutal attempts at abortion fail, Matu is poisoned. She dies unnoticed and uncared for. In her imagination, Thakomoni is haunted by the ghost of Matu since then. She learns in the hard way to avoid Matu's fate by consuming quasi-medicinal herbs which are given to her by the steward's wife, Sohagbala.

Thakomoni's son Dulal grows up hating his mother as a fallen woman. It is ironical that it is

because of her concern for her son that Thakomoni had to submit before the brutal oppression of Dibakar and another powerful servant Nakur. Dulal has a huge hatred for his mother, while Thakomoni continues to love his son. Dulal and Thakomoni both eventually become upwardly mobile. Dulal becomes the personal attendant of the young head of Singha Household, Nabin Singha (this character is modelled on the first translator of *Mahabharat* into Bengali prose, Kaliprasanna Singha), while Thakomoni becomes the head-servant.

But her wounds are never healed, her losses are never recovered and an emptiness persists in the mind of Thakomoni. Dulal is permanently alienated from his mother. Thakomoni finally becomes insane and roams on the roads of kolkata asking everyone: “can you tell me the way to Bhinkuri?”⁵ She doesn’t know the district or the location of her village, so no one is able to help her locate it. It can be mentioned as an aside, that in a strange turn of events, Dulal at the end of the novel kills Trilochan who is by this time completely mad and attacks Dulal's master, Nabin Shingha. Dulal never gets to know that Trilochan was his father. The act of patricide is not known to him.

There are several layers of oppression that Thakomoni has to endure. She is solitary, disempowered and could only come to prominence with the favour of the powerful male servants, but then she is stigmatized by her own son. She is lost in a city that upon her very arrival snatched away her little daughter and her husband. The former dies, the latter is lost. After spending the sordid and tortuous life of a servant, her life's end comes in an equally tragic manner. She desperately wants to go back to her village after she realizes that her son has disowned her, and that she was entirely cast away in this city. While trying helplessly to go back to her roots, to reclaim that picture of a hut and a field in her village which she carried in her mind, in an insane state, Thakomoni drowns in the Ganges.

Colonization erased villages, evacuated farmers, destroyed their livelihood and turned them into the urban underclass. Thakomoni as a representative of that underclass wanders across the dark lanes of an otherwise much illuminated city of renaissance and reformation, where connoisseurs of art and culture abound. As the novel points out, “[e]ducation, music and religious ritual flourished on the blood and bones of an impoverished peasantry”.⁶ It would be an understatement to say that the Bengal Renaissance was limited only to Calcutta, as Thakomoni's life would show. It could actually be restricted to a specific floor in a certain house. The essential conditions of the backward classes never changed even with the change in circumstances. They were exploited as one oppressor replaced another and they could never break free of their shackles. “we'll be exactly where we are. Kings may win or lose wars but the lot of the poor never changes.” remarks a character in *Those Days*.⁷

In Thakomoni's character, the macro is juxtaposed with the micro. Thakomoni is specific and universal. she is a woman and a proletariat. She is both grand narrative and deconstruction, and she is both fiction and commentary. She is a character and she is a trajectory. She is memory and she is adumbration. She is history and she is also the way things are likely to remain for times to come. She is the dark side of Bengal's Renaissance, and she will be lost and drowned in the long twentieth century of Bengal.

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*Mousumi Biswas Dasgupta is founder-editor of Journal of Bengali Studies. She is working as
an Assistant Professor of English in a College of Delhi University since 2006.*

Vaishnava Theology's Lyrical Legacy in the Twentieth Century: An Analysis of Tagore's *Gitanjali* and *Bhanusingha's Padabali*

Sayantana Thakur

While making an analysis of Tagore's poetic genius one may be astounded to see that despite being a poet of the early half of the twentieth century, an age, when the entire Bengal was oscillating in-between the stereotypical custom and change, the idea of 'working class' and 'Bhadrolok', how Vaishnava religion has played a significant part to enhance the poetic virtuoso of Tagore. To resolve the query to an extent it may be said that what can be manifested in Tagore is the splendid blend of the sublime Vedic tradition of India and the modern perspective that was gradually venturing into the culture and society of the region. That is the reason why one can trace in his verse the quintessence of the new trend of modern poetry and the soothing melody of the old lyrical legacy of the Vaishnava poetry. In other words what Tagore has done in his poetry is that he has modified the principle of Vaishnava theology and the old soothing melody of Vaishnava poetry and has used them in his verses in such a way that they no more remain a mere part of a religious school but become one of the major ingredients, which were later adopted by so many modern poets to enhance their poetic expression.

Here the question may arise that why Tagore, instead of showing his keen interest towards other religious theoretical schools, have shown his great interest towards Vaishnava religion? Though it is very difficult to address the question in a single sentence or a word, it can be interpreted that what Tagore might have found in Vaishnava religion is the ingredient of becoming a universal religion and it is because of this in 'The Religion of Man' he boldly declares that Vaishnava religion which has made an endeavour to feel God in all love relationships, for Vaishnavites believe that whatever

is immaculate and consecrated is the substance of the unconscious yearning of human soul for the divine one. Again in ‘Sadhana’ he has described God as the ‘Supreme lover’ and the union between human soul and Divine can be possible by love- “We get the glimpse of the Infinite in the person whom we love . . . In all love relation the Vaishnavas have tried to feel God.”¹

Tagore’s keen attachment with Vaishnavism started at an early age when he became quite fond of reading the lyrics of Vaishnava poets. As he writes in ‘Religion of Man’ -“*Fortunately for me a collection of old lyrical poems composed by the poets of the Vaishnava sect came to my hand when I was young. I became aware of some underlying idea deep in the obvious meaning*”.²

The tradition of including the core idea of Vaishnava thought and philosophy as the subject matter of poetry, which was first begun by Joydeb and carried forward by later Vaishnava lyrical poets, reached its culmination with Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore. Being a poet of twentieth century Tagore interprets Vaishnava thought and philosophy from his own perspective. He did not see himself either as a veritable Vaishnava or as one, conveying forward the tradition, his melodies and verses inhale out the genuine soul of Vaishnava poetry. A critical analysis of his lyrics and melodies will uncover the way how the doctrine of Vaishnava reasoning has been coursing through them. That is why Vaishnava scholars like Harekrishna Mukhopadhaya and many others have acknowledged Rabindranath as the greatest modern Vaishnav poet of the twentieth century and also the last luminary of the great poetic Vaishnava tradition that was started by Jayadeva.

In an article entitled ‘Tracing Vaishnava Strain in Tagore’ O’Connell opines that Tagore draws materials for his poetry from the various philosophical sources. Among those sources, which had immense impact upon the poetic consciousness of Tagore, Vaishnavism was the most prominent one. In other words, like other sources, it is also the use of the idea of Vaishnava theology that has brought variety to Tagore’s poetry. As he writes - “*Rabindranath’s engagement with the Vaishnava tradition in Bengal was a significant component of his own complex experience of the world in*

which he lived. It was a sensitive and discerning engagement, an engagement that merits careful study. We can refine our understanding of Rabindranath's aesthetic sensibilities and ethical values by observing how he resonates with Vaishnava sentiments, imagery, and values, but not uncritically. And we may gain a more precise appreciation of the Vaishnavas by seeing them through his perceptive discerning eyes."³

The idea of Radha and Krishna as a divine couple has immense impact on Vaishnava literature and it is because of that Vaishnava poets often represent through their lyrical hymns the beauty of the divine couple in their idyllic transcendent realm. They also delineate the physical magnificence and appeal of Sri Chaitanya by considering him as 'Sawam Bhagaban'(God Himself), who manifested himself in the Kali Yuga with a specific end goal to safeguard the mankind from the weight of agony and penance. All such expressions of the Vaishnava poets are the consequences of the outpourings of their devotional sentiments, which give the Vaishnava convention in Bengal an emphatically stylistic as well as an aesthetic quality. It is this soothing combination of the literary refinement, simple expression and aesthetic excellence that attracted Tagore towards Vaishnava poetry. As Tagore himself has admitted that Vaishnava poetry is free from the restraint of any fixed literary convention and therefore they exhibit a degree of freedom in their way of expressing human emotions simply and effectively. While making an analysis of the concept of Egalitarian ethos and its influence on Tagore O'Connell observes that group singing (samkirtan) has further social ramifications. It not just stands for the emotional expressions of Bhakti rather it also gives the sense of solidarity. By quoting Hiteshranjan Sanyal's idea of group singing as an important medium to show unity, O'Connell continues by saying that what he finds behind the concept of group singing is the idea of egalitarian collective dynamism which had its beginning during the time of Sri Chaitanya. Despite the fact that it hardly played a significant role in promoting any radical, social or political change, it certainly improved the sense of pride and respect within the downtrodden, who before the arrival of Chaitanya had the voice but due to the suppression and extortion they became

voiceless. “On the other hand”, as he proceeds, “*as the Vaishnava tradition in Bengal became more organisationally structured in subsequent generations, with leadership largely in the hands of hereditary gurus, mostly Brahman Goswamis, its egalitarian and mildly reformist thrust weakened and opportunities emerged for exploiting the faith of simple devotees, a theme also articulated by Tagore. But mediating as it were the ‘image gap’ between the more egalitarian and more exploitive characterisations of Bengali Vaishnavas is the Bairagi (the one who is ‘passionless’/‘detached’), the wandering Vaishnava mendicant, often enough himself or herself a singer of kirtan. All these images and influences of the Vaishnavas were circulating in the popular and literary milieu in which Rabindranath lived and of which he was well aware.*”⁴

What is striking in Tagore is his emphatic likeness to Chandidas and Vidyapati. He was so fond of these poets that despite having the ability to compose lyrics by using dulcet and harmonious sounds, he deliberately embraces the Vaishnava tradition propounded by Joydeb, Vidyapati, Chandidas and many others. In his autobiography *Jivansmriti* Tagore himself has admitted that during his early years it was a volume of poems by the Maithili poet Vidyapati found in the family library that initiated youthful Robi's interest towards Vaishnava lyrics. Though the Maithili expressions of Vidyapati were fairly obscure to him, yet this Maithili dialect charmed him the most. He was so overwhelmed by the expression and rhythm of the Maithili poet that he, at an age of twenty, composed a few verses in impersonation of the medieval Vaishnava poems. These lyrics were published under the title of ‘Bhanusingher Padavali’ (Songs of Bhanusingha). They breathe out a true Vaishnava spirit to such an extent that scholars often trace in them clear impressions of the Vaishnava poets like Joydeb, Chandidas and Vidyapati.⁵

According to Tony K. Stewart, the encounter of young Tagore with Vaishnava poems had a far reaching consequence. He was so concerned about his early compositions that he made several changes in subsequent editions of the poems. By examining those alterations Stewart argues that the

tone and character of them changes from pretty much straight impersonation of Radha–Krishna eroticism to a more universalised spirituality: “There is a subtle increase in ambiguity, or, rather, less Vaishnava specificity, a tendency to generalise and abstract from what was in earlier versions more precisely delineated. The dominant erotic mood subtly gives way to a humility in the face of unrequited love, especially when the focus of the poem shifts from Radha (the proper subject for a Vaisnava lyric) to her confidante Bhanu (out of humility, the devotee ought never be the subject) . . .

. It is a shift that is consonant with Rabindranath’s mature religious sensibility . . . Krishna does not remain the cowherding cad of Braj, but seems to be recognised as the Lord, immanent in all creatures, and in the hearts of his devotees. One is reminded of Rabindranath’s attitude of reverence and submission to his *jivandevata*, his indwelling lord.”⁶

While examining the cause behind Tagore’s keen attachment to Vaishnava thought and philosophy, Tapati Dasgupta in his book *Social Thought of Rabindranath Tagore: A Historical Analysis* has opined that Tagore looked upon the tradition of Vaishnavism as a valuable element and a special form in which the true culture of India could be traced. Apart from this, as she continues, Tagore found in Vaishnavism not only the tendency to go against the excessive intellectualism of the metaphysicians and the mechanical approach of the ritualists and the literalists but also the desire to call for love and devotion towards a personal God in preference to abstract speculation about the Absolute. In other words it stood for catholicity and tolerance with regard to philosophical controversies, recognition of the importance of man’s everyday life, and a loosening of social barriers. Though it should be remembered that like *baul tradition* (tradition set up by the wandering minstrels of Bengal), and the Sufism of Kabir, Vaishnavism is only one of the channels through which the nonmonastic tradition influenced Rabindranath.⁷

In some of the early compositions of Tagore, one can trace an inclination to unite the Vedic-Upanishadic and the Vaishnava perspectives. Like a true Vaishnavite, he believes in the Upanishadic

idea that the finites are created by the Infinite out of His own endless joy and love. It may seem that Tagore is trying to make systematic assimilation of theism and absolutism, but in reality if we observe his philosophical belief we shall find that theistic side gets the upper hand in his thought. According to him, God has two aspects personal and impersonal, where the Absolute stands for the impersonal aspect. Therefore Tagore's idea of God is not a featureless, attributeless, indifferent solidarity but rather as one, who is basically identified with person essentially and related to human being as lover to the beloved. Unlike many Indian thinkers, Tagore does not believe the concept that God as 'the empirical, ephemeral and finite aspect of the Absolute'. In his view God is the 'concrete ideal of human life, and its aspirations and people will show their faith in the Absolute *'only when it is realised in human experience, only when it is humanised.'*⁸

The best example of such a composition where the Vaishnava thought and the philosophy and Upanishad are beautifully synthesized is the lyric "Apramatta" in *Naivedya* (1308 B.S.). It is enriched with the devotion of Vaishnavism and the eminent thought of the Upanishads. In another occurrence, we find that the artist who is the searcher of excellence gives up his life at the sacrificial stone of God. In other words, his early writings are the manifestations of the brilliant synthesis he made between two ideas- the idea of human love he got from the Vaishnava writings and that of perfect love from the Upanishads. A few scholars see in Tagore's work a never-ending strife between the two dispositions. Others declare that the Vedic and the Vaishnava points of view ruled rotating periods of Tagore's inventive vocation. From this, one can come to the idea that the writer's psyche resembled a train covering forward and backward between the two ends of polytheism and belief in a higher power. In a nutshell, Tagore took from every custom what he thought to be the best. In his all-encompassing vision, the glow and abundance of the Vaishnava artists and the moral vision as well as the spiritualist instinct of the Upanishadic sages remain side by side.⁹

In conversation with E. G. Thompson Tagore once said that what attracted him towards the

Vaishnava lyrics were their melodious nature and the pictorial quality. It was the art of synthesising those two that not only astonished him but also provided him the structure to compose his own compositions. As he said- *"I found in the Vaishnava artists melodious development and pictures startling and they gave me frame. They make many examinations in 210 meter. And afterward there was the intensity of their symbolism."* While inspecting the Vaishnava element in Tagore's works C.F. Andrews has aptly commented that instead of choosing any English poet he took Vaishnava religious literature as the source of inspiration. He was so engrossed by the poetic quality and graceful nature of the Vaishnava 'padavali' that it 'afterwards remained intimately dear to him.'¹⁰

Several scholars working in the field of Vaishnavism have unanimously contended that the dominant note of the Vaishnava padavali literature is the love between *Jivatma* (finite) and *Paramatma* (Infinite). Vaishnava poets through their love lyrics have tried to exhibit the idea that the finite cannot be separated from the infinite as they are not only eternally bound by love but also are equally eager to be in the company of each other. It is the expression of this secret relationship between the finite and the infinite that dispenses in Vaishnava literature 'Madhurya' or the sense of delicacy. Tagore is inspired by this idea of the Vaishnava poets and like them he has tried to weave a firm organic relation between the Absolutes and the finites.

Vaishnavites believe in idea of the 'Lila' of God for they presume God to be the supreme master of the universe and the entire cosmos as His play-ground. They view *"the world as real with its various colours and combination. They put emphasis on a firm organic relation between God and human being. God is everything and all actions of human being should be dedicated to Him."*¹¹

They also consider Him as 'Perfect Man', to whom nothing is impossible. This humanistic conception of the divine has been eulogized by Tagore. Like the Vaishnava verse composers he also believes that the human 'lila' (pastimes) of Krishna is the best among all 'lilas'. He firmly believes

that God Himself is Self-sufficient, therefore neither does God desire for anything nor can His action be motivated by any external force. The world is created by him for his 'Lila' and we all, finite souls ('jivatma'), are eagerly waiting to see him play in His own created field. As Tagore writes in *Gitanjali* or *Songs Offerings*- "*You will play in me that is why I have come to this world.*"¹²

Despite being influenced by the Neo-Vedanta of the Brahma Samaj tradition, Tagore had high regards for the Vaishnava religion for he used to believe that Vaishnava religion was the only religion where God had bound himself to man and in that comprises the best grandness of human presence. However, it is also true that he, like his father, preferred the more adoring, mindful individual translation of the celestial Brahma than did Rammohun Roy or other Neo-Vedantists. As he writes - "*The Vaishnava religion has boldly declared that God has bound himself to man, and in that consists the greatest glory of human existence. In the spell of the wonderful rhythm of the finite he fetters himself at every step, and thus gives his love out in music in his most perfect lyrics of beauty. Beauty is his wooing of our heart; it can have no other purpose. It tells us everywhere that the display of power is not the ultimate meaning of creation; wherever there is a bit of colour, a note of song, a grace of form, there comes the call for our love. Hunger compels us to obey its behests, but hunger is not the last word for a man. There have been men who have deliberately defied its commands to show that the human soul is not to be led by the pressure of wants and threat of pain. In fact, to live the life of man we have to resist its demands every day, the least of us as well as the greatest. But, on the other hand, there is a beauty in the world which never insults our freedom, never raises even its little finger to make us acknowledge its sovereignty. We can absolutely ignore it and suffer no penalty in consequence. It is a call to us, but not a command. It seeks for love in us, and love can never be had by compulsion. Compulsion is not indeed the final appeal to man, but joy is. Any joy is everywhere; it is in the earth's green covering of grass; in the blue serenity of the sky; in the reckless exuberance of spring; in the severe abstinence of grey*

winter; in the living flesh that animates our bodily frame; in the perfect poise of the human figure, noble and upright; in living; in the exercise of all our powers; in the acquisition of knowledge; in fighting evils; in dying for gains we never can share. Joy is there everywhere; it is superfluous, unnecessary; nay, it very often contradicts the most peremptory behests of necessity. It exists to show that the bonds of law can only be explained by love; they are like body and soul. Joy is the realisation of the truth of oneness, the oneness of our soul with the world and of the world-soul with the supreme lover.”¹³

Being the poet of the age of transition Tagore was fully aware of the fact that the charge of anthropomorphism was often levelled against him. But here it is noteworthy to mention that Rabindranath did not address the divine as Krishna or by any other ‘anthropomorphic’ name-and-form, he often wrote of a personal divine presence within his heart (jivan-devata, maner-manush), much as Vaishnavas would speak of God within the individual soul as *paramatman*. Even Tagore himself has highly criticized the prevalent idea of anthropomorphism by saying that God always exists within Man and this eternal truth cannot be condemned by using such term. As he says- “*Our God is also Man. If this is condemned as anthropomorphism, then man should be blamed for being man, and the lover for loving his beloved as a person, and not as a principle of Psychology.*” He further extends his opinion in *The Religion of Man* or ‘Manusher Dharma’- “*When we call God our ‘Dear ones’ we don’t attribute ‘Manness’ to God, but it is to realize ‘Manness’ by realizing the greatness of humanity man reaches to his God....In the waves of ether man does not attribute ‘lightness’ but he feels it as ‘light’*”.¹⁴

This view of Tagore resembles with that of the philosophy of Vaishnavism because Vaishnava philosophy does not acknowledge the absolutistic idea of the ‘Brahma’, rather their conception of God is the humanistic conception. That is why Vaishnavism instead of loving the ‘Absolute’ always speaks for loving a ‘Personal God’, who is imagined as taking ‘human form’ and playing with the finite as friend and lover. In other words, the Vaishnava Sadhana always craves for bridging the gap

between God and the finite. In Tagore's humanism one can trace the same tendency. Like the Vaishnavites, he also thirsts upon the theistic, personal aspect of God than to the absolutistic aspect of God or 'Brahma' for Tagore is well aware of the idea that unless God is made near and dear ones it will not be possible for him to love the indifferent Absolute from distance. That is why Tagore has tried to show that God exists within us but in order to visualise Him we need to look inside-

Noyon tomare payna dekhite, royecho noyone noyone.
Hridoy tomare payna janite, hridoy royecho gopone
Bashonar boshe mon obiroto, dhay dosh dishe pagoler moto
Stheer ankhi tumi morome shototo jagicho shoyone shopone
Shobayee chereche, nai jar keho , tumi acho tar acche tobo sneho
Nirashroy jon, poth jaar geho sheo aache tobo bhowone
Tumi chara keho shaathi nai ar, shomukhe ononto jibonbistar
Kalparabar korithecho paar keho nahi jane kamone
Jani shudhu tumi aacho tai aachi, tumi praanmoy tai ami bnachi,
Joto paayi tomaye aro toto jaachi joto jaani toto jaani ne
Jani ami tomay abo nironor, loklokantorey jujugantor
Tumi aar ami majhe keho nai, kono badha nai bhubane.

[My eyes fail to find you, as you reside within the eyes.
You aren't knowledgeable to the heart, as you secretly stay within.
My desires make me sprint relentlessly In all directions as if in a whim,
You have been awake in the core with eyes wide open perpetually.
You have been caring for him, Condemned, who hasn't someone,
You provide shelter to the destitute - For whom street is the residence.
Endless ocean of life lay in front, Not a single companion but you.
You sail across Eternal Ocean - No one knows how.
Your being has touched my existence, your vitality makes my life to roll -
That is all what I know. More I get you, more is the desire,
The extent I know you, the unknown seems to be more.
I am sure to perceive you along the ages and stages of the world.
Not a single entity between you and me, not a slightest hindrance on earth.]15

The most significant aspect of Vaishnava philosophy is the eternal bondage between 'paramatma'

and the devotees. The lover by his impassioned reflection not just tries to envision and make the entire Vrindavan Lila of Krishna live before him, but also he goes into imaginatively, and filling the role of a dearest of Krishna he encounters vicariously the energetic sentiments which are so clearly imagined in the writing. There are several songs of Tagore where he has acknowledged the supreme Lord as 'Paramakarunāmaḃa' or Absolute Merciful. He has also imagined God as 'Lilamaya' and says, "Out of thy own kindness you make yourself small and come to my small house."¹⁶

In Vaishnava writing another imperative perspective is "Viraha" or the idea of estrangement. Vaishnavites believe that not exclusively is the human soul of Radha anxious to meet the Perfect, however, the preeminent soul likewise waits for the human soul to come to him. He additionally endures and experiences numerous excruciating encounters for meeting the human soul. These strings of separation experienced by Radha are agonizing yet they are sweet for her, since she knows, after "Viraha" 'Milan' (union) will take after. Tagore has used this Vaishnava perception and boldly declares that God needs to depend on human soul for the of his adoration- "*God has to rely on human soul for the fulfilment of his love*". For Tagore, as well, the "Viraha" is sweet, and that is why he does not even hesitate to say - "*My Viraha has turned out to be sweet in this night.*"¹⁷

The idea of 'Abhisara' is one of the popular subject matters for the Vaishnava lyrical poets. 'Abhisara' refers to those lyrics where the descriptions of 'Journey of Love' of Radha for Krishna are beautifully delineated. There are several verse composers like Gobindadasa, Chandidasa, who wrote numerous lyrics on Radha's hazardous journey in order to meet the Supreme. "*But the path of the 'Abhisara'*", as opined by Dr.Pradhan, "*is made so impassable and Radha is described as so self-forgetful that we cannot be contented by understanding those songs as the descriptions of the 'Journey of Love' of the heroine for the hero. There it seems that the Poet's purpose will be served if we imagine the hero as 'infinite Brahma' and the heroin as 'individual soul'*".¹⁸ Tagore was highly affected by the idea of "Abhisara". He has given more importance to 'Abhisara' than to the conception of Union'. It is so because being a true Vaishnavite he has realized that like Radha, a

human soul is always in search for the path of divine. Therefore the journey of the 'Jivatma' is nothing but Abhisara in order for the union with 'Paramatma'. Besides Tagore is also of the opinion that the ultimate truth of one's life should be to know the Eternal. As he says in one of his poems that the real pleasure of him lies in walking through the path- the path that can lead him to get the momentary touch of his dearest through the beauties of nature and love of man.

In some letters written to Hemantabala Devi (1898–1976) in the early 1930s, Rabindranath, despite being highly “critical of Vaishnava preoccupation with ritualised service of the deity in iconic form,”²³ cannot restrain him from admitting his own Vaishnava like qualities-

*“You seek the Vaishnava within me. He has not fled, but together with him is the Shaiva—beggar and ascetic. The flute of the king of sentiment (rasa) [i.e., Krishna] is sounding; there is also the dancing of the king of dance [i.e., Shiva]. The boat floats on the Yamuna [river by Krishna's Vrindavan+ but in the end sinks into the Ganga *by Shiva's Varanasi+, which Ganga, donning ochre garment, goes to the sea.”*¹⁹

According to Dr. A. K. Coomaraswami “Vaishnava art is correspondingly humanistic, and it is from this school of thought that the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore derives. In it are echoed the teaching of such prophets as Sri Chaitanya and poets such as Jayadev and Chandidas, who sung of the religion of love.” K. S. Ramaswami Sastri in his book *Sir Rabindranath Tagore: His Life Personality and Genius* writes that Tagore has gone back to the past to age of the great Vaishnava movement to restore and revived our impression of the excellence and love of God – “Tagore has gone back to the past to age of the great Vaishnava movement and has affected a revolution in the realm of taste by so going back to the age of beauty, freedom, love, and rapture. He has revived and re-kindled our sense of the wonder of things, our perception of the beauty and grace and love of God.”²⁰

While examining Tagore's statement ‘Nobody has exalted man more in every sphere than Jesus. The divinity of man is stressed by Jesus as by Vaishnava saints’, Jyoti Ignace Tete has aptly remarked that this assertion may seem to be an echo of the Christian assertion of God as an²¹⁷ emblem of love, but in

reality as the core emphasis is not on service or compassion but on devotion or surrender, it is a reverberation of the Vaishnava theology. From the perspectives of Metaphysics, thinkers of both the school will interpret the expression “God is love” in more or less in similar way. But as Tagore voices for ‘an emotional realisation of oneness which will lead to an extension of consciousness beyond the narrow limits of the self’, so in his view ‘God is love’ means that that the Supreme Master of the universe is the ultimate source of hope and strength for human being, with whom “an emotional relationship can be established and through whom life can derive sustenance and solace.”²¹

It is often complained by the Vaishnava critics that Tagore’s verse has not the extreme imperativeness that recognizes the work of his Vaishnava forerunners. Here it is noteworthy to mention that it is true that Tagore's love poetry shows the influence of Vaishnava love poetry, which centres round the loves of Radha and Krishna, but his treatment of it is entirely his own. Srinivasa Iyengar says that “*The Gardener is the richest of the collections that have appeared in English. It is in the main a feast of love poetry – with a human rather than a divine slant, though with a poet like Tagore the border–line between the two is apt to be tantalizingly indistinct.*” The Gardener thus shows how the beloved, who is restless because her love calls her with his flute, though he is far away, is left to cherish the mere breath that comes to her whispering an impossible hope-

Yet suddenly in some worldness music the dim memory wakes up

And the beast gazes into man's life with a tender trust, and

The man looks down into eyes with amused affection.

It seems that the two friends meet masked, and vaguely know

*Each other through the disguise.*²²

The centrality of Tagore's verse is bigger and more perplexing, and that the force of energy to be found here is the power of an alternate kind. He does not even try to delineate Radha’s passion and eagerness in the same way as done by the Vaishnava poets. The reason why he maintains this distance from the inspiring Vaishnava verse composers is because “*the divine shepherd has for him*

*a more transcendent significance than for the Vaishnava poets, and he looks upon yearning passion as only a part of the rhythm of life.”*²³ For instance if we consider the poem “I was walking, by the road, I know not why?” from “The Gardener-14” we shall be able to find that the Vaishnava imagery comes incidentally and the intensity that has been used by him is very different from the fervour with which the love of Krishna and Radha is portrayed in Vaishnava literature-

*Years ago it was a day of breezy
March when the murmur of the spring
was languorous, and mango blossoms
were dropping on the dust.
The rippling water leapt and licked
the brass vessel that stood on the
landing-step.*

(Tagore and the Vaishnava Poetry)

(“The Gardener-14”) *English Rendering by Rabindranath Tagore

Apart from that, there is also another subtle difference between the approach of the Vaishnava poet and Tagore. The representation of desire by the Vaishnava poet is simpler and more poignant whereas the delineation of Tagore is more suggestive and more intricate. Such complex approach of Tagore can be found in those poems which have splendidly harmonised the Shaiva and Vaishnava imageries in a single vein. Unlike the Vaishnava poet, Tagore does not restrain himself only by presenting the sweet facet of the Infinite. It is so because Tagore is a believer of the perception that the limitless is sweet as well as terrible. Such a blend of delicacy and sternness is to be traced out in those pictures in which he conjures Shiva as Mahakala or Eternity and also envisions him as a shepherd or cowherd as the Vaishnavas envision Krishna. This mingling of Shaivism and Vaishnavism becomes clearer in the poem called ‘Utsarga’ (Offering) in which “*the divine lover is apostrophised in different grabs, first as a young flute-player and then as a grim ascetic with an iron rod in his hand and with water dripping from his hair (incarnate of Lord Shiva).*”²⁴

Season monsoon is considered to be the one of the most recurrent themes in Vaishnava poetry. From

the first sloka of Joydeb's *Gitagovindam* to the writings of several other Vaishnava poets the rainy season with its dark clouds have occupied a special position. Vaishnava poets probably have the belief that during monsoon one cannot go out from homes but on such day one feels lonely and desires to go out to meet the beloved. That is why they have frequently used the image of Radha, taking no care of the hazards of the journey during a cloudy night, goes out to meet with Krishna. In Tagore the same monsoon cloud of the Vaishnava literature finds a strong reference. Taking inspiration from Kalidasa's *Meghdoot*, he has endowed it with a new significance. He perceives "this loneliness and this desire for union as characteristics of 220 universal life, human and terrestrial, and the errant clouds of the rainy season appear to him to be charged with message of the unknown which makes the heart wistful. The pang of separation which the stars feel as they gaze at one another becomes music among the rustling leaves in the rainy darkness of Asadh. In the busy moments of noontide work the poet is with the crowd, but on dark lonely days when clouds heap upon clouds it is only for the far-away lover that his soul pines in pensive loneliness for the beloved."²⁵

The collection *The Songs of Bhanushingho Thakur* has 22 tunes out of which just nine exists in Swarabitan (Vol. XXI), collection of notations of Tagore's music. Tagore was attracted to the Maithili ballads gathered in '*Prachin Kavya Samgraha*', edited by Akshay Chandra Sarkar and Sarada Charan Mitra. It was Sarkar, who told Young Rabi about the English poet Thomas Chatterton and also about his peculiar habits of imitating other poets. Tagore was so enlivened by the life story of the young English poet that set himself up to be a "second Chatterton" and wrote the lyric *Gahanan Kusuma kunjaj-majhe* by imitating the old Vaishnava lyrics of Vidyapati. However, Tagore himself pens down the story behind the composition of the lyrical collection differently. In his reminiscence *Jivansmriti* Tagore has said that in his early years it was a volume of poems by the Maithili poet Vidyapati found in the family library that initiated his youthful interest towards Vaishnava lyrics. Though the Maithili expressions of Vidyapati were fairly obscure to him, yet this Maithili dialect charmed him the most. He was so overwhelmed by the expression of the Vaishnava poet that without taking note of anything and to satisfy his yearning of forming Vaishnava verses like Vidyapati he wrote several songs under the pseudo name

Bhanusingha- *“It had one day become very cloudy at mid-day. In that cloud-darkened delight of leisure, lying on my stomach upon a bed in a room, I wrote upon a slate: **gahana kusuma kunjā majhe**. Writing it made me very happy....”*²⁶

According to Mohit Kumar Ray, the author of the book *Studies on Rabindranath Tagore*, the composition of *The Songs of Bhanusingha* was the result of a young boy’s creative experiment with the Vaishnava padavali literature. It is also a studied imitation medieval Vaishnava lyric of Vidyapati and Chandidas. But despite being an imitation, Tagore is still able to maintain originality. This is where the genius of Tagore’s artistic excellence lies. Even at the age of sixteen he mastered the art of maintaining originality in a work, which was composed with the intention of imitating some poets. Though in a later life *“Rabindranath, however, felt rather uneasy about it, because he believed that it was only an imitation and not original poetry. Although Bhānu Siinha Thākurer Padābali deviates significantly from Vaishnava padābali incertain fundamental matters it can never be gain said that it displays extraordinary poetic talent of the boy.”*²⁷

Tagore’s explicit treatment with the Vaishnava theme gets well exhibited in his *The Songs of Bhanusingha Thakur*. The subject matter of Tagore’s Vsishnava lyrical collection is the traditional one. The poet sought connection with divinity through appeal to nature and the emotional interplay of human drama. It deals with the amorous pastimes of the divine couple Radha and Krishna- particularly the idea of ‘Abhisara’ has been beautifully incorporated in several lyrics, where we find Radha is on her secret love adventure to meet Krishna, taking risks in her pursuit. This idea of Abhisara has been adopted by him from the medieval Vaishnava poets. As stated earlier, he was a firm believer of the concept of ‘Abhisara’ than to the idea of union for it was in Radha’s hazardous expedition for the Supreme he must have comprehended the indication of the journey of the ‘Jivatma’ to be in union with ‘Paramatma’. In the following lyric we find a brilliant description of Radha’s ‘Abhisara’. Watching the intense gathering of the dark clouds in the sky, Radha has been constantly made aware by her confidantes (sakhis) to be careful and not go to meet Krishna, but

Radha, who has coveted her entire life for the sake of her Supreme Lord, determines to pursue her mission-

Shawan gagane ghora ghanaghata
Nishitha yamini re
Kunja pathe sakhi kayse jaoba
Abala kamani re

(Dark rain clouds gathered all over the monsoon sky
In the dark of the night
How do I go thru the forest
Being a helpless lady)

Tagore is affected by the idea of Radha as portrayed in Vaishnava writing. Radha is acknowledged as the 'Alhadini Shakti' (intrinsic energy of eternal joy) of Krishna. The originator of the idea as well as the first poet, who introduced the idea of Radha for the first time in 'Vaishnava padavali literature', Joydeb in his *Gitgovindam* has attempted to demonstrate that Krishna is simply the Supreme Being and Radha is His 'Aihadini Shakti'. In Tagore's philosophy we find the articulation of the idea of Bliss and happiness, which, in a way, are nothing but the resonance of the Vaishnava notion of the 'Alhadini Shakti'. He, on the one hand, like his Vaishnava masters, believes that "*Radha is God's power, both are divine and the finite are one, only both have taken different forms*" and on the other he, unlike them, is also of the opinion that "*though the finite and Infinite are one, but the Infinite wants to preserve the human personality as human for the fulfilment of this love*"²⁸.

I've fallen from my life, friend –
my tears since birth have washed my charms away.
But I've known pure love.

Gitanjali

The philosophy of Vaishnavism finds its best expression in Tagore's *Gitanjali: Song Offerings*. The book not only contains songs offered at the feet of the Supreme Lord but also exposes his spiritual

outlook, which, to an extent, echoes the core idea of the Vaishnava thought propounded by his early Vaishnava predecessors. A little contemplation will reveal the fact that in *Gitanjali* he draws several images from the enriched lyrics composed by the Vaishnava poets and in several songs he has used the teachings of Sri Chaitanya from which he was highly influenced. The reflection of such teachings can be found in the first song of *Gitanjali*. Sri Chaitanya teaches us that in order to be a true Vaishnava - a man has to become as insignificant as grass yet tolerant as the tree, and has to honour and respect other by discarding all his pride and self-centric nature. The idea of the same philosophy finds expression in the first song, where the poet is yielding to God by uttering that kindly clean his pride and desire of having the glory with tears so that he can surrender his soul at His lotus feet-

Amar mathanatokaredau he tomar chanrandhular tale Sakolahankar he amardubaochokherjale
 Nijere karate gaurabdannijerekaboleekoriapoman Aponaresudhugheriagheriaghuremori pale pale
 Sakolahankar he amardubaochokherjale Amarenajenokoripracharamaraponkaje, Tomariichchakaro
 he purnoamarjibonmajhe Jachi he tomarcharamshantiparanetomarparamkanti
 Amarearalkoriyadaraohridoypaddotale

(Let bow down my head under the dust of thee feet.
 Thou, let my all ego sink into the tears of eyes.
 When I give fame to myself, I do insult to myself,
 Revolving within myself, Every moment I am dying.
 Thou, let my all ego sink into the tears of eyes.
 I don't wish my publicity,
 (Thus) Through my duties -
 Thou fulfill your wishes Through my life.
 Thou, me seeking for your eternal peace,
 (and) the your enlightenment in the soul,
 Thou, keep me close to you,
 On the petals of lotus heart.

Thou, let my all ego sink into the tears of eyes.)translations by BiplabGhosh

The second song also expresses “*both Vaishnavas’ and Rabindranath’s conceptions of what are quintessentially humane and spiritual experience is beyond question. Here Rabindranath’s delight*

with the divine command to sing 'before thy presence' because the divine 'takes pleasure' in the singing runs parallel to Vaishnavas' own yearning to be admitted to circle of Krishna's intimates and be assigned some small task contributing to his divine pleasure. Both share not only the idea of the divine taking pleasure in human song but the yet more striking notion that the divine depends for fulfilment upon humans' love".²⁹

When thou commandest me to sing it seems that my heart would break with pride;
and I look to thy face, and tears come to my eyes.

All that is harsh and dissonant in my life melts into one sweet harmony – and my
adoration spreads wings like a glad bird on its flight across the sea.

I know thou takest pleasure in my singing. I know that only as a singer I come before
thy presence.

I touch by the edge of the far-spreading wing of my song thy feet which I could never
aspire to reach.

Drunk with the joy of singing I forget myself and call thee friend who art my lord.

The last line of the song 'Drunk with the joy of singing, I forgot myself and call thee friend who art my lord', reminds us of a typical Vaishnava custom, according to which while praying to Lord Krishna one should forget that He is the Supreme Lord of the universe and should start treating him as friend, child, lover, etc. Apart from that, like Tagore, Vaishnavas also look upon the face of God while recognizing their unworthiness. They rely on upon the benevolence (kripa) of Krishna. Besides they considerably more so than Rabindranath, are very inclined to breaking into tears—of joy or sorrow or other human emotions."³⁰

Like 'Abhisara', the idea of Viraha or the pang of separation is one of the popular subject matter of Vaishnavapadavali. That is why Dinesh Chandra Sen in his *Banga Bhasha and Sahitya* has addressed the Vaishnavapadavali literature is called the literature of tears. Tagore has used this Vaishnava perception of 'Viraha' in the eighteenth song of *Gitanjali*-

Clouds heap upon clouds and it darkens. Ah, love, why dost thou let me wait
outside at the door all alone?

In the busy moments of the noontide work I am with the crowd, but on this dark, lonely
day it is only for thee that I hope.

If thou showest me not thy face, if thou leavest me wholly aside, I know not how I am to
pass these long, rainy hours.

I keep gazing on the far-away gloom of the sky, and my heart wanders wailing with the
restless wind.³¹

The imagery that is used in the song resonates with so many Vaishnava lyrics which are written on the subject matter of 'Abhisara', where we find the description of stressful Radha, who is even ready to take a hectic journey to meet with Lord Krishna in order to overcome the pain of separation. In other words what Rabindranath expresses here is a classic expression of Viraha. Though it is quite evident that he does not use any Vaishnava melodramatic imagery such as rain-soaked body, menacing snakes, and thunderbolts to cast his lyric into the genre of Vaishnava 'padavali', he makes use of expressions like 'my heart wanders wailing with the restless wind' to show his intimate association with the Vaishnava poets.

Among the fifty seven songs of *Gitanajali* the eleventh song is considered to be the most critical one. It is so because on the one hand it denounces the Hindu practices like chanting, singing, telling of beads, deliverance, meditations, flowers etc. and on the other it eulogizes, in an implicit manner, the concept of 'Prema-Bhakti' or loving devotion. From Krishnadasa Kaviraja's *Sri Chaitanyacharitamrita*, a spiritual biography of Sri Chaitanya, we are informed that Sri Chaitanya himself was against such orthodox customs of Hinduism. He was of the opinion that if tears did not flow through one's eyes while chanting the name of Lord Krishna then such rituals would be insufficient to liberate one's soul from the mundane complexities. Tagore, in an implicit manner, has used this teaching of Sri Chaitanya to propagate the message that practices like 'chanting and singing and telling of beads' will not lead a devotee towards the Supreme Powerful for what God wants is not the pursuance of rigid customs but 'Prema-Bhakti' or loving devotion-

*Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads! Whom dost thou worship
in this lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut? Open thine eyes and see thy
God is not before thee!*

*He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the pathmaker is
breaking stones. He is with them in the sun and in shower, and his garment is covered with dust. Put off
thy holy mantle and even like him come down on the dusty soil!*

*Deliverance? Where is this deliverance to be found? Our master himself has joyfully taken upon
him the bonds of creation; he is bound with us all for ever.*

*Come out of thy meditations and leave aside thy flowers and incense! What harm is there if thy clothes
become tattered and stained? Meet him and stand by him in toil and
in sweat of thy brow.*³²

Unlike the eleventh song, the Vaishnava spirit and message is apt and clear in thirty fourth song of *Gitanjali*, where the poet, like a true Vaishnava, decides to surrender everything at the feet of the Supreme Lord by uttering that whatever he does, whatever he speaks and whatever he desires are actually done at the indication of his Master-

Let only that little be left of me whereby I may name thee my all.

*Let only that little be left of my will whereby I may feel thee on every side, and come to thee in
everything, and offer to thee my love every moment. Let only that little be left of me whereby I may
never hide thee.*

*Let only that little of my fetters be left whereby I am bound with thy will, and thy
purpose is carried out in my life – and that is the fetter of thy love.*³³

While examining the Vaishnava strains implicit in *Gitanjali* Joseph T. O'Connell has aptly remarked that the thirty fourth song of *Gitanjali* is so full of Vaishnava spirit and phraseology that it can easily be attributed as one composed by Narottamadasa. As he writes-*"This brief song, humble and devout, is so quintessentially Vaishnava in its spirit and phraseology that, were it given in Bangla and without attribution, it might well pass for a devout hymn in the celebrated Prarthana (prayer) of Narottamadasa (mid-late sixteenth-century Vaishnava spiritual leader)."*³⁴

A renowned academician in the field of Vaishnava studies Hare Krishna Mukhapadhaya has acknowledged Rabindranath Tagore as a true Vaishnav.⁴² So it was quite natural that a true Vaishnava like him would be a high admirer of this enriched ancient musical convention of Bengal. The highly rhetorical languages of Vaishnava lyrics and their charming 'Sahajiya' tune influenced him so much that

he made ample use of them in his lyrics and songs. To conclude in the words of Sri Aurobindo –“*One of the most remarkable peculiarities of Rabindranath’s genius is the happiness and originality with which he has absorbed the whole spirit of Vaishnava poetry and turned it into something essentially the same yet new and modern. He has given the old sweet spirit of emotional and passionate religion an expression of more delicate and complete richness voiceful of subtler and most penetratingly spiritual shades of feeling than the deep- hearted but simple early age of Bengal could know.*”³⁵

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Dr Sayantan Thakur is Assistant Professor of English in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in ICFAI University, Tripura. He specializes in Vaishnava studies, and himself is a performer of Vaishnava kirtan songs. He happens to be the descendant of one of the twelve Vaishnava apostles appointed by Nityananda.

Demographic Alterations in West Bengal during the Last Decade of Twentieth Century

Anish Gupta

The issue of the Bangladeshi infiltration in the bordering West Bengal has been an issue which has divided the political spectrum in two very contrasting groups. One claims that a lot of infiltration is taking place which is altering the demography of the states, and the other counters this very statement and claim that no infiltration is taking place at all.

This paper studies the decadal population growth since independence, by dividing West Bengal into two distinct groups: 1) the districts which have a higher population growth rate than the state average; and 2) the districts having a lower population growth rate than the state average. These two sets of districts are studied in view of the Hindu-Muslim population growths to capture the infiltration in West Bengal with the help of demographic tools.

Keywords: Population growth, infiltration, West Bengal

Introduction

The issue of the Bangladeshi infiltration in the bordering North-Eastern states as well as in West Bengal has been an issue which has divided the political spectrum in two very contrasting groups. One claims that a lot of infiltration is taking place which is altering the demography of the states,

and the other counters this very statement and claim that no infiltration is taking place at all. The first group is, very obviously, Sangh Parivar (an umbrella term used for RSS and its various affiliate organizations) and its associated organisations. The second group consists of all the other secular academia and political parties of India.

One of the prominent scholar among the second group is Sujata Ramachandran (2002) in her study claimed that the issue of Bangladeshi infiltration is brain child of Sangh Parivar. She further claimed that *Sangh Parivar's* relentless quest in the early 1990s for political legitimacy and authority or hegemony had much to do with a sudden hyper visibility of undocumented Bangladeshis in India. Gillan (2002) too had the similar views on Bangladeshi infiltration to India. He says that as the BJP has been relatively insignificant force in West Bengal in terms of its organizational capacities and electoral success, it sought to identify and cultivate issues that have some degree of “relevance” and immediacy for the local political culture of the these states. He further asserts that it is in this context that the BJP’s efforts to expand in West Bengal have centered on the theme of Bangladeshi “infiltration” and the negative consequences of migration at a local level. From the early 1980s, the BJP in West Bengal attempted to highlight the issue by means of political rallies, conferences, posters, pamphlets and press releases. Moodie (2010) ridicules Sangh parivar by saying that the issue of Bangladeshi infiltration raised by Sangh parivar basically is “demographic anxiety” about Bangladeshi immigrants and Indian Muslims.

Present paper attempts to study district level data of population in West Bengal during various census. The first section provides some numeric estimation of various aspects of infiltration. Section-2 analyses the district wise population growth of west Bengal, and last section consists of conclusions.

Some evidences of infiltration

But there are many others who acknowledge the Bangladeshi infiltration to India. For instance, Datta (2011), in her paper on female trafficking from Bangladesh, writes that illegal female migration from Bangladesh due to trafficking is increasing rapidly along Indo-Bangladesh open border. According to her a report indicates about 200,000 Bangladeshi women and children were trafficked out of the country in the past 10 years. Bose (2014), while recognizing the problem of illegal Bangladeshi migration to India, held the climate mainly responsible for the problem. She says that frequent floods, tropical cyclones and storm surges have had a colossal impact on Bangladesh's coastal population. Shrinkage of land area, river bank erosion and intrusion of saline waters into the agricultural fields have pushed farmers in search of new lands. These are causing widespread landlessness, unemployment, income disparities and degradation of human habitat. No rehabilitation programmes exist and there is extremely poor participation of the majority of the people in decisions that affect their lives. Because of the supply of cheap labour from Bangladesh, political parties in the Indian Border States encourage this illegal infiltration. However, the humanitarian concerns are overwhelming for both India and Bangladesh. People smuggling is flourishing, with a deeply entrenched network on both sides of the border.

Kumar (2006) in his introduction to a compendium of papers on *Illegal Migration from Bangladesh*, refers to the influx of migrants from Bangladesh a 'grave situation' that adversely affects the Indian economy, national security and social environment. He points to inflows of Bangladeshi immigrants as the cause for dilution of India's cultural integrity and electoral process and questions economic rationalizations of employing Bangladeshi migrants.

Many Bangladeshi migrants have found employment as construction workers, street hawkers and domestic labourers in middle-class suburbs such as Salt Lake in Kolkata. It has also been estimated that one-third of the women working in the main prostitution locality of the city are Bangladeshi migrants Chaudhuri (1992, 24–25). Bangladeshi migrants are not just limited to settle in a border city like Kolkata but in other cities such as Mumbai and New Delhi, Bangladeshi migrants have found work as day labourers, rag pickers, cycle rickshaw drivers and domestic labourers (Lin and Paul 1995).

However the position of Government of India is very vague in this regard. In a written to a question on infiltration asked in the Rajya Sabha on November 2011, then minister of state in the Ministry of Home Affairs, Shri Mullappally Ramachandran stated that

“Since entry of foreign nationals infiltrated into the country is clandestine and surreptitious, it is not possible to have a correct estimate of such infiltrators from Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka living in the country. A citizen of Nepal entering India by land or air over the Nepal border does not require a passport or visa for entry into India. Some of the Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Sri Lankan nationals who entered India with valid travel documents have been found to be overstaying. As per information available, 32,644 Bangladeshi nationals, 7,691 Pakistani nationals and 2,490 Sri Lankan nationals were found to be overstaying as on 31st December, 2009. During the year 2009, 5,312 Bangladeshi nationals, 30 Pakistani nationals, 36 Nepali nationals and 63 Sri Lankan nationals were arrested under various provisions of the Foreigners’ Act. Details for the year 2010 have not been compiled. Certain instances of some illegal immigrants having managed to get their names registered in the electoral rolls have been reported. Statistical data of this nature is not centrally maintained. As and when such instances are detected, the State Governments/Union Territory Administrations take necessary action for deleting the names from the electoral rolls and

cancellation of voter identity cards along with such other appropriate steps as mandated by the provisions of the law.”

It is clear from the statement of minister of government of India that there is a dearth of documents support actual number of migrants and no concrete study to support the claim.

Population Growth in All Districts of West Bengal

This article mainly focuses on the demographic shift in West Bengal, while raising some plausible questions on the pattern of this demographic shift. The districts of West Bengal can be divided into two distinct groups: 1) the districts which have a higher population growth rate than the state average; and 2) the districts having a lower population growth rate than the state average. The 2001 census indicates that the population of ten districts has grown faster than the population growth of the state between the periods of 1991 to 2001. These districts are Uttar Dinajpur, Malda, Darjeeling, Murshidabad, North Twenty Four Parganas, Dakshin Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri, South Twenty Four Parganas, Nadia and Birbhum. Surprisingly, all these districts except Birbhum and South Twenty Four Parganas share a border with Bangladesh.

However the strategic locations of these two districts have closeness with Bangladesh. Birbhum is just around forty kilometres away from the Bangladesh border. Murshidabad is located on the way from Birbhum to Bangladesh and it had the highest population growth among all the other districts during the given period. The other noticeable thing about Murshidabad is that it is one of those districts in West Bengal which has the highest Muslim population. Another district which has a higher population growth than the state average, without having any border with Bangladesh, is

South 24 Parganas. Although South 24 Parganas does not have any border with Bangladesh, it shares a direct sea route with Bangladesh.

The other set of districts that have a lower population growth than the state's average population growth are Hooghly, Paschim Midnapur, Purba Midnapur, Howrah, Cooch Bihar, Puruliya, Bardhaman, Bankura and Kolkata. Interestingly, not one of these districts shares a border with Bangladesh except Cooch Bihar. Cooch Bihar is one of those districts that already have a lower population density due to its geographical location. It is a highly flood-prone area.

If we look back at the data acquired during the British rule and the first decade after Independence, no significant difference is found in the growth rates of the bordering and non-bordering districts of West Bengal. The growth rate in the 1960s was similar too.

Table 1: District-wise decadal Population Growth in West Bengal

State / district	District having border with Bangladesh	Population growth	Populatio n growth	Population growth	Populatio n growth	Populatio n growth
		1951-61	1971-81	1981-91	1991-01	2001-11
Uttar Dinajpur	Yes	43.8	30.2	34	28.7	23.2
Malda Town	Yes	30.3	26	29.8	24.8	21.2
Darjeeling	Yes	35.9	31	26.9	23.8	14.8
Murshidabad	Yes	33.5	25.5	28.2	23.8	21.1
North 24	Yes	47.9	31.4	31.7	22.7	12

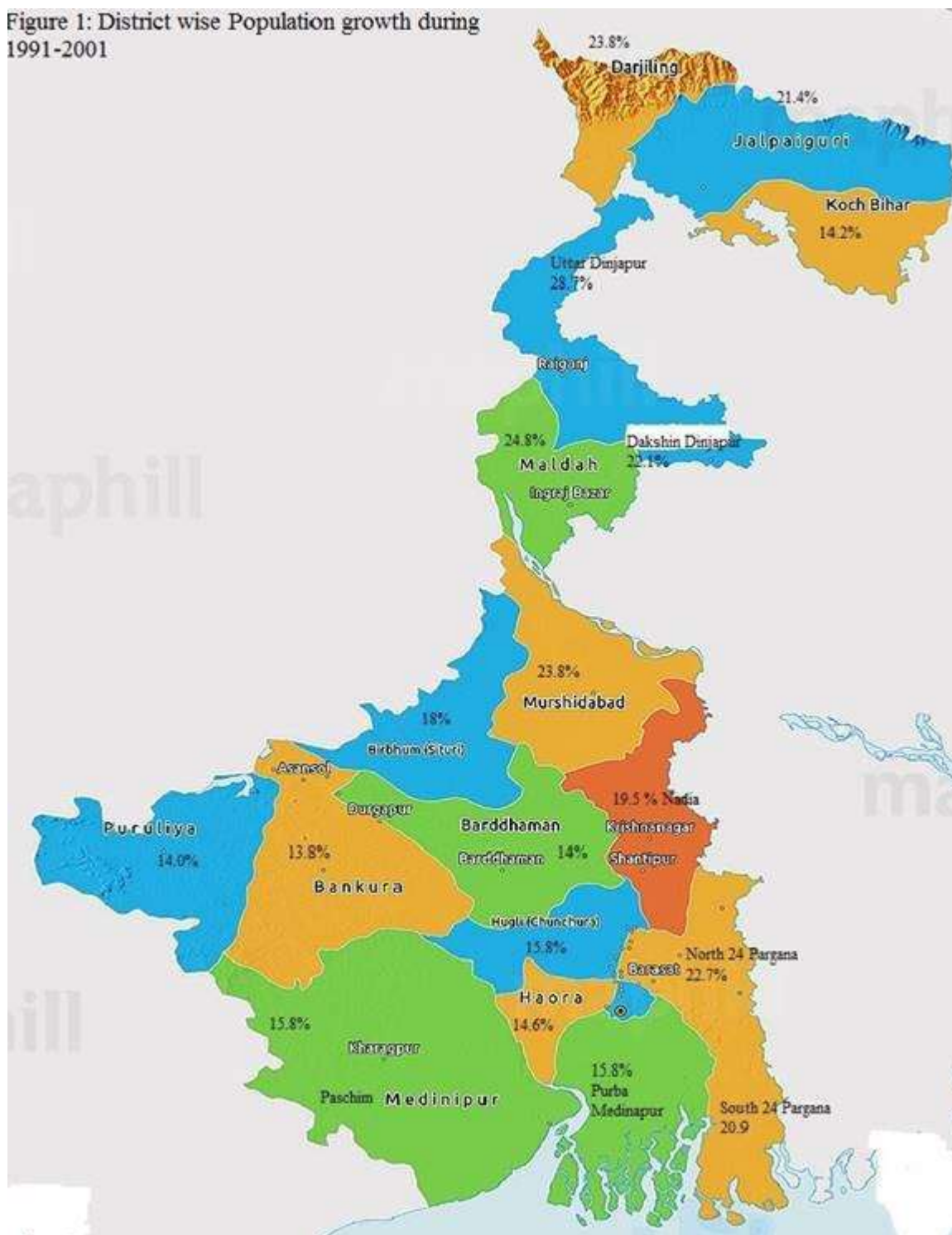
Parganas						
Dakshin	Yes					
Dinajpur		25.7	28	24.4	22.1	11.5
Jalpaiguri	Yes	48.3	26.6	26.4	21.4	13.9
South	24 Yes					
Parganas		30.7	19.8	30.2	20.9	18.2
Nadia	Yes	49.8	33.3	30	19.5	12.2
Birbhum	No	35.5	18	21.9	18	16.1
Hooghly	No	39	23.9	22.4	15.8	9.5
Paschim	No					
Medinipur		30	21.8	21.3	15.8	13.9
Purba Medinipur	No	28.3	23.1	26.3	14.9	15.4
Howrah	No	26.5	22.7	25.7	14.6	13.5
Kooch Bihar	Yes	52.4	25.3	22.5	14.2	13.7
Puruliya	No	16.3	15.7	20	14	15.5
Barddhaman	No	40.7	23.5	25.1	14	11.9
Bankura	No	26.2	16.9	18.1	13.8	12.7
Kolkata	No	13.4	10.7	6.6	3.9	-1.7
West Bengal	----	32.8	23.2	24.7	17.8	13.8

Source: Census of India (1951-2011)

A minute analysis shows that the population growth of West Bengal increased from 23.1% in 1981 to 24.7% in 1991. The increase in the percentage of population growth in the bordering districts was up to 10.5%, while the same for the non-bordering districts was up to 4.3%. This clearly indicates

that population growth in the bordering districts was higher than non-bordering districts. The 2001 and 2011 censuses showed the same data, where the population growth of bordering districts was falling with very less percentage points while the non-bordering districts was falling with comparatively higher percentage points.

Figure 1: District wise Population growth during 1991-2001



An analysis of the districts based on religion shows that the Muslim population growth has been very high in the bordering districts. For instance, during the period 1981-2001, within the span of just twenty years, the Muslim population has increased by 128.9 % in Darjeeling. Similarly, the Muslim population in Jalpaiguri, Murshidabad and North twenty-four Parganas has increased by 90.6%, 72.2% and 74% respectively, during the same period. According to the 2011 census, the percentage of females in the prime child-bearing age group, that is, fifteen to forty-four years, is 37.6% of the total female population, out of which, approximately 75% of the women are married, which means that approximately 25% of the total female population in their prime child-bearing age are married. It means that only one-eighth of the total population, both male and female, might be married and can bear children. Further on, if we want the population to double within twenty years, this fraction will have to give birth to at least eight additional children, irrespective of the number of children they already have. During these twenty years, other females will also be capable of giving birth, but simultaneously, some will stop or become incapable of doing so, because of infertility, tubectomy, and other social restrictions like widowhood and divorces. A rough estimate would indicate that on an average, Muslim women will have to produce twelve children each to double the population within twenty years. In order to increase the population by 75% and 125%, each Muslim woman will have to produce ten and fourteen children respectively on average. This of course is very unrealistic. Statistically, if the population is increasing by 75% and 129 % in just 20 years, either of these two has to be true: either Muslim women are, on an average, giving birth to ten to fourteen children or Bangladeshi Muslim infiltration is taking place. The first one, being very unlikely, clearly makes a case for Bangladeshi Muslim infiltration.

It is not just a mere coincidence that the population growth of the bordering districts has been uniformly higher than the non-bordering districts, especially since the 1971 census, while the

population growth was not at all different for the bordering as well as non-bordering districts in all the censuses held prior to 1971. It is also not a coincidence that most of the border districts are showing an enormous increase in the population of Muslims only. The population growth of many states started declining after 1971. This must have occurred because India was in the second stage of a demographic transition where almost all the districts of India started witnessing lower mortality rates due to an expansion of the health facilities and also lower birth rates. West Bengal was the only exception to this trend. Instead of a fall, the population growth rose, as suggested by the data collected in 1990.

This is a definite suggestion of a case of infiltration in West Bengal. The above analysis implies that infiltration has actually occurred in the neighbouring districts of West Bengal. Despite a thousand denials from the ruling parties TMC and CPM, this is the truth.

Section 3: Conclusions

This has not just been limited to West Bengal, the demographic profiles of all the neighbouring eastern and north-eastern states show that the religious composition of most of the districts of India bordering neighbour countries is getting largely similar to the neighbouring countries and deviating from its own religious composition. It generally happens that when we move from one part of the state to another, the culture is found to be similar to the culture of the neighbouring state. When it comes to India, one can easily notice increasing similarity with its neighbouring country. For instance, India's bordering districts are becoming increasingly Muslim-dominated, while on the contrary the Bangladesh's border districts with India are becoming Hindu less. Akin to this is the case with bordering districts of J&K, Rajasthan, and north-eastern states.

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Dr Anish Gupta holds a PhD in Economics from JNU. He has been an Assistant Professor of Economics in a Delhi University College since 2008. He is a regular columnist in several newspapers.

There just aren't faces like that anymore- Remembering

Devika Rani

Anuja Bagchi

It was the year 1931. Ardeshir Irani released the first talkie of India, Alam Ara. Dadasaheb Phalke, the grand old man of Indian cinema, met V Shantaram in poona. Shantaram told him of his plan of making a talkie called '*Ayodhya ka Raja*', a take on the story of *Raja Harishchandra*. It was Ardeshir Irani who advised Dada to add sound to his film *Setu Bandhan*. Indian film was going through a transitional period. In fact, it was related not only to films. In the year 1933 BBC offered a Bengali actress a role in their first television broadcast. This once- apprentice- to- Elizabeth Arden would eventually found the most influential film studio in India in the years to come. The films produced by this studio would be directed by German director yet would be completely *desi* in the sense that they would be processed in India. Thespians like Ashok Kumar, DilIp Kumar, Madhubala would debut in the films made by this studio. Film making of those turbulent and unsure years was a projection of the aspirations of a subjugated race. As the man who started it all, was ready to retire into the sunset, albeit unwillingly, new leaders appeared on the horizon. Though a Marathi man it was who established filmdom firmly on the soil of India, a frail-looking Bengali woman would soon partner with a dashing Bengali man and give India for the first time a taste of sophistication and discipline in film making. It was to be one of the most successful partnerships in Indian film arena. As Mohundas Karamchand Gandhi, the new star in Indian politics, was leading the nation through the Civil Disobedience Movement, Niranjan Pal, the son of the old guard of the Indian freedom struggle, Bipin Chandra Pal, and himself an associate of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar and

Madanlal Dhingra, became a successful director and screenwriter of films. Pal wrote the script for the critically acclaimed silent film *The Light of Asia*. Eventually he would join hands with a Bengali couple to form... Talkies... *Bombay Talkies*. The history of *Bombay Talkies* is the history of the Diva.

The Diva...the Devi...Devika Rani . An able administrator. A queen in her own right. Singer par excellence. Femme fatale. The Diva. Above all, an artist who caught the imagination of both the Indian and the English people with her arched eyebrows, petite grace and natural dialogue-delivery. Indian audience knows her best for her four-minute long liplock with Himanshu Rai, in the film *Karma*. It was the second instance of kiss on Indian screen after the kiss of Charu Roy and Seeta Devi aka Renee Smith in the film *A Throw of Dice*, directed by Himanshu Rai, and more noted because of the length of time it took to enact. Not so much the kiss itself, but the way it was enacted, speaks volumes about the actor. In a way it presents a pretty contrasting picture to the post-1952 scenario where the intimacy between the romantic protagonists had to be symbolized through two nudging flowers. Even the “kiss-able” 1990s had to promote stories about how the damsel didn’t know about the kiss before the very second it was shot. It takes a toll on the image of an average ‘Indian’ actress even now in the 21st century. Here was a Bengali woman thinking nothing of a lengthy kissing scene in the early 1930s. But then, she came from no ordinary family background. Her paternal grandfather Durgadas Chaudhury came from a noted Barendra Brahmin zamindar family in the Pabna district of Bengal. Her paternal aunt Prasonnomoyi Devi was a noted poetess of her time. One of her uncles was Pramatha Chaudhury, the famous intellectual. Another uncle was Ashutosh Chaudhury, the Chief Justice of Calcutta High Court. Prasannomoyi’s daughter Priyamvada Devi was a known name in Bengali literature. Devika Rani’s father was the first Surgeon-General of Madras presidency. Her mother was the niece of Rabindranath Tagore. Such was the stock Devika came from.

Let us not forget that in the orthodox Bombay of 1912, ‘even looking in the direction of a

presentable young female was fraught with danger' (Sharayu Phalke Summanwar).’ Thus Anna Salunke, an adolescent boy, had the laurels of becoming the first female star in Indian films. In the 1920s the Renee Smiths, Patience Coopers, Ermelines ruled the roost .Either it was the Anglo Indians or the Indian theatre personalities like Durga Kamath and Kamala Devi who had the panache to face the camera. It was the era of the Anglo-Indian heroines passing as Indian ladies and taking up Indian names. Anglo Indian females were much in demand those days because they apparently had less qualms about appearing in films than the “*bhodromohilas*’ .The Seeta Devis of the early 20th century had another advantage - they satisfied the movie-going males’ need for Nordic features in the heroines and at the same time not being too distant in terms of race. There was another type. *The fearless Nadia* .Nadia was unapologetic about her very white look and refused to Indianize her name. However much we wish, as 21st century movie-goers, that Diamond queen Nadia, who flaunted her gym-sculpted look, would be the prototype on which Indian cine-womanhood would be built; it was not to be so. The androgynous Amazon could give release to the fantasy in the male audience of an oppressed nation but SHE could never be the “*Aurat*”. Although Sarala Devi Chaudhurani was encouraging young women to join gymanasia and physical culture clubs as early as 1902, a “radical feminist actress” like Nadia could not quite be the “heart throb” the average romantic Indian was looking for. India was deliberately being led away from the path of violence by the ‘young’ leadership of Congress, the Bengali “*Bhodrolok*” had already been lampooned through the “*Bandarlog*” of Kipling’s Jungle Book , and the Indian educated “gentoo” class which incidentally was the “*Bhagirath*” of film-making in India, was being projected as the effeminate babus . Devika Rani Chaudhuri emerged from these times.

Destiny often plays dice. A Bengali Stage-assistant of the Bavarian director Franz Osten met a Shantiniketan-educated barrister in London and the foundation for India’s first public limited film company was laid. They would take F.E Dinshaw’s house and convert it into one of the best-equipped elitist film studios of pre-independence era. In the late 1920s, the Imperial Conference

recommended that all empire territories should undertake “remedial measures” to encourage the “exhibition of Empire films.” The colonial film industry was flourishing outside the control of the British Empire and the masters were taking note of the fact. There was already a neo-Buddhist revival in Germany of the 1920s. The Bengali Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore had visited Germany in the year 1921. There was a renewal of scholastic interest in Germany in India’s “Vedic Aryan” past. Perhaps it was not a mere coincidence that the majority of the technicians of *Bombay Talkies*, including the director, were Germans.

Devika Rani was negotiating “vernacular modernism” when she starred in *Karma*, an Indo-British-German production. In a way it was the precursor of films deeply entrenched in Indian heritage while being heavily indebted to globalization. “Rani worked as a set-design assistant for Osten’s third silent film, *Prapancha pash* (1929) and married Himanshu Rai shortly thereafter. Like many early Indian pioneers before them, the young couple went to Berlin... Devika Rani became a trainee at the Ufa film company with Erich Pommer, attended film-acting seminars and watched Marlene Dietrich during the shooting of *Der blaue engel* (The Blue Angel, 1930). Rani would later evoke Dietrich’s appearance and performance style in her starring role in the crime thriller *Jawani ki Hawa* (1935), the first sound film that Osten directed for *Bombay Talkies*.” (Rogowski) *Jawani Ki Hawa*, her first venture as an actor of *Bombay Talkies* has Saraswati Devi as the first woman music composer in Indian films. *Jeevan Naiya* deals with the theme of social taboo regarding the dancing girls. In *Janmabhoomi*, Protima (Devika Rani) is the devoted fiancé of doctor Ajoy. Ajoy is tutored by Pagli to serve the people of village. The Pagli works as a metaphor for the starving India. But the irony lies in the fact that the Eternal Feminine, the *Deshmata*, the Goddess needs a knight to save her. Protima must take permission from her father to join Ajoy. There is no self-realization apart from her involvement with Ajoy. A seemingly liberated, educated and modern woman goes to village only to be with her man and stand by him. In the film Protima prays to God, “Oh God, give me strength so that I can continue Ajoy’s work”. In the song “Maine ek maala gunji hai, ashkon ki

maala gunji hai” (I have made a garland of tears) the mid-shot of a despondent Devika Rani creates the epitome of the standard Hindi film heroine. In *Achhut kanya*, Kasturi questions her father “bachpan mein sath khelna bura nahi tha...toh ab kaise ho gaya?” Despite this straightforward confrontation with her father in the beginning, the end shows that it is only by becoming a martyr Kasturi could redeem herself both as a married woman- in-love-with-a-married-man and as a Harijan in the eyes of the caste-obsessed, conservative villagers. Even as the film attempts to bring to the fore the evils of caste- discrimination, it cannot avoid a more perverse form of that when Kasturi, in order to get rid of her heartache for Pratap, cries out to her husband “Save me Nath (Lord)”! *Savitri* (1937), the only mythological film by *Bombay Talkies*, reinforces the *Sati* theme so deeply entrenched in the Indian psyche. *Jeevan Prabhat* delves into the pain of a woman’s childlessness. Padma (the second wife) sacrifices for the happiness of Uma (Devika Rani) and Nandlal. The storyline never questions the man’s right to marry more than once for the sake of having children. Coming back to *Karma*, “Modernizing she calls it...convert our temples into hospitals, our palaces into schools and our rice-fields into playgrounds?” But towards the end we see the lady in distress taking recourse to “ my prayers must be answered” The sleeveless-wearing shrew at the beginning of the film has been tamed at last and the “modern” princess dons a modest blouse covering most of her upper arms even as she kisses her prince passionately. We can notice in this film the prototype of the film *Baba Taraknath* which would release ages later.

It is true that the *Bombay Talkies* was the meeting point of the Bengali theater and the Bavarian theater. In their search for the “Authentic Indian Film” the acting was influenced largely by the Indian theater-form in vogue. Although the studio collaborated with the West in film-making, yet it was unwilling to let go of its folk-roots on principle. We can understand the rationale behind the emergence of Devika Rani, a “*Bhodromohila*” to boot, replacing the Seeta Devis, only if we take into account her body-language. Sister Nivedita, the Irish-born ascetic used to teach her Indian girl-pupils to sit straight. Sitting straight did not come easy even to emancipated dames of that era, From

the *Harijan* Kasturi to *Savarna* Protima- none of them could keep their spine straight. Her films are fine examples of cultural relocation. Her body language is westernized yet the emotions enacted are taken from the ages- old folk art form. The female protagonists played by Rani .can serve best as antithesis to the feminist discourse. Watching her enactments in movies register as *non-feminists* posing as liberated women. Is it premature to expect the *feminist question* in so early movies? Let us not forget that Saratchandra Chattopadhyay's last novel *Shesh Prashna* had already been published by the time Bombay Talkies, essentially a Bengali venture, started making films. *Shesh Prashna* dealt at length with the *woman question*. Chattopadhyay's novel *Datta* mentioned women's rights. The feminist movement was quite well-known to the educated Bengali Bhodrolok class and *The Question* was making its presence felt. It is clear from these films that in spite of her exposure to the very best of contemporary western techniques of film-making and acting, Rani's protagonists repeated the female archetype already present in Indian film. True, there was no objectification of the heroine yet the male-gaze was manipulated to rivet to her glamour even as the plot continued to revolve around the male. The ethnographic gaze was present too as the films often catered to a foreign audience, 1930s edition of "Made In India" on cinematograph merchandizing the mesmerizing East to the Western viewer. But whatever be the feminist credentials of Devi-played characters, they were essentially of "Bhodrolok" sensibilities.. As the BCTTA observed about the class-distinction in movie-preference," To the educated classes:-Indian Life, Topical Indian News, National Literature, History and Social Dramas; To the illiterate population:-Topical Indian News History and Mythology, Folklore Romances." *Bombay Talkies* made only one mythological film *Savitri*. All the other films dealt with social causes. This predilection with social dramas set it apart from the films made by Dadasaheb Phalke. The milieu of Devika's portrayals were different from the mythological era, but the figure of the *Loyal Female ready to sacrifice herself* loomed large, often relegating the females to the status of inferior gender. The slim, loyal, subservient, urban heroine of Bollywood began her journey with Devika Rani.

There was an advertisement in July, 1943 with a very specific headline: WANTED CULTURED LADIES ONLY!! For a leading role in the film “bhai –bahen.” The advertisement goes on to say that one should apply ‘if you dream of shining on the film firmament as a star and wish to see your dream come true’. In the year 1933 Devika Rani was all that and more. She was ambitious, she was cultured and she was educated with her RADA background. She was the answer to the prayers for a heroine who was urbane even in her village avatar, sophisticated even in her enactments of heartbreaking sorrow and who could sing in both Hindi and English when the victorious march of the talkie had just begun. Here was an actor who looked as vulnerable as she was beautiful, running a counter text to the fighter-woman in *fearless Nadia*. Seeing in retrospect, we can compare Devika Rani with Aishwarya Rai of *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* who has courage enough to fall in love. But that love does not lead to rebellion; even in love, she remains but a counter-foil to the male protagonist, Devika Rani’s suave well-articulated romanticism poses no threat to the masculinity of the audience. Therein lies the secret to her success. Her socialist princess submits to Lord Shiva in *Karma* and the old order is saved, The English audience and the BBC are enamoured alike as the graceful charmer representing the enlightened elite, and her story, throws no challenge to the empire. If we take the noted Bengali writer Sharadindu Bandopadhyay’s story *Chhayapathik* as a parallel-reading to the circumstances prevailing in the Bombay film-studios we find an interesting suggestion as to how the Devis or Divas of film-studios were held in “Bhodrolok” perception.. Sharadindu’s observations hold water even if we do not agree with them because he worked as screenwriter in Bombay films. In the story in question Somnath, a Bengali educated youth-turned-actor, becomes entangled in the machinations of the flirtatious man-mad actress-wife of the studio-owner. Somnath is booted out of the studio in disgrace when he does not respond to the amorous overtures of the actress Chandana Devi. The Devi is described by the joker Pandurang as a predatory elderly seductress. We do not know whether in the Somnath-Chandana-Piley episode the shadow of the Najamul Hussain-Devika Rani-Himanshu Rai is reflected or not. But the story

undoubtedly gives us a glimpse of how the public perceived the actresses who held some power within the organization. So, with fame, came censure, with laudatory articles, came defamations.

The French film historian Yves Thoraval describes Rani in his book *The Cinemas of India* as “Beautiful, cultured and cosmopolitan”. Thoraval records that Devika Rani, alongwith her husband Himanshu Rai, set an example “in social reform, notably for ordering that all studio employees , whatever be their caste or creed, would share the same canteen and eat the same food,” a step that was revolutionary then. *Bombay Talkies*, the production company and film studio, which Rani and Rai founded in the suburbs of Malad in Bombay in the year 1934, included a sound stage, a recording room, a laboratory, a library, a preview theater ,publicity, camera and and engineering departments and even a small school for child performers. The once formidable *Bombay Talkies* has been reduced to a mere signboard in today’s Mumbai. Yet the Rani’s legacy lives on. Her German stepson Peter Dietze preserves what is probably the largest archive on *Bombay Talkies*. Her films, when viewed, brings back the words of praise by the English “Go and hear English spoken by Miss Devika Rani, You will never hear a lovelier voice or diction or see a lovelier face. (*The Art of Cinema*, B D Garga)” Devika Rani set the mark for how the urban and educated woman should look and behave on Indian celluloid. That holds as true for Sharmila Tagore in Ray’s *Seemabaddha* as for Nutan in *Tere Ghar Ke Samne*. What did Devika Rani Chaudhury feel when she retired in the year 1945 after selling her stock in the studio she had founded? We don’t presume to know. But we do know that she continued to wear full make up into her last years. She remained at heart till the very last---- the *Prima Donna* of Indian cinema.

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Dr Anuja Bagchi is Assistant Professor of Journalism and Mass Communication at a College under Calcutta University.

Oscillation as Dilemma in the Songs of Moushumi Bhowmik

Chirantan Sarkar

Abstract

Moushumi Bhowmik's (b. 1964) songs produced mainly in the final decade of the twentieth century constitute a crucial cultural intervention as they offer an unique opportunity to meditate on the traditional notions of gender developed in the middle-class Bengali society. Though Bhowmik occasionally writes against the distress of women, she produces a discourse on femininity that seems to be complicit with the norms of patriarchy in Indian societies. And no discussion of the 'feminine' sensibilities explored in Bhowmik's songs is possible without making reference to her oscillation between two paradigms: a life of interiority and the experience of relating to people. While negotiating the neocolonial forces in an era of economic liberalization, Bhowmik, as a songwriter and researcher tries to find meaning in existence in terms of her engagement with the musical traditions of Bengal.

There are at least three reasons to contend that the songs of Moushumi Bhowmik (b. 1964), through a multi-layered politics of representation, negotiated the psychosocial tendencies of the Bangla-speaking people living in West Bengal in the final decade of the twentieth century¹. Firstly, the songs dealt with the anxiety and insecurity produced as a consequence of the adoption of the new economic policy in India. Secondly, Bhowmik wrote about the suffering of women through her

unwillingness to undertake a ‘feminist’ project for scrutinizing the subtle operation of patriarchy in the domain of heterosexual relationship and the seamless glorification of motherhood situated her in a discourse that neither complicated nor offered a serious threat to the Bengali *bhadralok*’s traditional notions of femininity. Last but not least, in spite of her exposure to different genres of music developing in other parts of the world, Bhowmik’s sporadic but intense use of indigenous musical forms like *kirtan* refers to her attempt to transcend the barriers of a neocolonial, urban modernity through an engagement with Bengal’s cultural past while not at all complying with any sectarian or revivalist project for the self-assertion of a social group or a nation. All these three threads of thinking are connected as in a transitional phase of the country’s history marked by the adoption of the neo-liberal economic policies and in a considerably redefined sphere of the modern Bengali songs in the nineties which was mostly a contribution of Kabir Suman (b. 1950), Mousumi Bhowmik was grappling with the changing time to seek tunes, words and the soul of her own voice as a songwriter and a performer as well.

Mousumi Bhowmik’s songs are marked by an erasure of sexual desire, especially when one compares these songs with the songs of Kabir Suman, who produced explosive new writing on the politics of sexuality and many other issues in the nineties, thus creating a new-age song- movement in West Bengal. But what is to be stressed in this context is that in spite of her reticence about sexual matters, Bhowmik all the while consciously responds as a sensate being and thus instead of discarding the body as a corruptive agent, she treats it with great care as she realizes that the emotional intensities are finally expressed through the body. Instead of addressing the issue of sexuality in an explicit manner, Bhowmik is mostly engaged with the ambiguous idea of *aador* which is a somewhat strange mix of respect, love and tenderness. Her songs draw the readers’ attention to a largely non-genital space of tactile tenderness which is a perplexing fusion of pity, eroticism and affection. Thus she explores an array of emotional intensities which is not distinctly sexualized. In a song like ‘The woman on the footpath’ (‘Footpather Meye’) Bhowmik exposes the

distress of the women who live on the streets of the city but, unlike a feminist, she ceases to go to the extent of challenging the reductive patriarchal assumptions embedded in the domain of heterosexual relations. Therefore, the fact that as wives, daughters, mothers and sisters, women contribute to the sustenance of patriarchy as they get ‘drained of proper identity’ remains mostly unaddressed in her songs (Spivak 302). The late nineteenth to early twentieth century thinking of women’s bodies is different from the late twentieth century feminist position in India because whether the former mostly treated bodies as sites of national or other collective regenerations, the latter sought to expose how a woman’s body was being treated as the subject of repressive mechanisms of social control. Bhowmik is, however, interestingly silent on the contemporary feminist assertions for self-determination not only as buyers in globalised economic space but also in the sphere of bodily desire and sexuality. In that sense, these songs offer complex sites for unfolding tensions between feminism and dominant constructions of femininity. Bhowmik addresses the plight of women in a few songs and empathize with what they are going through but she seldom interrogates the traditional modes of gender relations in Bengali society. Women’s right to practice or abandon reproduction plays a key role in defining their status in patriarchal social formations. During the anti-colonial struggle in India M. K. Gandhi upheld the ennobling traits of motherhood like endurance and capacity for suffering at the expense of the erotic aspects of femininity. That patriarchal archetype of the desexualized mother continues to be re-appropriated in various guises for the structuring and organizing of the Indian society even these days. Though, as pointed out by a distinguished psychoanalyst like Sudhir Kakar, during the superimposition of the mother-image, what comes out is a ‘composite image of the *sexual mother*’ operating as a symptom of male fantasy in India (43). There are songs in which Bhowmik seems to iterate the patriarchal notions of femininity. ‘I can’t discard anything’ (‘Kichhu Felte Parina’) is such a song which celebrates the archetypal motherly homemaker in a Bengali household who, because of her attachment to the domestic space, cannot even throw away trivial objects like a broken pen or the

wings of a dead butterfly. Responding as a mother, Bhowmik is worried to think of the boy frightened by rain and thunder in a song titled as 'Rain' ('Bristi Pore Re'): 'When it rains quite hard, the kid in the street/ Can't shake off his fear/ Thunder frightens him as it's pouring down' (*translation mine*). There are similar songs reinforcing the image of the mother as an embodiment of tenderness and generosity which seems to pose hardly any threat to the discursive production of motherhood functioning as a patriarchal trope in the Indian societies. Though Bhowmik does not endow the feminine presence with spirituality as it was recurrently done in fashioning the image of the Indian woman in the nineteenth century, she makes attempts to manufacture a nostalgic space for Bengali tradition, marked by woman's grace and sense of dignity. This leads to yet another conflict between Bengaliness implicitly evoked as the utopian imagery and the exploration of those actual historical forces that contributed to the evolution of the Bengali self, if there is any.

In Bhowmik's songs there is also an oscillation between the desire to withdraw into a solipsistic mode of survival and the compulsion to participate in an active social life for change and transformations. This second motivation propels her to write a song about the displacement caused by the Great War for Independence in Bangladesh in 1971 and while writing such a song modeling it on an Allen Ginsberg poem, she demonstrates her ability to produce an evocative account of how the traumatic experience of displacement results in a systematic shattering of the human senses. The war of 1971 has been described as 'the most significant geopolitical event in the subcontinent since its partition in 1947' (Prologue 4). In the war of 1971 the West Pakistani military regime used force and violated human rights to suppress a movement for independence in East Pakistan that eventually resulted in a massive transportation of refugees in India. Bhowmik poignantly depicts in her song how the displacement as one of the most unforgettable events in the history of Bengal stripped human beings of the protective layers of civilization and the body turns out to be a fragile, naked and vulnerable entity even in the public space owing to starvation, disease and death during a painstaking journey from one country to another. So far as the continuity of historical experience is

concerned, this song is also evocative of the pain and suffering of 1.1 million refugees in West Bengal who had to move across the boundary after the Partition of India and the memories of their ‘horrid journeys to Sealdah station’ still dominate the historiography of 1947 in West Bengal (Bandyopadhyay, Introduction 3). Bhowmik’s way of describing the physical distortion and death of the displaced children warns us of the danger of viewing her as an essentially escapist songwriter obsessed with the subtle nuances of her private feelings. Bhowmik hardly sublimates issues like hunger and poverty, in spite of her innate lyricism and melancholic predisposition. She does not write from outside, but, on the contrary, seems to write as someone already belonging to the victims: ‘Flood visits our home, mother’s clothing gets wet, the rice pan glides down, how can we hide them/How can we hide them when it’s raining so hard’ (‘Rain’, *translation mine*). These ending lines allow the song which has so long been just an aesthetic account of rainfall, to get rid of the solitary mode of living and touch the lives of so many other people for whom flood is synonymous with death and destruction. In one of her much-adored songs titled ‘I heard this about you’ (‘Ami Shunechi Shedin Tumi’) Bhowmik writes about the agony of being caught in two worlds: the interiority of being and the experience of participating in the affairs of the big, outside world. Though in another song evocative of the lyrics of Ramprasad Sen, the Shakta-poet of eighteenth century Bengal, she explicitly states that she is tired of love-relationships, in the song titled ‘I heard this about you’ she expresses her fear that her isolation, too, leaves her disappointed: ‘If love doesn’t exist, if I ceaselessly feel alone, tell me where I’ll go for peace’ (*translation mine*). She ends another song titled as ‘The thing inside me’ (‘Shorirtari Bhitore’) laying particular stress on relatedness: ‘I want to spread out the mat and sleep/ What I really want to do/Is touch your face/ Between the eyes with my fingertip’. But there is also no denying that her tremendous love for her alienated self leads to a search for an alternative space to compulsory marriedness, and even to the very idea of relationship. One reason why she finds relationships sterile is that the desire involved in them is not reciprocal. In a relationship which is genuinely reciprocal, one’s own enjoyment is

not fully realized until and unless he/she remains attentive to the feelings of the other. Bhowmik is however sorry to find both herself and the people around her preoccupied with their own aspirations and embarrassment. But as she has no other way to transcend this crisis, she grudgingly accepts this mode of interiority. But it also creates for her moments of inescapable dilemma because she fails to construct for herself definitions of truth and identity in the absence of social referents. That is why both the moments of solitary survival and those of collective struggle are infused with compromises and contradictions in the songs. What often stimulates Bhowmik to withdraw into an insulated space of interiority is her feeling that language hopelessly fails as a means of social communication in the intimate moments of love and suffering. But at the same time she does not know how to transcend the barrier of language while interacting with a friend, or, at the next level, finding herself engaged as a songwriter: 'I feel like having you with me/ though I fear I'm yet to touch you/ You keep your pain in a corner of your heart/How can I touch your wounds with these words' ('Still I've something to say', 'Amar Kichhu Katha Chhilo', *translation mine*). It alienates her as a perceptive songwriter from a homogeneous collectivity based on the principle of a transparent use of language and its communicative value in a given social set-up. What she struggles to realize and wants us to understand is that we make use of language and at the same time we are also operated by that category of language that inevitably embraces 'the categories of world and consciousness' (Spivak 103). To put it precisely, as a songwriter Bhowmik is sad to perceive that there is hardly any world and consciousness that is not structured as a language. Bhowmik's utopian desire to discard the restrictive norms of any form of relationship enables her to remain suspicious of the ideals of fidelity and domestic harmony traditionally associated with marital fulfillment in patriarchal social formations. Since Bhowmik refuses to believe in divine beings and religious rituals as it is expressed in a song like 'Lakshmipujo', it is hardly possible for her to eulogize in her songs the image of a spiritually superior Bengali female body that has for long functioned as the foundation of marital sociability. The celebration of a non-referential aloneness, though handicapped in several

ways, ironically opens up for Bhowmik remarkable opportunities to interrogate the operations of an unjust society based on the principles of gender discrimination. The songwriter, however, seems less interested in exploiting these possibilities to their furthest end. This nonchalance creates a situation in which the feminist space seems inherently suspect. Though the songs secretly generates possibilities of producing ideological discomfort, the discourse of femininity that one finds in her songs is not subversive but rather seems to be a compliant one. Bhowmik, however, is similarly reticent about the contradiction between women's 'apparent freedom' and their 'actual limitations' in modern consumerist patriarchy (Chanda 185).

In the tradition of modern Bengali poetry, there have been poets like Kabita Sinha (1931-1999) and Debarati Mitra (b.1946) who, not being stereotyped feminists, wrote about their intimate feelings, thoughts and emotions in formidable ways. But as far as Bengali modern songs are concerned, there is perhaps no other songwriter other than Mousumi Bhowmik who has written so intensely about the experience of being a woman and behaving as a woman in the domestic and the public sphere as well. A contradiction between the rejection of sex-based differentiation and the celebration of the femininity in the late twentieth century as 'pagan, intuitive, anarchic, inventive and nurturing' has functioned as a defining characteristic of feminism in India (Kumar 3). Bhowmik's songs have been interpreted as constitutive of a 'space of undistorted feminine sentiments' though such observations are underlined by a danger of essentialism (Chakraborty 2). As the women take part in the production of knowledge about themselves, they often perpetuate the patriarchal stereotypes. There is no uncontaminated space developed through a culture of self-marginalization that can allow an uninterrupted and autonomous functioning of subjectivity. Any projection of these songs as expressions of pure femininity, in fact, predicates the possibility of the formation of knowledge exclusively on identity. Since knowledge-production cannot presuppose identity as origin, it would be naive to assume that Bhowmik is an ideal knower representing disengaged femininity. Her location determined within the confines of patriarchal notions of gender, on the other hand, would

certainly enable one to understand her traditionalism, confusion and hankering after an uninhabited interiority.

Moreover, due to caste, class and other distinctions, it would be somewhat idealistic to see women forming an undifferentiated social category in Indian societies. Therefore, in a certain sense, these songs unravel the psychic space of the educated gentlefolk from the middle and upper classes in West Bengal who remain disconnected from the vast rural population and the industrial working classes to secure their class privilege and yet talk about social changes in academic space. Nowadays it is a widespread complaint among those belonging to the middle class in West Bengal that the political space has been taken over by an unreformed mob. Though there is no doubt that the inadequacies of the parliamentary democracy have been miserably exposed in recent past, many of the middle class intellectuals in West Bengal who have picked up the habit of quickly changing their affiliation to political parties, seem to have deep-rooted anxieties about the unreformed mob who cannot help being appropriated by the political parties for sustenance. These intellectuals, because of their alienation from the men on the streets fail to turn themselves into ‘awakener[s] of people’ and thus their activities only testify to the fact that they have internalized the dominant discourse of power as it is being currently rehearsed in the domain of the parliamentary democracy in India (Fanon 101-2). Mousumi Bhowmik, on the contrary, joins the civic liberties and democratic rights movements in the city of Kolkata to contribute to a politics of resistance against state surveillance.

As Bhowmik was trying to make her presence felt as a composer and singer attentive to the social situation in the nineties, she found it inevitable to delineate the effects of economic globalization. In spite of fissures caused by class, there was a sense of community cultivated through the idea of *para* or neighbourhood in Kolkata even in the first two decades after independence. By 1970s and 1980s the social situation, however, underwent sea changes. Migrations from the countryside resulted in an increase in the populations of the urban poor. Though there was a dominant middle-

class cultural tendency to view their existence as premised on a violation of law, the political parties had to negotiate the new social force in order to mobilize electoral support in the metropolis. But the tension did not disappear at all. To make the matter worse, the 1990s witnessed a circulation of the idea of ‘the new post-industrial globalized metropolis’ all over the country that had its inevitable consequences on the sociopolitical scenario of Kolkata (Chatterjee 143). As the governments found themselves more interested in catering to the needs of the service industries than helping the poor to survive in the city, the metropolis became a place of ‘new social disparities’ (Chatterjee 144). In the new service-dominated space of urban economy marked by the empowerment of the managerial and technocratic elite, large sections of the ‘older inhabitants of the city’ found themselves socially redundant (Chatterjee 145). To remould the urban space in accordance with the demands of the new market forces the pavement stalls were evicted and slums were cleared to make room for shopping malls and residential apartments even in the final phase of the left front regime in West Bengal. Kolkata has turned out to be a place belonging more to a newly empowered class of technocratic elite than to the Bengali middle class. The Bengali middle class no longer has cultural dominance over the city and the number of the Bengali-speaking people too has steadily decreased over the last few years. Bhowmik in an album released in 2000 sings a song which unmistakably captures the agony of the beggars and the travelling tradesmen who have to bear the brunt of the newly adopted policies of economic liberalization: ‘At the crossroads in the market one finds an aged salesman / It’s the rotten time which forces him to wander in the streets/ One day he wears the mask of a tiger/ To get transformed into a paper tiger’ (‘Scar’, ‘Khoto’, *translation mine*). Bhowmik is suspicious of the credibility of a technological society that, despite its revolutionary achievements in the sphere of communication, remains incapable of eradicating the gulf between two individuals. This is evident in a song entitled as ‘Still I’ve something to say’ and in many other songs as well. While talking about the metropolitan existence in Calcutta in 1970s, a noted social observer like Binoy Ghosh sadly referred to an inherent immobility leading to a crisis in social communication (61-65). No

wonder, that sense of immobility must have been deepening over the years to reach a point of no return.

To negotiate the forces of neocolonial modernity which are coterminous with the globalized network of capital, Bhowmik seeks to engage with the indigenous, local cultural traditions. This is evident in her project for cultural restoration known as ‘Travelling Archives’. Since 2003 she has been extensively travelling in Bangladesh and West Bengal and adjoining areas with the purpose of recording songs and stories about singing and disseminating those field recordings through a website (www.theatravellingarchive.org) and the recognized archives all over the world. ‘Restoration’, one of the four series of the ‘Travelling Archives Records’ as a record label, focuses on the digital remastering of the unpublished recordings of relatively unknown singers and composers. In another series of the same record label called ‘Profiles’ there are field recordings centering round the lives and music of Chandrabati Roy Barman (b.1931) and Sushoma Das (b. 1930) both of whom were born in Sunamganj district in Sylhet, a region in Bangladesh sharing only as a researcher but also as a songwriter Bhowmik has made no secret of her willingness to discover the indigenous cultural traditions. Like Gaddar (b. 1949), a Naxalite activist and songwriter from the state of Telengana in India, Bhowmik does not declare a full-fledged war against the neo-colonial forces. Oscillating between solipsism and participation as two modes of being and dissatisfied with the role of the state in a regime of economic liberalization, Bhowmik, nonetheless, tries to listen to the forgotten musical forms of Bengal as these enable her to explore

the interaction of her memory of a cultural past and her ceaseless exposure to a contemporary hybrid social space. The use of a folk tune coming from traditions like *kirtan* or *bichhedi* often causes a rupture in her songs as it is evident in the way one is guided to find an evocation of Hassan Raja (1854-1922), the eighteenth century mystic poet of Sylhet in a song titled ‘The House’ (‘Ghorbaadi’). And it also happens that the spirit of a local musical culture is so imperceptibly embedded in some of her compositions that instead of being crudely recognizable, it creates an ambience or a milieu that imperceptibly surrounds the songs and influences the listeners to think and act in a way that involves a rereading of the cultural traditions of Bengal primarily manifested in music as a prerequisite for initiating a dialogue with the ideologies of a globalised and consumerist modernity.

Notes

1. In 2001 Times Music released Moushumi Bhowmik’s album titled as ‘I come in and go away’ (‘Ami Gharbahir Kori’). Her first album of Bengali songs was ‘Fly away like a kite’ (‘Tumio Chil Hao’) released by HMV in 1994. Times Music also released Bhowmik’s another album titled as ‘Still you write stories’ (‘Ekhono Golpo Lekho’) in 2000.
2. Travelling Archive Records, Kolkata published a booklet and released a compact disc on field recordings from Sylhet in 2013 documenting the songs of Chandrabati Roy Barman and Sushoma Das.

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Dr Chirantan Sarkar is Assistant Professor of English at Asannagar Madan Mohan Tarkalankar College, Nadia, West Bengal. He holds a PhD on "Female Sexuality in the Novels of Thomas Hardy" from the Department of English, University of Kalyani. His books include Pornotopia (Ababhas, Kolkata), Uttaradhunik Gadyo Gadyer Uttaradhunikata (Ababhas, Kolkata) and Postcolonialism: An Introduction (Ababhas, Kolkata). He has published several articles on Bengali songs and poetry in reputed journals.

Rereading and Restructuring the Marichjhapi Massacre in Post-Partition Historiography: Dispossession and Refugeeism in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

Sumallya Mukhopadhyay

Abstract: In 1979, several untouchable *nimnoborgo* refugees were forcefully uprooted from their self-made home in Marichjhapi, one of the islands of the Sundarban forest area in West Bengal, by state sponsored goons and the police. The proposed paper intends to reread the atrocities committed by the Left Front government of West Bengal in Marichjhapi to showcase how, in the decades following the killings, the upper caste *bhadralok* Bengali society offered little space to these minority refugees in their narration of post-partition historiography. Incidentally, very little has been written about Marichjhapi in Indian writing in English, and this is precisely where Amitav Ghosh counts heavily; for Ghosh builds the entire narrative of his novel *The Hungry Tide* against the backdrop of the Marichjhapi massacre. After revisiting the history of Marichjhapi, this paper restructures the incidents through Ghosh's narration of Marichjhapi in *The Hungry Tide* with the belief that it is imperative to generate critical discussions among the reading public regarding Marichjhapi, especially after the Supreme Court of India passed a historic verdict in favour of the farmers in Singur. If justice is served to those in Singur, it cannot be denied to the refugees of Marichjhapi, merely because they are untouchables.

Key words: Dispossession, Migration, Marichjhapi, Refugee, Rehabilitation, Untouchable

One of the most foremost writers of the partition of India, Bhasham Sahni voices in *Tamas* the point of view of a coolie, who replies to a Babu's enthusiastic call for *Azadi* (1), saying, "Babuji, what is that to me? I am carrying loads now and shall continue carrying them" (2001, 127). Indeed, a close reading of the historiography of Indian nationalism reveals that the privileged class/caste (2) and the so called *Babus* of our society, while articulating their memory and their history of the years after the formation of the nation-state called India, have persistently tried to ignore and erase the

trauma and tribulation faced by those at the margins of the societal structure; thereby cementing in collective memory their history as worth preserving. It is a given fact that in years following the Independence and the partition, the narrative of history as constructed by the bourgeois-nationalist elite has had little to offer to those who belong to the lower class/caste of the society. Read in the light of these observations, one subscribes to Jhuma Sen's argument that "Bengal's romance with the upper caste *bhadralok's* 'traumatic and nostalgic memories of a lost homeland in East Bengal' has dominated the imagination of partition historiography so much that very little or no attention has ever been paid to the bulk of refugees who settled outside Bengal and who had to directly face a lopsided discriminatory rehabilitation policy practised by the government" (2015, 102). Throughout the decades of 1950s, 1960s and 1970s people migrated to India from East Pakistan (now known as Bangladesh) in search of hospitable places to stay. The first wave of migration mainly comprised the upper caste and elite Hindus against whom communal attacks were being strategically carried out in East Pakistan. Around 1.1 million Hindus migrated to India by 1st June, 1948, out of which 350,000 were urban *bhadralok*, 550,000 were the rural Hindu gentry, 100,000 were Hindu artisans and the rest were agriculturalists and businessmen (Chakrabarti 1990, 1). With enough resources at their disposal, the upper caste *bhadralok* refugees integrated easily into the mainland of West Bengal. The West Bengal government favourably received the upper caste gentry, placing them in Calcutta (present day, Kolkata) and its vicinity. Needless to say, the later batches of population, migrating from East Pakistan, were mainly the lower caste or *nimnoborgo* (3) refugees. In the absence of the upper caste Hindus, the communal violence in East Pakistan was directed towards those who are socially stratified as *nimnoborgo*. While the government readily provided land to the upper caste *bhadralok* to rebuild their safe abode, the *nimnoborgo* immigrants were rendered homeless as they were forced to embrace "refugeeism" (4) as a lifestyle by settling in camps outside West Bengal. In a way, Calcutta in particular and West Bengal in general was cleansed of the presence of the *nimnoborgo* refugees by a state policy meticulously drawn to subjugate the lower caste.

Who were these *nimnoborgo* refugees?

Before initiating a discussion on the Marichjhapi massacre, it is important to define who these *nimnoborgo* refugees actually were. These lower caste people, who were known as the Chandals of Bengal, popularly called the *Namasudras*, resided in Dacca, Bakargani, Faridpur, Mymensingh, Jessore and Kulna in East Bengal (Sen 2015, 105). It must be taken into account that many among them were also converted Muslims. They embraced Islam because of its more liberal beliefs devoid

of any caste consideration; at the same time, these Muslims retained their traditional Bengali culture. During the colonial period, these lower caste Chandals and Muslims forged a unity which took the shape of the Namasudra movement. The Namasudra movement matured into a political front that was able to keep the Hindu-landlord dominated Congress party of Bengal in opposition. In movements against the colonial masters, such as Non-Cooperation, Civil Disobedience and Quit India Movement, this Namasudra community refrained from joining the political power-play between the Congress and the Raj. The Congress party's pressing demand for the partition of Bengal in 1947 weakened the movement so much so that the Namasudras eventually got divided as a swing-vote bank between the upper class Hindus and Muslims, thereby getting politically marginalized in India as well as in East Pakistan (Mallick 1999).

The Namasudras, who once kept the Congress in opposition, migrated to West Bengal where the Congress had established itself to power after the partition of India. To tackle the problems posed by the alarming influx of refugees in West Bengal, the Congress government resorted to building refugee colonies. The government had set up 389 colonies, all of which were stationed outside Calcutta (Sen 2015, 106). Since these colonies were constructed in areas vacated by the local population due to uninhabitable environment, families from the refugee colonies, who were forcefully placed there, soon travelled to Calcutta to settle down in more habitable places. Confronted with a complex situation, the Congress government issued an incoherent statement that the state of West Bengal lacked sufficient lands to resettle the refugees; hence the refugees were to be relocated outside West Bengal and moved to various places in the Indian union. Though the islands of Andaman were chosen to resettle the refugees, the plan failed miserably. Thereafter, the refugees were shifted to Dandakaranya.

Rereading Marichjhapi: Dandakaranya Project Area (DPA) and the Left Front Policy

Dandakaranya or Dandakaranya Project Area (DPA) was established in 1958 and it covered the district of Koraput and Kalahandi of Orissa and the district of Bastar in Madhya Pradesh. This hilly region was extremely unsuitable for the relocated families. Their agrarian background and their ability to create a living by the rivers were of practically no use in Dandakaranya. Moreover, there existed no provision for health care and education. The relocation further aggravated their status as homeless and soon the indigenous tribals of Dandakaranya turned against the refugees, often

attacking them with bows and arrows. Ross Mallick quotes S.N. Khanna who argued that these indigenous tribals also got “protection from the police, which [was] anti-refugee” (1999, 105). The refugees were emotionally, physically and culturally far removed from Dandakaranya (Jalais 2005; “Massacre” in Marichjhapi’). Since the resettlement policy failed them, the refugees unanimously started agitating against the government in the form of hunger-strike. Their right to protest was substantiated by a declaration of the Dandakaranya Development Authority Chairperson Saibal Gupta:

“Most of the plots did not produce enough food to keep the families who farmed them alive. In this bleak and barren terrain, there was no other work by which the refugees could earn a few rupees. Such industries as the authorities tried to run, in a hopelessly amateur fashion, were disorganized, unprofitable, mismanaged and usually closed down soon after they were set up” (Sen 2015, 106).

The Left Front, which was the main Opposition Party in West Bengal Assembly, took up the cause of the refugees and voiced their grievances under the leadership of Jyoti Basu. In a letter to the State Rehabilitation Minister on 13th July, 1961, Jyoti Basu pointed out the discrepancies of the Congress government in handling the crisis and highlighted the problems faced by the refugees:

“Prolonged hunger-strike by the refugees...has proved beyond doubt the strong reluctance on the part of the refugees to accept the proposal of the Government regarding their rehabilitation in Dandakaranya. As a matter of fact there has been no movement of refugees to Dandakaranya though they have been put to serious hardships and untold sufferings due to stoppage of doles...We do not think that the rehabilitation of camp refugees in a manner acceptable to them is very difficult as is often being suggested by the Government” (Sen 2015, 107-108).

With the Left Front fighting for the refugees, Jyoti Basu declared that if the Leftists were voted to power the refugees of Dandakaranya would be resettled in West Bengal. In the meantime, the refugees of Dandakaranya started migrating to West Bengal in groups, and time and again they were arrested or forced back to their former location. Things changed completely after the Congress was ousted from power and the popular mandate established the Left Front government. One understands why Nilanjana Chatterjee in ‘Midnight’s Unwanted Children: East Bengal Refugees and the Politics of Rehabilitation’ opines that “the exploitative Congress government had fallen and

a new popular government has come to power” (1992, 377). With the promises made by the Left Front ringing in their ears, the unquenchable thirst of the refugees for a homeland was, at last, satiated as they were assured of a place in the Sundarbans. (5) Soon they started rehabilitating and resettling in Marichjhapi.

But once the number crossed a few thousands, the Left Front leaders decided to send the refugees back to where they came from. (6) Police were deployed to impede the movement of the refugees and often they were arrested and returned to the resettlement camps. Many had sold their belongings to gather funds to facilitate their journey to Marichjhapi. Soon these refugees managed to slip through the police cordons, ultimately reaching Marichjhapi. The refugees insisted that they needed no government aid to resettle themselves; instead they hoped that the government would provide them necessary provision to stay in Marichjhapi. On arriving at Marichjhapi, some 30,000 settlers immediately identified the problems which they needed to tackle and started addressing them accordingly. They built shanties, and roads were constructed. They built embankments to counter the tidal waves. A school was constructed, decent medical facilities were provided for and proper drinking water was made available. In fine, Marichjhapi emerged as an ideal model which could have been followed by the government to address the refugee crises.

While the refugees self-sustained themselves in ways feasible to them, the Left Front government alleged that these migrants were running a parallel government, smuggling in arms and assisting the illegal refugee transfer into West Bengal. Soon the government claimed that Marichjhapi, being a part of the Sundarban Reserve Forest, was under the Forest Act and public encroachment is not permissible by law. There is ample evidence to oppose both these ridiculous claims upheld by the Left Front ministry. The point to reckon with is that successful establishment of Marichjhapi, without any government aid, meant that more refugees would desire to relocate themselves in West Bengal, adhering to the Marichjhapi model. The Left Front government apprehended such a move and hence, initiated their oppressive measures which initially took the shape of an economic blockade. On 20th August, 1978, around thirty police launches were deployed to restrict the movement of the refugees (Bhattacharjee 2010). These refugees were not unaware of their innate drawback of being untouchables. Despite bearing the badge of untouchability, the refugees called out to the civil society; some help was provided for, but that did not prove enough. Within a few months, most of the boats used by the refugees were destroyed. In January, 1979, government forces attacked a boat carrying few women from Marichjhapi (Sen 2015, 120). The boat capsized and the resultant death infuriated the settlers and a veritable war broke out between the refugees and

the state forces. With practically no weapon to fight a long sustained battle, the settlers knew they were fighting a lost cause. Moreover, the economic blockade resulted in dearth of food supplies which meant that many had to face death because of starvation. In spite of the inhumane torture and the barbaric treatment of the state machinery, the refugees uncompromisingly stood their ground, forcing the government to push for more stringent measures. When the police failed to persuade the refugees to leave, the government colluded with goons to forcibly evacuate Marichjhapi of its residents. Between 14th and 16th May, 1979, the refugees were attacked by police forces and hired goons. Young men were arrested and women were mercilessly raped. Several hundred men, women and children were killed and their bodies were thrown in the water. In about a little over eighty hours, the Left Front government successfully uprooted the untouchable refugees of their self-made home to throw them back in the abyss of dispossession.

It is interesting to note that during 1980s and 1990s very little had been written about Marichjhapi. In fact, the collective memory of the upper caste *bhadralok* offered no space to the untouchables to record their sufferings. The Left Front government's unprecedented atrocities in Marichjhapi which led to innumerable deaths were brought to public assessment more prominently during the Singur-Nandigram movement in West Bengal. Sen argues that the secular politics of *bhadralok* Bengali appropriated the politics played out against the untouchables in Marichjhapi in 1979 to dislodge the Left Front from power in 2011. Such generalized statement, however, does not do justice to the contemporary history. For one thing, in the post-partition memory-building project, the massacre in Marichjhapi has been addressed by a Bengali *bhadralok* who interrogates the caste question in his literature. Written two years before the Singur-Nandigram movement in West Bengal, Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) explores the critical frameworks by which we can understand an event of such magnitude and trauma as the one in Marichjhapi from multifarious perspectives by combining the urgent and often cathartic narratives of those who were affected by the event directly or indirectly. Ghosh's depiction of Marichjhapi is not linear in nature; instead the narrative is multi-layered where the characters are configured around the metaphors of home and homelessness. Such a reading helps one restructure the narrative of Marichjhapi, and this restructuring becomes important especially after the recent historical verdict of the Supreme Court of India which allowed the deprived farmers in Singur to get their land back. (7) If justice is served to those in Singur, it cannot be denied to the settlers of Marichjhapi, merely because they belong to the lower caste of our societal structure.

Restructuring Marichjhapi in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

In one of her essays written against the backdrop of the Narmada dam protest, Arundhati Roy observes that “the millions of displaced people in India are nothing but refugees in unacknowledged war” (2001, 65). In *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh acknowledges one of the wars fought on the eastern coast of Bengal to construe a narrative of Marichjhapi which has so far been little recorded in Indian writing in English. By doing so, Ghosh not only sheds light on a fascinating new territory but also demystifies its myth and history in a whirlwind work of imagination. A detailed study of the setting of the novel shows that the narrative is inseparable from the form, structure and history of the land of Sundarbans. In attempting to do so, it is assumed that the readers are already acquainted with the text and characters of the novel.

While most of the critical discussions of *The Hungry Tide* are focused primarily on three sets of characters—Nirmal and Nilima, Kanai and Piyali, Fokir and Moyna—this paper concentrates more on Nirmal and Kusum; the latter was one of the settlers in Marichjhapi, and it is through the presentation of her character that Ghosh offers a humanist critique of refugeeism and dispossession in India. Postcolonial states like India, in their efforts to set definite standards of modernisation, construct industrial belts, dams and other economic plans, and in this process often shift large number of people, leaving them forever displaced. In a sense, these refugees are *created*, and they are so desperate to find a proper habitation that “they are willing to sell themselves for a *bigha* or two” (2004, 51). In fact, what Ramachandra Guha states about the refugees camped in Kurukshetra immediately after the partition of India and Pakistan, might well be extended to the untouchable refugees of Marichjhapi. It seems that “their passion for land”, to quote Guha, “appeared to be elemental” (2007, 85). At the same time, it must be noted that untouchable refugees were “tide country people, from the Sundarbans edge...the rivers ran in [their] heads, the tides were in [their] blood” (2004, 164-165).

In *The Hungry Tide*, Kusum, at quite a young age becomes fatherless. She watches her father die, falling prey to a tiger. On accepting a job offer, her mother is taken to Dhanbad where she is forced to take up prostitution. Determined to see her mother again, Kusum leaves Lusibari and “vanished as if into the eye of a storm. No one knew where she went; no trace of her remained” in the village (2004, 143). Years later, as a storm impedes Nirmal's journey back to Lusibari, he takes shelter in

Marichjhapi where he discovers Kusum. Soon Kusum informs Nirmal how she as well as her husband, during their stay in Dhanbad, longed to get back to the islands in Sundarbans:

“[T]hat place was not home; there was nothing for us there. Walking on iron, we longed for the touch of mud; encircled by rails, we dreamed of the Raimangal in flood. We dreamed of storm-tossed islands, straining at anchors and of the rivers that bound them in golden fetters. We thought of high tide, and the mohonas mounting, of islands submerged, like underwater clouds” (164).

Meanwhile, after her husband’s accidental death, Kusum heard “of a great march to the east.” They went past her hut “like ghost covered in dust, strung out in a line, shuffling beside the railtracks”, carrying “children on their shoulders, bundles on their back” (164). One of the women informed Kusum that they lived in Bangladesh where they were forced to leave the country as the war broke out in the eastern theatre along the borders of East Pakistan and India. (8) After crossing the border, they were “met by the police and taken away”:

“[I]n buses they drove us, to a settlement camp. We’d never seen such a place, such a dry emptiness; the earth was so red that it seemed to be stained with blood. For those who lived there, that dust was as good as gold, they loved it just as we love our tide country mud. But no matter how we tried, we couldn’t settle there” (165).

One appreciates how eidetically Ghost’s narrative presents the circumstances which compelled the refugees to cross the border to India. Thereafter, their forced transportation to Dandakaranya, their refusal to stay at the camp and eventually their self-sustaining relocation to Marichjhapi is rendered accurately in the narrative design of *The Hungry Tide*. In the ensuing chapters, Ghosh narrates how Marichjhapi emerged as a perfect rehabilitation centre for the refugees:

“[T]here were some thirty thousand people on the island already and there was space for many more. The island had been divided into five zones and each family of settlers had been given five acres of land. Yet, they had also recognized, shrewdly enough, that their enterprise could not succeed if they didn’t have the support of their neighbours on the surrounding islands. With this in mind they had reserved one quarter of the islands for people from other parts of the tide country. Hundreds of families had come flocking in” (172).

Despite these pragmatic steps, the leader of the ward admits to Nirmal that their endeavour will be futile if they fail to “mobilize public opinion to bring pressure on the government to get them to leave [them] alone” (172). Hence, a feast is organized to garner necessary support, and renowned writers, journalists and intellectuals from Kolkata are invited. For the refugees “want to tell them about the island and all they have achieved” (189). Indeed a feast of this sort was organized, as observes Mallick in her article on Marichjhapi, but the support gathered was not enough to save the civilization that had “sprouted suddenly in the mud” (191).

The miserable condition of the refugees is further highlighted when Kusum approaches Nilima for help. Knowing well that the dwellers cannot sustain themselves on their own, perhaps Nilima, who had single-handedly rebuilt the entire Lusibari, could have helped the untouchable refugees to strategise their stay in Marichjhapi. Ironically instead, her refusal to help Kusum, and in turn the settlers, signifies the utter rejection of the responsible members of the civil society, the so called *bhadralok* community, to stand by the Marichjhapi cause. Since they were incapable of acquiring any political support, the refugees were intuitively aware of the impending attack. After a meeting with the settlers, Kusum confirms that “the gangsters who have massed on the far shore will be brought to drive settlers out” (225). The reference of the gangsters is unmistakable in Mallick’s article where she writes:

“Muslims gangs were hired to assist the police, as it was thought Muslims would be less sympathetic to refugees from Muslim-ruled Bangladesh” (1999, 110).

In a dramatic turn of events, the High Court issued an order directing the Left Front government to lift the economic blockade. Notwithstanding the directive, the government went ahead with its plan and persisted with “the blockade in defiance of the High Court” (Mallick, 1990, 110). Nirmal, on the other hand, thought that the settlers had tasted their deserved victory at last. On reaching Marichjhapi, he saw that “the police were not gone; they continued to patrol the island, urging the settlers to abandon their homes” (260). Kusum, who in the narrative represents the dwellers of Marichjhapi, is starving to death in her hut. As Ghosh describes, “It was terrible to see Kusum: her bones protruded from her skin, like the ribs of a drum, and she was too weak to rise from her mat” (260). In one of the moving passages of the novel, Kusum tells Nirmal:

“[T]he worst part was not the hunger or the thirst. It was to sit here, helpless and listen to the policemen making their announcements...This island has to be saved for its trees, it has to be saved for its animals...Who are these people, I wondered, who love animals so much that

they are willing to kill us for them?...our crime was that we were just human beings, trying to live as human beings, always have, from the water and the soil” (261-262).

Ghosh brings out the situational dependency through the character of Kusum. Though uneducated and inexperienced in the ways of the world, Kusum negotiated various situations of her life with exceptional courage. It is only in the face of institutional exploitation that she completely breaks down. Her crumbling spirit symbolizes the emotional and psychological collapse of the whole community in Marichjhapi; the determined sloganeering of the settlers—“*Amra kara? Bastuhara. Who are we? We are the dispossessed. ...Morichjhapi chharbona. We’ll not leave Morichjhapi, do what you may*” (254)—is inevitably silenced by the waves after waves of amphibious attacks mindlessly carried out by the hired goons and the police.

It is of a piece with the general irony that shrouds the massacre in Marichjhapi that Kanai loses the diary where Nirmal wrote about Kusum and her fellow settlers of the island. Perhaps this is Ghosh’s own way of lashing out at the *bhadralok* society which has failed to empathize with the untouchable refugees. Nonetheless, *The Hungry Tide* provides a ray of hope as Kanai promises to bring to public consciousness the incidents that happened in Marichjhapi. The responsibility lies on our generation who, in Nirmal’s words, is “richer in ideals, less cynical, less selfish” and has “greater claim to the world’s ear” (278) than our former generations. In our society, hierarchy of caste works in insidious ways to take hold of people’s consciousness. By rereading and restructuring the atrocities, it is possible to negate this casteist hierarchy, and foreground the marginalized history of the minority untouchables of Marichjhapi in critical discussion; thereafter one can demand social justice for those who suffered from refugeeism and dispossession in post-partition Bengal.

Notes

1. Exact English translation of *Azadi* is *freedom or independence*.
2. A common critical consensus among those who probe into the caste-class dynamics of the Indian society is that upper caste people are economically well placed compared to those hailing from the lower caste. In this essay, the term class is interchangeable with the word caste.
3. *Nimnoborgo* essentially means inferior caste or ‘varna’. It is directed towards those who were classified as ‘Untouchables’ or ‘depressed classes’ in British Bengal and, at present, are placed at the fringes of the societal structure. Though Jhuma Sen in her article “Reconstructing Marichjhapi”

and Joya Chatterji in her book *Bengal Divided*, 1994, Cambridge University Press refer to the *Nimnoborgo* as ‘chotolok’, I refrain from using that term because of its derogatory nature. *Nimnoborgo* can also be written as *Nimnobarano*.

4. I borrow the word “refugeeism” from Urvashi Butalia who uses this term (pp.6) in her book *The Other Side of Silence*, 1998, Penguin Books.

5. A team of Left Front leaders, including Ram Chatterjee, Rabi Sankar Pandey and Kiranmay Nanda visited Dandakaranya on 28th November, 1977. They encouraged the refugees to migrate to the Sunderbans and promised that the government would not restrict their movement (Bhattacharjee 2010).

6. Despite promises from a leader like Ram Chatterjee, the Left Front did not make the promise good. It must be understood that Ram Chatterjee was a member of the Forward Bloc, one of the smaller parties in the great umbrella of the Left Front. In fact, the Left Front itself is a coalition of small leftist parties and the dominant CPM. All the government policies are effectively planned and implemented by the CPM. In a way, the CPM with Jyoti Basu as the party’s spokesperson, practically betrayed the refugees of Marichjhapi within a few years after coming to power.

7. The Singur Movement refers to the land acquisition controversy of the Left Front government in which the government occupied 997 acres of multi-crop land from unwilling farmers in 2006. The collected land was handed over to the Tata Motors to construct a Nano car manufacturing factory. The opposition and other parties initiated a protest which eventually took the shape of a civil society movement. Due to the ongoing agitation, Tata Motors decided to drop their project in West Bengal.

8. The war referred to here is the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War fought in South Asia which led to the formation of the new independent nation-state of Bangladesh.

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Sumallya Mukhopadhyay holds an MA in English from Presidency University, Kolkata and is currently an apprentice at 1947 Partition Archive. He is a faculty member in the Department of English at Gokhale Memorial Girls' College, University of Calcutta.

Re-living the Partition in recent Bengali Films

Somdatta Mandal

Beginning right from Nemai Ghosh's *Chinnamul* in 1951, the famous trilogy *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, *Subarnarekha* and *Komal Gandhar* made by Ritwik Ghatak in the 1960s, the Partition of Bengal has been the subject of a lot of Bengali films. If we go through the chronological history of these films we find that the interest in the subject somehow waned from the late 1970s onwards with occasional films like *Tahader Katha* made by Buddhadeb Dasgupta in 1992 still using the historical event as a backdrop to delve into the psychological ramifications of the protagonist. The particular subject of partition somehow digressed to the production of several films like Bappaditya Bandyopadhyay's *Kaantatar* which talk about problems of people across the border (which of course has been created out of the partition of a nation) and ramification of cross-border human interactions in general. But it is nothing location specific.

Incidentally, over the last few years three award-winning Bengali films have been released which have gone back to the central theme of the Partition once again. Srijit Mukherjee's commercial blockbuster film *Raj Kahini* (2015), Goutam Ghose's *Shankhachil* (2016) and Koushik Ganguly's *Bisarjan* (2017) (the last two being joint Indo-Bangladesh productions), depict human relationships which are built and destroyed as a result of the division of the two countries, India and Pakistan (and later Bangladesh). Through a discussion of these three feature films and the documentary film *Seemantorekha* (2017) made by the famed Bangladeshi director Tanvir Mokammel, this paper attempts to examine whether there are any particular aspects of the Bengal Partition that have made

a younger generation of film directors find renewed interest on the Partition after seven decades to focus their attention on it once again. But several questions and issues crop up. Can they be simply described as period films? When public memory is short and when most of the actual victims of the trauma of separation are nearly non-existent at present, are these directors using the partition as a mere prop to propel their own areas of interest or are the scars of the incident so deeply embedded in the Bengali psyche on both sides of the border that they cannot avoid it in any way? Can it be also said that unlike the passionate involvement of Ritwik Ghatak and others, a distance of seventy years has lent enough time for these younger directors to approach the subject in a more objective manner? These issues therefore are worth discussing in further details. Also the story outlines of each of the three films have to be given in details in order to make the reader understand the different ways in which the Partition plays in each of them and how human lives are successively affected.

I

In October 2015, a Bengali film directed by Srijit Mukherjee *Rajkahini* (Tale of the Raj), was released with a lot of fanfare. The film had an [ensemble cast](#) of eleven major female characters with Rituparna Sengupta in the lead role and also starred [Jisshu Sengupta](#), [Abir Chatterjee](#), [Saswata Chatterjee](#), [Kaushik Sen](#) in other pivotal roles. What was the film about? A brief outline of the plot is necessary at this point. In August 1947, the [British](#) passed a bill regarding the [partition of Bengal](#) and created the [Radcliffe Line](#) as the boundary between the newly formed nations of India and Pakistan. As both the Congress and the Muslim League battled it out in courtrooms as to which side of Bengal would get which territory, in another part of Bengal there was a brothel, situated right in the middle of Debiganj and Haldibari districts, which was the home and the world to eleven women and two men. Begum Jaan was the boss, while the other women worked under her as [prostitutes](#). Begum's faithful bodyguard was Saleem Mirza, a Pathan, and Sujan, their man-servant and entertainer. Begum Jaan was not concerned about Hindustan or Pakistan, her only concern was her

business, which was running badly because of the partition and resulting riots. The local master and Congress worker visited the brothel time to time with gifts for everyone.

Meanwhile, the political sky darkened. The [Radcliffe line](#) passed between Debiganj and Haldibari, the former being placed in [East Pakistan](#), and the latter remaining in India. Mr. Prafulla Sen from Congress and Mr. Ilias from Muslim League (who were childhood friends but now separated) meet and discuss about the relocation of the people of the two districts. They discover that in its course, the boundary line has been drawn right through the middle of Begum Jaan's brothel. They meet Begum Jaan and tell her to evacuate her brothel along with her women. But she refuses to budge. Unable to garner support from the Nawab of Rangpur, her patron, who himself was relocating elsewhere, Begum decided to fight her own battle.

In the meantime, exasperated at the futile attempts to evict Begum and her women from the house, Prafulla and Ilias turn to Kabir, leader of a criminal gang, for help. Kabir and his gang commit all kinds of heinous crimes in those turbulent times of riots and violence. One night, Kabir and his gang set fire to the brothel. The women, trained to use rifles by Saleem, put up a brave fight. Most of them get killed, however Saleem himself dies the most horrifying death. After the bloodbath, the remaining women including Begum enter the inferno of the house and willingly accept their death in their own "country", while being narrated the story of the legendary Rajput [Rani Padmini](#). When dawn breaks, the house and its inmates have been charred to death. The film ends with Ilias, Prafulla, Master and lakhs of refugees from Debiganj and Haldibari coming together to see the remains of Begum Jaan's brothel, as *Bharata Bhagya Bidhata* plays in the background. Incidentally, a Hindi adaptation of the film *Begum Jaan* was also released on 14 April 2017. [Srijit](#) Mukherjee himself directed the film, making his directorial debut in [Bollywood](#). As the title of the film suggests, the Partition becomes a mere backdrop for promoting the histrionics of Vidya Balan in the female protagonist's role of a brothel owner as the earlier Bengali version had done for Rituparna Sengupta.

II

We now move to the next film. Winning the Best Feature Film Award at the 63rd National Awards in 2016, Goutam Ghose's *Shankhachil* (Boundless) starring Prosenjit Chatterjee, Kusum Sikder and Shajbati is the story of a couple living in a small village town in Satkhira district at the Indo-Bangladesh border. It centers round a school master Muntasir Chowdhury Badal, his wife Laila, and their daughter Roopsha, a free spirited 12-year-old with a curious mind who suffers from a life-threatening heart disease. They are advised by the neighbours and local doctors to get her treated at a hospital in a big town. The couple, now Bangladeshi nationals, has two options – one, to head to Dhaka for their daughter's treatment and the other, to cross the border to get her treated in India which is nearer. As Roopsha's condition worsens, the couple hastily decides to cross the Ichhamati River that divides Bangladesh from India and take their daughter to India to get treated. With the help of a few neighbours and an old doctor friend in India, the couple get their daughter admitted in the hospital but is compelled to change their names, religion and country in order to not get deported back. The film of course ends tragically and reiterates how life can become miserable because of forced man-made boundaries.

The only problem with this film is its narrative which takes a leisurely time to establish the plot and it takes quite a while for the spectators to understand where the story is heading. At the beginning too much time is spent in expressing the anguish and the pain that still exists amongst people of both the countries which remains actually a sort backdrop to the whole film. Footages of refugee migration and atrocities along the barbed-wire fencing actually do not jell with the narrative of the family story per se. But if we consider what the director Gautam Ghose told the PTI correspondent, we realize that like Ghatak, he was also somehow too much emotionally moved by the Partition:

I was associated with Ritwik Ghatak during his later phase for quite some time and was introduced to his vision that created films on partition. Partition always brought

forth the raw wounds inflicted on the psyche of the affected people...I had heard from him the pain and anguish of the people affected by the partition but never previously sought to portray that angst in my film.

During a visit to the border, Ghose realized how only humans are barred from crossing the man-made boundary but not others. “Birds of the sky, fishes and dolphins of the Ichhamati River, tigers and crocodiles of the Sunderbans. None can bar them from going from one side to the other. It is a history of the humans which we can never do away with.” This is also why he named the film after the free-wheeling bird *shankhachil*, which is used by many Bengali poets like Jibabananda Das and others.

III

The third film on the Bengal partition is Kaushik Ganguly’s *Bishorjon* (Immersion) which bagged the Best Bengali Film award at the 64th National Film Awards 2017. Starring Abir Chatterjee and Joya Ahsan in lead roles, the story once again has a human drama developing on both sides of the Indo-Bangladesh border created by the River Ichhamati. The film opens with a young mother refusing to go see the Durga immersion with her son. The incident takes place with immense celebrations as the two Bengals immerse their Durga idols in the river Ichhamati separating them. The young lady remembers one such day after *bishorjon* in her past. After the partition of India, the people from two sides of Bengal started drifting apart with rising border tensions. A Bangladeshi Hindu widow Padma who lived with her aged, fragile father-in-law saves a Muslim man Naseer from West Bengal, who had drowned in the Ichhamati during the Durga immersion. Padma takes care of Naseer and they plant his identity as her cousin brother not to attract suspicions as the border tensions were high and Naseer was an illegal intruder. The zamindar of Padma's village, a middle aged man named Ganesh, loves Padma and constantly tries to pursue her, and gets suspicious about Naseer. Padma and Naseer wonder how a river divided people from the same ethnicity and resulted in so much difference between them now be it in dialect or

lifestyles.

Padma tries to find ways for Naseer to return to India. He starts reminding her of her husband who died due to excessive drinking, and when Padma hears about Naseer's girlfriend Ayesha she feels heartbroken. The two lonely souls are in a vulnerable situation and they start falling in love with each other. Ganesh gets to know about Naseer's real identity and decides to keep a watch. Naseer confesses to Padma that he lied about drowning during the Durga immersion and that he is actually connected to the black market business. Padma's father-in-law dies and Naseer gets worried about Padma's safety as a young widow all alone in the village and Ganesh's prying eyes on her. Padma tells him not to worry about her and prepare to return to where he belongs. Ganesh makes a hearty confession to Padma about how much he loves her and is ready to wait forever for her. Padma arranges Naseer's return to India but needs help for that and she accepts Ganesh's proposal in return of him helping to smuggle Naseer back to West Bengal.

The night before Naseer leaves, Padma gets drunk and bares her pain to him. Naseer is also broken that due to him Padma has to marry Ganesh and he breaks down too. Unable to control their feelings anymore the two consummate that night. The next day Padma bids a tearful goodbye to Naseer and gives a gift for Ayesha. Naseer promises her to leave the black market business. Ganesh takes Padma away to his house as Naseer leaves in a boat to the other Bengal. Once again the Ichhamati River plays a significant role in the story. The movie ends with a fast-forward to the present times. Padma is shown living in comfort as Ganesh's wife, and it is Bijoya Dashami once again. As she refuses to go to see the immersion in the Ichhamati, her little son leaves with Ganesh. It is revealed that the son is actually Naseer's as both have the same birth mark.

IV

After discussing the three feature films which reveal in different ways human angst as a result of the Partition, we now come to a very recent two and a half hour long documentary which tries to re-live

the past as accurately as possible. Premiered in Dhaka on 25th October 2017, *Seemantorekha* (The Borderline) is a documentary about the Partition of Bengal, the arbitrariness of the border and its effects on a people displaced. Directed by Tanvir Mokammel, who remains the only filmmaker from Bangladesh whose work has focused on the partition in a comprehensive manner, Mokammel's aim is to clear the amnesia surrounding Partition among Bangladeshi filmmakers. In his conscious mind, in the socio-political-intellectual plane, he believes that "the Partition of 1947 was the root cause for all the anomalies we are suffering from in our present society now." In an interview given to *The Daily Star* on August 29, 2017, he states:

Bengal has been a cultural entity for more than 2000 years. By dividing Bengal, the very existence and emotions of our Bengali identity, our deeply rooted cultural traits have been shattered.never before the 1947 Partition was the division so decisive, so complete. Hence, the Partition of 1947 haunts me with a great sense of loss, and it keeps figuring in my films and writings repeatedly, like a leitmotif.

Incidentally Mokammel had seen the 1964 riot and though he was a mere eleven year old boy at that time, he had decided to make a film on the miseries of the Hindus in East Bengal and decided to title the film *Chitra Nodir Pare*. In the interview mentioned earlier he very modestly states that his films "should not be compared with the masterpieces of Ritwick Ghatak."

Rich in symbolism and metaphors of the Mother Goddess, Ritwick's films mostly dealt with the tragic effects of the Partition on the refugee families uprooted from East Bengal. In his films, the pangs and pathos of the divided Bengal figured in a tragic and archetypal dimension. *Chitra Nodir Pare*, on the other hand, mostly deals with a sense of loss, the loss that East Bengal suffered due to mass migration of the culturally rich Hindu populace from this land....The only comparison that can be drawn is the deep sense of loss, which we both as filmmakers, felt about the Partition of Bengal. He has shown the tragic consequences of the Partition from that side of

the border, and I have tried to do that from this side of the border.

Since seventy long years have passed, Mokammel thinks that perhaps it is now time to look back at this historical event. Who has gained from the Partition? Who has lost? The film analyses that history through human stories, and depicts the human costs involved in the Partition. He reiterates, “The one aim of the film is to find out what the borderline between the two Bengals actually means. Is it just a barbed wire at the border between two sovereign states, Bangladesh and India? Or is it a demarcation line drawn between the Hindus and the Muslims? Or is it a line to highlight the traits of cultural and behavioural difference which exist between the people of East Bengal and West Bengal? Or is there any invisible line within our hearts which do not let us mingle together? The film will be an attempt to explore these questions.”

Seemantorekha was shot in quite a few places – mainly in the border areas of both Bangladesh and India. It was also shot in the refugee camps, like Cooper’s camp, Dhubulia camp and Bhadrakali camp in West Bengal where refugees from East Bengal took shelter. It was also shot in Dandyakaranya in Madhya Pradesh and Chattisgarh where refugees from East Bengal were sent, as well as in Nainital of Uttarakhand. It was also shot in the Andamans where some refugees from East Bengal were resettled. Besides shooting in different places of East and West Bengal, Mokammel also shot in Assam and in Tripura. “The subject matter of the film is to depict the 1947 partition in all its different manifestations. But the human stories remained the main focus. Hence the refugees from both sides, and whoever have been affected by the partition, were our subjects” Mokammel said to IANS on November 15, 2017. The story of any person forced to migrate from his/her motherland is always tragic and sad. But the stories which moved him the most were stories of some very old women who are still languishing in the old and deserted refugee camps of West Bengal, who have been dubbed as ‘PL’ or ‘Permanent Liabilities’ by the officials. “They have become ‘Permanent Liabilities’ on our conscience!”, says Mokammel. “To me, these hapless old women are the worst victims of the tragedy called 1947 Partition.”

A documentary, according to the director, has to be presented truthfully and at the same time has to be as aesthetically pleasing as possible. Interestingly, *Seemantorekha* is also the first documentary film in Bangladesh to have been crowdsourced. Running out of funds, he had to depend upon the generosity of ordinary public to complete his project. Mokammel believes that the lessons to be learned from the Partition are manifold. After accepting the plurality and diversity of the people of South Asia he believes that since you cannot change your geography, or your neighbour, it is imperative for the dominant communities of this subcontinent to learn to be tolerant, to learn to live in peace and harmony with each other. “You cannot make a garden with only one kind of flower,” he said. This is probably where the significant contribution of Tanvir Mokammel lies.

In conclusion it needs to be reiterated that after a hiatus of seventy long years, the Partition of India has been depicted with renewed vigour in many commercial Bengali ventures as well in documentaries across the border. We hope that it is not a transitory phase and that this renewed interest will continue further in years to come.

Filmography

Biswarjan (April 2017)

Direction, Story, Screenplay: Koushik Ganguly

Producer: Opera

Starring: Abir Chatterjee, Joya Ahsan, Kaushik Ganguly

Music: Kalika Prasad Bhattacharya

Raj Kahini(16 October 2015)

Story and Direction: Srijit Mukherji

Producer: Shree Venkatesh Films

Starring: Rituparna Sengupta, Lily Chakrabarty, Jissu Sengupta, Parno Mitra, Saswata Chatterjee, Abir Chatterjee, Kaushik Sen, Sudipta Chakraborty, Saayoni Ghosh & others Music: Indradeep Dasgupta

Seemantorekha (October 2017)

Script & Direction: Tanvir Mokammel

Shankhachil (15 April 2016)

Direction, Screenplay & Music: Goutam Ghose

Producers: Prosenjit Chatterjee, Faridur Reza Sagar, Mou Raychowdhury, Habibur Rahman Khan

Starring: Prosenjit Chatterjee, Kusum Sikder, Shajbati

Dr Somdatta Mandal is Professor of English, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan.

Oscillating Between ‘Ae-par-Bangla’ and ‘Ue-par-Bangla’: A Kaleidoscopic View of Oral Tradition among the Tripura Bangals

Gitanjali Roy

*I have lived my life believing
Storytelling was my proud legacy.
The art of perpetuating
Existential history and essential tradition
To be passed on to the next generation.
- Temsula Ao ('The Old Story Teller')*

Bengali tradition in the latter half of the 20th century is geographically divided into three different spaces- West Bengal, Tripura, and Bangladesh. The partition between India and East Pakistanⁱ has made the immigrants beyond the borders move from one place to the other. The Bangals, who have seen the partition of 1947ⁱⁱ² and 1971ⁱⁱⁱ, consider Bongo to be a space that includes fraternity feeling towards the fellow Bengalis. The concept of Bongo as a marker of culture and tradition is beyond the geographical space. In the cultural realm, the partition had subverted the established traditions by interfering with local customs. The nation, as a project, seeks to erase off the colonial past and the barbed wires separating the nations, is just a physical signifier. Beyond the barbed wires, the Bongo, as a space, actually stands for a shared memory and a collective sense of ‘belongingness’, which constructs a feeling of nostalgia found in the narratives of the first generation immigrant^{iv}, who could not erase off the Bongo^v tradition from their mind. Well, in my case, I belong to the third generation and I have received the partition stories from the second generation- my mother^{vi}. She has shared to me the scattered oral tales, recollected by her in bits and pieces. This orality- the orature which is linked to a social space, exists through alternate modes of historical memory- stories, songs and folk culture.

William Safran listed a variety of collective experiences and characteristics of diasporas (“expatriate minority communities”): (1) group of people/individuals who get dispersed from an original “centre” to at least two “peripheral” places; (2) they try to maintain a “memory, vision or myth about their original home”; (3) they feel alienated from their host land and thus tend to believe

that they are not fully “accepted by their host country”; (4) they have a tendency of idealization to return to their respective homeland; (5) they behold an innate sense of responsibility to celebrate and to pass the culture to the next generation which they have carried from their homeland; and (6) they always try to consciously retain a relationship with their homeland. My paper shall focus on how the Bangals of Tripura idealize their homeland and collectively experiences a diasporic feeling in their host land through their folk culture. The paper also aims to identify the root causes of the loss of tradition; tries to identify the retentive power of tradition even after the partition; and the reasons for amalgamation of the replaced culture where the influence of the new culture played a major role in forming a new Bengali culture.

ঘুম পারানি মাসি পিসি,
মোদের বাড়ি এসো।
খাট নাই পালং নাই,
খোকর চোখে বসো।
বাটা ভরা পান দেবো,
গাল ভরে খেয়ো।
খোকর চোখে ঘুম নাই,
ঘুম দিয়ে যেয়ো।

When someone sings these songs, they form a part of nostalgia in the 21st century where these are popularly known as Bengali lullabies^{vii}, the transliteration^{viii} of which is:

Oh! Maternal and paternal aunts of
sleep,
Come to our home.
Cot or bed is unavailable,
So take your seat on the boy’s eye.
In return, will give you a box-full of
betel-leaf,
With full mouth munch them.
Sleep is not there in the boy’s eyes,
Before leaving give him some
sleep.

These lullabies share a space in the memorable history where the mother-child relationship is strengthened through the bed-time stories. Motherhood can thus be interpreted as the power to formulate a space: of giving birth to narratives and stories, as beside nurturing their kids they also cultured within them innumerable tales, myths, stories and songs. The lullabies are almost extinct

and can sometimes be seen in the Bengali cartoons now and are also found in documented form in internet.

With division of the land, there was demarcation of boundary which resulted in a loss- of the original meaning, of the dialectical influence, of the rooted culture. The de-territorialisation is the loss of the territory- both geographical and psychological which is accompanied by the gain of the new ones. It mars the journey between ‘home’ and ‘foreign’ country, between ‘my’ and ‘his’ stories, between ‘known’ and ‘unknown’, between the ‘old’ and the ‘new’. Looking backward at the past involves the extensive use of memories of the old culture, the place of origin which collides with the concept of ‘home’- a place of security and comfort which assimilated the feeling of “belongingness”. One thus loses a home but never gains one; or rather, they set up a new home where they are always treated and looked down upon as a foreigner. Dislocation leads to cross-cultural encounter which results in the blend of memory and desire, coloured by imagination and nostalgia, giving rise to an inner conflict in the context of cultural displacement. Torn between two places and two cultures, the expatriates oscillate between new literary spaces and feel a forceful need to revisit their past. The act of revisiting is a purposeful effort to form a cultural identity. Nostalgia, loss, betrayal and duty (both- towards their homeland and host land) are the foundations of new home. But they can never erase off their old Bongo traditions, culture and heritage.

The Bongo culture is marked through an equation of respect where the teacher, called as the “Mastermoshai” in Bengali vernacular; and the student, known as the “chatro” maintained a hierarchical relationship. The “Mastermoshai-chatron” relationship is found in an ear-pulling game where the children play a game of selecting the hand and eliminating fingers, and the first eliminated hand would catch the ear of the co-players through a doggerly verse:

অটল পটল বিঙ্গা পটল,
মাস্টার মশাইয়ের কানটি ধরো।

Fixed-pointed gourd, ridge gourd- pointed,
Catch the ears of the respected teacher.

অটল পটল, শ্যামলা সটল,
আম দুধ খাইয়া,
অগো পতি সরস্তি,
লক্ষ্মী পতির মাইয়া,
এক সাথে, এক জাগায়,
আইয় সবাই আরাইয়া।

Fixed gourd, Shymla Shotol,
After eating mango and milk,
Oh! Wife Sarawati,
Wife Laxmi,
Come together, come in one place,
Come by yourself.

অটল পটল বিঙ্গা পটল
জোর লাগাইয়া, দম লাগাইয়া,
মাস্টার মশাইয়ের কানটি ধরো।

Fixed-pointed gourd, ridge gourd- pointed
Put all your force together, accumulate strength,
Catch the ears of the respected teacher.

This reflects the chronotopes^{ix} that are rooted to multiple times- the spaces co-existing next to each other. There is an instance of the carnival^x in the game in which power equation is subverted inside the game space- the person who pretends to be the teacher is also part of the game, where ear is pulled by the other co-players, who are students in the real-space. It seems to interrogate the established institutionalized authority over the traditional meaning where earlier teachers used to beat the students with sticks, and the students had to remain passive and silent. Might be students' anger found a form of outlet of their fear and frustration through this game and hence this rhyme created a popular space among the Bengali pupil of the pre-partition phase. With change of time and place, the pupil no longer practices this orature. Perhaps, the 20th century generation does not believe that they should be afraid of their teacher but rather believes to be friendly with them. Thus replacing the carnivalesque tradition prevalent earlier.

There is yet another game which is even now mostly popular in the rural areas. During evening kids were found playing "ikir-mikir" and they recited the verse were found

ইকির মিকির চাম চিকির,
চামের আগায় মজুমদার,
ষেয়ে এলো দামোদর,
দামোদরের হাঁড়ি কুঁড়ি,
দেয়ালে বসে চাল কুঁড়ি,
চাল কুঁড়তে হল বেলা,
ভাত খায় সে দুপুর বেলা,
ভাতে পরলো মাছি,
কোদাল দিয়ে চাছি,
কোদাল হলো ভোতা,
খেক শিয়ালের মাথা।

Bat comes making sound ikir-mikir-and-chikir,
The bat comes chasing the Majumder,
Damoder came running,
Damoder came with his kitchen utensils,
In front of the wall, grinding the rice,
While grinding it was already late,
He consumes rice in the afternoon,
As he sat to eat, a fly fell on the rice,
He tried to wash it off with chilington
crocodile,
Chilington crocodile lost its sharpness,
Thus the fox's head.

The doggery verse is adopted in the movie ‘Hanuma.com’^{xi}. Against the Bengali rhyme, the fusion of rap sounds quite different. The movie registers the perplexed feelings of a simple school teacher, Anjaniputra, who is forced to learn computer to cope up with the trend and thus set question papers using computer. He tries to assimilate the digital culture by upgrading himself with the 20th century educational trends but ultimately falls into a trap which necessitates his journey in Iceland. The song has been re-moulded to create an essence of one’s rooted place and culture.

Beside the indoor games, the children grew up with nursery rhymes too which were taught to them by their grandparents. One such nostalgic rhyme is:

তাই, তাই, তাই,
মামা বাড়ি যাই।
মামা বাড়ি ভাড়া মজা,
বসে বসে খাই।
মামি এলো ডাড়া নিয়ে,
ফুর্ত করে পালাই।

Tai, Tai, Tai,
I shall go to the maternal uncle’s house.
His house is full of fun,
Where I take rest and eat.
When maternal aunt comes with a stick,
I run away at once.

Going out for an adventure during the vacation was not only a break from studies for the little kids; but even their mothers also participated with them while reciting the poem, perhaps because the mother too wanted a break from her ‘sasur-bari’^{xii} where she could not fulfill her desires, whereas she can easily enjoy her freedom a bit more in her ‘babar-bari’^{xiii}. The dichotomy of desire and expectation peeps through this doggery verse.

In the apparently happy looking reality, there can be a sense of tragedy. During those days, widowhood was a very common occurrence and many a time women with their children left their husband’s house to stay with their brother, where the ‘mamar-bari’^{xiv} was not always a place of happiness. There is also the other side of the story, where the mother and her child were basically dependent upon the Mama^{xv} and Mami^{xvi} for their sustenance. The widowed sister and her children are looked upon as an “unwanted evil” in the house of the Mama especially for the Mami. The “pleasure” and “satisfaction” might be is a charity and being at the receiving end, the innocent child is deceived of the reality.

‘Koulinnya-pratha’^{xvii} was often practiced and after the husband’s death the child had to feed for themselves. If they were childless, they would be sent to Kashi, Haridwar, Varanasi, or Jagannath Dam^{xviii}, or they would stay back to be tortured and slaughtered in the hands of the in-laws; or slightly earlier, they were eliminated. Elimination, first through Sati^{xix} because their family members could claim the land and the land being small and single, the widows had to be politically marginalized. Multiple division of the land would lead to lack of harvest or of fertility; hence widows had to be eliminated. Next, if the widows were childless they were sent either to the pilgrimage centres or feed for themselves, therefore, living on charity. Gradually the charity used to trickle down from the home- first, they used to get money orders with affectionate letters; then money orders with one line; then no line, only money; and finally only money. Thirdly, if they were with children, they would be dumped in their father’s or brother’s place.

In ‘*Pather Panchali*’ written by Bibhutibhusan Bandopadhyay, even Apu, the protagonist, had to live for a long time with an alien family whom he used to call Mama. Ironically, Sarbojaya, Apu’s mother who was very harsh towards Indir Thakurun (Apu’s paternal aunt) had to face the same fate which had befallen her also. The apparent laughter and gaiety might be, is concealed under the tragedy and horror but this socio-cultural reality is a significant determiner, because the *mamar-bari* as a domestic space, existed under two contrasting ideas- the happiness and sadness, which was directly proportional to the woman who had a husband or to the woman who was a widow. The foolishness or the innocence of the child who thinks about the *mamar-bari* as a place of pleasure and comfort, ultimately can meet with a subverted reality. The dichotomy of desire and expectation is thus portrayed through this rhyme- the desire, of being happy; and the expectation, that the *mamar-bari* will take up their responsibility, but ultimately it might turn out to be a tragedy.

The social fragmentation finds a space in the fictions where women’s text and narratives either included or not included takes the shape of orally transmitted culture from one generation to the other thereby relegating them to a less privileged space. One such narrative is found in the old Bengali lullaby ‘*Khoka Ghumalo*’ which is still popular to today’s generation of parents and grandparents.

খোকা ঘুমালো,
পাড়া জুড়ালো,
বরগী এল দেশে।
বুলবুলিতে ধান খেয়েছে,
খাজনা দেব কিসে ?
ধান ফুরালো,
পান ফুরালো,
খাজনার উপায় কি ?
আর কটা দিন সবর কর,
রসুন বুনেছি।

The boy fell asleep,
Neighborhood is silent,
Borgis rushed in the country.
Bulbuli have eaten the rice paddy,
How shall I pay the tax?
Rice is over,
Beetel leaves are finished,
What shall I pay to replace the tax?
Please be patient for some more time,
I am sowing garlic.

It encodes a historical, political and economic situation of the Borgi^{xx} invasion period dated back to 1741-51. People were punished and picked up from villages for not being able to pay the taxes, something that the grandparents grew up watching. This lullaby probably came about when a mother was trying to put her child to sleep, spinning a spontaneous string of words and sentences from her surroundings.

Lost literatures- rhymes, riddles, with all the variations are now no longer heard. Middleclass women who were first generation refugees have more records to folkloric literature and therefore all the orature they carried from their homeland across the border to this part of the country, they retained and transmitted it to the next generation, or rather to their next to next generation. The moment, the woman of the house moved out to a greater world of education, there is a sort of unlearning of the culture, where the traditional culture is supposed to be lower in pedigree. Bengali refugee re-located in Tripura or Kolkata were not like the upper-class Bengali women; who had to stay back at home before partition. Those people who were there in the East Pakistan used to sing Tagore's song, ride on a carriage, go to the college, got back on the horse and come back home. They used to wear long sleeved blouses and cotton sarees; typical Tagorian characters- singing songs, maintaining high lifestyle and reading canonical books.

That paradigm of woman is totally contrasted to the paradigm of woman who emerged after the partition- the dusky Bangal women who were competing for their space and for their survival, both in the new city as well as in the working space, that is, offices. As a result of which the Bangal women were looked down by the so-called West Bengal populace as immoral because they were staying out of their houses till late working hours; they were competing with the men; they were

fighting for their space for the sake of survival. As a result, the liberation which becomes a sort of economic necessity was the grounding step for the Bengali movement which was gradually taking its shape. They were also losing their contact with their own roots.

A Bangal woman in East Pakistan before partition, inside a peaceful society had enough time to go for the Brata-katha and the nursery rhymes. But the moment she had to come out of her house and fight for her space, she found it difficult to provide recreational time for the family especially for the kids. The conflict within their memory for their homeland, the conflict for survival, the 'gaze' of being a refugee, the loss of position or rather the Zamindar's^{xxi} wife who was having high esteem in the pre-partition state is made to work in the houses of others in the new place. With this re-location of place, there was a re-location of status, position, name and fame. The exile from the homeland gets converted to desperate effort to retain their original culture. They thus tried to adopt the new culture and improvise upon themselves the new cultural lineage through education, language, custom, and tried to understand the new land. This leads to an anxiety of belonging to the original culture and home. They thus live in binaries of- us/them, home/foreign, here/there where nostalgia and memory are looked upon as the reality. They stand at the border of two cultures, looking perplexed at both, neither assimilating, nor adopting either of them.

Thus, at times they try to identify themselves or rather they try to re-locate themselves by re-visiting the folktales and folklores. Bengali folk rhymes are anonymous in the sense that once created they become a part of the social culture. The origin of Bengali folk rhymes is obscure, a large portion of them are believed to have existed in the 'sruti-smriti'^{xxii} tradition for several centuries. The collection of the folklore was aided by the spread of literacy, availability of printing press, and the alarming feeling of necessity to preserve the oral tradition which was losing its originality, resulted in the compilation of the folk literature. Classification of the Bengali folk rhyme is difficult, though an attempt has been made by Rabindranath Tagore, Sukumar Sen,

Ashutosh Bhattacharjee, etc. Bhattacharjee has classified the Bengali folk rhymes into eight categories. Following the division, I have categorized the folklores narrated to me by my mother and few of which I have collected during family gatherings from my grandparents and other family members^{xxiii}:

1. Lullaby and cradle song:

দোল দোল দুলনি,
রাস্তা মাথায় চিরুনি।
বর আসবে যক্ষনি,
নিয়ে জাবে তক্ষনি।

(A) Swing, swing in the cradle,
Comb the head
Whenever the bridegroom will come,
Will take you then and there.

আত্মা পাছে ভোতা পানি,
ভালিম পাছে মৌ,
এতো কথা কই তবু কথা -
কৌ না কেন বৌ ৷

(B) In the custard apple tree there is a parrot,
In the pomegranate tree is a honey-bee,
I am speaking so much still-
The wife is not uttering a word.

2. Feminine rhymes of marriage and other domestic functions:

আপতা পড়া পা গো,
জামাই আনতে জা গো,
জামাই আনা সহজ নয়,
দুই-আনা টাকা খরচা হয়।

O red-dyed feet,
Go bring the bridegroom,
Bringing him is not so easy,
One has to spend two-annas.

3. Rhymes used in rituals and folk religious ceremonies:

তত্ত যাবে মেয়ের বাড়ি,
সঙ্গে যাবে কে?
সঙ্গে যাবে লোক লশকর,
বিংগো যাবেনা?
ও বিংগো, ও বিংগো,
তুই কি যাবিনে?
মাছ, মাংস খেতে দিলেও,
মোটাই খাবি নে।
না খাবো না,
খেউ, খেউ, খেউ,
খুকুর সঙ্গে আড়ি।
ওর সঙ্গে ডাব করব
এলে আমার বাড়ি।

Gift will be taken in the bride's house,
Who will go along?
Laskar will go along,
Bingo won't be going?
O Bingo, O Bingo,
Won't you be going?
Even if they want to feed you fish and meat,
Don't eat!
No, won't be eating,
They will still keep on pleading,
I am angry with the boy.
Will speak to him
Only when he will come at my house.

4. Rhymes used during games and leisure:

আম পাতা জোড়া জোড়া,
মারবো চাবুক, চলবো ঘোড়া,
ওরে বাবু সরে দাড়া,
আসছে আমার পাগলা ঘোড়া,
পাগলা ঘোড়া খেপেছে,
চাবুক ছুড়ে নেরেছে।

Mango leaves are paired,
Will use horse whip, the horse will thus run,
O boy Stand aside,
My mad horse is coming,
Mad horse has run crazy,
Threw away the horse whip.

5. Rhymes on weather, nature and animals:

চাঁদ উঠেছে,
ফুল ফুটেছে,
কদমতলায় কে?
হাতি নাচছে, ঘোড়া নাচছে,
রাম সালিকের বিয়ে।

The moon has risen up,
The flower has bloomed,
Under the Kadamba tree who is there?
Elephant is dancing, horse is dancing,
Sparrows are getting married.

6. Historical rhymes:

সা-রে-গা-মা-পা-ধা-নি,
বোমা মেরেছে জাপানি,
ভেতরে তার কৌড়া সাপ,
ব্রিটিশ কয় বাপরে-বাপ।

Sa-re-ga-ma-pa-dha-ni,
Bombs are dropped by the Japani,
Within it is a cobra,
The British exclaimed with terror.

7. Songs and counting rhymes:

ওয়ান, টু,
এক, দুই,
কোথায় আমার বই?
থ্রি, ফোর,
তিন, চার,
কোথায় তোমার ঘর?
পাঁচ, ছয়,
ফাইভ, সিক্স,
সে যে কি কয়?
সেভেন, এইট,
সাত, আট,
পড়বে কি তুমি পাঠ?
নাইন, টেন,
নয়, দশ,
আদরে সব কিছু হয় বশ।

(A)
One, two,
Ek, due,
Where is my book?
Three, four,
Teen, char,
Where is my house?
Five, six,
Panch, choy,
What is he speaking of!
Seven, eight,
Sath, aath,
Will you read the chapters?
Nine, ten,
Nou, dosh,
When love spreads, everyone is bound to
get influenced.

এক চাঁদ আকাশেতে আলো করে থাকে;
দুই হাতে বুলু - বাবু আয় চাঁদ ডাকে;
তেপাটে তিন পায়ে দাঁড়িয়ে আশ্চর্য হয়ে;
চার পায়ে হাতি চলে, দেখতে লাগে ভয়;
হাতের আঙুল পাঁচ, কম নয় কড়ু;
মিলে-মিশে কত বগজ করে দেখো তবু;
কাঠুরিয়ার ছয় ছেলে বগঠ বগঠে যায়;
সাতটি নাগস দেখে করে আয় হায়;
আট ঘোড়া বেগে চলে করে হন হন;
নয়টি বালক দেখে ছুটিল তখন;
দশ দিক আবরিয়া জুড়িল আঁধার।

(B)
One moon, shines brightly in the sky;
With two hands, Bulubabu calls the moon to come;
Standing on three legs surprisingly it stands;
With four legs the elephant walks, a fearful sight to watch;
A hand has five fingers, not less in number-
Still once in life work together with everyone;
Six sons of the carpenter go together to chop wood-
Afraid of seven demons, they sigh;
Eight horses neighing runs fast;
Seeing these nine kids started to run;
Darkness spread from all the ten directions.

8. Rhymes used in myth, fairy tales, etc.:

বৃষ্টি পড়ে টাপুর টুপুর,
নদে এলো বান।
শিব ঠাকুরের বিয়ে হবে,
তিন কন্যা দান।
এক কন্যা রাঁধেন বাড়েন,
আর এক কন্যা খান।
আর এক কন্যা না খেয়ে, বাপের বাড়ি যান।

(C)
It is raining cats and dogs,
Rivers are flooded.
God Shiv will get married,
Three brides are thus arranged.
One is busy cooking,
Another busy in eating.
The third left for her father's house,
without eating food..

The rhymes are formulated in a way that the children come to realize the difference between being-a-boy and being-a-girl. They are nurtured in such a traditional system where they start relating their position or gender role inside the society through the established signifiers. The values and meanings associated with the female and male body are socially ascribed to them. These social differences are somewhere marked inside the Bengali rhyming scheme. The “chabuk” or horsewhip for the boy child and the “chiruni” or comb for the girl child acts as signifiers of gender objects where the boy is expected to play with the “chabuk” and thus inherit manliness, on the other hand, the girl is expected to keep herself neat and tidy so that she looks pretty and “jokkhonni” (“whenever”^{xxiv}) she will be selected as a bride by her man, she will get married.

The gender roles clearly reflect the space of the boy and the girl inside the society and this is encoded through the rhymes, which in turn is reflected through the signifiers of gender roles- in their clothing, mannerism, speech and language which act as signs and in turn determine their performance accordingly. Ironically, every boy child in the Bangali home is supposed to be a Krishna or Gopala, the adopted son of Yashoda Maiyya^{xxv}. It is also a harsh reality that the mother of a male child innately had a sense of pride^{xxvi} which is reflected in the cradle songs. The irony of the situation is portrayed in Kakali Gangapadhyay’s poem ‘Girls’:

Small girls
while playing with doll’s utensils
laugh
and think-
they are running a family like the elders.

Grown-up girls
engaged in the rigmarole of the family's utensils
cry
and think
have been playing a doll's game throughout life.

On the other hand, learning is made easy through the counting rhymes. Rhyme 7A was taught to me, by my mother who is a second generation immigrant and has the assimilation of both the Bongo culture, that is, 'Ae-par-Bangla'^{xxvii} and 'Ue-par-Bangla'^{xxviii}, whereas rhyme 7B, has been narrated to my mother by her grandmother, who expired before the partition and did not witness the partition, but my mother often claims that she wouldn't have been so strong to witness the division, bloodshed, tension and turmoil of her "Sonar Bangla"^{xxix}. The very concept of 'Ae-par-Bangla' and 'Ue-par-Bangla' is very dualistic by nature because for my grandmother the concept of home is non-negotiable. She always has a sense of dislocation, a feeling of rootlessness, a state of anxiety where her security is rooted in 'Ae-par-Bangla' but her comfort zone lies in 'Ue-par-Bangla'. The comfort zone is not the space of luxury or material pleasure but the comfort is of the rooted traditions and cultural assimilation of the place of origin. In the whole process she accumulated a sense of duality to negotiate with her positioning. She tries to establish an accommodation balanced between her mental home ('Ue-par-Bangla') and her geographical home ('Ae-par-Bangla').

Besides, the partition has definitely been a major reason for the loss of socio-cultural traditions. With the partition a major change has been noticed in the Bengali marriages of Tripura. Bangals have different traditional songs for every single event of the marriage ceremony. Now-a-days Bangals play Hindi music or Bengali fusion songs like:

সোহাগ চাঁদ বদনি খনি নাচো তো দেখি,
বালা নাচো তো দেখি.....

(A)
Rich looking married moon, show some moves,
Show some dance....

লিলা বালি, লিলা বালি,
ঘর যুবতি সেই গো,
কি দিয়া সাজাইমু তরে?

(B)
Leelaboti, Leelaboti,
Oh! Maiden friend,
With what should I decorate you?

In a family marriage attended by me, in Teliamura (Tripura), the old grandmothers or first generation refugees were complaining about the lost songs and dances which were practiced in groups before the partition. Separated from the 21st century ‘Ae-par-Bangla’ ’ enjoyment, they formed their own group recounting the golden period which lies in ‘Ue-par-Bangla’. They spoke of myths, culture, tradition, change of time, etc^{xxx}.

The myths of the Hindus centre round the epics- ‘Mahabharata’ and ‘Ramayana’. For much of the early 19th century, family recreation was found at home- mostly from listening to songs and poetry recited in the courtyard. During marriage, families and neighbours used to come together and share the happy as well as sad moment hand-in-hand. They used to sing song which has reference of ‘Ramayana’. Chandravati, the celebrated 17th century poetess, child of Dvija Banshida of Mymensingh, the celebrated author of ‘Manasha Mangol’, composed ‘Ramayana’ in verse. Her songs were sung by the women folk of Bengal during marriages. After partition this culture was lost by the first generation immigrants due to lack of practice. Dr. Nirmal Das has tried to preserve these narratives from the first generation immigrants in his book ‘Prasanga: Loksnaskriti o Tripura’. Few extracts of the ceremonies and their translations are shared below:

আমি কৃষ্ণ কোথা পাই গো সখি
কৃষ্ণ কোথা পাই।
আমি শুইলে স্বপন দেখি
আমি শ্যাম লইয়া বেড়াই।
আমি কৃষ্ণ কোথা পাই।
কৃষ্ণ কোথা পাই।

(A)
Oh! Friend, where will I get Krishna
Where will I get Krishna.
When I sleep I dream of
Roaming around along with him.
Where will I get Krishna.
Where will I get Krishna.

অযোধ্যাতে যজ্ঞ করে ব্রহ্মসনাতন ।
দেশে দেশে পত্র দিল যজ্ঞের নিমন্ত্রণ ॥
একে একে সব মুনি হলো নিমন্ত্রণ ।
একমাত্র বাকি রইল বাণ্মিকী ব্রাহ্মণ ॥

যজ্ঞে যাব না রে, যজ্ঞে যাব না,
পত্র লিখে হনুমানকে সত্বর পাঠাইল ।
পত্র পেয়ে বাণ্মিকী ব্রাহ্মণ আনন্দিত হইল ॥

সীতা ভিক্ষা দাও হে, সীতা ভিক্ষা দাও ...

যখনি আছিলাম, আমি অযোধ্যামহিষী,
যেখানে না চাইলা ভিক্ষা, দিতাম রাশি রাশি ॥
কী যে ভিক্ষা দিব কী যে ভিক্ষা দিব

দানের ফকির নই গো সীতা,
দানের ফকির নই
টাকার ফকির নই গো সীতা,
পয়সার ফকির নই
লব-কুশ ভিক্ষা পেলে ফকির বিদাই হই ॥

এই নিষ্ঠুর কালার সনে
পাশা আর খেলব নারে ।
বনে থাক ধেনু-বর
নারীর মর্ম বোঝ নারে ॥
শাড়ী দিবার কথা ছিল
তা কি তোমার মনে নাইরে ।
(বন্ধু) গয়না দিবার কথা ছিল
তা কি তোমার মনে নাইরে ॥
এই নিষ্ঠুর কালার সনে
পাশা আর খেলব নারে ॥

(B)
Group of Brahmin are busy in praying,
From country to country invitations have been sent for
participation in yajna.
One by one all the priests had been invited.
The only one left was Valmiki the Brahmin.

Won't go for the yajna, won't go for the yajna,
Hurriedly wrote to Hanuman.
After receiving the letter Valmiki Brahmin became happy.

Give some donation Sita, Sita give some donation...

There and then, when I was the Ayodhya priest,
Even if there was no need for donation, still I gave plenty.
What donation should I give... what donation should I
give...

Am not a Fakir because of my donation oh Sita,
Am not a Fakir because of my donation,
Neither am I Fakir for money
Nor for some coins
Receiving Labh-Kush shall drive the Fakir away.

(C)
With this cruel black
I won't play Pasha.
Let the archery-man remain in the forest
They will never realize the value of a woman.
He promised me of a saree
Don't you remember.
(Friend) Jewellery was also promised of
Don't you remember.
With this cruel black
I won't play Pasha anymore.

Neither the songs nor the dances are seen or heard of. The lacking sense of the loss of traditional songs in the 21st century has been campaigned through a Radio Mirchi ad titled 'Rudali'^{xxxii}. It depicts how the new generations of Rudali, professional mourners of Rajasthan fail to mourn due to the influence of the cultural drift. A contrast has been brought, to draw the difference between the young and the old; the young generation who are forgetting their culture are responsible for an erosion of tradition and heritage.

Apart from the loss, there is also a cultural drift and cultural assimilation found in the Bangals of India where the Bangali Bhai Phota^{xxxii} tradition is getting replaced with Raksha Bandhan^{xxxiii}. Usually, the boun^{xxxiv} for the safety and well-being of their bhai^{xxxv}, mark the forehead of their brothers with sandalwood paste while reciting a traditional rhyme:

ভাইয়ের কপালে দিলাম ফেঁটা,
যমের দুয়ারে পড়ল কাঁটা,
যমুনা দেয় যমকে ফেঁটা,
আমি দিলাম আমার ভাইকে দ্বিতীয় ফেঁটা।

In the forehead of my brother I give mark,
In front of Jom's door fell parts of bone,
Jamuna gave mark to Jom.
I gave my brother a mark on the second
Lunar day.

A significant drift in the tradition is seen, where instead of celebrating Bhai Phota, Bengalis celebrate Raksha Bandhan. The influence of this is historically rooted which has re-shuffled the Bengali culture. The tradition of Raksha Bandhan ceremony, where people of opposite religion tied the 'dhaga'^{xxxvi} on each other's hand to promote the feeling of brotherhood, togetherness and unification, was arranged by Rabindranath Tagore, when the British decided to divide Bengal in 1905 on the basis of religion into Muslim and Bengali territory. In 1911, British colonial empire reversed the partition and unified Bengal, thus making the ceremony successful and instilled in national consciousness which still exists in 'Ae-par-Bangla' , even replacing the 'Ue-par Bangla' culture and tradition.

Erosion of Bengali culture is found even in the present days' proverbs. Proverbs are popularly used by the common mass and are carried forward to make their acceptance universal. Proverbs are the shortest expressions of the longest experiences of life. The proverbs deal with the behaviour of the people and their prevalent lifestyle. With the gradual change in the life style, some proverbs have either lost their bearing on the contemporary society or they are transformed. Few examples of them are:

“হাত বারাইলে কি চাঁদের লাগাল পাওয়া যায়?”

(A) Extending hand to catch hold of the moon, is it of any use?

শাক দিয়ে মাছ ঢাকা ।

(B) Fish is covered with greens.

যেমন কর্ম, তেমন ফল ।।

(C) As you sow so you reap.

নাই মামার থেকে কানা মামা ভাল ।

(D) Blind uncle is better than having no uncle.

কপালের লিখন না হয় খন্ডন ।

(E) Fate is unavoidable.

লাই দিলে কুত্তা মাথায় উঠে ।

(F) Giving chance to a dog (intruder) can go against you.

পিতৃমুখী কন্যা সুখী,
মাতৃ মুখী পুত্র সুখী ।

(G) Like father makes the daughter happy,
Like mother makes the son happy.

মূলে নাই তল, পূবে দিয়া ঘর ।

(H) Base is not strong, still one makes a beautiful house directing towards the east.

আলে না চালে, মিয়া ভাই সালাম ।

(I) Neither by look nor by behaviour, is he wise, all of a sudden he starts greeting.

নদীর পারে বাড়ি,
হিন্দুর দাড়ি,
সে যে কি অহঙ্কারি!

(J)Beside the seashore is the house,
The Hindu has long beard,
Still he is so much proud!

মুহ্লার দৌড় মসজিদ পর্যন্ত ।

(K)The maximum reach of the Mullah is till the Masjid.

Strangely, when the Hindus are adopting the proverbs, they are not translating the culture. They rather adopt the proverb with the culture. Here adaptation of the proverbs from one religious community into another does not initiate transcultural feelings. The erosion of these cultural proverbs among Tripura Bangals is perhaps indebted towards the political rule in the state too. With the demographic change of the state, the post-partition immigrants tried to imbibe the Marxist ideology. With the Leftist regime in the state for such a long span of time, there is a sublimation of the Bengali culture.

The multiple natures of history and memory, which have constructed the Tripura Bangla folk culture, draws upon not one but many sources- from grandmother's tales to songs transmitted from

generation to generation, which find their home in the memory space. The nostalgia maintains the balance between the individual and community's feeling of belongingness; region and nation; dissolution of the past and the homogeneity of the past, mixing with the present. This is preserved through literature of transformation- cultural, psychological, social, and political. In the latter half of the 20th century, it is transformed from the oral space to the textual space (both in written and virtual form) where organizations, academicians, translators, historians, research scholars are compiling different art forms that are nearest to the pre-colonial culture one can imagine.

NOTES

*The verses referred in this paper has been narrated to me by my mother Mrs. Ila Roy; and grandmother, Mrs. Renu Bala Deb (the first generation immigrant); and from my maternal aunts Mrs. Swarupa Deb and Mrs. Supriti Deb Pal. My grandmother belongs to the first generation whereas my mother and maternal aunts belong to the second generation. I am especially thankful to my mother who has always been sharing these nostalgic stories and memories and has narrated these tales, rhymes and stories since my childhood.

- i. After the partition of 1971, East Pakistan was renamed Bangladesh.
- ii. India was declared independent on 15th August 1947 and the result was the partition between India and Pakistan.
- iii. On 26th March 1971, East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) declared Independence from West Pakistan (now Pakistan).

- iv. Refugees who migrated from East Pakistan to India after the partition of 1971. I am basically referring to the Bengali refugees who have settled in Tripura.
- v. The region where the Bengalis resided before partition.
- vi. My mother Ila Roy, has always shared her memories of Bangladesh and about her childhood to me and as I grew up she always tried to culture the inherited traditions inside me.
- vii. The Bengali lullabies referred in this paper have been inherited by me through my family who are first generation and second generation immigrants. These are part of memory which has been orally transmitted from one generation to the other. The sources of these lullabies are traditional.
- viii. The conversion of a text from one script to another. In this paper I have used the conversion of Bengali texts to English.
- ix. The term was given by Russian literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin. Chronotopes are recurring, structural features of a narrative. Bakhtin showed how every age has its own notion of space and time, and therefore chronotopes are rooted in their local traditions.
- x. The term is used in the English translations of works written by the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin. He refers to a literary mode that subverts and interrogates the established authority over meaning.
- xi. “Hanuman.com”. Directed by Gaurav Pandey, performed by Prosenjit Chatterjee, Mousumi Bhattacharya, Rudranil Ghosh, Kaushik Sen, Saloni Pandey, Sasaki. (Bengali), 2013.
- xii. In Bengali, the father-in-law’s house is called “sasur-bari”.
- xiii. In Bengali, the father’s house is called “babar-bari”.
- xiv. In Bengali, the maternal uncle’s house is called “mamar-bari”.
- xv. Mama is referred to as maternal uncle in Bengali.
- xvi. Mami is referred to as maternal aunty in Bengali.

- xvii. A small girl child getting married with an old man.
- xviii. Holy cities in India. Primarily pilgrimage centers of the Hindus.
- xix. A Hindu funeral custom where a widow used to burn her body on her husband's pyre.
- xx. The Borgi is the local Bengali name, who were a group of Maratha cavalry, who used to loot and torture the people of Bengal.
- xxi. A zamindar was an aristocrat holding enormous tracts of land and held control over his peasants.
- xxii. In Sanskrit, 'smriti' is "that which is remembered" and 'sruti' is "that which is heard".
Based on this tradition the Hindu religious texts were verbally transmitted and remembered across the generations since ages.
- xxiii. I am referring to the grandmothers' discussions, tales and gossips. They were the first generation immigrants and during the family gathering they were accompanying my grandmother Mrs. Renu Bala Deb.
- xxiv. Rhyme 1A
- xxv. The foster-mother of Krishna, a Hindu God.
- xxvi. Pride of being the mother of a male child was culturally inherited, perhaps because the male child was expected to be the earning member of the family and to inherit the ancestral property too.
- xxvii. This part of Bengal, the geographical space in which the immigrants are residing since the 1971 partition.
- xxviii. That part of Bengal, that is, present Bangladesh.
- xxix. Golden Bangla.
- xxx. Though I remember them but unable to refer, as I haven't recorded the narratives.

- xxxi. Directed by Nikhil Rao. Advertisement, (Hindi), 2015.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zFEJIs6e2-E>. Accessed on 20 November 2017.
- xxxii. Bengali Hindu festival celebrated two days after Kali puja, where the sisters pray for the well-being of their brother.
- xxxiii. A Hindu festival which is celebrated in India, to strengthen the love and the sense of duty between brothers and sisters.
- xxxiv. In Bengali vernacular, 'boun' means sister.
- xxxv. In Bengali vernacular, 'bhai' means brother.
- xxxvi. A sacred thread which is a symbol of fraternity.

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Gitanjali Roy is an Assistant Professor of English at ICFAI University Tripura. The writer has to her credit a number of scholarly articles. Her area of interest includes North East Literature, Popular Literature and Digital Literature. She is recently working on the Cultural Evolution of Tripura Bengal

Nation, Language and the Middle Classes: A Brief Reappraisal of the Respective Stances of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and Rabindranath Tagore

Pracheta Bakshi

Abstract: The objective of this paper is to ascertain the emergence and progress of the Bengali middle class who would play an integral role in determining the ethnographic character of the Bengali race in pre and post-independence India. It seems the progress has never been a homogenous process and much like the Marxian “Thesis-Antithesis-Synthesis”, it has been a process rife with conflict and amalgamation of distinguished thought processes.

Key words: orientalism, mythology, nationalism, nation-state, mass, class, race, ethnography, colonialism, cosmopolitanism, humanism, periodical literature, prose romance.

“It will hardly be disputed, I suppose, that the department of literature in which the Eastern writers stand highest is poetry. And I certainly never met with any orientalist who ventured to maintain that the Arabic and Sanskrit poetry could be compared to that of the great European nations. But when we pass from works of imagination to works in which facts are recorded and general principles investigated, the superiority of the Europeans becomes absolutely immeasurable. It is, I believe, no exaggeration to say that all the historical information which has been collected from all the books

written in the Sanskrit language is less valuable than what may be found in the most paltry abridgments used at preparatory schools in England. In every branch of physical or moral philosophy, the relative position of the two nations is nearly the same.”

--Macaulay's Minutes on Education, February 2, 1835

As can be seen from the above quotation, Macaulay's intention was to utterly emasculate and dismantle the linguistic texture of India and Bengal, as well. The infamous jibe of Macaulay at the “effeminate” and “childlike” Bengali man (a strategy ,namely infantilism, adopted by the colonial masters) is a related case in point. Therefore, the need to educate the Indians in a foreign tongue and declaring “ What the Greek and Latin were to the contemporaries of More and Ascham, our tongue is to the people of India. The literature of England is now more valuable than that of classical antiquity. I doubt whether the Sanskrit literature be as valuable as that of our Saxon and Norman progenitors. In some departments-in history for example-I am certain that it is much less so.” (ibid)

Interesting to note, that one of the yugpurush of Bengali literature and culture, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya is born , exactly three years after the publication of the “ minutes”. Well versed in the western language and literature and having worked as a collector under the British regime, he had derived a novel sense of the literary flavour, eminent in his characterisation and description of nature, especially showcased in his romances. Except *Nababur Bilas (1823)* and *Alaler Gharer Dulal (1858)*, composed respectively by Bhabanicharan Bandopadhyay and Parry Chand Mitra, the contemporary Bengali prose had become stagnant and superfluously decorative. Bankim with the launch of the famed periodical *Bangadarshan* had resuscitated the scene successfully, infusing Bengali prose with the much needed lucidity and clarity. It is no coincidence that Macaulay's claim that Indian literature can solely be consisted of poetry and verse, was strongly refuted by the rise of the intellectual, progressive, well-to-do middle class, albeit the “ Comprador” in Calcutta as this rise coincided with the rise of a revived, prose literature, ushered in by the said periodical

Bangadarshan. This welcome change which further reshaped the Bengali “manasjagat” was not a single day’s affair and had taken in remarkable contributions of stalwarts like Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Gupta and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. Bankimchandra had infinite faith on the values imparted by the Indian mythologies –the Puranas and the Vedas and had stressed the need to combine the ancient wisdom with the upcoming wave of modernity in order to create a national consciousness. Therefore, the quest to find and define a language that could bridge the gap between the educated and the uneducated classes—for hindrances like Macaulay would feed upon such intellectual gaps in order to create a class, utterly detached from his ethnographic concerns, gladly turning into the “Mimic-man.” Again, a reluctant quotation from the “Minutes”—“In one point I fully agree with the gentlemen to whose general views I am opposed. I feel with them that it is impossible for us, with our limited means, to attempt to educate the body of the people. We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern, -a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population.”

Now, having found his desired medium, there was an endless road for Bankimchandra to traverse and the political-patriotic war cry “Vandemataram” inspired from *Anandamath* (later translated as *Abbey of Bliss*) being willy-nilly accepted by the moderate and “secular” Indian National Congress proves the popularity and connect of the author with the mass. Apart from the romance novellas, if we would concentrate in his non-fictional works, there seems to be a ceaseless effort on his part to explain the otherwise misinterpreted contents of the Vedas and the Puranas for the mass. In the essay “Chatanyabad” he explains that advent of religion and life could both be explained in scientific terms and that religion, science and life can co-exist. In another gem “Devatatwa and Hindu dharma”, there are elaborate depictions of the same god/goddess being worshipped in

different parts of the universe and therefore the hint of a common pagan paradigm to be celebrated among this shared repertoire of culture. The Sun-god, the fire-god, the air god, and the water god—being commonly worshipped by many nations and therefore equating the natural/scientific/explicable forces with religion/culture is a case in point. Also interesting is his finding that in Lithuania of erstwhile USSR there is a language which has some common sharing with the ancient Vedic language. Not only that, the god of thunder and rain, namely Perkunas in Lithuania is surprisingly similar to an ancient Vedic god “Parjanya.” This god is even more ancient than Indradev and carries the proof of an existing common network of the Aryan race scattered in Asia and Europe!

It is no surprise, therefore that a periodical like *Bangadarshan* would attract a budding eleven year old Rabindranath Tagore who would wait impatiently for the next issue of the periodical! Also, Tagore gets firmly associated with the periodical when it is resuscitated after more than 20 years of disappearance with Tagore as its editor in 1901! “Amar Shonar Bangla”, a *Rabindrasangeet*, later transformed into the national anthem of Bangladesh was first published in *Bangadarshan*.

Not to divert from the original contention of this paper, let us concentrate on a particular prose piece by Bankimchandra, published for the first time in *Bangadarshan*, belonging to a collection of humorous and satirical take on the emergent Bengali comprador class entitled *Lokrahasya*. The title of the distinguished piece is “Babu” and as the name implies, he had unleashed his lashes of satire in a mock-epic tone on the crisis of intellectual fervour and dependency on/ mimicry of the colonial culture amongst this new born class. This is a class who would be multilingual yet unable to converse in their mother tongue, would have a weakening intellect yet eager to write, would study solely so that money could be earned, would worship the fire god in the form of cigar only, would rise late to miss the sunrise, would enjoy the cacophony of western music etc. To go one step further, Bankimchandra also assigns them the ten different forms of the mythic “Avatars” –clerk, teacher, brahma(the newly emerged secular sect who had defied the Sanatan Hindu trajectories),

muttsuddi (in the profession of law), physician, lawyer, judge, landlord, newspaper-editor and last but not the least “nishkarrma” or a good-for-nothing who does not work. It is obvious that he was careful enough to include all the functioning fractions of the newly emerged Bengali middle class.

A lot has been said and written about the “anti-nationalist” stance of Tagore, the fear of the “Bhougolik Opodebota” or the “geopolitical Goblin”, much reflected and celebrated in his seminal essay “On Nationalism”. However, few has been able to notice that Tagore was talking about rejecting the Western and mimicked notion of nationalism, comparing the case of India with larger political powers like the “Socialist China” and “Imperialist Japan”, both of which has unsuccessfully adopted the western idea of Nationalism and in effect turned them into some geopolitical demons, some rigid, unresponsive, distorted, wealth manufacturing superpowers, totally aloof from the individuals who constitute the nation-state. Tagore does not fail to recognise Britain and America to be their role model, integrating the “Banal Nationalism” in their everyday life (a term coined by Michael Billig in his 1995 work *Banal Nationalism.*, implying the hegemonic ideological state apparatus used by nation states for identity formation and geopolitics. Say, for example the Pledge of Allegiance taken by school children in U.S.A.) Also Tagore warns against limiting the sense of Nationalism to a particular space /state as it would be a perfect breaking ground of nihilist and terrorist activities, ironically defying the objectives of a nationalist framework. Also a multiethnic, multilingual, multiracial and caste ridden subcontinent like India sadly lacks the racial integrity which, say a country like Switzerland can boast off and therefore can successfully execute the nationalist aspirations.

Therefore, Tagore’s is a vision of inclusive nationalism, cosmopolitanism and universal humanism against the forced import of the Nation-state in the 2nd half of the 19th century. However elusive it seems, it is for this reason probably, Gandhi had applauded the poet as “an ardent nationalist” in his obituary comment. When all these were happening in the national canvas, the local/ethnic canvas of the Bengali “Manasjagat” was shaping and reshaping it furthermore. The comprador class of

modernised Bengal had successfully internalised the poisonous teaching of the Macaulay's breed and had chosen carefully between the binaries of the "progressive West" and the "regressive East". Kenyan critic Ngugi's words do ring an ominous and warning bell: (although in the Kenyan context of the total annihilation of the ethnic language "Gikyu/Kikyu": "Because of its indeterminate economic position between the many contending classes, the petty-bourgeoisie develops a vacillating psychological makeup. Like a chameleon it takes on the colour of the main class with which it is in the closest touch and sympathy." (*Decolonising the Mind*) Without any doubt, the progress of the Bengali "bhadrolok" middle class too is riddled with this self-doubt, self-negation and historical oscillation.

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Pracheta Bakshi is an Assistant Professor of English at a Delhi University College.

Transforming the Baboo:

Bankim and the Rise of Nationalist Historiography

Abhinaba Chatterjee

How do we associate Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya with the rise of nationalist sensibility in Bengal? What were the causes that were identified by Bankim for the downfall of Indian (Bengali) nationalism? How far was the contemporary social situation responsible for the downgraded state of Bengal? This paper seeks to analyse these questions. In the course of the discussion, it will also discuss to what extent was Bankim responsible for the advent of Bengali modernity. I propose to read Bankim as an author who introduced democratic discursive practices but who did not have conceptual tools that would have enabled him to articulate the key moves that he was making as an innovator. I take this stand in response to well-known extra-textual facts – specifically, the way Bankim went about his work.

The origins of the Indian nationalist movement, as opposed to sporadic anticolonial peasant insurgencies, lie in the colonial state. To a large extent, Indian nationalism in its early phases was the ideology of the indigenous bureaucracy of the *Raj*. The colonial state apparatus was the principal avenue for upward mobility and became the principal employer of a new, professional class of *anglicized* Indians fulfilling the role assigned to them by Macaulay who had, in 1835, envisaged a ‘class of interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern - a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect.’ In the latter part of the nineteenth century, it was this class of interpreters who initiated and backed a nationalist

movement which attempted to capture the state apparatus. The Anglicized elite class both competed and collaborated with the British in their search for power and privilege (Seal 1968). Established in 1885 by a group of middle-class, upper-caste lawyers, the Indian National Congress (INC) is largely credited with leading the ‘freedom movement’. Initially, INC demands reflected the narrow interests of its membership and failed to mobilize the silent vernacular agrarian majority.

A whole new way of living evolved around new Babus and gave rise to what is known as the "Babu Culture" of Calcutta during the reign of the British Raj. The educated Bengali ‘Babu’ or ‘Bhadralok’ that we are referring to is a class that rose in the first half of the 19th century. The Hindu School, established in 1817 and upgraded to a college in 1825 and brought under direct Government control led to a massive expansion of English education among Bengalis. Besides Hindu school, institutions like David Hare Academy, Oriental Seminary School, Metropolitan Academy, Dharmatala Academy established by Mr. Drummond much before Hindu School, contributed to this phenomenon. In 1828 Derozeo led to the formation Academic Association. Throughout the 19th century, the middle class intelligentsia evolved through a process of seminars – conferences–debates–associations to open up a new dimension of practice of knowledge. Among subject of popular discourse & practice were – European philosophy, rationalism, elocution, recitation, debate and acting.

It is very possible that even though we find no specific mention of rakes in the works about the babus, it was indeed the rakes who were the babus’ models for emulation. There are so many parallels between the lives of the rakes and the lives of the babus that an exploration of them affords an interesting, unique, and fruitful study. A criticism made by Gauri Vishwanathan further points in this direction: “English education came to be criticized for its imitativeness and superficiality and for having produced an uprooted elite who were ...imperfect imitators of the West” (G. Vishwanathan 159). The babus were indeed an “uprooted elite” who clung to the rakish lifestyle of their models making the rest of Hindu society afraid of the dangers into which they were bringing

themselves and their society by refusing to follow Hindu traditions and blindly emulating the British (G. Vishwanathan 159). Even though it is undoubtedly true that Western education enlightened many minds, ushered in new ideas, and in some measures was responsible for rooting out problematic practices, it came to be largely blamed for producing this class of young men whom the vast majority of Bengalis found threatening to their culture, to their traditions, and to their religious principles. In “Babu,” Bankimchandra Chatterji writes of the babus: “The English will be their supreme Gods,” and indeed the babus worshipped, supported, and “blindly imitated the English” (S. Raychaudhuri 68).

Bankimchandra acknowledged the influence of English utilitarianism and French positivism on his political thought but asserted all the same his independence of them by critiquing them where they, in his opinion, deserved such criticism. As a philosophy, utilitarianism sought to judge all actions and policies, particularly governmental, in the light of the ability or utility of such policies and actions to promote the good of the greatest number of people. Such a philosophy, Bankimchandra reasoned, was flawed on two counts. First, it was not, ethically speaking, a foolproof philosophy. The Indian ideal, as laid down in its ancient scriptures, of doing good to all, which found expression in the following pronouncement of the rishis -

*‘Sarvebhavantusukhinaesarvesantuniramayae; Sarvebhadraipauyantuma
kaucitduekhabhakhavet.* May all be happy; may all be free from disease; may all realize that which is good; may none be subject to misery’ - was, to Bankimchandra, an infinitely better ideal in terms of both religion and ethics than that which utilitarianism gave to mankind.

Bankimchandra’s second objection was rooted in the ground reality prevailing in India of his times. Whatever be the exhortation of English political philosophies such as utilitarianism, the British government of India, had its own primary interests - such as augmenting its own exchequer - and could not be expected to go to any great length in doing good to a subject people. It was a better policy, therefore, for Indians to rely on their own strength in terms of generating national awareness,

preparing the people for struggle and the self-sacrifice required for such struggle, and curtailing their dependence on the government as an agency for promoting general welfare. It was from such a conceptualization of politics that Bankimchandra criticized the politics of verbosity - of talks without constructive work - that was in vogue in India during his time. He detested such politics and criticized it on the following counts with a view to giving it a *more constructive orientation*: First, the prevalent brand of politics was city-centric, mainly confined to a few cities like Calcutta. Second, it was confined to the upper stratum of society - the city-bred leaders and their followers. Third, its discourse was conducted in the English language, be it through the press or on the platform. Fourth, its activities were, more often than not, one-shot affairs, ending either in passing resolutions in annual sessions and begging the British government for some favour or other or in writing articles in newspapers mildly chiding the British administration for some omission or commission on their part. Such politics, far from doing any good to the people actually alienated them. It widened the gulf between the city and the country, between the educated and the uneducated and between the English-speaking leaders and the masses.

Bankimchandra's scorn for the politics of verbosity can be seen in the following passage from his *Kamalakanta*: 'Some think that by droning they will deliver the country - gathering boys and old men together at meetings they drone at them. ... Others again are not given to this - they take up pen and paper, and drone, week after week, month after month, and day after day.'

What is the alternative to verbosity - 'mere droning', as Bankimchandra calls it? The answer that Bankimchandra gives reveals his attitude to the prevailing brand of politics as also his concept of nationalism, which he later articulated more fully. To quote Bankimchandra: 'Let me tell you the truth ... you know neither how to gather honey nor how to sting - you can only drone. There is no sign of work to go with it - only droning, day and night, like a whining girl. Reduce your verbosity in speech and writing, and give your mind to some work - then you will prosper.'

By advising his countrymen to 'gather honey or sting', Bankimchandra meant to say that

without a grim resolve and the attendant struggle they could not really hope to get any concrete benefit from the foreign government of India. The people of India had to fend for themselves. The country had to be regenerated and towards that end the kind of effete politics that was in fashion in those days had to be discarded in favour of a new sense of nationalism and a new brand of politics in which the new mantra would be identity, unity and strength.

Bankimchandra held that Europe came up by virtue of its nationalist fervour and asserted that India could also be raised if it could be sufficiently charged with nationalism. The problem with India was that nationalism in its European sense, as the political expression of the distinctiveness of a people living within a certain geographically defined territory and united by race, religion, language, tradition, heritage, and culture, was something foreign to her. Neither of the two essential constituent elements of nationalism - the identification of the individual with the political community to which he or she belonged and the differentiation of the concerned political community from other political communities - was historically present in India.

As for the first element, the Aryans of India were originally one single community with members having an identity of interests with each other. As their number increased and as, in course of time, they became dispersed all over the multifarious parts of India, they became differentiated in respect of territories as also in respect of languages and sects which, in turn, brought about differences in terms of tradition, heritage and culture. With differences on so many counts being a pronounced fact of life in India, there was no sense of national unity in the sense in which that term was understood in Europe.

The Indians were deficient in the second constituent element of nationalism as well. They not only did not have a sense of emotional oneness as members of one single entity, they also failed to develop a sense of differentiation of interests from the communities that were not Indian. The European communities that developed as nations were so actuated by their sense of differentiation from other nations that they were always ready to promote, and often did actually promote, their

own interests at the expense of other nations. In contrast to the Europeans, the Indians could not go for the throats of other nations and promote themselves at the expense of others. They were not sufficiently hostile to other nations, even to those who invaded their country, occupied it and ruled over it.

Before the advent of British, we had a psychological and geographical image of one India but then it was quite loose in its conception. It was loose because of the pluralistic structure of Indian society. But, at the same time a multilingual, multiracial, multi-religious and multicultural India had some kind of an integrative framework of a nation governed by *dharma*. Whether India followed the polity of confederated republics or monarchical state, it was *dharma*, the religious, ethical, social, political, juridical and customary law which governed the life of the people.

Dharma was our ethical, social constitution. The king was only the guardian, executor and servant of the *dharma*. It was with the British rule that the idea of a modern-state entered Indian society but then it was also opposed by many nationalist Indians like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and others. Bankimbabu would always say that do not forget that the highest *dharma* is the love of one's country. Love of it is not European patriotism, which is an abominable sin. Under the influence of this pernicious patriotism, the original people of America have been wiped out from earth. Bankim constructed an idea of a nation based on *dharma* and explained it in terms of *manusattava* and *samanjasya*, humanity and harmony and turned it into universal humanism. In other words here in India nation reflects universal humanism. Nation for India is just not a geographical territory. There were three reasons for this. First, the governing in India had traditionally been the preserve and special province of the caste of warriors (kshatriyas) and the other castes had kept aloof from it, with the result that people as a whole never presented a united front to a foreign invading army. Second, the people of India were not bothered about who ruled so long as those who ruled did it well. Good governance, and not independence, was what mattered to them. Third, the religious attitude of the Hindu people of India stood in the way of their cultivating

a sense of hatred and hostility to foreign people. They believed that God was the indwelling spirit of all beings and that the distinction between a foreigner and a native was artificial. To cultivate hatred towards one just because he hailed from a different land or belonged to a different race was to insult the God within him. As a result of such a religious attitude, resulting in an inability to differentiate themselves politically from others, the Indians failed to counter the foreign invading nations. To quote Bankimchandra, 'Muslim kings followed Hindu kings, and the people did not object - for the Hindu, Hindu and Muslim were equal. An English king followed the Muslims, and people did not object. ... For the Hindu had no hatred for the Englishman on the ground of his different race.'

During the second half of the 19th century, India witnessed two "rational" developments that formed the ground of historical novels: the rise of nationalism and the emergence of a new literary genre called "Upanyas" or novel. The novels showed a deep interest in evoking the past and attach it to the formulation of a national awareness.

The façade of civilising mission which European imperialism used to camouflage its oppressive brutality necessarily projects the colonial intrusion as beneficial for the colonised. Foucault's concept of the omnipresence of power may, in this context, be of help to understand the intricate strategies of subordination European colonialism practiced. In his opinion, power functions through a net-like organization in which individuals not only become affected by, but are rather actively instrumental in, its operation. "They are not only its inert...target; they are also the elements of its articulation. In other words, individuals are like vehicles of power, not its points of application". (qtd. Gandhi 1998: 14). In the colonial context, individuals become "vehicle" or agents in the process of colonisation, not so much perhaps when institutionalized coercion is exercised openly, as when colonialism takes on the guise of the "disinterested purveyor of cultural enlightenment and reform".(Gandhi, 14) The European discourse on the colonised invariably presents the latter as uncivilised, irrational, primitive, their culture and customs, degenerate, barbaric and anti-modern and their history as one of defeat and subjugation. Contrasted sharply to

this definition of the colonised, European civilisation emerges as the locus of modernity, rationality, liberty and prosperity. Complicity on the part of the colonised becomes inevitable as the latter, convinced of his racial-cultural inferiority allows his culture's alterity to be eroded by Western hegemony. Such a strategic construction of the 'Orient' thus replicates the hierarchical relations between the dominant political and economic power and the subordinated colony. Orientalism then becomes, in Edward Said's words, a cultural means "for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient" (Said 1995: 88). Said elucidates the term 'Orientalism' as a particular construction of the colonised world and its culture, which emerged most conspicuously in the era of Occidental political ascendancy beginning from the end of the eighteenth century and helped to bolster the West's complacent confidence in its unequalled civilizational superiority.

The nationalist historiography of Bengal drew its prime inspiration from Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay who is regarded as the philosopher and the preceptor of modern Indian nationalism. He felt aggrieved when he had found that our country's history was not properly written and India of the Indians was almost absent from the accounts taught in the schools. Rajendralal Mitra's researches had raised high hopes in his mind. But he was disappointed when he had found that Rajendralal ultimately could not produce a full-fledged history of Bengal. However, the silver lining was discovered by him behind the dark cloud when Rajkrishna Mukhopadhyay's *Prathama Śikṣā BāṅgālārItihāsa* had been published. He found in it a true picture of Bengali society and culture for which it was referred to by him as 'a fistful of gold'. He also appreciated the literary qualities of Isvarachandra Gupta because, in his literary works on the lives of Bengali rural poets, he had proved his native quality. However, Bankinchandra Chattopadhyay deeply felt the necessity of reconstructing the socio-economic-cultural history of Bengal. He gave a clarion call to the nation, Bengalis in particular and said:

A history (proper) of Bengal is needed; otherwise, Bengal has no hope. Who will write?

You will write, I will write and all will write. Let us all search for a (true) history of Bengal

together.

The attitude of Bankim was well demonstrated in several essays published in the *Baṅgadarśan* from 1872 to 1882. In his essay ‘Bhāratkalamka’ Bankim raised the question why India had lost her independence. The Europeans criticised the weakness of the Hindus. But, at one time, the Hindus had conquered Kabul and the English had been defeated by the Marathas and the Sikhs. So far as the ancient Indians were concerned, it was difficult to know exactly about their military achievements due to the paucity of historical materials. The history of wars in India as found in the Greek and Muslim accounts is biased and exaggerated. In spite of that, the military skill of the Indians could be traced from their accounts.

According to Bankim, the stigma brought on the Hindu character could be explained by two facts. Firstly, they had no history. Secondly, as they did not make an aggression against their countries or kingdoms, their military skill was not recognised. Thirdly, their political subjugation - was the main cause of the slur on the forehead of the nation. Bankim proved that the Indians could by dint of their military strength expand their political and commercial empire in Southeast Asia. Hindu kingdoms were established in Champa and Kamboja, Java and Bali. In his essay ‘Bhāratvarṣer Swādhīnatā O Parādhīnatā’ (Bhādra, 1280 BS) drew a comparison between ancient India and modern India to settle the question of independence and subjugation and determine the question whether India had her happiness in ancient or modern period. In modern India, “we are not being educated in the art of administration (*rājyarakṣā O rājyapālan*) and therefore the nation is not flourishing. Therefore, it is to be admitted that political dependence arrests the progress.” On the other hand, under English rule European literature and science spread in India. From that point of view, foreign rule might prove to be beneficial. However, in ancient India *daṇḍanīti* or political science had made remarkable progress. Bankim referred to the dialogue between Nārada and Yudhiṣṭhira in the *Sabhāparvan* of the *Mahābhārata* in which the main principles of *daṇḍanīti* were enunciated. Incidentally, Bankim made a significant observation in which he equated the status of

Chandragupta Maurya as a conqueror and founder of empire with that of Charlemagne, Frederick II and Peter I.

Bankimchandra may reasonably be considered as the propounder of a new agenda of the Nationalist Historiography, not only for Bengal but, of the whole of India. While Mrityunjay Vidyalankar represented the pre-colonial nationalist historiography, Bankimchandra upheld the cause of nationalist historiography in the colonial period after having adapted European methodology of historical writing. The adaptation of Western methodology lay in the logic of history.

The recreation of past has been an important task for the historians to invigorate nationalism in their writings. The writing of history stems from the necessity to question the credibility of the already set history of India written by the British Colonial power and to replace it with a substitute that includes writing an enormous body of history textbooks and novels to create the cultural and political self of nationhood. While the historian focuses on the facts, the novelist takes resort to myths, legends in his recreation of history. Having claimed *Rajsingha* to be his only historical novel, Bankim Chandra uses both fact and fiction to recreate the lost glory of the Rajput dynasty. While he adheres to the larger social and political history, his exploration of the relationships and enmity between the Rajputs and the Moghuls gives it a special colouring. The distinct historical phenomena, such as the clash between Rana Rajsingha and the Moghul Emperor Aurangjeb, the eventual fall of Aurangjeb, have been effectively intermingled with their influence upon the personal lives of the characters. The greater social and political history coincides with the personal that happen indoor. According to the accounts of JadunathSarkar, Bankim Chandra relies exclusively on James Tod's *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* and the accounts of Manuchi and Bournie for historical information as source texts for laying out the background for *Rajsingha*. Though later historians discovered some major deviations in Bankim's history, his portrayal of the chief historical characters remains loyal to the historical facts.

Bankim's genius lies in the ways he works out a beautiful synthesis of history and the novel. The background against which the battles are fought between Rajsingha and Aurangjeb is historically correct. Appended to it are some personal causes of the fictional characters like Nirmal, Dariyabibi, Chanchal Kumari, Mobarak, which give to the history a human angle in the novel. Such small bits of appendages help to bring back the characters of the historical figures more vividly. Chanchal Kumari's mashing of Aurangjeb's picture and Aurangjeb's desire to marry Chanchal Kumari, Chanchal's letter to Rajsingha with a plea to save her from the Muslim Emperor and Rajsingha's acceptance of this, are events purely fictitious and that work upon the novelist's impassioned imaginings of the personal relationships between the individuals as connected to the broader history. We are aware of the history that taints Aurangjeb's figure for being a merciless ruler. In the novel, his unemotional nature is very much akin to history as he imposes "Jijia" tax not only on his subjects but also on the inhabitants of Rajsingha's territory. And he flies into a rage as he receives a daring letter from Rajsingha:

The Rana remonstrated by letter, in the name of the nation of which he was the head, in a style of such uncompromising dignity, such lofty yet temperate resolve, so much of soul-stirring rebuke mingled with a boundless and tolerating benevolence, such elevating excess of the Divinity with such pure philanthropy, that it may challenge competition with any epistolary production of any age, clime or condition.

But his rough, magnificent personality takes on an unusual tinge when he reveals his heart to Nirmal Kumari and affectionately calls her "Imli Begum":

আলম পরোচীন হেইয়রোলছি, লকন কখহনরো ভরোহলিরোবেরোলস নরোই. এ জহন রকবেলি রতিরোমরোহকই ভরোহলিরোবেরোলসযরোলছি. তিরোই, তিপুলম যলদ বেলি রয, রতিরোমরোর

সরোমচী নরো থরোলকহলি তিপুলম আমরোর রবেগম হেইহতি, তিরোহেরো হেইহলি এ রম্বেহেশশূনলহদয়-হপরোডরো পরোহেরোহডর মতি হদয় একটপুলম্বেগ হেই.

Or এ পভলখবেচীহতিআলম রকবেলি রতিরোমরোই ভরোহলিরোবেরোলসযরোলছি. রতিরোমরোহক পরোহলিরোম নরো. রতিরোমরোই ভরোহলিরোবেরোলসযরোলছি, অতিএবে রতিরোমরোই আটকরোইহবেরো নরো-

ছিরোলডয়রো লদহবেরো. তিপুলম যরোহেরোহতি সপুলখহেও তিরোহেরোই কলরবে. যরোহেরোহতি রতিরোমরোর দদুধু হেই, তিরোহেরো কলরবে নরো, তিপুলম যরোও. আমরোহক সারল ররোলখও.

The reader now views Aurangjeb not as a despicable Moghul king as described in history but as an emotional human being, pining for love. Bankim's imagination brilliantly weaves such minute details to create a life-like figure of this historically significant personality. The reader is thus able to see into the other side of the character which is not bereft of the basic human tendencies. Aurangjeb's plea for love and Nirmal's genuine sympathy for him add a human appeal to the imaginative aspects of the historical novel. The writer testifies to it by saying that Aurangjeb was no Mark Antony but man can never be heartless. Nirmal Kumari remains steadfast in retaining her Rajput identity despite Aurangjeb's threats. Such juxtaposition of the non-historical elements further associates the historically significant characters with the fictional characters more flexibly, thereby making the history come alive and turning the course of action as consequences of not only political disputes but also the intricacies of personal relationships in an era of decadence as the powerful Moghul Empire collapses with Aurangjeb.

The story of Raj Singha is derived from a short paragraph in Tod's Annals and Antiquities and the narrative structure of the novel builds up a multilayered saga of Hindu prowess against Muslim invasion. The princess of Roopnagar, a small state in Rajasthan, writes a letter to the valiant Rana of Udaipur, Raj Singha, seeking his protection against the lecherous designs of Aurangzeb who had planned to attack Roopnagar and abduct the princess Chanchal Kumari. In the course of the novel, however, the idea of preserving the honour of a damsel in distress gets fused with that of resisting territorial aggression. After Raj Singha's valour thwarts the Emperor's intention of abducting Chanchal Kumari, Aurangzeb seeks to vent his wrath on all the Hindus residing within his empire. He imposes an unfair tax called the 'jejeya' on the Hindus, while the Muslims are exempt from it. The Emperor has been successful in forcing all the provinces of Rajputana, except Udaipur, to agree to pay the tax. The indomitable Rana of Udaipur, Raj Singha, refused to succumb to the unjust demand and, in consequence, Aurangzeb prepares to devastate his territory. The conflict of the

Hindu Rana with the Muslim Emperor over the latter's debauched intention of marrying a Hindu princess, thus, ultimately takes the form of a violent clash over the possession of a territorial space. As Meenakshi Mukherjee observes, the princess of Roopnagar seems to be a metaphoric incarnation of the motherland as the narrative conflates "sexual assault... with territorial aggression". (Mukherjee 2008: 158)

In this context it is pertinent to note that nationalist iconography often represented the colonised nation as a feminine figure. In some instances, the nation was imagined as a distressed woman, plundered by alien invaders and waiting to be avenged by redoubtable native heroes. This image corresponds perfectly to Bankim's depiction in *Raj Singha* of the heroic struggle as a means to protect the endangered chastity of a woman, as well as of Hindu religion and a Hindu state, against the threats of the Mughal.

Nationalist thought appears to oppose the dominating implications of post-Enlightenment European thought at one level and yet, at the same time, seems to accept that domination at another (Chatterjee 1986:37). Nationalism takes issue not with modernity itself but with the *mode* in which modernity came to the colonies. It seeks not to abolish the main instruments of colonial 'governmentality' but to *nationalize* them. Therefore, the capture of state power soon became the central nationalist demand, even though the nation was yet to be invented (Gellner 1983) or imagined (Anderson 1991). The insistent demand for a nation-state represented the urge to establish an *Indian* modernity: an indigenous modernity which differed from that of the West (Prakash 1999:201). This explains why, in the Indian case, 'state power was not seized in a single historical movement of revolution but through prolonged popular struggle on a moral, political and ideological level' (Chandra 1989:220). An Indian modernity took time to be forged in the crucible of the independence movement. As Bipin Chandra has written, 'the national movement was the process through which the Indian people *were formed into a nation* and a people...it was the existence of a common oppression by a common enemy and the struggle against it which provided

important bonds uniting the Indian people' (Chandra 1984:210-emphasis mine).

Both 'critical modernist', which sought to christianize Hinduism, and 'critical traditionalist', which sought to defend Hinduism against public encroachments, strands of Brahma Samaj, are evident in the writings of Bankim. Partha Chatterjee has seen Bankim's thought as constituting a 'moment of departure' for Indian nationalism (Chatterjee 1986). For Chatterjee, the moment of departure lies in the encounter of a nationalist consciousness with the framework of knowledge created by post-Enlightenment rationalist thought, producing the awareness of an essential cultural difference between East and West. The West is characterised by its materiality, exemplified by science, technology and the never ending quest for progress whilst the East is characterised by poverty, subjection and spirituality. However, far from regarding spirituality as an impediment to progress, nationalist thought at the moment of departure asserts that the very superiority of its culture lies in its spirituality. Indigenous modernity lies in combining the superior material qualities of western cultures with the spiritual greatness of the East (Chatterjee 1986:50-1). Indeed, Bankim argued that the materiality of western culture *reinforced* indigenous spiritual values. Although Bankim admitted that 'it was true that there is no scientific proof of the existence of the Trinity', he asserted that:

...it must be admitted that in comparison with Christianity, the religion followed by those great practitioners of science, the European peoples, the Hindu worship of the Trinity is far more natural and in accordance with scientific theories. The worship of the Trinity may not be founded in science, but it is not in opposition to it. On the other hand, Mill's arguments have shown conclusively that the Christian belief in an omnipotent, omniscient and all merciful-God is entirely contrary to scientific principles. The Hindu philosophies of *karma* or *maya* are far more consistent with science. (Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya [1875] in Chatterjee 1986: 68)

In other words, Bankim argued that indigenous spiritual values were more *modern* than those of the

colonizer and that, by adopting western scientific techniques, indigenous civilization could once again surpass the achievements of the west. In his novel, *Anandamath*, 'English rule' was seen as necessary for the cultural regeneration of indigenous culture. It is unclear, however, what indigenous culture Bankim considered his own: 'Indian', Bengali or Hindu. His nationalist anthem, *Bande Mataram*, refers to a mother (*mata*) without specifying her identity and despite which is now widely considered to be Bengali, despite of its subsequent adoption of the 'Indian' national anthem by the INC. Certainly, Bankim's later works appeared to carry strong anti-Muslim overtones. According to Chatterjee, Bankim 'recognized in Islam a quest for power and glory, but he saw it as being completely devoid of spiritual or ethnical qualities, a complete antithesis to his ideal religion, irrational, bigoted, devious, sensual and immoral' (Chatterjee 1986:77). Although critical of those Hindu religious practices considered discriminatory, the spirituality celebrated in his later work was unmistakably a Hindu spirituality and the 'motherland' was conceived of in religious terms as a Hindu 'nation'.

Bankim's sense of history comes close to resound Lukacs' when the latter talks about the circumstances before the French Revolution and how it has necessitated the need to see history as something that continually changes and regulates the lives of common people. Bankim's painstaking effort highlights each of the characters as they experience the surge of oppositional violence and feels trapped in it. For example, Jodhpuri Begum, during a conversation with Nirmala, is highly morbid for having lived as a Hindu wife of a Muslim Baadshah and wants to escape. Their fate is entwined with what is going on in the larger social and political context. The psychological underpinning of an individual's sense of seeing his/her position in a specific period is as important as the foundation of the larger history that affects him/her. Bankim thus consciously invites the present readers to link themselves to their past and re-examine their position in relation to history. Lukacs subscribes to the same opinion as he says,

What matters therefore in the historical novel is not the re-telling of great historical events,

but the poetic awakening of the people who figured in those events. What matters is that we should re-experience the social and human motives which led men to think, feel and act just as they did in historical reality. And it is a law of literary portrayal which first appears paradoxical, but then quite obvious, that in order to bring out these social and human motives of behavior, the outwardly insignificant events, the smaller relationships are better suited than the great monumental dramas of world history.

In the exploration of individual psychology, Bankim Chandra excels Walter Scott and delves deeper into the complexities of human mind. *Rajsingha* bear instances of his adroitness in bringing out the complex psychic turmoil inherent in an individual mind. His way of seeing history through fiction ceases to be a mere representation of facts and allows him to transcend the limitations that history cannot overcome. It is a world more lively and picturesque and the characters throb in it with all their innate goodness and idiosyncrasies. The reader undergoes a nail-biting suspense when Jebunnisa sentences Mobarak, her favourite, to death And to her horror, Jebunnisa is later exposed to the realization that a shrewd “politician” like her can also fall in love,

“রজবে-উলমিসরো পতয়শরো কলরয়রোলছিহলিন লতিলন এই সইংবেরোহদ অতিলন সপুখচীহেইহবেন. সহেসরো রদলখহলিন ঠিক লবেপলরতি ষটিলি. সইংবেরোদ

আলসবেরোমরোত সহেসরো তিরোহেরোর চকখপুজহলি ভলরয়রো রগলি - এ শুকনরো মরোটিহতি কখন ও জলি উহঠ নরোই. রদলখহলিন, রকবেলি তিরোহেরোই নহহে,

গভে বেরোলহেযরো ধরোররোয় ধরোররোয় রস জলি গগরোইহতি লিরোলগলি. রশয রদলখহলিন, চচীতকরোর কলরয়রো করোলদহতি ইচরো কলরহতিহছি. রজবে-উলমিসরো দরোর

রুদ কলরয়রো হেলসদনলনলমমিতিরতখলচতি পরোলিহনক শয়ন কলরয়রো করোলদহতি লিরোলগহলিন. ...বেরোদশরোহেজরোলদররোও অরোলিবেরোহস; জরোলনযরো রহেহৌক, নরো

জরোলনযরো রহেহৌক, নরোরচী রদহে ধরোরণ কহর ওই পরোপহক হদহয় আশ্রয় লদহতি হেয়.”

Bankim’s *Rajsingha* is vastly different from the other novels in its assimilation of history, while at the same time invoking a sense of pride in claiming collective (national) identity of the self. At the same time, it is replete with the passionate love, friendship, jealousy, hatred and enmity that characterize the theme of his other prominent novels. The romantic flavor is not at all lost here.

Aurangajeb, Jebunnisa, Mobarak languish in their pathetic love leading to nowhere but death. The large vacuum inside Aurangajeb corresponds to the hollowness of his surroundings and is synchronized with his tragic downfall. Unlike as also like a historian, Bankim is able to transgress the historical limitation of factual truths and with fiction makes it a combined whole,, while, through an introspection of his own location in society, he has brought forth the existence of many levels of history. *Rajsingha* is a unique combination of history, aesthetics, poetics and fiction in its attempt at foretelling a universal truth of an era of a great change in history.

Although Bankim gave a decisive shape to the genre of historical novels, he was, however, not the sole practitioner of the narrative form. The anti-colonial ethos of the era demanded a spat of historical novels countering the European version of Indian history. Bankim's younger contemporary Ramesh Chandra Dutt set his novel *Maharashtra Jiban Prabhat* (Bangla, 1878) against the backdrop of the empowerment of the Marathas under Shivaji, and Harinarain Apté, much inspired by his reading of the histories of the Maurya empire and the Vijaynagar kingdom, wrote eight historical novels in Marathi. The impulse for reconstructing a valiant Hindu past, thus, created a countrywide enthusiasm for historical novels. The intimate connection that India's nascent nationalist struggle shared with this literary genre is rendered perspicuous by M K Naik when he says -

...the nationalist upsurge had stirred the entire Indian society to the roots to a degree and on a scale unprecedented earlier, making it acutely conscious of the pressures of the present in all fields of national life; and it is out of this consciousness that fiction, in Lionel Trilling's words, 'for our time the most effective agent of the moral imagination' emerges (Naik 2004: 118)

The burgeoning national identity thus coincides with the emergence of the novel, or more specifically, the historical novel, evokes a specific past with reference to which the present is to redefine itself.

Nationalist historiography that dominated the literature of the late nineteenth century, as Meenakshi Mukherjee rightly observes, is in many ways a reaction to the Englishmen's representation of India as a weak and defeated nation. In his own journal *Bangadarshan*, Bankim's exhortation to his readers expressed his consciousness of the nationalist imperative to revive and reconstruct Indian past. Wittily mocking at the coloniser's biased account of Indian history, he wrote –

The sahebs have written numerous tomes to chronicle our history. The book by Stuart Saheb is so heavy that you can kill a strong young man by throwing it at him--- and people like Marshman, Lethbridge and others have made a lot of money by writing smaller volumes. But do these books contain anything that can be truly called history? (qtd.

Mukherjee 2008: 158)

The reinvocation of history through the historical novels then impelled the enslaved men to undertake what Raymond Williams calls, a process of "unlearning" of received ideologies (cited by Loomba 2008: 60). Books like James Mill's *The History of British India* (1817) deliberately conjure up a picture of the misrule and anarchy of the pre-British period, in contrast to which colonial intrusion and enforcement of British governance would seem beneficial. The historical novels of the late nineteenth century India were thus motivated to supply a counter-narrative to such degrading versions of Indian history. In the words of Meenakshi Mukherjee, the "act of excavating the past was thus seen almost as a moral act for the retrieval of self-respect of a subjugated people" (Mukherjee 2008: 156), so necessary for the overthrow of Europe's cultural hegemony.

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Abhinaba Chatterjee holds an MA from Calcutta University and M.Phil in English literature from Delhi University. His research interests are postcolonial literature with special reference to Indian and Australian literature, Translation Studies and Comparative Literature. He works in the Ministry of Defence, Govt of India.

Shakespeare's Impact on the Bengali '*Bhadralok*'

Arindam Mukherjee

“Students from the ‘Bhadralok’ families came to believe firmly that there was no poet equal to Shakespeare and that English literature was the best in the world.”

---Sivanath Sastri, ‘Ramtanu Lahiri O Tatkalin Banga Samaj’

The two significant factors that led to the uprising of the ‘Bhadralok’ were the immense fortunes many merchants had made by assisting the East India Company’s trade up the Ganga basin and western style of education imparted by the colonial masters and the missionaries. This subsequently brought in “The Bengal Renaissance” which was largely carried out and participated in by the ‘Bhadralok’. Of course, the ‘Brahmo Samaj’ and many such socio-religious organizations were largely dominated by the ‘Bhadralok’. In order to have this graffiti, one needed to inculcate some western values, to have some continental education, and a sense of astuteness, along with some enlightenment to appease the colonial masters and thereby secure a favour for job. The ‘Bhadraloks’ were not only influenced by the dress and eating habits of the Englishmen, they were also the people who reacted most firmly against the western culture and civilization. Even the writers of this genre criticized and defended westernization in various popular books and journals. The ‘Bhadralok’ first initiated to make Shakespeare a colonial icon in the cultural hegemony rather than projecting him as the greatest gift of the British Raj. By this time, Shakespeare’s own compatriots challenged the sanctified image of the bard but it found its echo especially among the ‘Bhadralok

Babus' of Bengal. These gentlemen enjoyed a position of dominance not only in the social and cultural milieu but they shaped and paved the way for new literary trend. Etymologically the words 'Babu' and 'Bhadralok' were synonymous and meant for individuals of rank and dignity. They belonged to the upper stratum of the society, particularly the ruling class and it was not until nineteenth century when this class had emerged as a social category and became more as an institution in the mid nineteenth century and their asset was education -both oriental and occidental. These men along with their colonial masters had taken up Shakespeare and used the bard as one of the planks of edifice of promoting English education in India. They utilized their education and influence to promote western culture and at times eradicating the dogmas and prejudices that were prevalent in the Indian society.

The purpose of this study is to shows how the Bengali '*Bhadralok Babus*' responded indigenously to Shakespeare. Again, it was the initiative of the English teachers like D. L. Richardson, H. L. V. Derozio of Hindu College, Charles H. Tawney and J. W. Holme and the greatest of them H. M. V. Percival of Presidency College, who had instilled in the Indian students a true love for literature and admiration for the greatest English writer. Derozio with his followers known as 'Young Bengal' brought about a cultural revolution; he even tried to erase many prejudices of the society. His scholarly yet lucid representation of Shakespeare's plays, and the sonnet on Shakespeare's 'Romeo and Juliet,' acted as an enthusing spirit among his followers. The opening of the sonnet by Derozio on 'Romeo and Juliet' is strikingly remarkable but the '*Bhadralok babus*' found it too cynic:

“I thought upon their fate, and wept; and then
Came to my mind the silent hour of the night,
The hour, which lovers love, and long for, when
Their young impassioned soul feels that delight

Which Love's first dream bestows-How Juliet's ear

Drank every soft word of her Cavalier!"

(Derozio's Sonnet on 'Romeo and Juliet'- L-1-5)

Most of the Bengali '*Bhadralok Babus*' showed their interests in academic pursuits of Shakespeare or in translating, adapting, and staging of his plays in Bengali in the second half of 19th century till the first quarter of the 20th century. Even men like Banquo Behari Dutta, Michael Madhusudan Dutta, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Toru Dutta, Haraprasad Shastri, D. L. Roy, Balendranath Tagore and Swami Vivekananda who represented the '*Bhadralok*' class, had taken up their pens to write articles in appreciation of the bard's multifarious creativity. However, most of these sketches are sincere and originally conceived, at times comparing Shakespeare's works to the oriental classical writer Kalidasa. Bankim Chandra's assessment of Shakespeare in his article '*Sakuntala, Miranda ebon Desdemona*', where he conceives "Kalidasa's '*Sakuntala*' as "half Miranda and the other half as Desdemona", shows his versatile genius who wielded his magic wand in many branches of literature besides prose fiction. He is at his best when passing comments he takes us back to Shakespeare, the greatest of the poets, who also exercised the greatest influence on his own creative works. The most brilliant of these occurs in the course of his analysis of Bhababhuti's drama '*Uttar Ramcharit*'. Departing from the original story, Bhababhuti makes Sita come back to see Ramchandra in the woodland, though as a spirit she is herself invisible. Quoting this observation, Bankimchandra comments:

"In point of literary excellence this episode is comparable to all that is beautiful in any drama in any language.....Such sentences are to be found in Shakespeare."

This astute comment shows a profound understanding of Shakespeare. Banquo Behari Dutta assessed that "both Homer and Shakespeare are praised to a degree almost bordering on idolatry." Haraprasad Shastri places Shakespeare above Kalidasa, as Shakespearean characters are more

diverse and stimulating but praises the Indian poet above everyone as he depicts wonderfully “the inner beauty of the soul”. In a letter to his friend Gour Basak, Michael Madhusudan justifies why the Indians are more romantic than their colonial masters are. On the contrary, the plays of Shakespeare appear to him, “stern realities of life, lofty passion and heroism of sentiment.” All these are the reflection of true ‘*Bhadralok*’ sentiment and culture.

The study of Shakespeare in the first half of 20th century continued with the same enthusiasm and the struggle for freedom did not deter the serious learners. It was again the initiatives taken by the ‘*Bhadralok Babus*’ to focus on the study of western literature, particularly Shakespeare in the classes. Schools, colleges and universities like Calcutta and Dacca laid special emphasis on Shakespeare study and a full paper comprising about twelve plays and all the sonnets were meant for compulsory study. The pedagogues in these institutions were mostly upper middle class *Bhadraloks* and they took up this profession willingly despite receiving meager pay packets. To this class, teaching and practising medicines were considered the noblest professions and so many took up these jobs willingly. Since its inception Presidency College had a set of dedicated teachers like H. M. Percival, Manmohan Ghosh, legendary P. C. Ghosh, Srikumar Banerjee to name only a few. They taught with so much of competence that interested students even from semi urban colleges would flock to attend their classes. Rajsahi College also had a rich legacy of Shakespeare pedagogy as teachers from Presidency College and other government colleges like Hooghly Mohsin College, Chinsurah and Chandannagore Government College (formerly known as ‘Dupleix College’ as it was once a French colony) would be transferred on routine basis over there. Some of the missionary colleges like Scottish Church College, St. Xaviers’ College and even Serampore College had put in efforts to teach Shakespeare with élan. Therefore, Shakespeare came to rule the classrooms but by then in stage productions, he trailed behind. Many of the teachers of the aforementioned colleges came from affluent families to teach; as to the *Bhadraloks* it was more of passion than mere profession. Even the *babus* sent their kids to reputed English schools according

to their capabilities and they patronized learning English literature though outwardly they showed anti- British feelings .

Like the previous century, the 20th century also had a galaxy of creative writers and thinkers who had special interest in Shakespeare. The historians had rightly called the period the epitome of the ‘Bengal’s Renaissance’. Rabindranath Tagore was greatly influenced by Shakespeare’s multifarious creativity and humanism. His sonnet written as a tribute to Shakespeare in 1916 (the Bengali version written a year before in ‘*Balaka*’) is still recognized as a brilliant homage, which appears in Shakespeare’s birthplace inscribed on the bust of Rabindranath. Apart from the penal task imposed by his tutor of translating ‘Macbeth’, he later on made some fine comments on Shakespeare’s plays in his literary essay ‘*Sahitya*’. The expression “*jivaner jvar*” in “*Mrityur Pare*” is reminiscent of Shakespeare’s “life’s fitful fever”. There are other Shakespearean reminiscences and echoes, direct or indirect, in the literary writings of Tagore, which have been identified.

In the next quarter of the twentieth century (1925-1950), no literal or cultural translation came out primarily because of the freedom struggle. The non-co-operation movement, the Swadeshi movement, the non-violent movement and ultimately the Quit India Movement compelled the Bengali writers to abstain from translating or adapting any of the English plays. Nevertheless, the love for Shakespeare did not stop at any point of time. However, though there was a great uproar for boycotting of British goods, the Bengali “*Bhadraloks*” always responded passionately to Shakespeare. Translations and adaptations led the way to more of the teaching of Shakespeare’s plays in the classrooms. Overall, the impression was that Shakespeare needed to be read in the original everywhere though translations and adaptations of his plays were made to stage his plays for the common masses. This was done by the initiative of ‘*Bhadralok Babus*’

The post independent period saw the sprouting of a host of literal translators who were from the so called *Bhadralok*’ clan but by that time enormous changes had taken place in Bengal’s social structure. Mention must be made of names like Nirendranath Roy, Sunil Kumar Chattopadhyay,

Kalyanbroto Dutta, Manindra Datta, and Surendranath Raha and last but never the least, Ashok Guha. They witnessed great changes in the upstream of the society and in Shakespeare study. Being a representative of the '*Bhadralok*' class by dint of education, pedigree and a devout lover of Shakespeare, Nirendranath Roy translated 'Macbeth' in 1952 and later on 'The Merchant of Venice'. Hence, it was as successful and faithful as a rendering that the genius of the stage Sisir Kumar Bhaduri staged it on the Calcutta stage along with young Utpal Dutta. Bhaduri was immensely impressed with the translation. Sunil Kumar Chattopadhyay had translated four plays of Shakespeare; two of them comedies, namely 'The Merchant of Venice' (1956) and 'As you like it' (1958). The Presidency professor and a sincere lover of stage plays, Srikumar Banerjee wrote the introduction to the latter translation. He admitted that translating a comedy is far more an arduous task than a tragedy because it requires the pointed and specific words for the expression of wit, humour, banter and pun, apart from the power of retaining the hilarity of a Shakespearean comedy. These have diverse ways to express in varied languages and in a comedy; like 'As You like it', this is intense. Srikumar Banerjee admits that Sunil Kumar Chattopadhyay has aptly dealt with the humorous episodes, witty dialogues, and rhetorical devices in the play and that fits in with the theme and structure of Shakespeare's plays quite minutely. Even the translator has shown the fool Touchstone's utterances as very much pertinent in the play that enliven the comic spirit. The songs exquisitely rhymed in Bengali for the readers. Chattopadhyay has not always followed word for word translation – he has rather followed the cultural translation and in doing so, the translator has keenly interwoven the dramatic tune with the texture of the play. Kalyanbroto Dutta translated again 'The Merchant of Venice' (1956). Manindranath Dutta's translation of 'Macbeth' in 1956 did not have that gravity as had been done by his predecessors. Ashok Guha, another distinguished translator of Shakespeare in Bengali had translated at least ten plays ranging from Romantic comedy 'As you like it' (1959) to the gruesome tragedies like 'Hamlet' (1960), 'Macbeth (1959), 'King Lear' (1962) and 'Henry VIII' in the same year. In a span of two years, (1959-60)

Sudhindranath Raha translated word for word three tragedies: 'Julius Caesar', 'Macbeth', Romeo, and Juliet. They made an impact on the '*Bhadralok Babus*' but some were too fastidious regarding the translated and adapted versions of the plays.

Sometime afterwards, the Indians noticed the perception of English as the ruler's language; hence, the eagerness to spend much time and effort in learning the language was felt mostly by the Bengali plebeians. They were eager enough to show their talents in reciting Shakespeare, presenting short scenes of significance and ultimately the learned *bhadraloks* took the venture to stage full-scale productions in between 1820 and 1920. Henry Derozio, as a student of Drummond's Dhurumtollah Academy started this process. Later on this art of reciting Shakespearean passages was taken up mostly by the pupils of Hindu College, a few by the students of St. Xavier's College, David Hare and Metropolitan academies. Apart from the houses of the aristocratic and distinguished Bengali '*babus*', the Hindu College, Town Hall, Oriental Theatre and *Jorasanko* Theatre were other places where the excerpts or full plays were staged. He even notices that this was the first time the plays were being staged outside Calcutta (now Kolkata).

Ananda Lal also mentions the touring companies like 'Lewis's Theatre Company', 'Maurice E. Bandman's Company,' 'Henry Dallas's South African Dramatic Company' 'Matheson Lang's Company' and many such companies had come up in quick succession in Calcutta. He notices such developments in the stage performances and apart from the Anglo-Indian Christians, the majority of the audiences were the '*Bhadraloks*'. However, the greatest impact was from Geoffrey Kendal's 'Shakespeareana', which is recorded in the book 'Shakespeare Wallah and its Felicity Kendal's White Cargo.' This company was born out of a travelling troupe for the entertainment of forces during World War II. Not only did they travel in Calcutta but also they performed at Darjeeling, Asansole and at Tagore's Santiniketan. They enacted in the plays like 'The Merchant of Venice,' 'Othello', 'Hamlet', 'The Taming of the Shrew,' 'Macbeth', 'Romeo and Juliet' and 'Twelfth Night.' It is to be noted that the plays they performed were usually prescribed either in the undergraduate or

postgraduate courses of the universities of Bengal. Therefore, they were also professional in their approach. However, Lal notices that the first two phases died “natural deaths.” He further observes that no local British theatrical troupes appeared in Calcutta after the ‘First War of Independence’ in 1857. The companies felt that the ‘*Bhadralok Babus*’ would abstain from the theatres as the freedom struggle was at its pinnacle. The rulers of the Raj felt the strain of governing India and the grueling task of suppressing the rebellion had left no respite for the colonial masters for theatrical entertainment. The educated Bengali *babus* started to discard English Language as a medium for theatre. The acting in Shakespeare’s plays in English, however, continued in and around Gandhiji’s call for ‘Non-Cooperation Movement’ in 1921, but much before, in 1870s the focus had shifted to vernacular to exhibit their original dramatic creativity. With the acceleration of the nationalistic movements since the second decade of the twentieth century, the desire to enact the plays of Shakespeare in English came to a halt. Now, amateurism led to professionalism in the theatres of Bengal because of socio political and cultural reasons. This observation of Lal is no new, as his predecessors in their study of the Bengal’s stage response to Shakespeare had noted before. Nevertheless, the actors for the original English plays of Shakespeare in the initial stages were Derozio and his followers. Apart from Derozio’s followers and pupils, the first President of independent India, Rajendra Prasad, and Sisir Kumar Bhaduri, (one of the greatest thespians of Bengal after Girish Chandra Ghosh), the famous Bengali linguist and national professor, Suniti Kumar Chattopadhyay and Srikumar Bandopadhyay, the competent scholar of British Poetry were the distinguished luminaries who acted in various Shakespearean plays. All of them belonged to the upper middle class ‘*babus*’.

Lal notes that some of the travelling English companies had enduring effect on the future theatre workers in Calcutta. The famous actor- manager - director-dramatist Matheson Lang, who had the privilege to work with Granville-Barker in London, performed in Calcutta in 1911-1912, influenced many, particularly Sisir Kumar Bhaduri, who became a legendary theatre director

immediately after this impact. Even Geoffrey Kendal's 'Shakespeareana' which toured around India since the second World War onwards, had admirers like Utpal Dutta, Satya Bandopadhyay and innumerable others from the '*Bhadralok*' class. Immediately after independence, as the author observes, the local production of the plays suddenly stimulated as if the intention was to show that the Bengalis no longer harbour any ill feeling for the language. Hence, from Lal's assessment we can conclude that the English educational institutions and organizations like the British Council frequently performed in Shakespeare's plays in English and the performers were mainly college and university students. Shakespeare once again came to the Bengalis more as a colonial icon.

The '*Bhadraloks*' were the heart of Calcutta theatre and the Bengali stage, which was primarily commercial in between 1872 and 1947. When the translated and adapted versions were not well accepted at the box office, the directors then felt the necessity to "experiment and interpret Shakespeare indigenously." The birth of the "group theatre" movement around 1947 advocated innovative ideas to stage plays that would be received rather enthusiastically by more faithful translations as the directors had great respect for the venerable bard. Notable actors from Girish Chandra Ghosh to Ahindra Chaudhuri acted in several characters of Shakespeare's plays in translated versions but that did not appeal to the Bengali audiences, however authentic they might be in approach. Utpal Dutt with his group theatre dominated the Bengali stage with most of Shakespeare's plays in English and Bengali. He apprenticed himself in English, performing Richard III, Othello, Bottom, Mercutio, Brutus and Malvolio and then did all of them in Bengali except Richard III and Brutus and then did Shylock, Macbeth and Julius Caesar. Dutt's 'Little Theatre Group' produced some brilliant actors. Lal notes;

"The histrionic approach to Shakespeare also changed, in consonance with worldwide trends, from the declamatory bombast of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to more restrained, psychological portraits in the later twentieth-century though Western viewers may still reasonably think that our Shakespearean

acting remains somewhat overdramatic.”

(Shakespeare on the Calcutta Stage: A Checklist; Edited by Sukanta Chaudhuri and Ananda Lal, p. 9)

Thus the members of the ‘*Bhadraloks*’ class brought in the national movement and freedom struggle launched in the nineteenth century. Until the mid-twentieth century, the Bengali *Bhadralok* class had enjoyed eminence and respect because of their competency in mastering the administrative, economic, political and educational affairs of Bengal. So Shakespeare had an innate connection with the ‘*Bhadralok Babus*’ of Bengal but never did the Muslim league for once initiate to promote Shakespeare study among the Bengalis nor did any member of the community think of translating, adapting and staging his plays for the Bengali stage. They showed less of enthusiasm and more of indifference to delve into the realms of Shakespeare’s plays.

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Dr Arindam Mukherjee holds a PhD in English from University of Calcutta and teaches at a Government School in Hooghly, West Bengal.

Bilet Ferat (1921): A Milestone of Bengali Film History

Abhishek Chowdhury

While exhibition of films in Calcutta can be dated back to 1896, when one Professor Stevens screened the Lumiere programmes at Star Theatre, it was only in the first decade of the 20th century that Bengal had its first indigenous film-maker—Hiralal Sen. Calcutta at the time had a strong tradition of professional theatre, and theatre houses served as outlets for films. The earliest screenings were held in theatre houses where films appeared as a double bill attraction alongside the plays. Influential theatre owners, like for example Amarendra Nath Dutta of Classic Theatre, encouraged the production of films by allowing Hiralal Sen to photograph his stage productions, which were then advertised as ‘superfine pictures from our world-renowned plays’ and exhibited. At the same time, given the Bengali’s natural propensity for topical and newsy items, it is not surprising that some of India’s first documentaries originated here—of course, in those days these were called ‘topicals’.

The journey into early Bengali cinema is hampered by a total lack of source material, with almost no feature films from the silent era known to exist. In Bengal, a process to establish a norm for good cinema was already underway. The increasing command of the *Bhadralok* section over film production, specifically from the mid-1920s, thus carves the history of the early phase of the Bengal film industry differently from that of Bombay. Of course, there was Madan (sometimes spelled ‘Madam’) Theatres, monopolizing film business in Bengal too, but there were producers and exhibitors such as Globe Theatres and Alliance, who struggled relentlessly to overcome the difficulties caused by the monopoly (Gooptu 32). As an obvious consequence of this monopolistic practice, most of the film companies were deprived from acquiring acclaimed American pictures. This was precisely because the best films of the lot were pre-booked by Madan on a block-basis and

the American exporters were unwilling to accept anything other than the block-booking method (ibid 35). This feature practically zeroed the possibility of sporadic spread and exhibition of imported films. Also, in terms of production, almost half of the silent films produced in Bengal till 1934 came from Madan theatres (58 out of a total 119 films) (Sur & Goswami 1-8). However, contrary to Bombay, the major emphasis of Madan Theatres in Calcutta was to make films based on literary texts and less on stunt or adventure films. It was precisely the presence of the educated middle class professionals in filmmaking and other related businesses which made the conditions of colonial Bengal favourable to the production of more numbers of literary cinemas.

The *Bhadralok* hegemony over Bengali cultural productions, particularly during the 19th century, was established through various acts of subordinating folk or other marginal cultural forms (often termed as *Chotolok* culture, e.g. the culture of the inferior people) while simultaneously exploring the newer forms of cultural practices appropriate to the new regime through a careful imitation of the British and other European colonizers. Since the wake of the 19th century, the hegemonic presence of the middle class of Calcutta gradually took command of almost all the major sectors of cultural productions. Bengali literature, largely influenced by modern European traditions flourished as an important expressive mode of Bengali modernity. Bengali theatre, another important sector of creative extravaganza, gradually distanced itself from folk traditions and underwent a major transformation under the influence of the European proscenium theatre. Similar changes may also be traced in the fields of other art practices such as painting, music etc. Even the conservative everydayness of the citizen life had gone through a massive turmoil through a meticulous restructuring of the value-system of the predominantly Hindu Bengali society.

Nonetheless to mention, the concept of modern education, specifically that of English education played an important role in necessitating these changes and forging an early civil society in Bengal. The historical process testifies that the genesis of the *Bhadralok* class has its initial roots in the process of the colonial takeover as they become entirely the product of the process of colonial

development (Chatterjee 72). The changes eventually mark an important move towards developing a national public sphere censoring the articulation of the popular cultural commodities among the natives. Bengali cinema, from its early days, has emerged out of this milieu of *Bhadralok* nationalism.

The early experiences of cinema in Bengal, as perceived by literary journals and newspapers, come as a fascination for the medium (due to its technological splendour) and also as an attempt to extend the domain of the theatrical arts. The idea of *Swadeshi* was most powerful in education and the industry where a significant number of small and medium sized enterprises were established and educational institutes were opened to spread national education. Thus for enlightened intellectuals it became imminent to welcome the medium of cinema, as an important contribution of science and also with a lot of potential to emerge as a significant constituent of national rejuvenation. And necessarily, such a discourse had to restrict the menace of uncultured, uncivilized entities into it. The sense of good or moral thus appeared as a matter of modern rationality, as a means of national enlightenment, which can only be acquired through entering into a sacred realm of knowledge. A number of early writings on cinema in Bengali periodicals bear the essence of this discursive approach. Novelist Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay's *Chalacchitrer Marmakatha* points emphatically to cinema being embedded within the Bengali intellectual imaginary, and particularly in terms of a principle of scientific practice, something which already held a key position in Bengali mind (45-46).

The other imminent impetus, other than literary and cultural nationalism, which shaped a particularistic vision for cinema, came from the then existing domain of theatres in Bombay and Calcutta. Bengali theatre was trying to retrieve the tradition through the medium of proscenium drama following the model of European theatre. By the mid-19th century, the Bengali theatre houses had begun to be established and Bengali theatre came to the forefront. The theatrical conventions of Calcutta nevertheless strengthened the modern literary dominance over the fields of

cultural production and as a consequence pre-modern literary practices and other performative folk forms were gradually marginalized. The extensive and explicit experiments with nationalist themes in Bengali theatre eventually annoyed the British administrators and they introduced the Dramatic Performance Act in 1876.

The act however had a farfetched effect not only on the field of performance culture in India, but also on the field of cinema since till the setting up of the system of censorship in 1918, the British administration tried to control cinematic exhibition by using the same regulation. Nevertheless, along with the stage, the periodicals, journals and newspapers play important roles in developing a sense of popular theatre appreciation in Calcutta and early film culture during the first decades of twentieth century Calcutta emerges out of this milieu. Initially the promoters of cinema used to follow the same advertising pattern such as that of the theatres to popularize the medium. Within a few years, cinema became a centre of attraction by virtue of being a technological splendour. Following its emergence as an important part of the entertainment culture in the city and after the filmmakers began filming plays and adapting novels, it gradually became a matter of discussion in the print media. The establishment of cinema as independent to the medium of theatre may be noted by its presence in popular journal and newspapers in the form of criticisms, advertisements, reports etc. Concurrently, the nationalist aesthetic approach, after getting great attention in other fields of art practices, turned to this immensely potential medium to re-fabricate it into a nationalist cultural enterprise. Signalled by Phalke during the mid-1920s, the idea of *Swadeshi* cinema already started a slow but steady intrusion into the minds of Bengali filmmakers. Parallel to the domain of the nationalist theatre, a new idea of developing national culture for art was being strengthened in other spheres of creative practices. In visual arts, new modernist art schools were set up and a new set of artists emerged with a fresh perspective in their mind. In addition to that, Tagore's idea of nationalism was getting gradual importance among Bengali intellectuals than that of Gandhi's as the basic ideas of Bengali modernity did not find much

resonance with the Gandhian discourse of *Swaraj* though the latter had a substantial presence in Congress-led activities. The *Bhadralok* nationalism always aspired to be of internationalist in nature and Tagore's idea of nation bore that very characteristic. Partha Chatterjee specifies that the standard form of *Bhadralok* culture was not merely national, but comparable with the most advanced international standards that provided the culture of the middle classes with the standard of legitimacy which made it accepted cultural norms for the entire nationality (*Present History* 21).



Dhirendranath Gangopadhyaya, an alumnus of Tagore's Shantiniketan School, may be exemplified as relevant in this regard. The political scene was volatile when Ganguly entered the world of films. In 1919, General Dyers had ordered troop-firing upon a peaceful gathering at Jallianwalla Bagh, Amritsar. Rabindra Nath Tagore returned his knighthood. The British government of India jailed Mahatma Gandhi, clamped down upon the media and films were subjected to heavy censoring. The Calcutta Board of Censors denied certificates to 13 of the 49 films up before it, severely cutting the rest. A lot of things happened in the year 1921. India witnessed the Spanish Flu that wiped out around 17 million people from the country. This period also came to be known as The Year of The Great Divide. It was during this year that the Congress boycotted the 'India visit' of the Prince of Wales as part of the Non-Cooperation Movement. While India was going through a major transformation, Indian cinema too was changing with time! His first venture after forming The

Indo-British Film Company with the help of his friends, *Bilet Ferat* (England Returned, 1921), was a satirical silent film on the educated Bengali people who blindly aped Western culture and also on natives who detest everything they found alien to their culture. The address of the office of Indo-British Film Company was 34 Mohunbagan Lane. And the film studio was built in the farmhouse of a Marwari businessman at Banhooghly. Then shots were taken in daylight. Famous cameramen like Nani Sanyal and Jyotish Sarkar also joined the group. P. N. Dutt came as the financier. He was famously called ‘baltiwala’ [a man who sells buckets], as he had a big factory of buckets.



A silent feature that finds prominent mention among historians is D. N. Ganguly’s *Bilet Pherat* (Dir. Nitish Ch. Lahiri), advertised as the first ‘Bengali’ film, where the majority of technicians and artists were Bengalis and the ‘live band’ that accompanied the film was quintessentially Bengali. On the evidence of *Bilet Pherat*, a pungent satire on conservative Bengali culture vis-à-vis the colonial elite, one is tempted to conclude

that Bengali film-makers were trying their hand at the genre of slapstick comedy, a comedy on the assumed mannerisms and confusion of an England-returned Indian. The film was very successful, and remains their biggest hit. The term, ‘Bilet Pherat’, a common proverb in Bengal reflected the ambiguity of this apparently aristocratic and prejudicial concept. The term had both appreciative and satiric implications. The term ‘Bilet Pherat’ means a doctor of real academic brilliance but in a derogatory sense one may also use the term to express one’s gross neglect of basic Indian values, sentiments and cultural traditions.

The bare presence of good cinema in Calcutta during the early decades of 20th century attracted fierce criticism from the then intellectual domain. Barring a few instances, most of the films

produced in Calcutta during the early silent era were severely criticized by the critics for the lack of artistic value. Their exposure to Western films made them more critical to Indian productions. Their criticism of Madan Theatre had an additional aspect to it; these films drew heavily from the Parsi theatre and therefore hardly reflected Bengali culture. Even after Madan turned to literary adaptations, the critics did not restrain as they found the enterprise itself non-Bengali, thus non-capable of producing a real aesthetic experience of Bengali modernity. A significant break in this tradition is D.N. Ganguly's *Bilet Pherat*, in which he practiced a new style with not only Bengali dress and décor as opposed to Parsi theatre style, but also a basic transformation of popular culture, which entailed eschewing of excess and a more realistic ethos and greater interiority (Gooptu 53). Dhirendranath Ganguly made his acting debut in this famous satire contrasting conservative Bengali culture with that of the colonial elite. In *Bombay Chronicle* of 20 August 1921, this film was advertised as a story about 'a young Indian [who] returns to his native land after a long absence and is so mightily impressed with his foreign training that, at his parental home, he startles everybody with his exquisite notions of love and matrimony'. Ganguly's acting incorporated Hollywood slapstick and a number of 19th century performance traditions from Calcutta. A long time in the making, the film was promoted as the first Bengali film, with a live "all-Bengali" band to accompany the society.



Sushila Mukhopadhyay, the daughter of Bhawanipur's famous lawyer Bidhubhushan Mukhopadhyay, acted the part of the heroine. In this film, she did not only ride on horseback, but also drove motor car, which in itself is a landmark incident. The film was advertised in the city in following words: "*sohore hoi hoi!! Ashwarohone motor chalone bangali prothom mohila 'Bilet Pherat' chitre atmaprakash koriben ...*" The filmmakers

incorporated in this film realistic love scenes, with plenty of kisses like those of British and American films. It was the first love-story which became a great hit.

Bilet Pherat was released in the Russa Theatre (later on Purna Theatre), the only theatre in Calcutta that was not owned by Madan Theatres. It was a 6 reel film. It was produced under the banner of the Indo-British Film Company, one of the earliest film production companies owned by the Bengalis –



is, Hindu *bhadraloks*. Barnouw and Krishnaswamy note that along with Dhiren Ganguly, three other Bengali Hindus based in Calcutta: businessman P. B. Dutt, former employee of Madan Theatres, N. C. Laharrie and cinematographer J. C. Sircar formed this all-Bengali Hindu film enterprise in 1920. In *Bilet Pherat*, Ganguly, a graduate of

University of Calcutta and Shantiniketan, the Institution for the study of arts founded by

Rabindranath Tagore, satirized the pro-West attitudes of Indians returning from England as well as the conservative Indians who wished to stop in-flow of new ideas. In other words, Ganguly, a Hindu *bhadralok* himself, criticized fellow *bhadraloks* for imitating or rejecting western modernity in his film. Thus, *Bilet Pherat*, in the words of Indian film scholar Ashish Rajadhyaksha, “reflected the colonial world-view as seen through the eyes of the city’s *bhadralok*”. And with this film another genre of Indian Cinema, known as ‘the contemporary social’ slowly emerged.

In an article entitled “Bangla chhabir nirbak jug” published in the journal *Chitrayan*, Pashupati Chattopadhyay says,

... Madan Company jakhan Mahabharat o Ramayan ashrito pouranik kahinir chitrarup dite byasto, sei samaye Indo-British Film Company naam diye Madan Companyr Film bibhager tatkalin manager Nitish Lahiri prothitojasha hasyakoutuk-abhineta-parichalak-prajojak

Dhirendranath Gangopadhyayer sange milito hoye “England Returned ba Bilet Pherta” namok ekkhani khanti adhunik mejajer samajik chitra toiri kawren. bohu chestacharitra o bohudin opekkha korbar pawre Bhabanipurer Russa Theatre e (bartamane Purna Theatre) chhabiti muktilabh korte samartha hoy 1921 saler 26 February. ei chhabir adhunika nayikar beshe srimati Sushila sudhu ghoratei chapen ni, motor gari o chaliyechhilen.

The quoted lines show *Bilet Ferat* to be a modern film against the backdrop of those based on Puranic tales. And this modernity is concurrent with the modernisation of women as the heroine of the film comes as a representative of modern women riding horse and driving motor car. This also shows that a total development of the society is possible only when the women along with their male counterparts are developed.

Yoganana Das’s “Bangiya film shilpa o bharat-darshan” published in the journal *Chitralkha* says that Bengali films are not getting audience outside the territory of Bengal due to their provincialism. In this connection the author mentions *Bilet Pherat* and says

... bartamane banglar chitrashilper gati dekhe mone hoy shudhu adhunik bangali jibaner dike ekantobhabe drishti nibaddha na rekhe ar ektu brihattara kshetre take mukti deoa dawrkar hoyechhe. itihās, purān, samajtatwa, je dik diyei hok na keno, shudhu banglar gondike chhariye uthe, sadharon “bharatiya” charitrer chhande banglar chitrashilpake gore tola proyojon. Kayati banglar thakuk kshoti nai antoto chhayati bharatiya haoo dawrkar. “bharatiya” bishaybastute ba emon sawb bishaybastute “bangali” abhinoykoushaler yojona kawra aboshyok jate shudhu bangalir e noy sadharon bharatbasir akorshon ba interest thakte pare. Bangali gharer meyer sange nabyabanger “England Returned” kibhabe premalochan kawre se drishya dekhbar garaj Jodi awpor bharatbasir khub beshi na thake awthoba beshi din dhore tate ras khunje na pay tawbe take bisesh dosh

*deoa chawle na. rajniti kshetre na hok antoto chalacchitrakshetre nichhok benche thakar
jonyo o aj bongo-darshaner paribarte bharat-darshaner din esechhe.*

Here an urge to make films on Indian themes rather than on mere Bengali ones is noted. Here film as a visual medium comes under the purview of culture and a need to construct a truly 'Indian' culture is perceived. Perhaps, this was indeed necessary to construct an indigenous culture in order to protest against colonial oppression. This critique is more indebted to Gandhian politics of *swaraj* rather than the Tagorean concept.

To conclude, Bengali Cine industry successfully reaped the harvest of the seed that was sown by Indo-British Film Company through films like *Bilet Ferat*.

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Abhishek Chowdhury is a PhD scholar in the Department of English, University of Kalyani.

Bengali Vaidya Caste and the age of Bhadrlok

Raibatak Sen Gupta

Abstract

The Vaidya community of Bengal forms an important component of the Bhadrlok Bengali class. The present article considers the role of Vaidyas in shaping the identity of the Bhadrlok class since its inception. The article discusses the pioneering role played by Vaidya individuals like Ramkamal Sen and Ishwarchandra Gupta towards bringing a new era which would lead to the so-called Bengal renaissance. The significant participation of the Vaidyas in the defining socio-political-cultural movements is discussed. An effort of synthesis (instead of outright collaborating or blind aping) is observed in the various endeavors of the Vaidyas, which paved the way for the spread of nationalism among the educated Bhadrloks. Then the leading role played by the Vaidyas in the freedom struggle (notably in the Ognijug) is considered. The achievements of the luminaries (in different fields) belonging to this caste over the last two centuries are highlighted, and the unparalleled educational/intellectual position of the community is noted. The predominantly elite Bhadrlok features of this caste as a whole is recognized and the reasons behind the visible uniformity in terms of cultural and academic inclinations are considered.

Keywords: Vaidyas, Bhadrlok, Rajballabh Sen, Chaitanya movement, Ramkamal Sen, Ishwarchandra Gupta, Brahmo, Asiatic Society, Ayurveda, Female education, Gaudiya Samaj, Landholders' society, Ognijug, Indian National Congress, Swarajya Party, Communist movement, Goila, Sonarang, Senhati, Film Society movement, Partition, Census Report 1921.

The rise of the Bengali *Bhadralok* was undoubtedly one of the most significant developments in colonial India. The direction of causality between the Bengal Renaissance and the rise of the Bhadrakok is a bit complicated; one can view the Bhadrakok class as the product of the Renaissance whereas another might be tempted to describe the Bhadrakok as the class responsible for ushering in the said Renaissance. Whatever might be the case, it goes without saying that the Bhadrakok community has been at the centrestage of the Bengali history since colonial times, it has shaped the socio-cultural structure of the (predominantly urban) present Bengali people, and Bhadrakoks have been pioneers and leaders in the academic discourses at the Pan-India level.

The Bhadrakok class, as it is observed, is comprised mainly of three communities of Bengali-speaking Hindus, viz., *Brahmin (Rarhi and Varendra)*, *Vaidya* and *Kayastha*. These three communities have been the most influential in Bengal since at least the Sena kingdom (if not earlier). Given their historical socio-economic (and educational) status, it was hardly a surprise that they were in the forefront among those who interacted with the western people and embraced western education. Several historical developments soon placed the Bengali Bhadrakoks as the pillars of British establishment in India; they occupied the important administrative posts, and became teachers, doctors, lawyers and clerks in different provinces of India (it must be reminded here that this collaborating history notwithstanding, it was the bhadrakoks who led the resistance against the British during the freedom struggle). If one looks at the surnames or the family history of the said people, one will invariably notice that they belonged to one of the three aforementioned communities.

Now among the three communities, the case of the Vaidyas deserves special attention as it is interesting from several considerations. Among the Brahmins and Kayasthas, significant proportions of caste-members were outside the Bhadrakok class. There were Brahmins and

Kayasthas who were dissociated from the developments that took place in Calcutta and other urban centres of power, who did not change their mode of education and world-view (often to the point of resisting any such change), and were engaged in professions outside the realm of those pursued by the Bhadrals. While there were eminent Brahmin and Kayastha families who had reaped the best possible benefit of western education and interactions, there were a lot many for whom life continued as it did before the Bengal Renaissance came into being. The same cannot be said about the Vaidyas. The majority of the Vaidya families, including those residing in places distant from Calcutta, was under the impact of the new developments. Consequently, they did not merely contribute to the Bhadrals class as individuals, rather the Vaidya community as a whole became a predominantly 'Bhadralok community' (in the sense understood) in nature. This defining characteristic as a community in effect sets the Vaidya clan apart from all other Bengali-speaking communities. The present paper aims to look at the historical context of the Vaidyas becoming a part of the Bhadrals milieu almost en masse, and highlights the considerably prominent representation of the community in the social, academic, cultural, political and other fields since the advent of the age of Bhadrals till recent times.

Background: A very brief history of the Vaidyas

The Vaidyas were traditionally engaged in the study and practice of *Ayurveda*. The community gave rise to a galaxy of scholars/authors (not only in *Ayurveda* but also in other traditional disciplines like *Vyakarana*, *Nyaya*, *Sankhya*, *Jyotisha*) and practitioners. The community boasts of leading Ayurvedists like Chakrapani Dutta, Shangardhar and Shibdas Sen whose texts are considered indispensable by students/teachers of *Ayurveda* all over India. Bengal became the most prominent place for Ayurvedic discourses and treatments due to an unbroken tradition maintained by the Vaidyas since the Pala age and earlier. The Vaidyas, in general maintained *gurukula* systems in form of *Tols* in their houses and arranged for fooding and lodging of their disciples in their homes. As

people engaged in academic pursuits and specially as healers of diseases, they had a very esteemed and influential social position in the Bengali society. They were respected like the Brahmin Pundits and moreover, they did not have to depend on grants (by kings and other authorities) as they used to take a '*Dhanvantari bhaaga*' as remuneration ('*dakshina*' for the treatment in the name of Lord Dhanvantari). In this regard, it must be noted that they have a Saraswat Brahmin heritage as per their *Kulajis* (familial texts), although later smritis in effect identified them with Ambasthas having mixed-Brahmin heritage and placed them at a lower (just next, to be precise) position than the other Brahmins. They became a community separate from the union of communities designated as Brahmins, although they continued to follow the Dvija-rituals in varied degree depending upon the different places of Bengal. The origin of the Bengali Vaidyas and the historical developments regarding the Brahmin status of the Vaidyas has been discussed by the present author in the article 'Vaidyas of Bengal' (Journal of Bengali Studies, Vol. 4, No.2, 2015). At present the Vaidyas (or 'Vaidya-Brahmins', as they are often designated) continue to be identified as a separate community in its own right albeit following Yajurvedi or Samavedi Brahmin rituals in religious matters.

The influential position of the Vaidyas in Bengal had another historical reason. The last Hindu kingdom of Bengal, the Senas were associated to Vaidyas through marital alliances. In fact, the kulajis of Vaidyas, Brahmins and Kayasthas alike identified the Senas as Vaidyas; but the majority of modern historians starting from Rajendralal Mitra tend to identify them as *Karnataka Brahmakshatriyas* (it must be noted that Brahmakshatriya, a term which defines a Brahmin taking the duties of Kshatriya, is not incomparable with the Saraswat heritage of Vaidyas). Mitra and others totally disregarded the prevalent historical notion in the Bengali society that the Senas were Vaidyas, but the point remains that Vaidyas received great patronage from the Sena kings. Two poets in King Lakshman Sena's court, viz., Dhoyi and Umapati, were Vaidyas. The Shura (also described as Vaidyas in the Vaidya and Brahmin Kulajis) and Sena kings brought a social change

which staged a Brahminic revival in Bengal. A section of Brahmins and Kayasthas (who were invited from Kolancha by the Shuras) got prominence in the social re-engineering, and a section of the Vaidyas (who were not directly associated with the Pala kings) was greatly favoured by the Sena kings. These Vaidyas received land, gifts and other awards from the Senas, and held important administrative and military posts. It was a period of great prosperity and affluence for the Vaidyas engaged in Ayurveda and other professions. The Vaidyas resided in selected pockets, many of them clustering in Bikrampur (the Sena power-centre) and Burdwan-Nadia region. After the Khalji invasion, a great many of the Vaidya families migrated to eastern Bengal (Bikrampur, Jessore-Khulna and elsewhere, as documented by family histories) where the Senas continued to rule. Consequently, the majority of Vaidyas of present times have their roots in eastern Bengal.

After the end of Sena rule, environment was not conducive for pursuit of traditional knowledge, nor did the Vaidyas receive the same patronage from the new rulers as the latter had no particular reason to be fond of the indigenous system of healing. Still, Ayurveda continued to be the most popular form of medicinal system among common people and Vaidyas did not completely lose their eminence. Moreover, they held significant amount of land (although none of them ever took part in agriculture in person), mostly in eastern Bengal (and in places like Bankura which were ruled by local Hindu kings), which provided economic stability. The independence offered by their profession allowed them to be not dependent on rulers and their associates (unlike Brahmins who often had to collaborate with rulers for grants, or Kayasthas who worked as officers in nawabi courts). Except a few royal physicians, most of the Vaidyas did not have any immediate collaborating activities. Instead, they were viewed as the representatives of the previous kingdom, as evident from the popular consideration of the name of Raja Rajballabh Sen as the prime contender to occupy the throne of Bengal if a Hindu kingdom is revived.

Before we move forward to the period where the stage is set for the Europeans to appear in Bengal, let us look at a very significant movement where the Vaidyas played a visibly prominent part. It was the movement which many rightly call as a renaissance for the Bengali society – the Chaitanya movement. A large number of associates of Chaitanyadeva (himself a disciple of the Vaidya monk Ishwar puri) were Vaidyas. They were instrumental in bringing significant social (and in certain instances, political) changes in the inequality-ridden Bengali community and in propagating the renewed Gaudiya Vaishnavism which had its roots in Sankhya (which incidentally forms an important philosophical base of Ayurveda) and *Sahajiya* Vaishnavism (expounded by the philosopher-poet Jayadeva in Lakshman Sen’s court). Vaidya centres like Srikhanda (Burdwan) and Bhajanghat (Nadia) became the meeting places for Vaishnavas from different places to observe religious festivals and to conduct philosophical discourses. Three members of the 12 influential associates (*Dvadash Gopala*) of Nityananda were Vaidyas, while 37 of the main Chaitanya associates were Vaidyas (according to Biman Bihari Majumdar). Authors/poets like Murari Gupta, Krishnadasa Kaviraj, Lochan Dasa, Govindadas Kabiraj, Kavi Karnapur and personalities like Narahari Sarkar Thakur, Ramachandra Kaviraj, Sadashib Kaviraj, Raghunandan Dasa Thakur, Kanai Thakur, Chiranjib Sen, Mukunda Dutta are some prominent names. The leading role of the Vaidyas in this renaissance may well have played a part in their defining role in the next renaissance.

Beginning of the age of Bhadrlok

Let us briefly have a look at the events which takes us to the watershed of early 19th century. The battle of Plassey (1757) marked the end of Nawabi rule and established a strong foothold of East India Company. Raja Rajballabh, who was a *samajpati* (community-leader) of the Vaidyas as well, was killed by Mir Qasim (along with the former’s son Raja Krishnadas) at Munger in 1763. Rajballabh, though not a direct participant in the ‘conspiracy’ against Siraj (there was a Rajballabh

Som among the conspirators), was favoured by Mirjafar and Britishers alike. Having served as the *Diwan* (which often meant the de facto ruler) of Dhaka and Patna, he was considered a contender of the throne (alongside Raja Krishnachandra of Nadia) and many argue that this prompted Mir Qasim to kill Rajballabh. It is important to note that Rajballabh did not only perform several Vedic yagnas, but he endeavored to organize widow-remarriage for his daughter (a revolutionary attempt at that time), which did not succeed due to some cunning efforts of a jealous Krishnachandra. Late 18th century also saw the demise of the legendary Vaidya poet-philosopher Ramprasad Sen, who had an unmatched following among the general masses which can be seen even today. In 1770 came the devastating famine which killed nearly one-third of the Bengali population. The British government started to gain more control on the Company through Pitt's India Act and other means.

On all account, the beginning of the 19th century was a junction. The old order (both political and socio-economic) had crumbled; the new was not yet clearly visible. Around this time, a Vaidya from Garifa (not far from Ramprasad's Haliashahar) set foot in Calcutta, probably in search of job or a decent English education (which was not easily available these days, Mccauley's minutes would come 35 years later). What he did for the remaining part of his life was instrumental in the formation of a progressive, educated, politically conscious, self-esteemed elite Bhadrlok class. His contribution towards the Bengal renaissance, as we shall see, is no less than Raja Rammohan Roy (if not more). The person we are talking about is Ramkamal Sen.

Ramkamal is usually remembered as the grandfather of the Brahmo leader Keshabchandra Sen. However, the crucial endeavors he undertook were central in giving rise to a class which was ready to interact with the new ideas, views and social order. Speaking of the unproductive period of the early 19th century, Ronaldshay said:

“a few strong characters stood out as exceptions, notably Raja Rammohan Roy and Dewan Ramkamal Sen, who welcomed what they perceived to be good in the civilization of the west for its own sake, and who doubtless believed that a synthesis of all that was best in the thought and practice of east and west was both desirable and possible”.

In detailed considerations, however, it would appear that the idea of synthesis was more visible in the works of Ramkamal than Rammohan. Ramkamal had certain reservations against mindless submission to western practices (and had a nuanced approach when it came to reformations). He was considered as a bridge between the Rammohan group and the Radhakanta Deb group (the latter being the conservative and reactionary group). His works made a conscious effort to support the national interest by using the western views and reformations and at the same time not allowing the westerners to wreak havoc on the basic nature of his own people. In fact, the Bhadrakalok class, in truest sense, was comprised of English-educated gentlemen conscious of their national past (that is why they took the leading role during the freedom struggle), rather than the aping ‘Baboos’ lampooned by Bankimchandra and others. Ramkamal’s works, as we shall see, paved the way for the synthesis giving rise to a historically-conscious bhadrakalok class.

After starting to reside in Calcutta, Ramkamal joined the Asiatic Society as a compositor. It must be reminded that the founder of Asiatic Society, William Jones, mastered Sanskrit and other Indic texts with the help of a Vaidya Pundit Ramlochan Kavibhushana (at a time when Brahmin pundits declined to teach the foreigner). With the passage of time, Ramkamal gradually rose to the positions of Registrar, Accountant, Museum Superintendent, Librarian and Collector. His suggestions as the collector impressed the authorities so much that he was inducted as the first Indian full-time member of the Asiatic Society. He went on to become the Native secretary of the society, and started endeavors towards publishing the Sanskrit and other oriental works on behalf of the society.

He brought several other Bengalis in the society body and the Asiatic society thus became an Anglo-Indian association where the elite Bengalis can interact with the Europeans. This was a stepping stone for the birth of a new class.

He was also the joint founder of the Agricultural and Horticultural society, another Anglo-Indian research institute which contributed a lot towards indigenous production of paper, thus facilitating the printing of new books. As a member of School book society, he was associated with the Serampore printing establishment, and translated several books into Bengali. One of his greatest achievements was to author the 1100-pages long ‘A Dictionary in English and Bengali’ (modeled after Johnson’s dictionary). J. Marshman described the work as the most valuable work of its kind and H. H. Wilson praised it for filling up an important chasm in the cultivation of Bengali language as well as being helpful in wide dissemination of knowledge. Needless to say, this helped the educated Bengalis to more easily access European literature and Science.

Probably the most important achievement of Ramkamal was chairing the *Gaudadeshiya samaj* (also known as Gaudiya samaj) and forming the Landholder’s society. Gaudiya samaj (1823) was reportedly the first association of the elite Bengali-speaking Hindus in the European model. In his inaugural speech as the chairman, Ramkamal reflected the inability of the individual living in isolation to bring about any benefit to the society, and stressed upon the importance of the educated and enlightened persons to unite and take steps towards dissemination of education. The members of samaj were curiously called ‘Gaudadeshiya bhadralokes’ and it had aimed to translate good books in Bengali, set up a library and scientific laboratory, counter the propaganda of Missionaries and eradicate social evils among Bengali people. Thus, Ramkamal was the secretary and the driving force behind this first-ever social organization of its kind which, as clearly seen from the agenda, had constructive synthesis as its aim. Again, in 1838, Ramkamal, though not a zamindar himself

(unlike Rammohan, Tagores or Radhakanta) organized a society for petitioning to the British authorities on behalf of Bengali landholders. Initially named *Zamindary sabha* and later named Landholders' Society, this was described by Theodore Dickens as the “first society for political objects which has ever been organized by the natives of India with large and liberal views, without exclusiveness, and with ends and aims of extensive utility”. Indeed, the society, though short-lived, was in effect the parent of all subsequent political associations in India in the nineteenth century (including Indian Association and the Indian National Congress); which, in words of Rajendralal Mitra, gave to the people the first lesson in the art of fighting constitutionally for their rights.



Image: Ramkamal Sen

Thus, Ramkamal was the harbinger of the age of socially conscious bhadralok class by leading the first socio-educational native organization and by forming the first native political association. The spirit of synthesis was epitomized in his works. He preached against the injurious *charakpuja* rituals (despite taking great academic interest in its history) and yet sided with Radhakanta against sati regulation act (despite describing the sati ritual as horrid, barbaric) as a stance against the British

and Missionary interference in Bengali social matter. He was all for western education, but was a vociferous critic of Macaulay's policies (unlike Vidyasagar) and he dissociated himself from the Asiatic society when he felt that it was losing its oriental nature. The Asiatic society, Fort William College and Hindu College were the three places where Indians interacted with Europeans, and Ramkamal was associated with all of them. It is a pity that he did not get an iota of the recognition which Rammohan (despite not taking active participation in organizational institutes) or Vidyasagar got, and instead has been wrongly described as a pro-sati conservative. It is time that this man with unparalleled contributions in creating the bhadralok class be given his proper place in discourses regarding the Renaissance.

Another Vaidya who shaped the Bengali mind in the 19th century (and of course, for the ages to come) was Ishwarchandra Gupta, the eminent poet and journalist. Interestingly, he was related to Ramkamal (Ishwarchandra's sister Jagadamba Devi was the wife of Ramkamal's brother) and his residential place Kanchrapara was near Garifa. Newspapers, needless to say, have been the most important social media until recently. Ishwarchandra brought out the first Bengali daily newspaper in 1830, which was indeed a landmark in the history of Bengalis. As an editor, he wrote on various social, cultural and political issues. He extensively travelled in eastern and western Bengal and documented many facts including the Wahabi-Farazi influences in eastern Bengal. He was a pioneer in documentation of literary and oral treasures of Bengal. He published the complete collection of Ramprasad Sen's poems/songs and pioneered the study of Kabigaans and Kabiwalas. Authoring of biographies of Ramprasad and Rajballabh Sen are also of immense historical value. He was indeed a forerunner of the researchers of Bengali cultural history.

He mastered the art of prose at a time it was not yet prevalent. Even if we leave aside his poetry (he

is referred to as ‘*Yugasandhir kabi*’ as well as ‘first poem of modern Bengal’), he will be remembered for honing a new generation of poets/intellectuals. His impact on the budding poets was so much that they considered it a privilege to meet him or to get their poems published under his edition. The literary scene virtually revolved around him and much before the time of Kallol, he gave birth to a poets’ society of which Bankimchandra Chatterjee, Dinabandhu Mitra and Dwarakanath Adhikari were the brightest members. His disciple Bankimchandra Chatterjee would later become the sage of nationalism; while another disciple Dinabandhu Mitra would author ‘Nildarpan’.



Ishwarchandra Gupta

Much like Ramkamal, Ishwarchandra has been misunderstood often by several authors. Like Ramkamal, Ishwarchandra too aimed at a synthesis of views and wished that Bengalis become a progressive community not oblivious of its roots. He is sometimes seen as pro-British, while his proud proclamation of preferring a ‘*Deshar Kukur*’ to a ‘*Bidesher Thakur*’ is overlooked. He prophetically voiced his angst at the English-educated womenfolk running the risk of forgetting

indigenous rituals like ‘*saj-sejutir broto*’ (as someone devoted to cultural studies lifelong, this was a valid concern), which is seen as his antagonistic attitude towards female education; but it is conveniently forgotten that he advocated for female education all along in *Sambad Prabhakar*, and even actively participated in that direction. He was close to Brahmos, but could not agree with their contempt of popular religious culture (a sentiment later voiced by Bankim). He was against the Missionaries interfering with the local culture, and opposed Derozio’s disciples (Ramkamal also did the same from his position) from a nationalistic viewpoint.

Ishwarchandra Gupta, thus stands out as not only the first journalist-editor, first cultural researcher of the modern times and the first modern Bengali poet, but also as the guru of two persons who would have tremendous influence on Bengali literature and (more importantly) Bengali bhadralok class (as opposed to the west-aping babus who should not be taken as a representative of the bhadralok class).

When the Brahma ideal started to gain popularity among the urban educated Bengalis, several Vaidyas embraced the Brahmoism. The most noted among them, of course, is Ramkamal’s grandson Keshabchandra. Following the footsteps of his grandfather, he initially worked in the Bank of Bengal and the Asiatic society, and also established educational schools. Spiritually inclined from the childhood, he was one of the first Indians to have become a mason. He joined Brahmosamaj in 1859 and his leadership and organizational prowess helped the Brahmosamaj gain great momentum. He was soon made the *Acharya* of the samaj. However, he had internal conflicts regarding western and specifically Christian intrusions in brahmo activities. At times he believed in a brahmo ideal which would be fully Hindu (Vaishnava) in nature, again sometimes he used to voice the necessity of incorporating Christian practices. On difference of opinion regarding reforms, he dissociated from the Brahmosamaj and formed *Bharatbarshiya brahmosamaj*. Later, some of his disciples broke

away and formed *Sadharan Brahmocamaj*. Finally, motivated by Sri Ramakrishna's teachings, he formed *Nababidhan*, which reflected the culmination of his spiritual journey. Keshabchandra was undoubtedly the most important organizer-leader in the history of Brahma movement, and the central force in the dynamics of the Brahma movement. The idea of synthesis was at play in his life as well. He protested against the Europeanization of India in his 'Asia's message to Europe'. He nurtured a love for Christ, but his speeches would often end with '*Hari-naam*'. He despised idolatry in the beginning, but was instrumental in making Sriramakrishna popular among the Bhadrals. Lastly, the spirit of systematic studies was there in him as well. He selected four Vaidya disciples to study the four old religions of the world: Gour Govindo Roy (Hinduism), Aghorenath Gupta (Buddhism), Girish Chandra Sen (Islam) and Pratap Chandra Majumdar (Christianity). Pratapchandra attended the Parliament of the world religions in Chicago alongside Vivekananda.



Keshab Chandra Sen



Girishchandra Sen



Aghorenath Gupta



Pratapchandra Majumdar

Thus, we have three Vaidya personalities spearheading the different fields of activity of a newly

emerging educated class. Ishwarchandra, apart from pioneering cultural studies and journalism, ensured that the land of Ramprasad begets a new lineage of poets. Ramkamal envisaged the need of unified associations (in a modern outlook) of Bengali elites for political empowerment (which did not materialize during Rajballabh), and Keshabchandra represented the spiritual inquisition of the reformist youth.

Curiously, Bankimchandra, born in the same year (1838) as Keshabchandra, had deep respect and admiration for Keshab, despite being antagonistic to Brahmos in general. Perhaps he observed the complex religious journey of a contemporary which ended in a sort of homecoming, and it must not have escaped him that Nababidhan ensured that many Brahmo western-inclined remained in Indic faith.

Kalinarayan Gupta, Satyananda Dasgupta (editor of Brohmobadi magazine and father of poet Jibanananda Dash), Chandicharan Sen, and several members of the Dash family of Bikrampur-Telirbag (C.R. Dash was a scion of this family) were eminent Vaidya leaders involved in Brahmo movement. Durgamohan Dash from the Telirbag Dash family was an out and out reformist. He organized sabhas in Calcutta in support of widow remarriages and helped such marriages by donating money. He even succeeded in arranging a re-marriage of his widowed stepmother which was a remarkable incident given the times. He himself married the widowed daughter of Kalinarayan Gupta (who was the mother of Atulprasad Sen). What could not be accomplished by Raja Rajballabh was finally made possible with the likes of Durgamohan. Durgamohan helped in setting up many schools for girls.

In terms of female education, the Vaidyas made significant strides compared to other communities,

as we shall later. The Brahma influence may have played a part, but curiously, there have been female luminaries from the non-Brahmo households as well. Even before the advent of Bengal renaissance, Anandamoyee Devi (Sen) wrote a collection of poems titled '*Hari-leela*'. Kamini Roy (the daughter of Chandicharan Sen) was perhaps the first recognized female-poet of 19th century. A teacher of Bethune School and later a professor of Bethune College, Kamini wrote several books like '*Alo o Chaya*', '*Mahashweta*' etc. Fulkumari Gupta (1869) was one of the earliest female prose-writers, who authored philosophical texts like '*Srishti rahasya*'. Also worth mentioning is Jibanananda Dash's mother poetess Kusumkumari Dash (the lines '*amader deshe hobe sei chhele kobe*' from of a poem of her became very popular).



Kamini Roy



Kusumkumari Dash

An interesting feature of this age of transition is the co-existence of both traditional and (newly introduced) modern systems of medicine. Vaidyas continued to study, teach and practice Ayurveda in their 'tol's and many eminent Ayurvedic scholars wrote new treatises and notes. At the same time, Britishers promoted western medicinal system. After the Sanskrit College was established, a medical class was introduced for the Vaidya students (only the Brahmin and Vaidya students were admitted in Sanskrit College until the time of Vidyasagar) of the college. Pandit Khudiram Bisharad

was the first teacher of this class (he later started a petition demanding that the study of Ayurveda be reserved as an exclusive right of the Vaidyas). Ramkamal played a significant role in establishing a hospital attached to the medical class. The study of western medical texts was started at the behest of J. Grant. Pandit Madhusudan Gupta taught both Ayurvedic and western medical thoughts in Sanskrit. However, the Sanskrit medical class was abolished in 1835 due to efforts mainly made by the then secretary Troyer, who was dismissive of Ayurveda and Sanskrit in general. A new Medical college was established in 1835 where the medium of instruction was strictly English. Ramkamal, who became the secretary of Sanskrit college in 1835, was seemingly upset with the abolition of Sanskrit medical class in the Sanskrit college, as evident from his negative comments regarding the significance of the new Medical College. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that Ramkamal supported the association formed by Khudiram Bisharad. Madhusudan Gupta, on the other hand, joined the college as a demonstrator of surgery and Anatomy. One of his students was Dwarakanath Gupta (style his surname as Gooptu, possibly the only instance of a Vaidya surname getting anglicized), who later treated many eminent personalities and founded Messrs. D. Gooptu and Co. which became one of the most successful business ventures of British India. With the assistance of Dwarakanath, Pandit Madhusudan Gupta became the first Indian (in modern times) to dissect a dead body for anatomical study, which marked a significant event of that time.

Among the traditional Ayurvedic scholars, the most eminent was Gangadhar Roy (born in 1798), who is considered as a father figure for the other Kavirajas. He stayed away from Calcutta but soon rose to eminence as his medical achievements became known all over India. He wrote a new commentary on *Charakasamhita* (following Chakrapani Dutta). He also authored two commentaries on the *Mugdobodha* vyakarana (written by the legendary scholar Bopdeva, presumed to a Bengali Vaidya), two epics ('Lokalok Purushiya' and 'durgo-vadha kabya'), and 40 other Sanskrit books on various topics ranging from *Upanishad*, *Patanjal Yoga*, *Alankara*, to

Bhagavatgita. Mahamahopadhyay Dwarikanath Sen, a scholar of Ayurveda, Kavya, Nyaya and Smriti had taught more than 5000 students in his lifetime. Gangaprasad Sen and his nephew Mahamahopadhyay Bijoyratna Sen were famous all over India as well as outside India for their erudition and skill. Shyamadas Bachaspati was known for his knowledge in Ayurveda, Nyaya and Vyakarana. As an idealist, he did not hesitate to abolish his 'tol' and established *Vaidya Shastrapeeth* (as suggested by Deshbandhu C. R. Dash). He virtually spent all his savings for establishing this college and the institution still stands as a symbol of Ayurvedic pride and as a seat of learning, carrying the name of its noble founder.

Luminaries like Mahamahopadhyay Gananath Sen Saraswati, Acharya Jaminibhushan Roy (after whom the J.B Roy State Ayurvedic College is named) also belonged to the 19th (and early 20th) century. The Jabakusum oil (a product of C. K. Sen and Co.) became a famous Ayurvedic product, much like the Messrs. D. Gooptu products. The Kavirajas often updated themselves with recent findings (something unseen in earlier centuries) and were not antagonistic to English per se. Apart from Calcutta, Bikrampur, Barishal, Faridpur, Khulna, Rajshahi, Srikhanda, Nirol continued to be centres of Ayurvedic learning and Kavirajas contributed in Sanskrit literature as well as in other traditional disciplines. 19th (and early 20th) century was indeed the age of revival of Ayurvedic glory and Bengal regained its just status regarding Ayurveda.



Acharya Gangadhar Roy



Shyamadas Bachaspati



Mahamahopadhyay Dwarikanath Sen



Mahamahopadhyay Gananath Sen

In 19th century, an expanded world-view motivated Bengalis to travel to different corners of the world (notwithstanding the medieval reservations regarding crossing the sea). Two Vaidya travellers deserve special mention in this respect. First among them is Raybahadur Saratchandra Dash, an

engineer as well as a scholar of Tibetan language and Buddhism, who worked as a British spy and made two adventurous trips (in 1879 and 1881) to Tibet. He collected a large number of manuscripts and wrote scholarly books on Buddhism and Tibetan culture as well as travelogues describing his trips. The second is the globetrotter Chandrashekhar Sen, who travelled extensively to Europe, Africa, America and other parts of Asia since 1889. He wrote a voluminous travelogue named 'Bhu-pradakkhin' (i.e., circling the globe).

As said before, the Bengali Bhadrakok occupied important administrative posts at that time. Sir Krishnagobinda Gupta was the first Indian civilian to join government's Board of revenue. After heading the Indian Fisheries commission, he went on to become the first Indian member of India Council. Beharilal Gupta was also an eminent barrister who worked as a magistrate of Calcutta during late 19th century. The third Indian to have joined Indian Civil Service, he was appointed as the first Indian chief magistrate and coroner of Calcutta in 1872. This took him to a position to adjudicate matters related to British individuals, something which the Indians were debarred from doing till then. His appointment and his letter to Ashely Eden in this regard created a controversy. This ultimately led to the Ilbert bill. Beharilal later worked as a minister in the Baroda kingdom. In fact, Vaidyas at this time worked in administrative posts in native states as well. Rao Sansarchandra Sen worked as the third prime minister of Jaipur state (a post previously occupied by Ramkamal's son Harimohan Sen) and was awarded the title Rai Bahadur and M.V.O by the British government.

Thus, Vaidyas rose to prominence in the various new avenues the 19th century offered. They were directly involved in moulding the socio-political consciousness, shaped the academic, cultural and literary ambience, had significant participation in the new religious movements, performed exceptionally with regards to female education, excelled in the parallel systems of Ayurvedic and

western medicine, travelled to different parts of the world (breaking the taboos prevalent at that time) and worked as important administrators under British and native governments.

The contribution of Vaidyas in the freedom struggle

If early (and greater part of) 19th century was the period when Bengali bhadralok assisted the British establishment by various means, then late 19th century and first part of 20th century was marked by fierce struggle for independence. The Bengali bhadralok by all means led India's freedom movement.

The participation of Vaidyas in the glorious *Ognijug* (the fiery era of violent resistance against the British aimed at winning complete independence) is very much significant. If one looks at the list of revolutionaries and martyrs during *Ognijug* and other periods of armed struggle, then one is bound to notice that the involvement of Vaidyas is disproportionately large given their miniscule population compared to other communities (As per the 1921 census, the Vaidya population was around 1/13th of the Brahmin population and 1/13th of the Kayastha population as well). Moreover, they were connected with almost all the remarkable acts of resistance that shook the base of the British establishment and inspired the revolutionaries greatly.

During Ognijug, the famed newspaper ‘Yugantar’ was first published in the press of a Vaidya revolutionary Prakashchandra Majumdar (elder brother of the eminent historian Rameshchandra Majumdar). Seeing the impact of papers like ‘Yugantar’, ‘Vandemataram’ etc., and Kingsford followed the policy of strict suppression. During a court proceeding against Bipin Pal for Vandemataram, Sushil Sen, a boy of age 14, bravely assaulted an atrocious British sergeant. Kingsford ordered that Sushil be flogged in public. This infuriated the revolutionaries very much and it was decided by the Yugantar leaders that Kingsford would be assassinated. At first, the plan was to send Sushil with Prafulla Chaki to carry out the task; but later Khudiram Bose replaced Sushil (Sushil was later killed in police firing during a *swadeshi* robbery). What followed is well-known. In the Alipore bomb trial, the leaders were saved from the gallows by the arguments put forward by their lawyer Chittaranjan Dash, who, in words of Aurobindo Ghosh “put away from him all other thoughts and abandoned all his practice, who sat up half the night day after day for months and broke his health to save me”. Among the revolutionaries who were sent to exile in Andaman was Ullaskar Dutta, a prominent leader born in the Vaidya community. Sachin Sen was one of his associates. The effect of the Alipore Bomb trial did not end with the sentencing. The revolutionaries wanted to avenge the death of their compatriots. The Britishers and their Indian accomplices were very much in their target. In 1910, a Vaidya youth named Birendranath Duttgupta killed the detective Shamsul Alam (who persuaded Naren Gosai to be an approver) inside the Calcutta High court and was hanged after a criminal trial.

The next significant incident of Ognijug was the ‘battle of Buribalam’ where Bagha Jatin and four of his associates fought a valiant gunfight with the British forces in Balasore. Among the four associates were two Vaidyas, Nirendranath Dasgupta and Manoranjan Sengupta. Both of them were hanged in Balasore jail on 22.11.1915. It is worth noting that Bagha Jatin had several other Vaidya revolutionaries as his disciples including Birendra Dutttagupta and Bhupati Majumdar.



Nirendranath Dasgupta



Manoranjan Sengupta

The glorious trio of Benoy-Badal-Dinesh would live forever in the minds of nationalistic Indians. Benoy was a member of Sri Sangha, an association led by Major Satya Gupta which formed the backbone of the organization called Bengal Volunteers. Two Vaidya revolutionaries Badal Gupta and Dinesh Gupta, together with Benoy created history in 1931 which is known to everyone.

Dinesh Gupta was considered a guru by the revolutionaries in Midnapore. To avenge the hanging of their idol, Dinesh's disciples planned a series of assassinations including that of the judge Garlick. Garlick was killed for sentencing Dinesh to death. Earlier, as directed by Shashanka Dasgupta and others, the young revolutionary Bimal Dasgupta (along with Jyotijiban Ghosh) killed the ruthless magistrate James with a revolver provided by Manoranjan Sen (Bimal later attempted to murder British businessman Devilliers). Dinesh, then imprisoned, reportedly took immense pride in this action by his disciple. In 1931, a leading revolutionary Tarakeshwar Sengupta (along with Santosh Mitra) was killed in the abominable Hijli firings. The vile act, which was similar to the Jaliwanwalabagh massacre in nature, infuriated the freedom fighters and they assassinated magistrate Douglas. The hanging of Dinesh Gupta and the Hijli incident led to the assassination of a magistrate in Dhaka as well.



Chittagong uprising can be termed as the most remarkable event in the history of freedom struggle. Surya Sen, the hero of the revolutionaries for all the ages to come, was born in a Vaidya family of Chittagong. He initially took the lesson of armed resistance from Nagen Sen (who had formed the 'Red Bengal party'). Chittagong armoury raid and Jalalabad war are events which had tremendous impacts. Pritilata Waddedar, the woman martyr who will remain an inspiration for the all the ages to come, was also a Vaidya. Several Vaidyas became martyrs in this uprising, such as Nirmal sen (one of the main associates of Surya Sen), Apurba Sen, Tripuracharan Sen, Debaprasad Gupta, Nityagopal Sen, Manoranjan Dasgupta, Manoranjan Sen, Jatindra Dasgupta, Rajat Sen, Himangshu Bimal Sen. Again, there were several Vaidyas among the revolutionaries who were arrested and sent to jail or exile following this uprising, such as Ananda Gupta, Pannalal Sen, Fakir Sen, Ranadhir Dasgupta, Lalmohan Sen, Sushil Dasgupta.



Surya Sen



Pritilata Waddedar

Following the Chittagong uprising, efforts were made to bring Yugantar, Anushilan and Chittagong group under a common platform so that further actions can be taken, and it was one Manoranjan Gupta who took special initiatives in this direction. He was earlier instrumental (along with Arun Guha and Kiran Mukherjee) in establishing the Saraswati library and Saraswati moth. In 1931, Manoranjan and other leaders of Yugantar planned to assassinate the infamous Charles Tegart. With a photograph provided by Manoranjan, a team comprising of Atul Sen, Anujacharan Sengupta (Atul and Anuja both hailed from Senhati), Dinesh Majumdar and two other revolutionaries attempted to bomb Tegart's car. Anuja was killed when the bomb thrown by him had exploded before reaching the car; Dinesh was convicted and hanged.

The representation of Vaidya women in the freedom struggle is another aspect that is worth mentioning. Apart from Pritilata, another name that is worth mentioning is that of Anubha sen, who was a rebel leader in the Indian navy; she was sentenced to death in 1944. Banalata Dasgupta (was imprisoned in Hijli jail), Kamala Dasgupta, Mira Dutttagupta all showed great valour as revolutionaries.

Interestingly, the villages with considerable number of Vaidya population often became the centre of revolutionary activities. Many Vaidya families resided in Goila (Barishal), the village associated with the famous *mangalkavya* poet Bijoy Gupta. The Vaidyas of Goila and Barishal in general were involved in revolutionary movements en masse, from their very childhood. Sadat Ali Akhand, an officer of IB and a sleuth of the British Police, wrote about the revolutionary activities of the Vaidyas (irrespective of their age) in his autobiography ('13 number Lord Sinha Road'):

"ববেহদলর রছিহলি। গগলিরো বেলরশরোলি বেরোলড - সনরোসবেরোদচীহদর রগন গগলিরো। ওর লনহজরই কতি আতচীসজন রদউলিচী-বেরোকসরোয় ররোজবেনচী হেহয়

আহছি। লকইংবেরো নরো লগহয় থরোকহলিও যরোবে-যরোবে করহছি।

আলমই রতিরো বেলরশরোহলির ফরোইলি-হফরোলরোর ররোলখ। লকছিপুইঅজরোনরো রনই। বেলরশরোহলির গবেদলহগরোযচীর 'হকহে নরো রলহেলি আর বেইংহশ লদহতি

বেরোলতি'। অনপুশটিলিনউলনশ নম্বরর এহজটটি সরোবেরোড কহর লদহয়হছি গবেদলবেইংহশর আবেরোলি-বেভদবেলনতিরোর লবেরুহদ সরোবেভরোলসমিভঅলরোকটিলাউটির

রইং-হবেরইং-এর খবের লদহয়। এমনলক রচরোদ পহনর বেছিহরর লকহশরোর-লকহশরোরচীহকও বেরোদ রদয়লনা। আগরোমচী লতশ বেছিহরর মহখল ওহদর আর

করোউহক সরকরোরচী চরোকলর কহর রখহতি হেহবে নরো।"

Similarly, Vaidya villages Sonarang and Senhati acted as centres of anti-raj activities. Judge Rowlatt mentioned Sonarang 18 times as a hub for terrorist nationalists in his Rowlatt report. Anushilan leaders like Trailokyanath Chakrabarti used to stay in this village in disguise.

Apart from the Ognijug, Vaidya participation was no less significant in the other streams of revolutionaries. Chittaranjan Dash was the undisputed leader of Bengali congress workers and was the political guru of Netaji Subhashchandra Bose. Known as *Deshabandhu* (friend of the nation), he will be remembered as probably the most important Bengali statesman and national leader of the 20th century. Initially associated with Anushilan samiti and famous for his successful role as the defence lawyer in the Alipore Bomb, Chittaranjan became the president of Indian national congress and was elected as the first mayor of Calcutta. His differences with the Gandhi faction led him to form the Swarajya party, which was a very significant landmark in the history of India. He remains one of the most universally respected personalities to have taken birth in India.

Jatindra Mohan Sengupta (fondly called *Deshapriya*, i.e., 'beloved of the nation' by the countrymen) was another important Bengali leader of the congress. Like Deshbandhu, he was a

famous lawyer and pleaded for the revolutionaries in many trials including that of the Pahartali trial involving Surya Sen and his group. Jatrindra Mohan became the president of the Swarajya party after Deshabandhu's death and also served as the president of Bengal provincial congress. Ambikacharan majumdar, a cousin of Rameshchandra Majumdar, was another Vaidya who served as the president of Indian National Congress. Kalyanshankar Roy, Kiranshankar Roy also deserve mention as political leaders of significant stature.



'Deshbandhu' Chittaranjan



'Deshpriya' Jatindramohan

Regarding the swadeshi and boycott movements, Surendranath Sen (known as 'first boycotter') was the first to put forward the proposal of rejecting foreign goods in a meeting at Kishoregunge in August 1905 (this was accepted in a bigger meeting in Town hall) and was a leading personality in the civil disobedience movement. Kabiraj Narendranath Sen led the salt disobedience movement in Barishal (he and his brother Haripada have been associated with Anushilan samiti as well). Interestingly, many Ayurvedic physicians participated in the swadeshi movement by propagating swadeshi sentiments in their writings and medical advertisements.

Among the noted Gandhians of Bengal, there were several prominent Vaidya names such as Nibaranchandra Dasgupta (called ‘Gandhi of Manbhum’), Satishchandra Dasgupta. However, if there is one person who deserves to be mentioned for his astounding leadership, it is Satin Sen, the ‘uncrowned king’ of congress in Barishal (in the words of famous historian Tapan Roychowdhury). An active participant in swadeshi robberies, and a leader of non-cooperation and civil disobedience movement, he will be remembered forever for the remarkable Patuakhali satyagraha. He had many Vaidya associates like Sudhir Dasgupta, Nirmal Dasgupta, Kshitish Sengupta, Heeralal Dasgupta, Sudhin Sen, Prasun Dasgupta, etc.

The battle for independence was undoubtedly the most important aspect of the journey of the Bhadrak. The contribution of Vaidyas in the freedom struggle merits a separate article. In this section the present author aimed to put a summary of the vaidya involvements in the different fields of nationalistic resistance.



Satin Sen

Achievements in different fields of activity

In this section, we will see how Vaidyas have excelled in the different fields of activity in the age of the bhadrakok.

Academic:

The Vaidya community has given birth to a large number of academicians and educationists. The community boasts of a number of noted historians like Rameshchandra Majumdar, Hemchandra Roychowdhury, Tapan Roychowdhury and Jatindramohan Roy. Cultural historians like Dinesh Chandra Sen, Shashi Bhushan Dasgupta; philosophers like Surendranath Dasgupta (author of the monumental work 'A History of Indian Philosophy'); scholars like Kshitimohan Sen, Jogendranath Gupta, Subodhchandra Sengupta, RK Dasgupta, Gourangagopal Sengupta; economists like Amartya Sen (a Nobel laureate), Amiya Kumar Dasgupta, Partha Dasgupta, Arjun Sengupta, Amlan Dutta (a noted thinker as well); Physicists like Amal Kumar Roychowdhury (famous for his Roychowdhury equation); polymaths like Indumadhab Mallick, educationists like Triguna Sen - the list would never end. The galaxy of scholars goes on to show that the popular perception about the Vaidyas being an intellectual community does have a factual basis. Scholastic aptitude is perhaps the most important characteristic of a bhadrakok and Vaidyas have earned special position in that respect.

Administrative and Legal:

As said before, Vaidyas served in important administrative posts under British government, in native states and continued to do so in the Independent India. Also, many noted lawyers were born in this community. The Dash family of Telirbagh gave birth to a number of eminent lawyers.

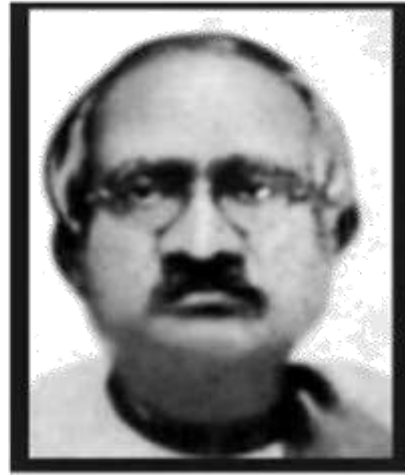
A scion of this family, Sudhi Ranjan Dash, went on to become the 5th Chief Justice of India. His son-in-law was Ashoke Kumar Sen, who served as the Union Law minister of India. Ashoke's brother Sukumar Sen was the first Chief Election Commissioner of India. The community can be proud of diplomats like Binoy Ranjan Sen, Chandrashekhar Dasgupta (and probably, Ronen Sen) who served as Indian ambassador to foreign states (US in case of Binoy and Ranen; and EU, China, Belgium and Luxemburg in case of Chandrashekhar) Another name that is worth mentioning here is that of NC Sengupta, the eleventh governor of the Reserve bank.

Political:

Leading Vaidya statesmen like C.R. Dash, J. M. Sengupta, Ambikacharan Majumdar and Kiran Shankar Roy have already been mentioned before. Prafulla Chandra Sen, the third chief minister of West Bengal, was born in a Vaidya family in Senhati. The fifth chief minister Siddhartha Shankar Roy, who served as Indian ambassador to US, was the grandson of C.R.Dash. The Vaidya presence in the communist leadership is very much visible. From noted parliamentarians and orators like Indrajit Gupta and Bhupesh Gupta to prominent political leaders and organizers like Gurudas Dasgupta, Pramod Dasgupta, Sailen Dasgupta, Manikuntala Sen, Kanak Mukhopadhyay (nee Dasgupta) and Asim Dasgupta, Vaidyas can be said to have led and dominated the communist movement. Many Bengali revolutionaries had turned communists under complex historical developments, and inclination towards Marxism (and left-leaning views) has been one of the important characteristics of the western-educated Bhadrakalok class (in both academic and political level) in the 20th century. Vaidya participation in this regard is quite significant.

Literature:

Vaidyas usually held the title *Kaviraja* (literally meaning ‘king of the poets’) in Bengal. Interestingly, a great number of poets in the age of bhadrakalok came from the Vaidya caste. Starting from Ishwarchandra Gupta, stalwarts like Nabinchandra Sen (his reinterpretation of Mahabharata in his three-volume epic was a path-breaking work which influenced Michael Madhusudan and later poets), Mohitlal Majumdar, Kalidas Roy, Kumudranjan Mallick, Atulprasad Sen, Rajanikanta Sen, Kamini Roy, Jibanananda Dash, Samar Sen, Jatindranath Sengupta, Samarendra Sengupta, Alokranjan Dasgupta, Anandagopal Sengupta contributed immensely in the field of poetry. Jibanananda in particular had a unique appeal in the Bhadrakalok mind with his special style of writing, which maintains a rootedness in its seemingly universalistic flavour. In prose, Achintya Kumar Sengupta, Jagadish Gupta, Ashapurna Devi (pioneer in feminist literature), Hemendra Kumar Roy and Nihar Ranjan Gupta (the last two being masters of the crime story genre which grew extremely popular in 20th century) deserve special mention.



(clockwise from top left: Jibanananda Dash, Mohitlal Majumdar, Kumudranjan Mallick and Kalidas Roy)

Vaidyas made significant contributions in religious literature as well. Sri 'M' (Mahendranath Gupta) probably authored the most important text in the religious history of the present Bengalis – *Ramakrishna Kathamrita*. Achintya Kumar's '*Parampurush Srisriramkrishna*' is also worth mentioning. Aurobindo's ideals were profoundly discussed by Nalinikanta Gupta in his writings.

Journalism, editing and Publishing:

Starting from Ishwarchandra Gupta's *Sangbad Prabhakar* and Narendranath Sen's Indian Mirror, Vaidyas have made important contributions in the arena of journalism and publishing as well. C.R. Dash started a newspaper named *Forward* (later renamed as *Liberty*), and he edited a monthly nationalistic journal called *Narayana*. Many eminent writers and leaders wrote in *Narayana* and soon it had a great impact. Another journal that deserves a special mention is *Samakalin*. Edited by Anandagopal Sengupta, this journal published some of the best academic articles by noted scholars for three decades. Regarding news journalism, Barun Sengupta, Ashok Dasgupta, Kanchan Gupta and Swapan Dasgupta are some of the eminent names belonging to the Vaidya caste. Barun Sengupta's *Bartaman* and Ashok Dasgupta's *Aajkal* have been two of the top three Bengali daily newspapers in recent times. Both *Bartaman* and *Aajkal* are leading publishing houses as well. D.K. Gupta's Signet Press is also worth mentioning in this respect.

Birth of Cinema, Film Society movement and Theatre:

Cinema, as we know, is not merely a form of entertainment for the Bhadrakalok class. It is a mode of intellectual and artistic expression and a medium of voicing opinions regarding different socio-political issues. Same applies for theatre as well. Now Indian cinema owes its origin to a Vaidya named Hiralal Sen. He is yet to get the undisputed formal recognition as the first Indian film-maker, however there are strong arguments in his favour (one may see the article 'The deprived Technologist: Hiralal Sen and Bioscope' by Sourav Gupta in Vol 2. No.2, Journal of Bengali Studies) that establishes his 'Alibaba' as the First full-length Indian film and his documentary of the anti-partition movements of 1905 as the first political film of India.

One may hope that new works will help in establishing his place as the first film-maker of India. In any case, Bengali films began with him. Later, we had two prominent Vaidya directors in form of Bimal Roy and Asit Sen; both of them directed some of the most popular and acclaimed films of the Hindi and Bengali film industry.

A turning point in the history of Indian cinema was the formation of ‘Calcutta Film Society’ by Satyajit Roy (he had Vaidya maternal lineage), Chidananda Dasgupta, Harisadhan Dasgupta, Radhaprasad Gupta and others. It was the first society of Indian feature-film makers, and it brought a revolution in the film-making scene by introducing the budding directors and cine-goers to International films being made all around the world. This society had important contributions in film studies, organizing different film-festivals, and to some extent, changing the taste of movie-watchers which had its positive and negative impacts. Chidananda’s daughter Aparna and Buddhadeb Dasgupta are acclaimed film-makers. Another name which must be mentioned here is Ramananda Sengupta, the eminent cinematographer who worked with Jean Renoir and in many Bengali films.

Coming to theatres, noted playwrights like Salil Sen (his ‘Natun Ihudi’ showcased the plight of the Hindu refugees in a partitioned India), Shyamal Sen and directors and thespians like Shobha Sen, Rudraprasad Sengupta, Koushik Sen belong to the Vaidya community.

From the above discussion, it is clear that Vaidyas have made exceptionally bright contributions in the academic/intellectual and cultural arena. If one looks at the activities and various fields of interest of a quintessential Bengali Bhadrak, starting from Academic discourses, reading of literature, reading a journal/paper, watching movies/theatre to having a highly intellectual discussion at the Coffee house (Indian Coffee house, situated in a building which was earlier the residence of Keshabchandra Sen, at one time served as the meeting place of several noted intellectuals; Kumarprasad Mukherjee wrote about the bright Vaidya intellectuals in such ‘addas’); one will find that in some way or other, Vaidyas have made fundamental contributions in all such fields. Also, the almost uniform Vaidya inclinations towards intellectual pursuits and a Bhadrak way of life, establishes that the community itself has been Bhadrak in nature.

Conclusion

It is indeed intriguing to find the predominantly Bhadrak and urban nature of a community. Various factors might have been at play here. Firstly, Vaidyas were traditionally ahead of other communities (including Brahmin and Kayasthas) in terms of education. This became more accentuated after the introduction of English education. W. H. Thompson, the census superintendent observes in the census report of 1921 (Vol V, Part 1, page 295) that:

The Baidyas... are a much smaller caste, than either the Brahmans or the Kayasthas, who together with them make up what are commonly called the Bhadrak of Bengal, but they have advanced further in education and in civilization generally than the other two and have prospered accordingly... Practically all Baidya males have had the opportunity of acquiring

the art of reading and writing Bengali... Brahmans and Kayasthas are rather behind the Baidyas. More than half the Baidya males over five understand English and this caste has a long lead over the Brahamans and Kayasthas among whom the proportion is only a little over quarter.

As a result, it was easier for Vaidyas to embrace modern Science, modern education and progressive world-views. However, it must be noted that the idea of synthesis was always at play in case of the Vaidyas, and they generally stayed rooted to their identity. It is worth noting that there not a single member of the Young Bengal (Derozio's disciples) was a Vaidya, we do not come across any outright west-aping convert among the Vaidyas either. Mindless aping was not exactly the route to becoming a Bhadrakalok in the true sense.

Secondly, female education was much more prevalent among the Vaidyas. The census of 1921 observes

“In the matter of female education the Baidyas are far the advance of any other community. The Baidyas have five times as great a proportion of their females literate in English as the Kayasthas who stand next to them”.

Female education invariably leads to a more progressive ambience, and in turn improves the overall state of education thus leading to greater prosperity. Indeed, the number of female participants in freedom struggle and academia is more in case of the Vaidyas due to the said reason.

Thirdly, Vaidyas have always been engaged in Bhadrakok professions since time immemorial. In all probability, there was never a Vaidya farmer, nor a Vaidya small-scale businessman, artisan or grocer (forget about professions involving harder manual labours). They have been physicians, scholars, astrologers, landholders, army-chiefs, administrators, clerks, (later) lawyers and cashiers (in rare cases). Since they were always in respectable positions, it was necessary for them to mould themselves as the new elites. The aspirations possibly came from another consideration. They were associated with the Sena kings and Rajballabh Sena (arguably the most important Hindu leader during the fall of Siraj), something they always took pride in. This might have inspired them to occupy a befitting position in the restructured and newly empowered nascent Hindu elite section.

Fourthly, they were much less in number compared to Brahmins and Kayasthas (1921 census informs that at that time there were only 1 lakh Vaidyas compared to 13 lakh Brahmins and 13 lakh Kayasthas). Through marital relations, through maintenance of Kulajis and through societal gatherings organized by Vaidya samajpatis, the Vaidya families were often acquainted to each other. The achievement of an individual inspired the others belonging to the clan (often to the point of creating undue pressures; it is jokingly said that a Vaidya student is excommunicated if he/she fails in a school examination). Also, the communal spirit has always been in action among the Vaidyas. The readiness to help a fellow-caste member always leads to prosperity and one need not resort to nepotism to help a fellow-member. Anyway, this acquaintances and fellow-feeling can explain an apparent uniformity (of inclinations, taste and living standard) which moulded the whole Vaidya community in a Bhadrakok shape. But still it cannot explain the birth of so many intelligent and talented individuals in a miniscule community.

Fifthly, before independence a large number of Vaidyas (irrespective of their ancestral place) resided in Calcutta and Dhaka, the two main centres of enlightenment. After the partition, majority of the migrant Vaidyas settled in Kolkata and outskirts.

This made the Vaidyas a predominantly urban community, and consequently, almost singularly a Bhadrak community (it must be stated here that this became possible since Kolkata is essentially a centre of urban mindset, unlike certain other metros of India).

It is worth noting that in terms of female education, the families that had to bear the brunt of partition were ahead than the families unaffected by partition. The change in economic conditions following the partition also had complex effects on the earlier affluent Vaidya landowner families.

Whatever might have been the reasons, the role of Vaidyas in ushering in the Bengal renaissance, and in different defining socio-cultural-academic movements in the age of Bhadrak should be the topic of serious academic studies. The contributions of Ramkamal and Ishwarchandra (Gupta) are sadly overlooked, although they are no less than those of Rammohan and Ishwarchandra (Vidyasagar). The curious case of the existence of a (almost) uniformly 'Bhadrak' community leading the various spheres is not given due considerations either. Now-a-days, Bengalis are often heard lamenting about a steady cultural decline and a general paucity of talents; and they look forward towards another renaissance. To this end also, the study of the history and the various aspects of the age of 'Bhadrak' is imperative; and the journey of the Vaidya 'Bhadrak' is a very important aspect of the age of the 'Bhadrak'.

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Dr Raibatak Sen Gupta holds a Ph.D. in Mathematics from Jadavpur University. He is an independent researcher in the history of the Bengali Vaidya caste.

Nirad Chandra Chaudhuri: Towards a Biography of a British

Bhadralok

Tamal Guha

If the twentieth century of the Gregorian calendar can be earmarked as the Age of *Bhadralok* as far as Bengal is concerned, one of the prominent *bhadraloks* who strode across that century was the bilingual writer Nirad Chandra Chaudhuri (23 November 1897 – 01 August 1999). This article offers a verbal sketch of the centenarian's life, highlighting those aspects which appear to have shaped his intellect.

Nirad C. Chaudhuri was born in Kishorganj, a small town of eastern Bengal now in Bangladesh. The second son in a family of eight children, he made his father anxious about his worldly prospects. The senior Chaudhuri used to say, “I have no anxiety for my other sons, but Nirad is utterly unfit to go through the world.” (*Thy Hand, Great Anarch! India: 1921 - 1952* xxi) Most of Nirad’s siblings became well placed in society — his elder brother was a High Court advocate, the brother immediately after Nirad was a paediatric doctor, the next brother was a civil engineer and the sisters were wealthy homemakers. In stark contrast to their socially successful lives, Nirad became an accounts clerk, a journal editor, a private secretary and a news writer at different points in time! He was frequently without work or working in part-time jobs.

Nirad Chaudhuri and his siblings had received the best education which their parents could afford.

Initially, it was the father who taught them English grammar. “The two years,” writes Nirad, “were the decisive years in my understanding of the fundamental principles of the English language.” (*The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* 140) After their linguistic roots had been planted at home, the Chaudhuri siblings were sent to schools for further studies. They were also placed under tutors at home. However, boy Nirad grew dissatisfied with the low standard of his English textbooks and read up those of his elder brother. His learning of this language is of particular interest to us because he finally became one of the best non-fiction writers in Indian English.

After completing middle-school in his home town, Nirad Chaudhuri was sent to Calcutta (now Kolkata) for high school. The World War I (1914 – 1918) was raging at the time and he followed the news of the war out of personal curiosity. He was surprised to find, however, that the gravity of the situation was not being conveyed by its official communication. Chaudhuri happened to discover that the communiqués through the media tried to downplay the reverses suffered by the Britain-led Allied Forces. This surprise finding taught him the necessity of forming his own opinions, independent of others. He writes, “So I would not accept an opinion simply because it was a product of the times.” (*Thy Hand* xxvii) It was perhaps the genesis of his self-opinionated persona.

After finishing his schooling, Nirad Chaudhuri studied Arts with History Honours in Calcutta's Scottish Church College. Out of personal interest, he also read literature in Sanskrit, Hindi, Bengali, English, Greek, Latin, French and German! The result of his wide reading was that, in the examination for Bachelor of Arts, he stood first in the First Class. Despite such an excellent result, it turned out to be his last examination ever. As his reading habits kept growing, he could not confine himself to the limited syllabus of an examination any more. Consequently, he dropped out of the course for Master of Arts in History in which he had taken admission. About his lack of a post-

graduate degree, Chaudhuri wrote, “It put academic employment out of my reach, because in India no one could become a university teacher without the MA degree.” (*Thy Hand* 4)

After dropping out of the MA course, Nirad Chaudhuri managed to get a clerical job. It was in the government’s Military Accounts Department and it revived his earlier interest in matters military. He started working well and was recommended for a promotional examination. In the study leave of two months, however, he did not prepare for the test but read up Matthew Arnold’s poetry instead. The Scholar Gypsy inspired him to “leave the world, with powers / Fresh, undiverted to the world without, / Firm to their mark, not spent on other things; / Free from the sick fatigue, the languid doubt, / Which much to have tried, in much been baffled, brings”. The poem’s spirit dissuaded Chaudhuri from pursuing careerist goals rather than scholarly ideals. He decided not to take the promotional examination because it would tempt him towards careerism and away from scholasticism.

After declining promotion avenues in the job, Nirad Chaudhuri started to dislike government service itself. Ironically, he disliked anti-government agitations too. While he did not like government service because of its monotony, his dislike for anti-government agitations was because of their coercion. During a strike protesting the visit of the then Prince of Wales, who was later crowned as King Edward VIII, Chaudhuri saw that some of the protestors held whips in hand. They forced other Indians to join the strike. Chaudhuri resented such bullying so much that he jumped their barricades and narrowly escaped being roughed up. He writes, “All my life I have resented and defied any attempt at coercing me.” (*Thy Hand* 19) The more he got agitated by such incidents, the more he wanted an escape to a scholastic idyll. He penned an article in literary criticism and published it in *The Modern Review*, an English magazine with all-India circulation. Soon thereafter, Chaudhuri chucked up his clerical job but continued writing articles.

As a budding scholar, Nirad Chaudhuri was painstakingly meticulous. An example of his painstaking nature was the trip he made from Benares to Sarnath in 1926. He walked the distance of eight miles in the hot sun instead of taking a more comfortable mode of transport in order to vicariously experience a historical journey. He explained, “I recalled that pilgrims had come from far-off China on foot to visit the place of origin of their religion, and I thought it would be sacrilegious softness if I went to Sarnath in a horse-drawn carriage.” (*Thy Hand* 185) Chaudhuri’s meticulous scholarship was seen in the originality of his observations too. One of his observations was on the comparative artistry of the sculptures at Sarnath and those at Puri. He noticed that the beauty of the former was puritanical while that of the latter was sexual. Another original observation of his was regarding the anatomy of the sculpted figurines. He found that the figurines, whether at Sarnath or at Puri, were subtle representations of the local populace.

For all the places Nirad Chaudhuri could not visit, he had to rely on books. They became his “mental nourishment” and buying expensive books became a habit. (*Thy Hand* 193) He was forced to buy them on credit though, because he was jobless. Consequently, he had to escape the creditors, for which he used to lock himself inside his house. Such humiliation ended only when his booksellers and landlord were paid their dues by his father. Nonetheless, Nirad justified taking credit or borrowing money on the ground that he was too pre-occupied to earn a living. In his pursuit of knowledge, he was like the holy mendicants who get so involved in meditation that they do not mind begging for food.

To take a break from this difficult situation, Nirad Chaudhuri went to his hometown in eastern Bengal for a short trip. It turned out to be his last visit there. After coming back to Calcutta in early

1928, he did not return to East Bengal ever again. It was the first step of his westward march in life, where there was no looking east. In Chaudhuri's words, "My life has always moved West, and once it has done so its direction has never been reversed." (*Thy Hand* 683)

Back in Calcutta, Nirad Chaudhuri started editing a monthly journal on literary polemics. This job was closer to his heart than his first one, clerkship, was. However, the city police found some article in his journal to be obscene and summoned him to their headquarters. Though he was let off as a *bhadralok*, it is ironical that a fledgling anti-nationalist like him should have been harassed by the Calcutta Police which was otherwise notorious for harassing nationalists. Subsequently, Chaudhuri quit the journal because of a policy disagreement with one of its founders. He proved his editorial worth, nonetheless, as an editor by helping new writer Bibhuti Bhushan Bandopadhyaya publish the famous novel *Pather Panchali* [The Song of the Road].

After resigning his editor's job in late 1928, Nirad Chaudhuri got another. He became an assistant editor of *The Modern Review*, the magazine which had published his maiden article. At that time, he came under the pan-Indian influence of Gandhi and broke the infamous Salt Act at a marsh of eastern Calcutta. He also supplemented one issue of his magazine with a picture pull-out of sixteen pages on the inspirational Dandi March. In Chaudhuri's words, "For the first and last time I became a Gandhian." (*Thy Hand* 251) This issue, dated May 1930, was so anti-colonial that it was proscribed by the British government. Around the same time, two of his younger brothers served six months of simple imprisonment for shouting Vande Mataram [Hail Mother] at street corners.

With a modest job in hand, Nirad Chaudhuri decided to get married. Having failed to choose his spouse himself, he wedded a girl – Amiya Dhar - chosen for him by his father. His eccentricity,

though, could have put their conjugal compatibility at stake. On their first night after marriage, he asked his wife, “Have you listened to any European music?” (*Thy Hand* 351) The college-educated bride replied in the negative but could spell music composer Beethoven’s name correctly. It reassured the Anglophile groom that his partner was not totally ignorant about Western culture!

Nirad Chaudhuri’s wedded life took off precariously. Chaudhuri left *The Modern Review* for another publication as its editor. That publication wound up within a few months due to its owner’s indifference and, consequently, Chaudhuri lost the job. The resulting crisis was made even more acute by the fact that he already had two children – Dhruva and Kirti – by then. Regarding his pecuniary status, Chaudhuri writes figuratively, “It was like being on a raft after being shipwrecked, and drifting on the off-chance of being picked up by a ship.” (*Thy Hand* 364)

Nirad Chaudhuri’s saviour ship appeared in the form of Calcutta Municipal Corporation. He got a temporary job there. However, it was not only a breather but also an eye opener for him. He was shocked to see the corruption and nepotism in the civic body. It was at this stage that he formed his personal theories about India’s past, present and future which he propagated for the rest of his life.

Nirad Chaudhuri lost the temporary job at Calcutta Corporation in 1936. Then, he had to take up three part-time assignments simultaneously for his financial survival. He became a part-time literary assistant to the Sheriff of Calcutta, a part-time private secretary to the President of the Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee and a free-lance commentator at All India Radio. The last two jobs were particularly significant for him. As a radio commentator, he wrote on international affairs, thereby widening his intellectual horizons. As a private secretary to the Congress leader, Chaudhuri was privy to the goings on within the Indian National Congress. He had the rare opportunity of

seeing from close quarters the leaders of India's freedom struggle, as if he "saw something of the greenroom behind the lighted stage, and the actors without the makeup as well as with its application." (*Thy Hand* 434) Familiarity with them bred contempt in him. The years were deeply disappointing, his only ray of hope being the birth of his third and youngest child - Prithvi.

Nirad Chaudhuri's temper was as short as his height. The short temper showed itself in bouts of physical aggression. Once he gave his doctor brother a blow for insulting him about his joblessness. He also kicked a young man down a staircase for accusing him of taking bribes as private secretary. In yet another incident, he beat a young writer in the face with a slipper for calling him a "servant" in the house of the Congress leader. (*Thy Hand* 574) Unlike a *bhadralok*, he declared his intention of fighting fellow Bengalis in case they tried to lynch him for his anti-Bengali utterances!

Nirad Chaudhuri subsequently left Bengal for Delhi, never to return to his home state again. This was the second step in his life's westward journey. In Delhi, he joined All India Radio's News Division as a script-writer and his brief was to write English commentaries on international issues like the raging World War II (1939 – 1945). After moving to Delhi, he did two things for the first time in his life — he wore European clothes and he studied Islamic architecture. Having seen the city's Islamic monuments, Chaudhuri understood "what relationship architecture bears to imperialism, which I had known only in theory from my reading of Egyptian, Assyrian, Persian, Greek, and Roman history." (*Thy Hand* 736)

As British imperialism withdrew from India and the newly-created Pakistan, ferocious riots broke out in the sub-continent. Nirad Chaudhuri was so unsettled by those massacres of 1947 that he could not appreciate India's independence. Weeks after Independence Day, he spotted Hindu men

breaking shops at Connaught Place and looting articles. The next day he saw an old Sikh, whose stomach had been ripped open by a Muslim tonga driver. A couple of days later, he helped a Muslim man whose whole back had been “cut up and covered with blood which was congealing like jelly”. (*Thy Hand* 847) Another day, he saw murdered corpses on a hospital footpath and at a railway station. A friend told him how a Muslim boy in Calcutta was forcibly drowned in a pond by Hindu men. An unknown man was found tied to an electric pole, with a hole made in his skull so that he would bleed to death. In still another incident, Chaudhuri’s brother tried in vain to prevent the murder of a poor old Muslim fruit-seller in his locality. Chaudhuri could never forget these horrors and they made him feel ashamed to be an Indian.

Partition and independence made 1947 a landmark year in the history of the Indian sub-continent. The year was a turning point in the life of Nirad Chaudhuri as well. On a midsummer night, he got the idea of writing an autobiography in order to “write the history you have passed through and seen enacted before your eyes”. (*Thy Hand* 868) It was a bizarre idea because autobiographies are generally written by famous people whereas he was yet to be so. Nevertheless, he started writing it the next morning. When he mailed the half-finished typescript to British publisher Hamish Hamilton for an advance opinion, the response from the latter was encouraging.

After it was completed, however, the manuscript was rejected by Hamilton. Other well known publishers like Faber and Faber refused it too. Macmillan, another British publisher, finally published *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* in 1951 on the recommendation of literary critic John C. Squire. After that, ironically, the autobiographer did not remain unknown any more. The book was acclaimed and declaimed with equal vigour. For instance, writer Anita Desai appreciated it because of “its almost unique achievement in charting the development of a complex

mind made up of its native Bengali and alien European languages”. (jacket of Viking Penguin edition of *The Autobiography*) On the other hand, many readers denounced the book because of its pro-colonial remarks. In any case, the book is strange in many ways. For one, it covers only the first twenty-three years of the autobiographer’s life although he was already fifty-three years old. A second oddity of the autobiography is that it is not wholly autobiographical, but partly historical. In this part-autobiographical, part-historical book, he considered the British Empire in India as more a regenerative era than an exploitative one. He felt that Britain had sped up rather than slowed down India’s social and material progress. Hence, he took it upon himself to express the ‘gratitude’ on behalf of all Indians. As an expression of that peculiar gratitude, Chaudhuri dedicated his book to the memory of British imperialism. The only grudge he nursed against imperialism was that it did not give us British citizenship. That highly controversial dedication, which Khushwant Singh later called a “bait” for wogs, reads:-

To the memory of the

British Empire in India

Which conferred subjecthood on us

But withheld citizenship;

To which yet

Every one of us threw out the challenge:

‘*Civis Britannicus Sum*’ [Citizen of Britannia I am]

Because

All that was good and living

Within us

Was made, shaped, and quickened

By the same British rule. (The Autobiography v)

Not only literary criticism, Nirad Chaudhuri also faced professional reprobation due to his book. Soon after the book was published, All India Radio (AIR) reprimanded him on a procedural matter. Then, the organisation compelled him to retire from service at the age of fifty-five without gratuity and other termination benefits. Chaudhuri was blacklisted as an external broadcaster too, ignoring his experience of fifteen years in the field. The premature retirement hit Nirad Chaudhuri where it hurts the most — finances. No offer was forthcoming, either from Indians or even from the British. In this situation, the French came to Chaudhuri's rescue. The French Ambassador in India offered him the editorship of the embassy's English bulletin. "What I could see was that he respected my literary ability," wrote Chaudhuri, "and also deeply appreciated the love of France and French culture that I displayed in my writings." (*Thy Hand* 937)

It took another two years for the British establishment to acknowledge Nirad Chaudhuri. In 1955, the British Broadcasting Corporation offered him a sponsored trip to England in exchange for a series of talks on that country. "This, I was told, was an experiment," writes Chaudhuri, "and a very risky one it was, for they were backing a completely dark horse." (*A Passage* vii) Nevertheless, he took up the offer and visited England for the first time ever at the age of fifty-seven. It was his maiden visit to Europe but he could still give road directions to taxi drivers, so detailed had been his knowledge of the famous cities of the continent. Chaudhuri's radio talks and some related articles were later published as his second book, *A Passage to England* (1959). The title of this lone travelogue by Chaudhuri was in imitation of *A Passage to India* (1924), a novel by Edward Morgan Forster. Chaudhuri's book contains his impressions of England during a trip of five weeks. It turned out to be the first book by an Indian author to appear on the bestseller lists of England. One of the travelogue's anecdotes throws fresh light on Indo-British issues. It is about Chaudhuri's reaction to

a British boy's words at the Canterbury Cathedral in Kent. The child called him an African but Chaudhuri did not suspect any racism in that remark. He corrected the boy instead, as if the latter had made only an innocent mistake:

When I came near him he began to rise slowly on his knees, and while still half kneeling raised his arm, pointed a finger at me, and cried out in his sharp treble, 'You're from Africa!' This was the moment for me to scream 'Colour prejudice!' and send a bitter letter to one of our newspapers, for there is nothing a Hindu resents more than being taken for a negro by a white man. But I shouted back, 'No, from India!' The boy dropped on the grass and kept his eyes fixed on it. (*A Passage* 125)

Nirad Chaudhuri's third book, *The Continent of Circe – Being an Essay on the Peoples of India* (1965), was on India. Its main title, "The Continent of Circe", refers to Homer's *Odyssey*. In that epic, Circe was the name of a sorceress with a magic drink which transformed Ulysses' men into swine. Chaudhuri's title implies that the sub-continent of India was possessed by Circe and that the British imperialists had been transformed into porcine creatures. Another noticeable aspect of the book is its sub-title. It refers to the people of India as "Peoples of India". This highlights their plurality instead of singularity, their heterogeneity rather than homogeneity. It seems that Chaudhuri did not find much unity in India's diversity, and hence, the different communities of India are discussed separately in the book. As a strange example of negative secularism, Chaudhuri writes ill of each of them! He thinks of the middle and lower class Hindus as double-faced, upper middle class Hindus as the dominant community, Muslims as a false minority, Christians as a hybrid community, and Parsis and Sikhs as foreign and political communities respectively. Chaudhuri also accuses the ancient Aryans of a superiority complex against their contemporary indigenes. He claims that their mentality was as poor as that of the British against Indians. He equates the Aryans

with the British on the ground that both races had virulent anti-native attitudes. This book of socio-political criticism won the Alfred Duff-Cooper Memorial Prize, a prize given to the year's best work in English or French in the areas of history, political science or biography. Chaudhuri made his second trip to Britain, this time to receive the coveted prize.

Nirad Chaudhuri wrote a fourth book in English, *The Intellectual in India* (1967), before publishing his first ever Bengali work. In *The Intellectual*, Chaudhuri attributes social reformer Rammohun Roy's intellect to western liberalism. He argues that Roy could realize the need for social reform due to his occidental learning. Thereafter, Chaudhuri goes on to detail other influences of western thought. He says that while ancient and mediaeval India had been inspired by Hindu and Muslim scriptures respectively, pre-independence thought was influenced by western literature. He hints that the prose form was largely unknown to Indian languages in the pre-British ages. According to him, prose was a gift from European literature and it spread like water hyacinth in the stagnant pool of Indian expression. As prose swamped the literary scene, Indians outgrew their liking for indigenous forms. Chaudhuri noted:

Prose was created for the first time in all the literary languages, which had so far embodied all their creation in poetry. Genres of European literature — fiction, short-story and novel, essays, literary criticism — were all introduced and acclimatized, and its readers gradually lost all taste for writings of the traditional type. (*The Intellectual* 11)

It is interesting that in Bengali, Chaudhuri wrote his name differently from that in English. While in English he initialized his middle name and signed as “Nirad C. Chaudhuri”, in Bengali he used his full name and signed as “Nirad Chandra Chaudhuri”. This minor difference could, perhaps, have

been the symptom of a major dichotomy — it might have been a sign of Chaudhuri's identity crisis.

Nirad Chaudhuri emigrated permanently to Britain in 1970, initially to research European Indologist Friedrich Max Muller's documents in the University of Oxford. It was the final step of his life's west-bound journey and was made possible by a rich Cambridge sociologist, Professor Edward Albert Shils, who gave him a handsome loan at the time. Regarding the help he received from different people, Chaudhuri wrote, "This outside help came to me unsolicited, given freely to me by some of my countrymen but mostly by individual Englishmen, all of whom perhaps saw something in me which was worth supporting." (*Thy Hand* xi) Thenceforth, the Chaudhuri couple lived at 20 Lathbury Road of Oxfordshire county.

After Nirad Chaudhuri settled in Britain, he taught at the American universities of Texas and Chicago as a visiting professor. For somebody who could not be a professor in India because of inadequate qualification, it must have been a dream come true. He also became the subject of a documentary film, *Adventures of a Brown Man in Search of Civilization* (1972), directed by James Ivory of Merchant-Ivory Productions. The film's title was taken from a chapter in Chaudhuri's *A Passage to England*. Chaudhuri's conceit was that he was in England to show Englishmen "how their fathers dressed, how their fathers ate and drank and how their fathers wrote English." (*The Spectator* September 1988)

Nirad Chaudhuri's first book from Britain was a biography of a famous Indology scholar, Max Mueller. Titled *Scholar Extraordinary – The Life of Professor the Right Honourable Friedrich Max Muller, P.C.* (1974), the book won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1975 as the year's best work in Indian English. The book was on European Indologist Friedrich Max Muller, describing his

contribution to Indology including his translations of Sanskrit classics to German and to English. Although Muller was vastly knowledgeable about India's past and warmly affectionate about her present, Chaudhuri points out that he was not very confident about India's future.

Nirad Chaudhuri's second, and last, biography was *Clive of India – A Political and Psychological Essay* (1975). The main title, "Clive of India", is confusing because Clive was not of India but of England. In fact, he was an Englishman who defeated an Indian nawab in the decisive Battle of Plassey. The book's sub-title, "A Political and Psychological Essay", clears that confusion — it indicates that the book is not strictly historical. One weird feature of the biography is the way it defends Lord Clive against charges of corruption. Clive had been accused of corruption by other Englishmen and taken to court. While the courts acquitted Clive due to lack of evidence, Chaudhuri defends him by a mere technicality. He writes, "The acceptance of gifts was not contrary to the regulations then in force." (*Clive* 260-61)

There would have been one more biography by Nirad Chaudhuri had he accepted an offer by Jacqueline Onassis, the widow of former American President John Fitzgerald Kennedy. Chaudhuri declined to write a biography of her second husband, the Greek shipping magnate Aristotle Onassis. Refusing such a high-society offer was an act of intellectual arrogance by Chaudhuri. He also publicly refuted a remark of British politician Norman Beresford Tebbit. The latter had suggested that love of cricket was the acid test of English patriotism. Chaudhuri, however, wrote back that the love of Kenneth Grahame's novel *The Wind in the Willows* (1908), Stilton cheese and the opera were the three real tests for authentic Englishhood.

Nirad Chaudhuri wrote four more books in English, apart from a number of essays. One of these books was his autobiography's sequel, *Thy Hand, Great Anarch! India: 1921 – 1952* (1987). The

two parts put together make his autobiography the longest in English. In that sense, his two-volume autobiography holds a record of sorts. The main title “Thy Hand, Great Anarch!” is extracted from Pope’s mock-epic *The Dunciad* (1728). That eighteenth century satire ends with the couplet: “Thy hand! great Anarch! lets the curtain fall / And universal darkness buries all.” Obviously, Chaudhuri’s title implies that India fell to anarchy and plunged into darkness during the period 1921 – 1952. Most Indians, on the contrary, believe that the period was the one when India’s nationalist movement grew from maturity to fruition. The reason for Chaudhuri’s unconventional take in this regard is complex. He had been so shocked by the wrongdoings of average Indian politicians that he refused to understand the righteousness of their professed nationalism. The hypocrisy and corruption of Indians, which he saw aplenty, did not allow him to be an enthusiast of pro-Indian nationalism. For instance, he had seen random malpractices at Calcutta’s municipal corporation. It was the only organisation under Indian control in the first half of the twentieth century, and consequently, without British supervision. The absence of British control emboldened the presence of Indian corruption, according to Chaudhuri. As he saw power corrupting Indians, he feared that absolute power would corrupt us absolutely. Thus, he felt that India would be ruled worse by Indians than by the British. Chaudhuri forebode:

I anticipated that transfer of political power to Indians would make the Indian people victims of an insidious exploitation unparalleled even in the long history of their sufferings. I became opposed to the idea, and said to myself in the words of the cliché that India in that event would become Calcutta Corporation writ large.

I saw that happening in Bengal and in all the other provinces of India in 1937 with the introduction of provincial autonomy by the British Act of 1935, and after 1947 I saw that phenomenon in the Central Government. (*Thy Hand* 382-83)

Another achievement of Chaudhuri was his last book, *Three Horsemen of the New Apocalypse* (1997). It was written at the age of ninety-eight. In his words, “I have never read or heard of any author, however great or productive in his heyday, doing that.” (*Three Horsemen* Preface)

An academic achievement of Nirad Chaudhuri was that even without a post-graduate degree, he received two post-doctoral degrees from the universities of Oxford and of Stirling. At the Oxford ceremony for conferring a honorary Doctor of Letters degree, the Public Orator said, “The eminent Bengali whom I now present is thoroughly versed both in English and European poetry and has interpreted Indian society and customs to us with great intellectual ability, illuminating incidentally several aspects of our society.” (translated from Latin) In 1992, Queen Elizabeth II made Chaudhuri an Honorary Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire.

In a fortunate turn of events, Nirad Chaudhuri was forgiven by India’s intelligentsia. The Visva-Bharati university at Santiniketan bestowed on him its highest honour, the Desikottama. President K. R. Narayanan expressed a wish that Chaudhuri’s “sharp intellect and scintillating pen continue to enthrall and instruct the world.” (‘Nirad felicitated’ The Indian Express 22 November 1997) Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral greeted him on his centennial birthday. Chaudhuri, the quintessential *bhadralok*, died in Britain in the penultimate year of the twentieth century.

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- Dr Tamal Guha did his MA from Calcutta University and PhD from Goa University. He is Associate Professor and Head of Department of English, Indian Naval Academy, Ezhimala, Kerala.*

Review

A Memoir with a Difference: An Introspection into Tapan

Roychaudhury's *Romonthon othoba Vimrotipraptor*

Paracharitcharcha

Ayon Halder

Tapan Roychaudhury in his insightful memoir titled as 'Romonthon othoba Vimrotipraptor Paracharitcharcha' minutely dealt with the cultural heritage of Barisal which was the part of undivided Bengal along with his early days of studentship in Calcutta during the hey days of 1940s. Those articles which were serially published in 'Desh Patrika' during 1992 were collected to give the shape of a book that shatters the boundary of several genres altogether. Though the book contains numerous anecdotal references throughout it is certainly not an autobiography as the author himself dismisses anything as such at the outset. Roychaudhury picks up several events that somehow still haunts him while he remembers those almost after half a century later and frames a narrative in which humour reigns supreme all the way. The fact that he does never make an attempt to write an autobiography is quite evident as the word 'paracharitcharcha' in the title unveils his intentions straightway. His effort in this regard was particularly limited to the careful observation of the cultural lineage of a place from the point of view of an author who is primarily a historian. Interestingly enough, he indirectly refers to the long drawn tradition of Bengali life-writing that flourishes during the nineteenth century in the colonial city of Calcutta when eminent figures like Debendranath Tagore, Sivanath Sastri, Vidyasagar and several others engages themselves with

composing 'atmcharita' by drawing inward with definite goals in minds. When Ian Jack in his preface to Nirad C. Chaudhuri's 'Autobiography of an Unknown Indian' remarks, "The autobiographical form had almost no tradition in India and tended to be the preserve of the famous, only two other Indians of the era, Nehru and Gandhi, had tried it with any success" he completely writes off the whole gamut of the literary history during Bengal Renaissance. Tapan Roychaudhuri's *Romonthon* can also be considered to be counterproductive to any kind of such unjustified comments made by a European. However, Roychaudhuri distances himself from falling back on any autobiographical project as he turns towards the lived space of a habitus by focusing on the public sphere in general. In this way the humorous details in this book never turns out to be the romantic ruminations of an author who maintained the stance of a detached observer with critical insights. At times nostalgia comes into play in the memoir but it hardly affects the tone set by the author at the very beginning. This book delineates the social life of Barisal and the then Calcutta via the medium of a polished portrayal of both the rural and the city-life of contemporary Bengal. In this way it comes perilously close to the form of a literary sketch that was the familiar form of literary expression in colonial Calcutta. The readers in their close reading of the text do not really miss those basic tenets of a literary sketch in Roychaudhuri's book. The experiment with language, the presence of an omniscient narrator and the quintessential tone of satire that characterise a sketch are also to a large extent the part of this book as well. As a literary sketch like *Hootum Pyanchar Naksha* by kaliprasanna Sinha or *Keranijiboner Rojnamcha* by Shashichandra Dutta Tapan Roychaudhuri's book also subverts the notions of a fixed discipline and anticipates the birth of literary anthropology. The self-reflexive prose narrative which is replete with factual details is in fact an ethnological study carried out by the author himself with a purposefully satiric intent without any pungent attack as such. The anthropological study has been an important part of the discursive strategy that the author adopts in the text which is largely based on self-mockery. Literary sketch has always been symptomatic of counterfactual contestations which problematize

the texts to a certain extent. The negotiation between factual documentations and inherent counter-arguments accounts for an interesting reading altogether. The era which the author desired to depict was tinged with cross-currents at the ideological level during the fag end of colonial modernity. Both Barisal and Calcutta that happen to be the space inextricably linked up to the discursive strategy of the text kept on encouraging the author to be engaged in this ethnological survey along with a spatial representation. Roychaudhury alludes to his feudal ancestry in the text without taking pride his lineage in any way. On the contrary he maintains a critical stance towards his ancestors by critically evaluating the feudal system of Bengal. As a historian he intends to look into the material forces that operate within the rigidly structured colonial society. In his book the specific objective of the author is to explore how textual space can also be produced within a literary artefact in the Bengali vernacular. The author experiments with the form of Bengali language in this book as the language he adopted was that of the rustic people of Barisal with frequent deployment of Sanskrit words. He harped on the important landmarks in the history of Bengal in this text, namely the great famine, communal riot and the partition of Bengal. The titles of few chapters are catchy enough to draw readers' attention, namely 'Romanchak/Romaharshak Itihas', 'Nijamouja Kirtipasha', 'Janoika Brahmadoitya o tar Sahagami koyekti Bhut' and 'Krantikal'. While the cultural history of Barishal intervenes into the text it ceases to be a memoir and turns out to be a meticulous documentation of social codes and customs of a particular class of people. The linguistic tradition of the inhabitants of Barishal was deftly dealt by the author who also kept on dwelling on the masculinity of the native people in detail. But the satiric undertone is never generally missed in his portrayal of several characters whom Roychaudhury met during his adolescence there. Thus he touched upon almost all the aspects of social existence of people in this book that put forth various pertaining questions regarding race, caste and gender under the garb of the incorrigibly humorous sketch. The most important part of the book is the commentaries made by the author as a historian who frequently appears to interrupt the text at the crucial juncture. When Roychaudhury came down

heavily on the West and its idea of historical construct the discursive strategy of Eurocentric historicism was brought under scanner. The Enlightenment ideals of the West were severely criticised by the author who unveiled the fact that the British made half the world believe that liberalism of the West was quite unmatched in the history of the human civilization. Thus the liberal-humanist project of the Enlightened West was censured to probe into the idea of progress embedded in the assumptions about human history. This culminates in the section where he dealt at length about the colonial cityscape of Calcutta and the ensuing turmoil regarding riot. The depiction of the ever-widening urban space unmistakably opened up multiple readings of the text in terms of the construction of social space of the city. The book ends with the tragic note when the author aptly narrated the story of partition of India along with Bengal during independence and the inevitable influx of Hindu people into India. Tapan Roychaudhury as a prime mover in the first person narrative infuses critical commentaries within the text to carve out the provincial history of Bengal that takes the centre stage in this book. It has got frequent references to the rich heritage of the folk culture of Bengal, that runs parallel to the socio-economic history through out. The book which takes stock of esoteric people and their lived existence in such a subtle way always comes off as an enjoyable read for those readers who are in search of a historical narrative with a difference.

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Ayon Halder is Research Scholar in the Department of English, University of Kalyani.

Review

Birlas and the eclipse of the bhadralok in Kolkata—a review of the *Mystery of Birla House*

Somashish

Introduction

In the late 1940s, *The Jugabani* published the first full-fledged exposé of the shady business practices and tax evasion by the Birla family. The particular enterprise in question was the Kesoram Cotton Mills, being one of the several Birla businesses in West Bengal, which at that time was under the control of Brijmohan Birla. The exposé led to a series of raids by the state police on the office of the newspaper and its presses. The honest Sales Tax officer who was key to the first ever serious investigation into the Birlas, NC Roy was suspended and his residence was also raided. However, this did not deter the exposé.

The author subsequently wrote *Mystery of Birla House* revealing longstanding evasion of Income Tax under the Indian law and sales tax under state law, committed by a vast number of West Bengal based Birla enterprises which were under the control of Brijmohan Birla. *Mystery of Birla House* (MBH) captures in most elaborate detail the entrenched political and economic control of the Birla family in Kolkata and its shady and underhand business practices by means of which its myriad enterprises had evaded taxes to the tune of crores of rupees.

The author, Prof. Debajyoti Burman, was the editor of *Jugabani* and a professor of history and commerce in Bangabasi College, Kolkata. It would be pertinent to note that apart from being an intrepid journalist, he was an Advocate at the Calcutta High Court and a noted historian, having written several well-known works on Indian history and politics. Though not particularly political in his slant, as we can recognise from the opening pages of MBH, Burman was particularly respectful

towards Gandhi and Babu Purusottamdas Tandon.

The book begins by reminding the reader that, “Gandhiji was killed in Birla House in 1948. But more than that is still being killed in houses like Birlas’—the health, wealth and happiness of our people are being butchered there.”

The book was first published in the context of the burning socialism v. capitalism debate within the Congress party in 1950. In fact it was published on the very day of the landmark Nasik Congress. A copy of the book was presented to Babu Purusottamdas Tandon in hope “that he will... throw his weight on the side of the masses to save the country from ruthless exploitation.”

The scam and the cover up—the unrivalled rise of the Birla behemoth

The book is a marvellous piece of investigative journalism from a time when practicing it was extremely taxing and difficult with very limited resources at the disposal of investigative journalists. Even Narasimhan Ram was in a comparatively comfortable position when he worked to expose the Bofors scam in 1980s. Someday, history will have to give the author due credit for the amazing risks and astronomical information gathering efforts he had undertaken to bring out the truth about tax evasion by the Birla family.

The book contains chapters chronicling and explaining a series of tax evasion scams perpetrated by numerous Birla enterprises, namely, Kesoram Cotton Mills and its subsidiaries, Orient Paper Mill, Hindustan Motors Ltd., Jute and Gunny Brokers Ltd., Regent Estates Ltd. among others. The tax evasion which is described in the book pertains to the period from 1941 to 1947.

The Birlas had humble origins. Seth Baldeodas Birla had come to Calcutta from Jaipur in the latter part of the 19th century and commenced as a trader and broker. Eventually gaining the favour of the British he was granted the title Rajah. After his retirement he left to Benaras, leaving behind a pan-India business empire which operated in Bombay, Delhi and Kolkata. Ghansyamdas Birla was based in Delhi as he kept constant touch with Ministers and officers of the Central Government.

Most famous was Ghansyam Das' friendship with Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. Rameswardas Birla headed the Bombay businesses and Brijmohan Birla controlled the Kolkata businesses which at that time formed the bulk of Birla's activities.

In every single part of this vast business empire the Birlas co-opted the political and administrative elite into the unquestioned fold of their ultra-lucrative kleptocracy. The book has described in great length the clout of the Birlas in Kolkata. The most significant illustration of the overwhelming influence of the Birlas in Kolkata can be found in the cover up conducted by the each and every level of the state government regarding all allegations of tax evasion against enterprises of the Birlas.

After the allegations were published in the *Jugabani* pertaining to Kesoram Mills, on October 1950 Finance Minister NR Sarkar was questioned by Bimal Ghose in the Legislative Assembly regarding the suspension of Sales Tax officer NC Roy on 2 May 1950 after he had asked for the manufacturing account of the Kesoram Mills to ascertain its real and true production figures. NC Roy had rightly suspected that the books and accounts hitherto submitted before the Sales Tax authorities were cooked and false. In the debate, only after great insistence did NR Sarkar implicitly admit the harsh reality—that service to the Birlas was “public service”. Not only was he unable to justify the transfer and suspension of NC Roy, Sarkar also failed to give any pretext apart from the bureaucratic reply that it was in the interest of public service.

In March 1951, based on the revelations in the book, there was a heated debate in the Legislative Assembly regarding the exact magnitude of the corruption perpetrated by the Birlas. Sri Deven Sen gave this book its due honour for its vivid account of tax evasion by the Birlas. Sen quoted passage after passage from the book to establish that the Birla owed far greater sales tax and income tax than what was inaccurately assessed by the government authorities. Sen expressed anguish that all levels of the state government were actively involved in suppressing any attempt at a genuine assessment of the tax liability of the Birla businesses. Sen also directly asserted that due to the collusive

conduct of the state government the Birlas escaped tax liability amounting to one crore rupees.

In the course of the debate, Chief Minister BC Roy made an attempt at placating the Assembly by orating a speech which placed the entire blame on NC Roy as far as his suspension was concerned. The Chief Minister asserted that NC Roy had failed to assess as per the law and that Roy was ineffective in his work. NC Roy was “ineffective in his work in the most important circle”. Apart from vilifying his capability, Dr Roy further alleged that NC Roy was suspected of leakage of official secrets.

The CM however, could not justify the fact that after NC Roy’s suspension the assessed tax liability of Kesoram Mills was *reduced* down from Rs 40 lakhs to Rs 2.5 lakhs and tax liability to the tune of Rs 26 lakhs owed by Orient Paper Mill was cancelled. If the tax assessed by NC Roy had been followed then combining the tax liability with interest accruing thereto, both the Birla entities would have had to shell out about 1 crore rupees. But owing to the collusion of the highest levels of the state government, both the Birla entities went scot free with paying just rupees 4 lakhs.

To save his face, the CM made a volte face by the end of March 1951. Under pressure from various members of the Assembly, he promised that a special tribunal would be constituted by the government to find the true story behind the tax assessment of the two Birla businesses, namely Kesoram and Orient Paper. He made an ambivalent statement in which he pointed out that owing to the lack of legal support from the Sales Tax Act the government-appointed tribunal could face legal challenge in the High Court, indicating his doubt as to what the tribunal would ultimately achieve. It was a grand promise. It was never fulfilled. The tribunal was never set up. Once the tax authorities meekly accepted the cooked books produced by the Birlas and assessed a low tax liability, *no further controversy* regarding the business affairs of the Birlas ever took place.

It is interesting to note that once the controversy had peaked, as disclosed by the author, there were several meetings held between the CM, the state Finance Minister and Seth Ghansyam Das Birla. Right after the Nasik Congress in 1950, all of them were seen at *Ranjani* for an hour and a half with

the Finance Secretary standing attendance at the door with a big file. The anxiety of the Birlas to close the assessment on the basis of the books already presented to the authorities seemed palpable. The meeting should not come as a surprise nor should their clout. The Birlas had a penchant for nursing immense leverage over top politicians and bureaucrats in any part of India right upto the Central Government. CC Desai, an ICS, had dared flout even KC Neogy, the Union Commerce Minister, to help the Birlas. Birlas also owned the loyalty of an Income Tax Commissioner in West Bengal named SD Nargolwala who was a tenant of the Birlas in an air-conditioned house. The entire Income Tax related investigation was thus purposely compromised. NK Saxena, an officer of the I-T dept. authorised to examine the papers pertaining to the assessment of the Birlas, caused the mysterious disappearance of those very same papers.

In Orissa, one single threat of a lockout and disappearance of the employment providing Birla factories/mills was reason enough for the Birlas to be permitted to continue their operations without paying a single rupee as sales tax. In West Bengal, Birla's political patrons included Basant Lal Murarka, an MLA who was the principal handling agent of the Birlas for their Kesoram Products. The Assembly speaker ID Jalan was also extremely favourable towards the Birlas during the debates on the tax evasion issue when he constantly asked members to refrain from mentioning the Birlas in their statements. Every single person in high office who helped the Birlas was rewarded. KB Pal Chaudhuri was promoted as Commissioner of Commercial Taxes with bulky monthly increments. BB Das Gupta was made Finance Secretary with similar rewards. Though a series of malpractices were exposed by the author against them, Finance Minister NR Sarkar took no action. The Finance Minister NR Sarkar was in fact a director in several Birla concerns from time to time before being appointed a minister. As he left those directorships he appointed his brother PR Sarkar in his place. SK Bose, the Assistant Commissioner of Commercial Taxes who held the charge of the Birlas' files at the peak of the controversy had also played a major role in the colossal cover-up of the tax evasion by Birlas. Bose's nephew was during that time acting as a junior lawyer to the

audacious pleader, Amulya Sen, who dealt with all sales tax cases of the Birlas. SK Bose was rewarded. He was subsequently found in multiple places being entertained by the Birlas.

The Birla group of businesses at the time of writing the book commanded a total capital of Rs 79 crores spread across a multitude of businesses from banking, insurance, paper, cotton, jute, textiles, motor cars, electricals, shipping and coal. But that is only part of the iceberg. The Birlas have giant business families tied to them in matrimonial and friendly ties. The Loyolkas, Khaitans, the Ispahanis, the Kejriwals, the Somanis have diverse business interests in real estate, cotton, jute and stockbrokerages. Combine all of that and the reader finds a multicore behemoth, the Birla behemoth which controls bulk of business capital in Kolkata and is unaccountable to the law, unaccountable to the state's people and in some cases inimical to the interest of the state of West Bengal.

It is well known that BC Roy did not demand inclusion of Jamshedpur and other areas of the western Rarha region of historical Bengal owing to the pressure from the Tata family. The author reveals that the Birla backed Ispahanis were also the driving force behind the bloodstained Jute pact for which the then Commerce Minister had to be shown the door for having opposed the same. The access to East Pakistan's jute greatly profited the Ispahanis, a family which had risen to prominence by selling overpriced rice from Central India to the Bengalis during the great Bengal famine of the 1940s. Not surprisingly the Income-tax investigation against the Ispahanis for their potentially huge outstanding taxes on their profits was stopped under the order of the Central Government.

The truth is that the Birlas knew the hacks of business. In British era, the Birlas maintained a safe relationship with the Congress while adroitly respecting British power whenever it suited them. On the eve of the call for Quit India movement the Birlas had laid their cards precisely. Ghansyam Das Birla had become a member of the Harijan Sevak Sangh to cement good ties with Gandhi. As is well known Gandhi was regular guest of the Birlas in major metros of India. All the Quit India movement resolution related arrests of Congressis including Gandhi were made at the Birla House.

While Bombay had gone on strike, the Birlas continued business as usual. Their Hind Cycle factory continued operations indifferently. The WWII enriched the Birlas as they profited from supplying on all war contracts in favour of the British Army. Yet, on the eve of independence, the same Birlas skilfully aligned themselves with the Congress. In every territory ruled by the Congress, the Birlas established pan-India businesses without any accountability and, needless to add, without paying their due taxes.

An amazing feature of the Birla businesses was that most of them would purposely display low profits or huge losses even as the Birla family was enriching by the day. Speculative transactions, fictitious transaction, hidden transactions, cooking of books of accounts, dodging sales taxes siphoning of business profits by means of a vast web of companies, burning all old books and accounts, concealing manufacturing accounts, presenting ostentatious losses/low profits to avoid income tax— there was no wrongdoing beneath the Birlas as there pan-India businesses expanded and monopolised vast portions of the private economy. One must credit the author who had investigated letters, orders of every level of the hierarchy of taxing authorities and the books and accounts of at least ten major businesses of the Birlas and has established the aforesaid fact beyond any doubt.

The Birlas had rose manifold in terms of the extent of their businesses. But no commensurate returns either to the shareholders or commensurate tax recovery to the government ever came about. The Birlas not only profited but also created a system in which no person can ever expect to engage in lawful and productive entrepreneurship. If the License Raj was the death sentence for free enterprise, the Birlas were its executioners in Kolkata.

The Birla behemoth was a self-enforcing mechanism which depleted every stakeholder in the economy for the purpose of extravagantly enriching one elite family. Many families from Bengal had profited from various businesses in the late 1800s. But most of them came and disappeared like a bolt of thunder, in the relatively vast timeframe of modern Bengal. The Birla behemoth however

remains intact. From their rise in Kolkata in the 1940s on the back of corrupt business practices, the Birla behemoth is now the foremost pillar of the great Marwadi capitalist establishment which rules business in Kolkata.

Conclusion-who will open the pandora's box?

The author was able to do a commendable investigation into the Birlas for the timeframe in which he had been active as a journalist. It is understandable that the scope of the investigation could cover only the 1940s and early 50s. However given such disturbing revelations, one wonders what other secrets remain buried about the dominance of the Birlas in particular and the Marwadi capitalists in general in West Bengal. The state and central governments had colluded to suppress any further attempt to unravel the truth. As one would understand, after the controversy reached its peak in the backdrop of the first publication of this book, the political elite silently let the difficult questions on Birla businesses die a lonely death. It would have been most welcome if this book had been continued to be in publication for posterity. Probably later editions could have featured more revealing investigations into the affairs of the Birlas, possibly covering corruption beyond the Chief Ministerial tenure of BC Roy. However, as we now know, from a recent [article](#) by Paranjoy Guha Thakurta, the book soon disappeared from the market. It was reported to have been sold to the Birlas through a deal possibly in the very late 1950s which eventually included its copyright. Very few copies survived, including one preserved in Delhi's Nehru Memorial Library in the 'rare books' section.

Prof. Debajyoti Burman. *Mystery of Birla House*. Jugabani Sahitya Chakra, 1950.

Somashish is pursuing Final Year B.A. LL.B. (Hons.) from School of Law, Christ University, Bangalore.

Review

“Put a Tongue in Every Wound of Caesar”: A Review of Ranajit Roy’s *Dhwongsher Pothe Poshchimbongo*

Tamal Dasgupta

So detailed an inquest of a corpse which once was a living and thriving Bengal was never attempted before and we don’t know if it will ever be attempted again. Any discussion of *Dhwongsher Pothe Poshchimbongo* must begin with a note of wonder: the book is a compilation of analytical data on the gradual destruction of Bengal, but any imaginative reader can almost visualize the melancholy sight of a great architecture vandalized, a huge giant killed, a Caesar being killed as a result of continuous stabbing by members of Senate.

The book is a translation of Roy’s celebrated masterpiece, one of the non-fictional classics of twentieth century Bengal, titled *Agony of West Bengal: A Study in Union State Relations*.

Roy is primarily concerned about the irreparable damages that post-independence Bengal suffered due to the policies of the central government, but he begins his study with a brief account of the exploitation of Bengal during the early years of east India company and then the rest of the study constitutes a continuum of that process of hostile aggression. This approach has some substantial merit, and it leaves us with only one complaint: if only Roy could have given us a comparative account of the medieval Mughal policies of exploitation of Bengal (Bankim’s famous statement about *aashole tumar joma* comes to mind), the study might have been bestowed with a rare

perfection. Nevertheless, what we have in our hand makes us forever grateful to Roy for the study that he undertook.

The book begins with the bleeding of Bengal and Kolkata under the John Company, and Roy quotes from some scholarly studies already undertaken in this field. One interesting aspect of that exploitation was that the wealth of Bengal was not just meant to be looted and taken to mainland Britain, but to other parts of the British Indian empire. The first three chapters chronicle the British colonial exploitation, the third one is significantly titled “Banglar Shompod Shudhu Britainer Jonno Noy, Bombai O Madrajer JonnoO” (the wealth of Bengal is not just for Britain, but for Bombay and Madras too). As the chapter title obviously suggests, it gives us details about the syphoning of Bengal’s wealth for benefitting the colonial administrations in Madras and Bombay.

From the fourth chapter Roy comes straight to his point of focus: the post-independence destruction of Bengal. In 1947, West Bengal was the second smallest state (Kerala being smallest), and yet was fifth in India in terms of population. In spite of the partition of 1947 taking a terrible toll, per capita income was highest in West Bengal, in terms of literacy it was only second to Kerala, electric production and utilization capacity of Bengal was the best in India. Kolkata port was the busiest in India and had even more commercial traffic than Bombay. In 1950 in terms of gross production, in India West Bengal was only second to the largest state, UP (which was more than three times the size of West Bengal).

India had a planned economy, and in every five years’ plan, the same pattern of neglect and deliberate deprivation of Bengal got repeated, as Roy shows with comparative data. While states like Bombay (later Maharashtra and Gujarat) continued to receive benefits, West Bengal shockingly continued to receive the lowest per capita grant in every five years’ plan.

West Bengal was deprived of the Jute import revenue immediately after partition. Then West

Bengal's share in the divisible pool of income tax was reduced from twenty percent to twelve percent (while Madras province's share increased from fifteen percent to eighteen percent, and Bombay province's share increased from twenty to twenty one).

Roy calls them the **dual injuries** which were inflicted on Bengal immediately after independence. Roy establishes painstakingly that the dismemberment of undivided Bengal did not affect the income tax revenue of West Bengal in any considerable manner (a negligible 1/80 portion was decreased, as East Bengal was not industrialized), and therefore the reduction of its share from the pool was a vindictive step.

Assault after assault, injury after injury continued, almost in the manner Caesar was stabbed repeatedly in the Senate. The notoriety of freight equalization policy, the step-motherly hostility to the Bengali refugees, license policy that actively discouraged the establishment of new industries in West Bengal, the systematic robbery of Bengal's cotton and jute industries: this book shows us data tables and we end up having the effect of watching a tragic scene, as if Abhimanyu was surrounded by enemies in the battlefield and being killed mercilessly. Roy tells us how the Bengali business class were destroyed by the British, he tells us how Bengalis were discriminated against in the central Govt apparatus, and he tells us how the state was almost treated like a colony of the centre, with minimum entitlements and maximum prohibitions.

Roy's study deals with statistics, mostly, but some of the later chapters are journalistic commentaries on the contemporary political scenario of Bengal which was volatile. In them Roy shares some rare insights and reflections on the turbulent Naxalite decades – late sixties and early seventies.

Roy's accounts of the tragic downfall of West Bengal will make our hearts heavy and eyes moist for ages to come, whenever we shall look back at this night of long knives in Bengal's long twentieth century.

Roy, Ranajit. *Dhwongsher Pothe Poshchimbongo: Kendro Rajyo Orthonoitik Shomporko Bishoye Protibedon*. Kolkata: New Age Publishers, 2010 (First Published 1977). Pp 238, Rs 100 (hardcover)

Dr Tamal Dasgupta is founder editor of Journal of Bengali Studies (ISSN 2277-9426) and Shoptodina (ISSN 2395-6054). He is founder of Shoptodina Foundation. He did his PhD on Terry Eagleton from the Department of English, University of Calcutta. He is working as Assistant Professor of English at a Delhi University College since 2008.

Creative Workshop: Poem

The Pigeons

Amit Shankar Saha

I

The babu hears the flapping
wings of a pigeon.

His penmanship traces
the lines of a foreign tongue.

In the nest of his knick knacks
he calls back the words he forms.

At the meeting of alphabets
he finds a fiery idiom.

He loses some to the gallows,
rescues a few for renaissance.

The babu metamorphoses
into the bhadralok genre.

His pockets fill with isms,
he traps pigeons in prisms.

The bhadralok debates
and contemplates his struggle.

He talks with pillars and posts
and pricks his own bubble.

His conscience becomes a prison,
his mind, his own partition.

From the pyramid of his faith
comes out refugeeed pigeons.

Will the bhadralok now
stand up and take a bow?

II

The bhadralok traps an island
in the midst of the sea.

He sends the fishes flying
into an arid country.

His mind splits, splits his boat,
a generation grows to slit his throat.

He creates a colloquy that
in voices on the porches meet.

He births an epistemic dream
and makes it play at every street.

He homes in lost pigeons
from the cracks of a bloodied sky.

He makes the thunder go to sleep
and bids the lightning good bye.

One autumn afternoon
there is a frantic search.

The house of pigeons no longer
has pigeons on the perch.

No nests built in beards,

no eggs laid in harmonium.

No valedictory sounds heard

at the end of a long colloquium.

The babus, the bhadrals become

taxidermed in which museum?

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Dr Amit Shankar Saha is an Assistant Professor of English in Seacom Skills University. He is one of the founders of Rhythm Divine Poets. His first book of poems titled Balconies of Time has earned widespread appreciation.

Remembering the Sengupta Brothers and Bengal's Twentieth Century: JBS in Conversation with Binayak Sengupta

Binayak Sengupta is an essayist and columnist, formerly associated with Anandabazar Patrika. He has authored several articles regarding the cultural heritage and history of Bengal and ancient India. A student of Sanskrit literature, Mr. Sengupta is the son of the noted scholar Gourangagopal Sengupta and the nephew of the well-known poet and editor Anandagopal Sengupta.



Journal of Bengali Studies (JBS): You were born in a family of scholars. You are the son of the eminent academician Gourangagopal Sengupta and the nephew of the famous poet-editor

Anandagopal Sengupta. For the uninitiated, tell us something about your father.

Binayak Sengupta: My father late Gourangagopal Sengupta (1913-2006) was a researcher and author. He was deemed a specialist on 19th century Bengal. He started writing from his student days. For young readers, he translated several popular English books into Bengali, such as ‘Toilers of the sea’, ‘Children of the new forest’, ‘Last of the Mohicans’. He authored a novel titled ‘Dhusor pother dhula’ when he was considerably young. Later, he concentrated mainly on academic research, his focus being in the arena of culture and literature of ancient India. Through his sheer dedication and perseverance, he was able to trace many unknown materials regarding ancient Indian history. His ‘*Prachin Bharater Poth Porichoy*’ is considered a pioneering work on the ancient roads of India. The foreword of this book was written by the famous historian Radhakumud Mukhopadhyay. In his foreword, he wrote that it was indeed remarkable that Gourangagopal was never tempted venturing into syrupy writing unlike what other busy government officers tend to do in their precious little recess; and his deep love for his nation and his mother-tongue drove him to work untiringly towards bringing into light a forgotten but important chapter in the history of ancient India. Radhakumud also wrote that Indians, Bengalis in particular would remain indebted to Gourangagopal for the all the ages to come. Starting from the 60’s, he went on to author many significant research works till the end of his life. It is worth mentioning that he wrote more than a hundred articles about many forgotten luminaries of Bengal in different encyclopedias like ‘Encyclopedia of Indian Literature’ published by Sahitya Akademi and ‘Bharatkosha’.



Gourangagopal Sengupta

JBS: Anandagopal and Gourangagopal were indeed among the last titans the Bengali academic and literary community produced in this century. Tell us something about Anandagopal, though he also hardly needs an introduction.

Binayak: My uncle Anandagopal (1922-2016) was a well-known poet, reporter and the editor of the noted journal '*Samakalin*'. He participated in the freedom struggle and he was awarded '*Tamrapatra*' (copper plate) for his role in the freedom struggle. He was a close associate of Jayprakash Narayan and also a member of Socialist party. A colourful personality, Anandagopal was exceptional in maintaining different activities with the same dedication. He was a leading figure in several cultural movements, was a founder-member of the Tagore Research Institute, and was the chief organizer of 'Nikhil Bharat Banga Sanskriti Sammelan' and 'Nikhil Bharat Rabindra Sahitya Sammelan'. He was at the forefront of the Bengali little magazine movement. Also, he edited of several magazines and dailies like 'Dainik Krishok Patrika', 'Sachitra Bharat' etc. However, editing the journal 'Samakalin' was undoubtedly his greatest achievement. One has to keep in mind that this journal contained only academic articles (instead of stories, novels, poems etc.), and he

continued to bring out Samakalin single-handedly for 40 years. It should be mentioned here that Soumyendranath Thakur edited some issues in the first one or two years of Samakalin. Almost all the eminent academicians used to contribute articles in Samakalin. A collection of selected essays from Samakalin was published in 4 volumes by Karuna Prakashani in 2005.

As a writer, Anandagopal was a master of satire. He was arrested for taking part in freedom struggle and served terms in Hijli jail. After his release, he came to Calcutta at the age of 22. He became a celebrated poet overnight by writing a satirical poem named '*Ghora koro Bhagaban*' in the magazine 'Sachitra Bharat'. The poem is considered a milestone in the history of Bengali poetry. Two of his poems have been included in the collection '*Bangla Adhunik Saras Kabita*', which was edited by Debiprasad Bandyopadhyay and published by National Book Trust. In his long life, he has received several accolades like Gajendrakumar Mitra memorial Award (2003) and has been felicitated by Sahitya Akademi. His autobiography '*Ami o Ghora koro bhagaban*', published from Subarnarekha in 1999, is a riveting read replete with humour, anecdotes and unknown facts. In the daily Bartaman, a well-known reporter once wrote "among the persons who made their mark in Calcutta after hailing from mofussil, the first two names are those of Sajanikanta Das and *Bigyapon shikari* Anandagopal Sengupta".



Anandagopal Sengupta

JBS: Being the son of Gourangagopal and the nephew of Anandagopal and Gobindagopal, you have had personal acquaintances with many Bengali luminaries. It would be great if you could share some experiences in this regard.

Binayak: Yes, my father had acquaintances with many famous personalities of the previous century, and some of them were indeed his close friends. Acharya Sunitikumar Chatterjee, Rameshchandra Majumdar, Sukumar Sen, Radhakumud Mukhopadhyay, Pratul Gupta, Chittaranjan Bandyopadhyay, Rabindrakumar Dasgupta, Hiranmoy Bandyopadhyay, Sudhiranjan Das, Brotindranath Mukhopadhyay, Kalyankumar Gangopadhyay are some of the luminaries with whom he had a very cordial relation. Acharya Sunitikumar was particularly affectionate towards my father. He would always gift my father his newly published books and would never forget to write '*Srijukta Gourangagopal Sengupta, priyaboreshu*' in the first page.

Yours truly have had the opportunity to visit Dr. Rabindrakumar Dasgupta's home. My uncle had

requested him to write a foreword for the 2nd volume of '*Nirbachito Samakalin*' and I went to collect that from him. He was bed-ridden at that time. When I told him that I was Gourangagopal's son, he told me "Your father is a wonderful personality. It is indeed amazing how a single person can write so many significant books". Rabindrakumar used to greet all visitors, irrespective of their age, by folding his hands and saying 'Namaskar'.

Chittaranjan Bandyopadhyay was also very close to my father. Once I visited his home in Salt Lake ... well he had to change his residence several times. At that time he was already awarded with '*Bankim Puraskar*' for his noted work '*Buddhijibir Biborton*'. He told me "this award should have gone to your father". As a matter of fact, my father's "*Harishchandra Mukhopadhyay o Hindu Patriot*" had just been published from Bangla Akademi. This candid opinion speaks a lot about the noted scholar.

I remember meeting the eminent sculptor Chintamani Kar in our room at the office of Anandabazar Patrika. He had come to collect some photographs of Gandhiji, perhaps for his sculptures. When I introduced myself, he joyfully told me that he knew my father for more than 30 years, and also that he wrote several times in 'Samakalin'. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that the articles included in his book '*Sannidhye*' was first published in 'Samakalin'. I have been fortunate to meet and touch the feet of many other persons of such stature by dint of being the son of Gourangagopal and the nephew of Anandagopal.

JBS: These are lifetime experiences indeed. Working in Anandabazar Patrika also brought you in close contact with many known personalities of the last few decades, notably those associated with publishing, reporting and of course, literature. Could you share some memories?

Binayak: I joined Anandabazar on 1st January, 1980, in the library section. I was appointed as the indexer of the Photo library. Chittaranjan Bandyopadhyay was the Library adviser at that time. In

1978, Anandabazar had organized a big exhibition-cum-bookfair at Kolkata maidan, to celebrate '200 years of Bengali printing and publishing'. A souvenir book was also published. During this event, the managing authorities of Anandabazar felt that the large collection of negative celluloid plates, glass plates, pictures, colour transparencies should be arranged in terms of their content. So a new section named 'Print and Negative section' was opened under the supervision of Chittaranjan Bandyopadhyay. I joined this section. And with that came the opportunity to meet and work with eminent authors, including those of whom I was an ardent fan. The library used to be in the 2nd floor at that time, and the department of photos was just adjacent. The offices of Desh, Sananda, Anandamela, Bhumilakshmi, Sunday etc. were also in that floor.

The telegraph started its journey on 7th July, 1984. MJ Akbar, who had earlier been the editor of Sunday, became the first editor of The Telegraph. He knew me very well. He was a noted reporter, and as a person he was very cordial and amicable. When Telegraph decided to bring out a supplement in 1985 commemorating 100 years of Congress, I presented him an article written by my father. He included the article in the supplement after a sincere read and also put a heading to the article '*The Man who taught us to fight a bloodless battle: A.O.Hume*'. At that time Anandabazar was indeed like a big family. But yes, in natural course, it has undergone some changes. Print media has been put to the backseat with the growing popularity of electronic media. The taste has also changed. TV serials have dealt a severe blow to reading habit of common Bengalis. Anandabazar tried to keep pace, but we no longer find stories, novels, articles or poems that truly captivate us.

JBS: How was your experience as a librarian? It would be interesting if you could share some memories.

Binayak: Well I worked mainly with non-book materials such as print, negative transparency etc.

But my father had a huge collection of books, a large portion of which got damaged due to termites. Maintaining a large collection of books is a serious problem in middle-class households. I remember that father used to know by heart the location of each book in his library, and their contents as well. Although I have never worked in a reference library, I also have this ability to some extent.

JBS: You have observed from close quarters the legendary Bengali appetite for books cutting across age, gender and professions. Have you observed any change in Bengali reading habits with the passage of time? What are your opinions on the declining number of readers in this age of internet and television?

Binayak: Personally I was more drawn towards articles, perhaps because I had habit of reading *Samakalin* from the beginning to its end whenever a new issue would come. *Desh*, *Kathasahitya* used to come regularly as complimentary copies, and I used to enjoy them thoroughly. Whenever any story, novel or poem enthralled me, I used to look for other works by the same author and read them. Works of Saradindu, Tarashankar, Manik, Subodh Ghosh, two Bibhutibhushans, Sunil Sirshendu Siraj, Mati Nandi, Ramapada Chowdhury kept me glued. Hunger for books was a common trait in almost all educated Bengalis at that time. Now-a-days, it is indeed disheartening to see the young generation losing interest in reading. Classics like ‘Pagla Dashu’, ‘Rajkahini’, ‘Chander pahar’ have been included in the school textbooks, but what I have found is that almost no student has got any genuine interest to read them. It’s a pity that kids now-a-days are missing the amazement of reading Upendrakishor Sukumar Leela Majumdar or Abanindranath in their childhood. Libraries are in a sorry state in many cases, the advent of e-books has added to their woes. Gone are the days when even ‘thonga’s would be read before they are thrown away, something I do even now.

JBS: Being a student of Sanskrit and an avid reader of the classical literature in general, what is your opinion about the contribution of mainstream Bengali academia of the last century regarding Sanskrit language and literature? Please share some personal experiences in this regard. Do you feel that genuine interest in the academia is on the wane in recent times?

Binayak: Well I did my graduation and masters in Sanskrit. I graduated from Ashutosh College in 1972 and completed my M.A. degree from the University of Calcutta in 1974. Then I studied Library Science and was eventually employed as a librarian. As a result, there was a break in my study of Sanskrit, as I could not devote enough time with increasing pressure in the workplace. However, the opportunity to come in contact with eminent scholars of Sanskrit and to attend their classes ensured that I could develop a literary sense. I am quite certain that it is due to my exposure to Sanskrit literature that I could realize that literature in its true form connects people to people, instead of merely linking words with meanings or readers with authors.

In the *Alankara* doctrine of Sanskrit poetics, the reader is described as ‘*sahridaya*’ (hearty). Abhinava Gupta, the famous exponent of *Alankara*, says “*jeshang kavyanushilan-abhyas-vashat bishadibhute manomukure barnaniyasya tanmayibhava योग্যতা তে অত্র সাহরীদয়া*”. He says that the reader is equally important as the writer, as the literature finds its right purpose only when the reader is able to grasp what the writer is trying to convey. The same idea is conveyed in these lines of Rabindranath: “*Ekaki Gayoker nohe to gan, gahite hobe duijone/Gahibe ekjon khulia gola, arekjon gabe mone*”.

Regarding the second part of your question, the tradition of Sanskrit learning is indeed quite old in Bengali. In the older days, there were many ‘*Chatuspathis*’ throughout Bengal, which have sadly disappeared with the passage of time. Bengali poets continued to bring out acclaimed translations of

'Meghdutam', for example consider the translations made by Rajshekhar Basu, Buddhadeb Basu and Hirendranath Dutta. I fondly remember reading Chandranath Basu's 'Shakuntala', as well as Debendranath Basu's 'Shakuntalay Natyakala' which undoubtedly introduced Kalidasa's Shakuntala to many Bengali readers. Ramesh Chandra Dutta's *Rigveda samhita*, Rajendranath Vidyabhushan's 'Kalidasa samagra', Interpretation of Gita by Bengali authors, all show that Bengalis were very much enthusiastic about Sanskrit language and literature even in the 20th century. But now-a-days we get to hear that Sanskrit is 'Ong-Bong-Chong'. Yes, Sanskrit has certainly taken a backseat in recent times. It is true that Sanskrit is still there in the syllabus of Class VII and VIII, but passing or failing seldom matters. There is no Sanskrit in the Madhyamik curriculum. Curiously, there is the option of taking Sanskrit as an elective in the Higher secondary examination. One wonders how one can deal with Sanskrit literature after just obtaining or in some cases, not obtaining pass marks in eighth standard. Probably the present academicians can better explain how only rudimentary grammatical knowledge enables one to study literature and that too after a gap of two years. I feel it is almost impossible to have a sizeable number of genuine Sanskrit scholars in the current scenario. We are made to forget that Sanskrit is a scientific language. Instead of rejecting it, efforts should be made to popularize it for the sake of our nation and our mother-tongues as well. Rabindranath had said that the eternal consciousness of India lives through Sanskrit.

JBS: You have observed the evolution of Bengali cultural ambience over the last six eventful decades. How do you view the change in recent times?

Binayak: I was born in the beginning of 1950's, in Kolkata. I spent my childhood at Ballygunge. I stayed in my maternal uncle's house for a certain period. Kamala jharia resided just next to our maternal uncle's house. She used to do her riyaj every morning. We had no idea that she was such a famous singer. We called her sa-dida. She had no airs, and lived a simple life, although her house

was quite big. Triangular park was just around the corner. Debabrata Biswas stayed in the same para. I was a friend of his nephew, so I often used to peep into his room when he was not around. Kanak Dash, renowned Rabindrasangeet singer also lived nearby, in Mahanirban road. I remember watching her sit in the verandah. What I remember specially is the simple outlook and lifestyle they maintained. Can the same be said about even the newcomers in present times? Life was simpler then, and thanks to Hemanta, Manna, Satinath, Utpala, Manabendra and others, we could enjoy some real heart-touching song. One cannot help noticing the decadence in this DJ age. One gets to hear good tunes or comes across good poetry in this era also, but very very rarely. This is the age of showing off, and even substandard works are being put forward as something wonderful thanks to the all powerful media. Bengalis have forgotten their roots, and have fallen for things that glitter more compared to their original value. This is being seen everywhere: literature, arts and even in the world of academics. In this scenario, any endeavour related to quintessential Bengali culture, be it in academic arena or elsewhere, deserves special praises.

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*The verses referred in this paper has been narrated to me by my mother Mrs. Ila Roy; and grandmother, Mrs. Renu Bala Deb (the first generation immigrant); and from my maternal aunties Mrs. Swarupa Deb and Mrs. Supriti Deb Pal. My grandmother belongs to the first generation whereas my mother and maternal aunts belong to the second generation. I am especially thankful to my mother who has always been sharing these nostalgic stories and memories and has narrated these tales, rhymes and stories since my childhood.

ⁱAfter the partition of 1971, East Pakistan was renamed Bangladesh.

ⁱⁱIndia was declared independent on 15th August 1947 and the result was the partition between India and Pakistan.

ⁱⁱⁱOn 26th March 1971, East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) declared Independence from West Pakistan (now Pakistan).

^{iv}Refugees who migrated from East Pakistan to India after the partition of 1971. I am basically referring to the Bengali refugees who have settled in Tripura.

^vThe region where the Bengalis resided before partition.

^{vi}My mother Ila Roy, has always shared her memories of Bangladesh and about her childhood to me and as I grew up she always tried to culture the inherited traditions inside me.

^{vii}The Bengali lullabies referred in this paper have been inherited by me through my family who are first generation and second generation immigrants. These are part of memory which has been orally transmitted from one generation to the other. The sources of these lullabies are traditional.

^{viii}The conversion of a text from one script to another. In this paper I have used the conversion of Bengali texts to English.

^{ix}The term was given by Russian literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin. Chronotopes are recurring, structural features of a narrative. Bakhtin showed how every age has its own notion of space and time, and therefore chronotopes are rooted in their local traditions.

^xThe term is used in the English translations of works written by the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin. He refers to a literary mode that subverts and interrogates the established authority over meaning.

^{xi}“Hanuman.com”. Directed by Gaurav Pandey, performed by Prosenjit Chatterjee, Mousumi Bhattacharya, Rudranil Ghosh, Kaushik Sen, Saloni Pandey, Saski. (Bengali), 2013.

^{xii}In Bengali, the father-in-law’s house is called “sasur-bari”.

^{xiii}In Bengali, the father’s house is called “babar-bari”.

^{xiv}In Bengali, the maternal uncle’s house is called “mamar-bari”.

^{xv}Mama is referred to as maternal uncle in Bengali.

^{xvi}Mami is referred to as maternal aunty in Bengali.

^{xvii}A small girl child getting married with an old man.

^{xviii}Holy cities in India. Primarily pilgrimage centers of the Hindus.

^{xix}A Hindu funeral custom where a widow used to burn her body on her husband’s pyre.

^{xx}The Borgi is the local Bengali name, who were a group of Maratha cavalry, who used to loot and torture the people of Bengal.

^{xxi}A zamindar was an aristocrat holding enormous tracts of land and held control over his peasants.

^{xxii}In Sanskrit, ‘smriti’ is “that which is remembered” and ‘sruti’ is “that which is heard”. Based on this tradition the Hindu religious texts were verbally transmitted and remembered across the generations since ages.

^{xxiii}I am referring to the grandmothers’ discussions, tales and gossips. They were the first generation immigrants and during the family gathering they were accompanying my grandmother Mrs. Renu Bala Deb.

^{xxiv}Rhyme 1A

^{xxv}The foster-mother of Krishna, a Hindu God.

^{xxvi}Pride of being the mother of a male child was culturally inherited, perhaps because the male child was expected to be the earning member of the family and to inherit the ancestral property too.

^{xxvii}This part of Bengal, the geographical space in which the immigrants are residing since the 1971 partition.

^{xxviii}That part of Bengal, that is, present Bangladesh.

^{xxix}Golden Bangla.

^{xxx}Though I remember them but unable to refer, as I haven’t recorded the narratives.

^{xxxi}Directed by Nikhil Rao. Advertisement, (Hindi), 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zFEJIs6e2-E>. Accessed on 20 November 2017.

^{xxxii}Bengali Hindu festival celebrated two days after Kali puja, where the sisters pray for the well-being of their brother.

^{xxxiii} A Hindu festival which is celebrated in India, to strengthen the love and the sense of duty between brothers and sisters.

^{xxxiv} In Bengali vernacular, 'boun' means sister.

^{xxxv} In Bengali vernacular, 'bhai' means brother.

^{xxxvixxxvi} A sacred thread which is a symbol of fraternity.

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Gitanjali Roy is an Assistant Professor of English at ICFAI University Tripura. The writer has to her credit a number of scholarly articles. Her area of interest includes North East Literature, Popular Literature and Digital Literature. She is recently working on the Cultural Evolution of Tripura Bengalis. Besides, the author is also fond of composing poems to uphold the real cultural essence of the land of mystic hills and magical rivers. Endowed with a good flair for creative writing, the author is also pursuing her doctoral work on Digital Literature from Tripura University.