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Reconstruction of Subversive History of the Marginalized in Select Contemporary Bangla Novels

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Abstract

There are diverse types of representation of subalternity in contemporary Bangla novels. Select Bangla novels written during the three decades 1980 to 2010 are in focus in this critical assessment of contemporary fictional scene. During the time of the rise of the left to political power in West Bengal – when the ultra-left had also gained ascendancy, one finds a great upheaval and several mass movements. It was also at this time that the imagination and the disillusionment of the youth and gradual degeneration of the shine of the left movement got reflected in Bengali fiction. The Subaltern Studies Group also emerged at this time to redefine history and rewrite the History of South Asia. The present study will attempt to analyze the Bangla novels against this broad political and cultural backdrop.

Keywords: Marginalized, Subaltern, Ultra-left, Mass movements

Background of the Study

It is known that the term ‘subaltern’ – borrowed from its military sense of referring to someone ‘of inferior rank’ – was used by Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) in his *Prison Note Books* (1971) to refer to those marginalized groups in society, subjected to the hegemony of the ruling classes whose narratives need to be formulated. The domination of these groups and their relegation into an inferior

rank could have been because of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, or religion, or such other divisive and decisive criteria. The idea that these masses who a silent majority are playing an important role in the nation's production structure was silenced and marginalized in the dominant discourse of our history. The present study is an attempt to reclaim some of these subversive history based on contemporary Bangla fiction. There have been lamentations expressed by both sociolinguists and literary scholars about such treatments of the tribal groups living in Bengal as well as the *Kirata-jana* (cf. Chatterji 1951) or the Indo-Mongoloid people from the north-east. A vast group has thus remained outside our purview as neglected chapter of Indian literary and cultural history. We suggest that an introspective study in these fields could highlight and bridge many gaps in understanding of Bangla culture and Bangla literature. And it can address many hitherto unanswered questions regarding linguistic and cultural developments in West Bengal.

Search of cultural roots of the marginalized is a recurrent theme in the world of fictional art. This is more evident in the novels of the once colonized countries. In the novels from the Latin American countries and in those from Africa, the quest for cultural roots frequents. The search for one's cultural identity has been one of the fundamental concerns in many of our significant works as well. Just as the African fiction writers try to expose the authentic African personality and the pressing influences on the psyche, authors such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi Wa Thiong'O, Nadine Gordimer, Amos Tutuola, Ben Okri and many others have already established a trend. They could all be seen as developing a fictional poetics based on African reality and African identity in all its complexities and political-racial compulsions. Similarly, search of cultural roots of the marginalized is also a recurrent theme in the alternative Bangla novels. This is in a way to reconstruct the subversive history of the marginalized. In the mainstream elitist literature including Bangla novels no genuine attempt was so far made to record the cultural histories of the marginalized people as the Bajikars, the Santals, the Kakmaras, the Mundas, the Bouris, the Shabars and the like.

1. The Indian Scenario

The impact of the tribal culture on the mainstream Indian art, craft, literature and music is deeply rooted and indelible. The cultural cauldron that Bengal has been – because of its special history of a large-scale influx of people from outside into this cultural space has had a tremendous impact on the making of Bangla language and culture. And this impact has been assimilated into the course of living Bangla culture to such an extent that instances of such impact cannot be separated and easily looked upon. There are numerous words and cultural practices which the Bengali people have assimilated from the tribal cultures around them. Suniti Kumar Chatterji has rightly observed:

An appraisal of the role of the Mongoloid peoples in the development of the composite Hindu or Indian culture in its expansion in North-eastern and Eastern India through Mongoloid contact or participation – should be looked upon as an important line of enquiry in tracing the history of Indian civilization. Yet so far as I know this has not been viewed in its proper perspective by any scholar... and there is reason for this neglect (Chatterjee: 2014:18). What Suniti Kumar observed in regard to the Mongoloid cultural impact is true in case of all other tribal cultures the Bengali people came in contact with.

Most of the novels under our critical perusal are in a way planned attempts to reconstruct the cultural histories of the marginalized. The streamlined stories are not given sole importance here. These novels are important also for documenting the cultural roots and cultural transformation of the marginalized communities. Here we get a documentation of the hitherto unrecorded history of the subaltern tribes. The mainstream Bangla novels brought out by market-oriented publishing houses have been somehow captivated in the self-possessed world of the urban and semi-urban middle classes who do not suffer from hunger and poverty but are possessed by the ghosts of unsatisfied and troubled sexual life. In comparison, the off-beat novels discussed here have not only radically challenged the parochial thematic world of the traditional Bangla novels but also extended the geographical periphery of the Bangla novels. The centrality of urban space has been a recurrent theme in the mainstream Bangla novels, whereas in the novels we discuss, it is the rural space which is fore-grounded as the real India. The India which is usually projected and advertised to attract the foreign tourists is usually imagined as a true picture of our cultural space but this India is unknown and alien to these tribal people. The glitz of the much advertised 'imagined nationality' does not make them proud of at all. The subaltern novels have somehow attempted to explore this unknown India submerged under the covers of discrimination and negligence of elitist historians and literary critics.

In his essay "*On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India*", in the first volume of *Subaltern Studies* Ranajit Guha analyzed the character of mainstream Historiography of Colonial India. The central concern of the project was to produce an authentic account of South Asian history and society. In doing this, subaltern historians rejected the 'neo-nationalist', 'neo-colonialist' and 'Marxist' modes of historiography. They contended that existing interpretations of Indian history had robbed the common people of their agency. The issues further raised were forms of power as well as ways of understanding the nature of resistance in a coercive society. *Subaltern Studies* is in fact a critical history from the beginning. As Ranajit Guha writes:

The historiography of Indian nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism -- colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism. (Guha: 2015:1). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has introduced and elaborated this concept of literary representation of the subaltern in her different writings including her essay "*Mahasweta Devi's Stanadayini*" collected in *Subaltern Studies V* (1987) and her preface to *Imaginary Maps*. Spivak considers literary representation to be more effective than non-literary or theoretical. This non-

literary representation is sometimes called symbolic and sometimes referred to as political representations. For Spivak, aesthetic representation tends to foreground its status as a re-presentation of the real, whereas political representation denies the structure of representation.

Subaltern theory is now being applied as an approach to read literary texts to analyze the representations of the marginalized and to see how power structures operate to perpetuate this process of marginalization. There have been some attempts earlier to make these voices heard. For instance, Shibaji Bandopadhyay in his book, *Bangla Upanyase Ora* (The Others in the Bangla Novels, 1996) has explored the space of subalternity in the novels as *Dhorain Charit Manas*, *Tistaparar Brittanta* and *Khoyabnama*. Here, Shibaji Bandopadhyay has questioned the authenticity of representations of the marginalized in the traditional and mainstream Bangla novels, and says:

In many novels the tillers of the land or the labours, the so called 'common mass' seem to be voiceless, it is because of this appropriation. Tistaparar Brittanta is an exception to this tradition. At least no such 'new' edition of the trade-mark labours or the tillers of the land, manufactured in the industries of the middle class is not to be found in this novel. (Bandopadhyay: 2012:117) (Translation by us)

In *Bangla Upanyase Bratya Samaj* (1999) Subodh Debsen has explored the representations of the subaltern in Bangla novels (1923-47). Here the writer has used 'bratya' in the sense of 'marginalized', 'outcaste' and 'subaltern'. Subaltern theory is now getting familiar as a tool of critical enquiry of the themes and crafts of Bangla fictions.

The subaltern issues had been dealt with in modern Bangla novels much before the Subaltern Studies Group started exploring the issues of the marginalized in 1980s. To quote a few examples, the novels such as *Pank* (1924) and *Upanayan* (1933) by Premendra Mitra depict the life of dire poverty, rootlessness and degeneration. Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay's *Aranyak* (1939) brings out the life the Santal King Dabru Panna and the Princess Bhanmati. Here, the writer had beautifully implied how the Aryan invasion has proved to be a great onslaught on the culture of the indigenous people as the Santals and the Oraons and the like.

We have also seen the representation of the marginalized in a number of novels of Tarashankar Bandopadhyay: *Hasuli Banker Upakatha* (1947), *Kalindi* (1950) and *Nagini Kanyar Kahini* (1951) and *Aranya Banhi* (1966), for instance. There are others in this class as well. *Charkasem* (1949) by Amarendra Ghosh, *Dhorain Charit Manas* (1949, 1951) by Satinath Bhaduri, *Ganga* (1955) by Samaresh Basu, *Titas Ekti Nadir Nam* (1956) by Adwaita Mallabarmar, *Purvaparvati* (1957) by Prafulla Roy, *Satakiya* (1957) by Subodh Ghosh, *Iishmarir Char* (1967) by Abdul Jabbar, *Rahu Chandaler Had* (1985) by Abhijit Sen, *Phulbou* (1988) by Abul Basher, *Halong Mansai Upakatha* (1988) by Amiyabhushan Majumder and *Rasik* (1991) by Subrata Mukhopadhyay could be mentioned as examples. The writers of these novels attempted to portray and

document the culture of the marginalized out of their direct experiences and of their social and political consciousness and commitments.

In this essay, we would like to look at the new crop of novels in Bangla that appeared between 1980 and 2010, such as follows: *Pourush*, Kabita Singha (1984), *Rahu Chandaler Harh* by Abhijit Sen (1985), *Phulbou* by Abul Basher (1988), *Halong Mansai Upakatha* by Amiyabhushan Majumder (1988), *Rasik* by Subrata Mukhopadhyay (1991), *Kush* by Manab Chakraborty (1992), *Ekti Upakathar Janma* by Jaya Mitra (1994), *Mahulbanir Sereng* by Tapan Bandopadhyay (1995), *Janguru*, by Bhagirath Mishra (1995), *Bibir Mithya Talak O Talaker Bibi Ebang Halud Pakhir Kissa* by Afser Ahmed (1995), *Neel Dukher Chhabi* by Anil Gharai (1995), *Shesh Rater Sheyal* by Sadhan Chattopadhyay (2003), *Shabar Charit* by Nalini Bera (2005), *Machhmaster* by Swarup Dutta (2005) and *Madanbheri* by Saikat Rakshit (2008).

For many, the experience of reading the life of the marginalized in the Bangla literature has so far been limited to the writings of Mahasweta Debi. Now the periphery has started widening with the issue of translations of the writers like Anil Gharai, Jatin Bala, Kapil Krishna Thakur, Manohar Mouli Biswas, Nalini Bera, Goutam Ali and the like. Some of the novels here *Rahu Chandaler Harh*, Abhijit Sen, *Mahulbanir Sereng* by Tapan Bandopadhyay, *Shabar Charit* by Nalini Bera, *Janguru* by Bhagirath Mishra, *Neel Dukher Chhabi* by Anil Gharai and *Madanbheri* by Saikat Rakshit help reconstruction of history of the Adivasi people in different parts of West Bengal. *Phulbou* by Abul Basher and *Bibir Mithya Talak O Talaker Bibi Ebang Halud Pakhir Kissa* by Afser Ahmed depict the social condition of Talak-cursed Muslim women. Representations of the transgender or the third sex in *Pourush* by Kabita Singha, that of the Nachnis in *Rasik* by Subrata Mukhopadhyay and that of the sex-workers and tribal Naxalites in *Kush* by Manab Chakraborty contribute to widen the spectrum of representations of the marginalized.

In the following sections, we would take up only a few of these path-breaking texts to draw a picture of the marginalized occupying the centre-space in the contemporary Bangla fiction world. These include Abhijit Sen's *Rahu Chandaler Harh* (1982), Amiyabhushan Majumder's *Halong Mansai Upakatha* (2010), Tapan Bandopadhyay's *Mahulbanir Sereng* (1995), Bhagirath Mishra's *Janguru* (2005), and Nalini Bera's *Shabar Charit* (2005).

3. Rahu Chandaler Harh: Reconstruction of the History of the Jadukar Community

In *Rahu Chandaler Harh* (1982), translated into English by Papri Sri Raman as *Magic Bones*, published in 1992 jointly by Abhinav Publications, New Delhi, and Facet Books International, New York, Abhijit Sen looked for cultural roots of the Bajikars and reconstructed the history of the Bajikar community on the basis of oral components of culture. Rahu perhaps was their ancient ancestor. The magic wand made of Rahu's bone was their mysterious source of power, which created enchantment and sorcery. The Bajikars were one such wandering race. In a few

villages of northern part of Bengal a few gypsies still fight to establish themselves as peasant man. Time gradually obscures memory. The new generation does not perhaps know that they might have originally belonged to a territory of northern or western part of India where they had a separate language and alien rituals, systems and habits. Shariba collects the past of the Bajikars from his Grand Mother's songs, tales and a story of continuous struggle for existence. It's a tale of five generations which began 150 years ago at the time of Pitem, the Great-Great Grand Father of Shariba. It includes, very naturally, many ups and downs of the region which have their reference in those of the entire country for one and a half century. Pitem wished that his race would cease to be a wandering band of gypsies and transform into a race of peasant man. And after five generations Shariba still carries out the legacy. In the novel Abhijit Sen also explored the cultural relations of the Bajikars with other subaltern communities as the Goalas, the Namashudras and the Machhmaras. From time immemorial the Bajikars have been wandering in search of a piece of land for settlement. But the social, political and economic system of the country is such that they are not permitted to do so. In this vast country they have no land to build up a house, no land to cultivate for livelihood. Abhijit Sen's novel *Rahu Chandaler Harh* is a document of this unfortunate wandering tribe. Akhtaruzzaman Elias says:

The mainstream men are isolated. The bourgeois society emerges beating the drums of individual liberty. With the development of this society, dependent on other people's labour this much advertized liberty takes the form of individualism and now it ends in the form of self-centeredness by jumping into the all-devouring hunger of capitalism. Now that individualism can be called exclusive individual-interest. The society which is marked exclusively by individual interests, create the art which gradually gets damped in the self-mourning of a rickety sickly individual. This sickly individual is hollow inwardly. Abhijit Sen does not attempt to write a story of this hollow and coreless individual. (Elias: 2000:139) (Translation mine)

The plot of *Rahu Chandaler Harh* (1982) is not a straight forward narrative. History, myths, folklores and anecdotes collaborate to form a narrative that defies the definitive form of the traditional novel, having a clear-cut beginning, a climatic middle part and a satisfactorily conclusive end. The novel begins in the manner of a folktale. Lubini introduces Shariba to the cultural history of the Bajikars. Tapodhir Bhattacharya observes:

The microcosm of 'Rahu Chandaler Harh' reminds us of the Latin American magic realism that proposes an alternative narrative-structure, challenging modern realism. In thematic pattern, form and application Abhijit Sen, as if, wishes to reject the incompleteness of pseudo-realism. He has looked for such a complete neo-realism that can easily assimilate magic consciousness. As long stored up archetypal memories remain dormant in apparently miraculous cultural components, he uses details of the life of a community as the threads of his narrative. (Bhattacharya: 2011: 210-11) (Translation mine)

Rahu Chandaler Harh is an exceptional Bangla novel which introduces the hitherto unknown cultural and social life of the Bajikars. It certainly extends the periphery of contemporary alternative Bangla fictions.

4. Halong Mansai Upakatha: A Study in Subversive History of the Rava

The Ravas, an indigenous community of the Indian states of Assam, Meghalaya and West Bengal live mostly in Goalpara and Kamrup in Assam, in the Garo Hills in Meghalaya Rava in Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar districts in West Bengal. Moreover, almost, 70 per cent of them live in Jalpaiguri district. The whole area of Eastern and Western Dooars may be termed as the cradle land of the Ravas. The Ravas refer to themselves as Koch and assert a connection to the historical Koch Kingdom. The Ravas belong to the Indo Mongoloid group of people and have similarities with other members of the Koch group such as Garos, Kachari, Mech, Koch, Hajong and others. Most of the Ravas of Dooars refer to themselves as Rava, but some of them often declare themselves as *Kocha*. (Basumatary: 2015: 12)

The Rava people traditionally practice animistic rituals. However, today they more often follow a faith, which is a blend of some Hindu <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hinduism> and a few animistic rituals. There are considerable differences in ritual practices among forest Rava who still live in the forest villages and the Ravas that live in the villages as cultivators. The forest Ravas follow traditional animistic practices tinged with some rituals of mainstream Hinduism. On the other hand, village Ravas have merged with local Hindus as far as their religious practices are concerned. The Rava people's religious world is pervaded with various spirits and natural objects. The main deity of the Ravas is called *Rishi*. *Rishi*, for the forest Ravas as well as village Ravas is a male deity. He is also known as *Mahakal*. Forest Ravas worship him in all important social and religious ceremonies. (Basumatary: 2015: 16)

In a number of novels Amiyabhushan Majumder, a fiction writer, who avoided patronizing any quarter of the society, dealt with the socio-cultural problems of the Rava tribe. These novels include *Halong Mansai Upakatha*, *Sondal*, *Makchak Harin* and *Bindoni*. In all these novels Amiyabhushan Majumder explored the life and culture of the Rava community. These novels do not regard the present socio-economic condition of the Ravas but are deliberate attempts for reconstructing the cultural history of the Ravas. The anthropologist and historian selves of Amiyabhushan have merged into the novelist self of his. A postcolonial cultural reading attempts to explore the unending possibilities of meaning and significance in a text. It brings out the subversive components to interpret the text from a hither-to unknown perspectives. Most of the novels by Amiyabhushan Majumder are polyphonic and an open-ended texts. It is an inter-textual discourse where myths, anecdotes and subversive history have got intertwined in such a way that the text offers a number of possible interpretations.

In Amiyabhushan Mazumdar's novels socio-cultural marginalization and representation constitute an important part of his fictional structure. It is rather a structural condition of capitalist societies, politically organized as nation states, to have an unequal distribution of resources – material and symbolic ones and to be organized hierarchically is not possible without the acceptance and systematic validation of social boundaries. Material and symbolic culture or capital as a rule constitutes what usually social boundaries are made of. Many of Amiyabhushan's characters as Matalu in *Dukhier Kuthi* and Bimala in *Nirbas* in the novels are found aspiring for citizenship. Issues like claiming citizenship, marginal voices, identity and a sense of belonging are recurrent in the fictional narratives of Amiyabhushan Majumder.

In *Halong Mansai Upakatha* which was first published in the autumn issue of *Basumati* and later collected in the 7th volume of his collected novels, *Amiyabhushan Rachanasamagraha (Vol-7)* Amiyabhushan Majumder narrativised the human life in a dense forest. It is often apprehended that human life is not at all safe in a forest full of wild animals. Amiyabhushan thinks contrary to it. In the novel the writer established the forest to be the shelter of the marginalized and the oppressed and their source of sustenance.

Chandani alias Chandrani whom Gajen, the rich muscle man and political goon sexually molested and wanted to force her to marriage fled to a forest. With two young children she continued to live there safely in spite of dearth of provisions. Halong Naga, Ledu Miyan never attempted to take advantage of her helplessness. Rather they came to her help by all means. Halong was found enjoying the beauty of Chandani's bare body when she would do breast-feeding to her child. But Amiyabhushan presented Halong to be in a sense of wonder and not in an excitement of sexual lust. Chandani gradually understood Halong's innocent wonder and considered him a wild child of nature. When a tigress appeared in the wild area of their settlement, Chandani apprehended that civilized people might appear in search of the tigress and might endanger the life of the animal and that of her. So, she alerted Halong repeatedly about the possible arrival of a search party which could pose a threat to her safety. Chandani observed: No, Halong, do not say anything about the tigress to anybody. Let it be one fleeing from a circus party. If it gets trapped again, we too will be found out.

If a human being cannot live in a village, he/she will have to stay in a forest. And the greater the number of tigers in that forest, the better. No man will come there. How men would hide their faces if there were no forests? (Majumder: 2010: 74)

In spite of its darkness and wild animals, the forest has some benign rules that are better than those of the so called civilized world. The modern urban values have discarded the culture in the forest to be unpolished, wild and uncivilized. A contrast between the civilized world and the world of the wild is placed as a centre of conflict in the novel. Chandani, Halong Naga, Ledu Miyan and Faltu alias Fatik Lal did not get frightened of tigers and other animals. But they were afraid of civilized human beings, the state and its cruel administrative machinery.

The secret of the tigress could not be suppressed. It somehow leaked to the civilized world outside the forest. And the hunters invaded the forest and killed the tigress which delivered recently a few cubs. Finding out the tiger to be dead Halong Naga ruefully uttered:

Alas! The tiger is dead. Injuries of a katari-weapon are on its head; its front right leg has got trapped. Alas! The trap is iron-made. ... It could not get it saved. Blood, blood! It is dead. (Majumder: 2010: 74)

The death of the tigress was shocking to Halong as he considered the forest to be his shelter and source of sustenance. Halong developed a deep sympathy, love and a sense of mutual understanding for the animals, birds and other creatures living in the forest. In the novel we found Halong and Chandani perturbed when they discovered the shoal of young fish would die for want of water in the small reservoir in the forest. Chandani asked Halong to let the mother fish free as she was full of eggs. All these established the sustenance philosophy and ecological understanding in the tribal people.

Ecological understanding and insight which has recently been theorized in the areas of literary, environmental and some other academic studies were integral part of the life style of the Ravas and other indigenous tribes. Halong Naga represented that sense of ecological understanding. So, he felt deeply the fate of the hapless cubs of the dead tigress. He picked them up and brought them to Chandani with the natural belief that Chandani, the mother would rear the cubs along with two babies.

In the novel Amiyabhushan Majumder has not got his narrative limited to depicting the miseries of the marginalized or the subaltern. Rather he has cared sincerely to bring out the alternative life-view of the subaltern with a view to teaching the so called civilization a truly civilized face to be found in the wild.

5. Mahulbanir Sereng: Quest for Cultural Identity and Movement for Jharkhand

Mahulbanir Sereng (1995) by Tapan Bandopadhyay is another novel which brings out an intimate picture of the Santal life. The novel has been written with the contemporary Jharkhand Movement in the backdrop. The movement produced enough heat in different parts of the Jangalmahal part of West Bengal. So, the political components in the novel are equally important with the cultural ones in it.

Born in 1947 Tapan Bandopadhyay who worked as a Sub Divisional Officer (SDO) in the Santal populated district of the then undivided Midnapur has adequate knowledge of the Santal life, language and culture. The book *Santali Kabita, a collection of Santal Songs into Bangla* (1976) under his editorship bears the stamp of his scholarship in the Santal culture. His intimate knowledge of the Santal culture has got a distinct reflection in his novel *Mahulbanir Sereng (1995)*. Not only his knowledge of culture but also his knowledge of the Santal language has made the narrative refreshing in a number of ways.

The narrative of *Mahulbanir Sereng* (1995) revolves around the accidental relationship a Santal married woman Saheli and Alaktak Roy, a city-bred young doctor who has recently joined the small Government health centre in the village Mahulbani. The young doctor fell in love with the simple minded tribal people. He served sincerely the poverty stricken and socially neglected people and soon became a dear friend of most of the men and women. His love and sincerity touched the hearts of the Santals who have been so far habituated to see hatred and refusal in the eyes of the educated and elitist 'deku' (non-Santal) people. People who were suspicious of the doctor's goodness were Ramu Ojha, Hardeb Mukhia and the like who wish the society to remain bogged in superstitions so that they can continue to enjoy their social dominance and economic exploitation in the society. It is to be noted that even in the Santal community different power centers operate in different forms. In the novel Tapan Bandopadhyay has delved deep into the socio-economic complexities of the Santal society and have not indulged in any attempt of idealizing the primitive simplicity which the tourists often do.

Saheli has been issueless though she has long been married to Aghor. Aghor, a police constable stays out of hometown and in the mean time Saheli gets closer with the new young doctor of their village. On a night of festival Saheli, drunken with '*handiya*' and '*madkam*', two types of liquors the Santals are very fond of intoxicated the young doctor and they copulated. When Aghore came back, he got the news that Saheli was pregnant. He becomes very happy and thankful to the doctor with this belief that the doctor has medically cured Saheli of infertility. All the village men claim that the baby is the doctor's and not of Aghore. Aghore tried to argue in favour of innocence of his wife and the doctor. But the villagers were convinced. Dako, a woman of some mental strength tried to save the doctor. Once the Chieftain, Hardeb Mukhia had a secret physical relationship with Dako on the of Kajal's marriage when Dako went into a forest in search of flowers. Dako threatened the Mukhia of revealing the sexual secret to the villagers if he would not stop working upon the villagers against the doctor and Saheli. But Dako had to pay a high price for challenging the Mukhia who along with Ramu, the Ojha branded her a witch and excited the superstitious people to kill her.

The writer here explored that witch hunting is not an outcome of superstitions but an act that is conditioned by a number of socio-economic factors and gender discriminations. Dako seemed to be a potential threat to the image and authority of the Mukhia and so she had to face a dire consequence.

Extramarital relationship within the Santal community is permissible. But adultery is considered a grave offence when a Santal woman is found in relationship with a Diku male. So a '*Gira*', a great gathering of Santal people of the adjoining Santal villages where the headmen of the ten villages pass judgment on a sever offence was convened. It was naturally expected to give

death sentence to Saheli and the doctor. But the local Sub Divisional Officer rescued the doctor to safety. Finally, Saheli committed suicide.

Several small sub-plots have been interwoven within the main plot. Sahadeb, an educated young man of the village Mahulbani gets involved with the Jharkhand Movement which demands a separate state for the tribal people. This movement was not merely an idealistic search for cultural roots but a strong political movement for ensuring political power to uphold the cultural identity of the tribal people. Sahadeb symbolizes the spirit of new awakening in the Santal youth. His love for Parija did not get materialized but this emotional loss got him prepared for a greater cause of liberating the Santals from exploitations and discriminations of the upper caste people.

In Bangla there have been many novels which refer to the Santal culture. But in most cases the Santals have been misunderstood and their culture has been depicted to be ribald sexuality and promiscuity. Tapan Sanyal writes:

Here it is worth mentioning that in the part of modern fictions on the Adibasi life; especially the writings on the Santals are exclusively based on the man-woman relation. All these writings are full of physical and sexual details. (Sanyal: 2004:140) (Translation mine)

The character of Parjan, the old man is very significant. He often seems to be a choric figure in the novel. He recounts the Santal folktales and folksongs as well as narrates the stories of cultural rituals and those of gods and goddesses. The writer informs:

The old Parjan is entitled to look after the young boys and girls of the village, so that they learn the Adibasi rituals and listen to about them. But as he is old, the young boys and girls avoid him. They do not have any urge of learning the Santal ways of life. The old man threatens them with blood-shot eyes, you do not do it right. *Marangburu's* eyes see you. If you do not learn the rituals, *Bonga* will get displeased. (Bandopadhyay: 1995: 14) (Translation mine)

Memory is an important component of culture. Parjan's effort is directed to save the Santal culture from effacement due to the onslaught of modernization and continuous encounters with other cultures. Sahadeb and Parjan are two persons of different wavelength of consciousness but somewhere they meet. Sahadeb knows that only political power and a separate state can fulfill the aspirations of the Santals. Parjan believes that cultural amnesia is the final death of a community. No amount of economic development can save the Santals if they are culturally uprooted.

Uses of tribal myths, myths of the marginalized and references to various cultural practices have added new dimension to these novels. Introduction of archetypes, local folklore, anecdotes and oral history contribute to the profound

riches of the novels. These techniques are not forcefully imposed for foregrounding and ornamentation; rather they are integrated into the narrative structure organically. In *Mahulbanir Sereng* numerous Santal myths, folktales and folksongs have been interwoven into the structure of the novel. Though the relation between Alaktak and Saheli is an important part of the story, it is not a story of two or three individual. It is a story of collective representation of the Santal culture. The old 'Parjan' narrates these stories to the young boys and girls to build a resistance to the invasion of the dominant 'Diku', the alien to them. Sanatan, the young Santal man wants to build up political resistance what Parjan tries achieving 'through commemoration of the golden past. The novelist carefully recounted Parjan's narration of the creation myth of the Santals. Every tribal community has its own mythology and that further recreates the specific culture. The Santals believe that in the beginning this primitive world was filled with water everywhere. Marang Buru, the supreme power in the Santal theology pondered about how he could form the land for 'Pilchhu Haram', the first man in the world and 'Pilchhu Burhi', the first woman in the world who were born of two eggs of a bird. He created seven amphibian animals which were – crab, crocodile, eel, prawn, earthworm and tortoise, all equipped with the operating capacity both land and water . For the creation of land, God then asked them one by one to help him figure out how to make land. Almost all of them failed to solve problem. Finally, the earthworm succeeded. For seven day and seven nights the earthworm ate at the bottom of water and excreted on the back of the tortoise. The tortoise anchored himself on the both side firmly and the earth piled up mud on the tortoise-back, and thus the earth got formed. This is why there is a belief among Santals that movement of tortoise causes earthquake. So, the Santals worship the earthworm and the tortoise. They take care of these animals. Here we find a strong sense of ecological awareness in the indigenous Santal culture.

6. Janguru: Uses of Superstitious Beliefs to Marginalize Women in Bouri Community

The fictional world of Bhagirath Mishra (born 1947) is dominated by the issues of the subaltern class. In several novels of his, such as *Taskar* (1992), *Arkathi* (1993) and *Charanbhumi* (1994) he has explored the different shades of light and darkness of the life of the marginalized tribal men and women of the Lodha, the Shabar, the Lohar and the Bauri communities. Bhagirath Mishra's uniqueness lies in the fact that he explores the character of the power centers operating within the marginalized society. Mishra has attempted to find socio-economic explanations to the numerous superstitions existing in the society. His *Janguru* is a novel which delves deep into the inner recess of the minds of the marginalized, exploited by the powers within the community and by those outside.

The novel has no single straight cut main plots, but rather a number of inter-related plots have been interlocked to produce a unified effect. The novel

opens with the scene where we find the Ojha Chhatar Bouri who exorcises ghosts and performs different tricks confuses Mrityunjay Mahanty, a school teacher by his sharp jugglery of words. And he convincingly argues that the knowledge we learn from the formal schools and colleges are incomplete and not adequate enough to explain the mystery of life. Pachu Bouri, an associate of Chhatar wanders here and there and keeps Chhatar updated of everything that happens in the locality so that Chhatar can successfully perform his tricks of exorcising and other supernatural activities. Pachu visits the section of the Marashol village where people of the Bouri community live. A boy dies of some unknown fever. Pachu explains that 'kou *khachchhe*' (Mishra: 1995:21), meaning someone is eating up. A story of witch-craft is hatched and all the men and women have got entangled within this deadly construct of witch-craft.

Maghi Budi is an old childless widow. She is Harin Bouri's aunt. Harin desired to grab her property but failed. So now he takes route to this design of stigmatizing her as a witch to finish her. Harin expressed his suspicion that she killed her husband with her witch craft. The villagers could not be convinced that such a simple minded and soft spoken woman could be a witch. Pachu advised Harin to consult his guru Chhatar Bouri for final decision.

We see another fraud Dhirat Patidar, an exorcist. He attempts to exorcise a young lady, the childless daughter-in-law of Shashadhar Acharya in the village of Kinchka. He prescribed '*gupta Shiber puja*', meaning a secret worship of Lord Shiva in a closed door room with the lady. It was actually a trap of sexually exploiting the lady.

Manasaram Shikari is an educated youth of Lohar community. He is a teacher in the village primary school as well as an elected member of the village Panchayet. He has built up a group of young people to wage a war against all these superstitions and the people who like to perpetuate them for their self interest. Manasaram's mother Manada Shikari was stigmatized as a witch and almost beaten up if she was not saved by Jugajit, a teacher of local Taldangra High School where Manasaram was a student. Jugajit, the teacher had a lasting impression on some of his students. Manasaram was one of them. But the teacher was found missing from the area. The writer has not given any definite clue to this missing. It might be that he was murdered because of his radical thinking.

Manasaram later exposed the fraud Dhirat Patidar and saved Arati, the daughter in law of Nanda Roy from his sexual lust. Dhirat also planned to seduce Phulmati, the childless wife of Chunaram Bouri by arranging the rituals of '*jan kundra*', a practice that make a woman fertile. But Dhirat Patidar died from falling from a tree when he tried to frighten Arati's husband in the guise of a supernatural being from a tree. Phulmati was saved from the sexual lust of Dhirat Patidar but she was subject to the stigma of being a witch. A number of animals and a child died in quick succession. And Phulmati was declared to be the '*dain*', the witch. It was a conspiracy. Phulmati was childless and her dear

friend Sundari was a young widow whom Chunaram fell in love secretly. Sundari's father Pitam Bouri planned to stigmatize Phulmati to finish her so that Chunaram can remarry Sundari. Chunaram and Sundari both were aware of this plan and were a part of it. It was shocking to Phulmati. Suphal helped Phulmati escape. He has gone to inform his friends who can save Phulmati from the wild witch-hunting. Phulmati does not like to die. The writer has beautifully narrated her struggle for life. The writer describes Phulmati's desire for life with a dramatic suspense:

Phulmati, caged in the dark pit tries to see the world outside through a hole. It's a small sunlit sky. A piece of pasture it is. A few green leaves. With this, Phulmati keeps her contact with the world outside. In this way she tries to save herself until Suphal returns with the members of their Society. (Mishra: 1995: 174-75) (Translation mine)

Bhagirath Mishra's novel *Janguru* is not simply a narration of superstitions in the subaltern Bouri and Santal societies but a deliberate attempt to explore the socio-economic factors behind the use and perpetuation of those superstitions in the societies of the marginalized. It is naïve to believe that the tribal societies are without complexities. Even in their societies, exploitations, discriminations and gender inequalities are equally strong. Mishra's novel explores how all the power-structures operate in the tribal and semi-tribal societies to ensure and perpetuate the dominant positions of the Ojhas, Jangurus and Mukhias.

In the novels Bhagirath Mishra documented several rituals, beliefs and anecdotes of the Bouri and the Santal communities and employed them to the structure of the novel. The Bouris as well as the Santals believe that women hoodwinked Marang Buru and received from Him the power of witchcraft. And enraged Marang Buru equipped their male counterparts with the power of detecting a witch. They believe that a witch can make a magic tree fly from Kamakshya, the place in Assam famous for esoteric cultures. The Bouris believe that Durga, the Goddess was bathing in the river and soil from her divine body turned into Bouri men and women. All the inclusions have made the novel a document of the cultural life of the Bouris and of the Santals to an extent.

7. Shabar Charit: The Socio-cultural Epic of the Lodha Shabar Community

The novels of Nalini Bera are the result of his experiences of encounters and meetings with the marginalized Lodha Shabars. His novels as *Joyer Janyo Ekta Palok*, *Ishwar Kabe Asben* and *Shabar Charit* (2005) attest to his deep and direct experience of the Shabar life and culture. The Shabars are of two types—the Khedia Shabars and the Lodha Shabars. In *Shabar Charit* (2005) Nalini Bera (1952) has documented an elaborate socio-economic history of the Lodha Shabars. Bera's novel makes an epic documentation of the life and culture of the Lodha Shabars. The Shabars were stigmatized as the criminal tribe in the Bengal

Gazetteers in 1876. This stigma has been struck to them so indelibly that they have been still carrying the label which acts as an agent of 'othering'. The political power of the conceptual India nation has been transferred from the British rulers to the upper-caste bhadraloks of India. But the Lodhas are still subject to the same discrimination and exploitation.

The narrative of the novel orbits around the collective life of Raibu, Gudgudia, Gurbha, Gudkunda, Sharaban, Shatura, Phultusi, Shishubala, Sombari, Niyati, Sabitri, Dhalo, Adari, Bhadari, Nileshtar alias Niluya, Lakshmirani alias Nuku and many other Lodha men and women of the Tapoban Jangalmahal, some area between Nayagram and Gopiballabhpur now in the district of West Midnapur. Their life is characterized by dire poverty, hunger and illiteracy. The males enter the jungle in search of wood and small birds and animals; women look for fallen leaves, small withered branches, mushrooms and the like. Sometimes they get arrested by the forest guard and face endless torture, physical, mental and sexual.

In the novel we see Raibu and Gudgudia intimately toiling for collecting wood and games of animals. Raibu decided to give his young sister Sombari in marriage to Gudgudia. But she is lost from the hermitage in the forest. The faith she reposed in the hermit was frustrated. Raibu combed the jungle to find her out but in vain. Here Sombari and Lolita of the folklore *Lolita Pala*, the story of which is popular to the Shabars come close together. The simplicity of the Lodha people is thus exploited by each and every power centers, operating in the society, the policemen, the forest guards, the money-lenders and the like. And the Lodhas have appropriated all these measures of injustice and discrimination to be something natural.

The Lodhas consider the jungle to be their mother who feeds them and offer them their provisions. From time immemorial they have inseparably connected to the forests. But in the name of conservation they have been brutally deprived of their rights. This forceful displacement is a kind of state sponsored terrorism on their natural habitat and livelihood.

Chuni Kotal was a Dalit Adivasi of Lodha Shabar tribe, who became the first woman graduate of her community. Her death through suicide on 16 August 1992, after years of harassment by officials, united the Lodha Shabar community in a big way. Eventually her story ignited the noted writer-activist Mahasweta Devi to look for the cultural roots of the Shabar in her novel, *Byadhkhanda* in (1994), translated into English by Sagaree Sengupta and Mandira Sengupta as *The Book of the Hunter* published by Seagull Books, Kolkata in 2002. Bera has dedicated the novel to the memory of Chuni Kotal. Some of her poems have been used in this book. The character in the novel Lakshmirani Mallick alias Nuku in a number of ways embodies her life and personality. The novel does not end conclusively or in a summed-up manner but it ends with a sense of open-endedness or that of inconclusiveness. Of course, Nalini Bera has suggested in

the concluding part of the novel that the educated young people of the Lodhas as Nuku will get united to fight a battle against all kinds of social and economic discriminations and injustice meted out to the society all power centers of which have been represented and controlled by the upper class bhadrals. A possibility of united revolt has been implied in the concluding chapter of the novel. In the concluding part of this epic novel we find Nuku coming to meet Raibu and Gurgudia who have arrested by the forest-guards and sent to the lockups in the Midnapur jail. Failing to find them out there Nuku got depressed. Nalini Bera writes:

... in despair and anger she picked up a piece of stone and suddenly threw it to the red gate of the jail. A thudding sound came out. The wall did not break down but it put a mark on it. (Bera: 2009: 739) (Translation mine)

This epic novel brings out adequately the socio-economic causes which have proved instrumental in the eruption of political movements in the entire Jangalmahal part of the then Midnapur district, now West Midnapur.

In Jaya Mitra's novel *Ekti Upakathar Janma* the old tribal woman Damri narrates a folktale that the earth is our mother. And the mother should not be smeared with blood. To do it is a crime. Subha, the young woman in the novel had to unlearn what she learned in her school and college. In Subir Mandal's novel, *Paur* the myth of Bono Bibi speak of collective ecological sense. The same ecological sense is to be found in the Shabar community. In both of the novels *Shabar Charit* and *Byadhkhanda* we find such references. Myths are used in some of the novels as a narrative technique as well as exploring traditional knowledge of the tribal communities. Modern urban people consider the forest as the source of economy but the indigenous tribal people regard it as the mother, who supplies them with food, medicine, shelter and protection.

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