

## Nature and Humans in the Imagination of Bengali Intellectuals of 1930s- 1950s

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### *Introduction*

Literature embodies every historical period's social and economic context. This paper explores the changes in the social relationship between humans and nature through a study of Bengali novels written in the middle of the twentieth century. It argues [that] there took place an epistemic shift in the representation of the human-nature relationship in Bengali novels in this period under the impact of Marxist ideology. Prominent Bengali writers such as Manik Bandyopadhyay, Advaita Mallabarman and Samaresh Basu, influenced by Marxist political underpinnings and aided by new literary forms, depicted lives of marginal people, such as boatmen and fishermen of the riverine delta of Bengal alongside factory workers, who were earlier excluded as subjects in Bengali novels. They viewed these subaltern social classes as agents of their own social and economic transformations within the structural constraints of late colonial society. For the purpose of this paper, three river centric novels of the above mentioned three authors (Bandyopadhyay's *A Boatman of Padma*; Mallabarman's *A River Called Titash* and Basu's *Ganga*) are selected to explore this interaction. All three novels narrate the story of an/the exploited and marginalized riverine population of fishermen and boatmen. These Subaltern classes through their labor and struggle for livelihoods reshape the riverine environment into a vibrant arena of social life. Theoretically, this essay explores the interactive process between ideological underpinnings of the literary movement and the turbulent political times that sensitized litterateurs to the relationship between the marginal subaltern population and their respective environment through the prism of the class relationship.

***Theoretical Framework: Ideas of Nature***

Drawing on materialist literary traditions, this essay locates how human labor plays a pivotal role in reshaping the environment within a class divided society. The aim here is to revise the erroneous notion that Marx prioritized human action over nature and engaged in false binary contradiction between the two. Indeed in such crude renderings nature becomes a passive entity waiting to be transformed by human actions. Yet this critique of Marx also elides [over] the interactive relationship between nature and humans. Through a study of the prominent Marxist literary theorist Raymond Williams' writing on nature, I shall here problematize such readings of Marxist notions of human- nature relationship. Nature in Raymond Williams' essay *Ideas of Nature* is treated as an important component of environment, one that contains "an extraordinary amount of human history."<sup>1</sup> To him the natural landscape is "the product of human design and human labor, and in admiring it as natural it matters very much whether we suppress that fact of labor or acknowledge it."<sup>2</sup>

This singular abstraction of humans from nature is, as Williams points out, "a function of an increasing real interaction."<sup>3</sup> If nature is seen as a component of the environment but separated from humans, not only does it become exceedingly easy to reshape to meet the dominant needs but also helps to obliterate exploitation of marginalized classes by other classes. As Williams puts it succinctly, "nature was where industry was not, and then in that real but limited sense had very little to say about the operations on nature that were proceeding elsewhere."<sup>4</sup>

One might ask why this split was necessary. The real split, as Williams sees it, is in humans' themselves- as producers and consumers. Humans consume intended products without much

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond Williams, "Ideas of Nature" in *Culture and Materialism: Selected Essays* (London: Verso; 1980). p.67.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p.78.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p.83.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p.80.

concern about the byproducts accompanying the former but they are forced to “treat leftover nature in much the same spirit: to consume it as scenery, landscape, image, fresh air.”<sup>5</sup> Consequently, Williams in his essay, *Problems of Materialism* aptly points out “in a world of materialist history there is no room for the separated abstract categories of ‘nature’ and ‘man’”.<sup>6</sup> Thus cultural representation of every materialist history constantly reconciles with this interaction between humans and environment, history and nature.<sup>7</sup>

It is, therefore, imperative to understand the concept of human labor and the role of nature from the Marxist standpoint. To Marx and Engels, human labor represents a decisive intervention between humans and their non-human surroundings.<sup>8</sup> In *Capital*, Marx wrote,

Labour is, first of all, a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature... Through this movement he acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature.<sup>9</sup>

Thus the symbiotic relationship between nature and human labor forms the basis of Marxist materialism and its critique of capitalism. Nature plays a crucial role in providing the means of subsistence, but under the capitalist mode of production, Marx argues that all relations between humans and nature are dissolved<sup>10</sup>. At the heart of Marxist analysis and critique of capitalism lies the constant presence of nature. Not only does the flow of capital lead to the alienation of

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.81.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p.111.

<sup>7</sup> Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee, *Post Colonial Environments: Nature, Culture and the Contemporary Indian Novel in English*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan; 2010).p.61.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.65.

<sup>9</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1*. Translated by Ben Fowkes. (London: Penguin Books; 1976). p.284.

<sup>10</sup> Mukherjee, *Post Colonial Environments*, p.66.

humans from their environmental conditions, but at every level it represents degradation of nature: “material wealth, the world of use values, exclusively consists of natural materials modified by labor...but under capitalism, the social form of this wealth, exchange wealth, is nothing but a ...social form of the objectified labour contained in the use-value”<sup>11</sup>.

One might ask the reason for such a detailed account of the flow of capital or its relation to the genre of Bengali novels which I have chosen to discuss. The truth is that the flow of capital, like the rivers, has entangled itself with Bengal’s colonial past. Uneven economic development in Bengal under the aegis of colonial capitalism has a distinct cultural component attached, which is manifested in the literature of the twentieth century. The novels are symptomatic of this. In all three novels, the protagonists belong to a class ridden society, exploited by moneylenders and landlords. United in their penury, the protagonists seek to break free by their own efforts, rather than being rescued by a benevolent or a politically sensitized landlord. This foregrounding of marginalized classes and their desire for change sets these novels apart from their predecessors.

Just as this awareness of the symbiotic relationship between human labor of the subaltern classes and their riverine environment in Bengali literature draws substantially from Marxist production relations, it also brought Realism to the foreground. While this new genre of realist novels informs the public of class exploitation, it also gave out a strong secular message. All the novels tell stories of typical villages in rural Bengal, inhabited by Hindus and Muslims.

### ***Geographical Context: Why the river?***

Lower Bengal’s rivers are the most crucial geographical element that determines the social, political and economic organization along with shaping the psychological responses, culture and religious practices of its people. Art is said to mirror the social context of a historical period and it will not be wrong to assume that environment, too, plays a significant part in the process of identity building. Describing the Ganges plain as the “genus of life,” Radhakamal Mukherjee emphasizes the regional identity of this river centric landscape; the result of which is that man and his environment evolves “through

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p.66.

mutual influences.”<sup>12</sup> To him, a thorough understanding of the interrelations among what he saw as the four different components of nature—land, river, tree and human—is crucial: “Man here is essentially a child of the rivers. His crops and farming practice are closely adjusted to the timely inundations of red water; and, indeed, if the rivers do not rise in flood, and submerge the country, he will be a fish out of water indeed.”<sup>13</sup> The constant shift in the courses of rivers changes the landscape of the country and it is usually believed that “there is nothing like an up to date map of Bangladesh.”<sup>14</sup>

Observing the changing landscape James Rennell, the seminal eighteenth century British oceanographer who provided the first systematic map of Bengal and India has pointed out, “as a strong presumptive proof of the wandering of the Ganges from the one side of the Delta to the other, I must observe, that there is no appearance of *virgin* earth between the Tiperah Hills on the east, and the province of Burdwan on the west; nor on the north till we arrive at Dacca and Bauleah”<sup>15</sup>. A closer look at the various cultural forms of the region illuminates this entwined existence. At least four distinct musical genres *bhatiyali*, *saari*, *baul* and *majhigaan*,<sup>16</sup> describe the constant

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<sup>12</sup> Radhakamal Mukherjee, *The Changing Face of Bengal: A Study in Riverine Economy* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta; 1938), p.13.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p.20.

<sup>14</sup> M.Q. Zaman, “Social Structure and Process Land Settlement in the Brahmaputra – Jamuna Floodplain”, in *Man, New Series* 26, no. 4 (December, 1991): pp.674-675.

<sup>15</sup> James Rennell and Joseph Banks, “An Account of the Ganges and Burrampooter Rivers”, in *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* 71 (1781): p.102.

<sup>16</sup> The term *Bhatiyali* is derived from the term *bhati*, meaning low lying area in Bengali, inundated during the monsoon floods. This area may be traced to present day Mymensingh, Tripura, Sylhet and Dacca in Bangladesh. *Bhatiyali* is defined as a genre of Bengali folk associated with boatmen and characterized by metaphors derived from the sights and sounds from river life. *Sari gaan*, on the other hand is a group song, sung by boatmen during boat races. *Baul* is the name given to a small group of individuals with a distinct religious belief, from the village laboring classes of Bengal. The

presence of the river in the lives of the marginalized communities. To the writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, alike, these musical traditions are characteristic of the rich cultural heritage of deltaic Bengal. Bengali proverbs and sayings, too, contain frequent references to the rivers. Not surprisingly, therefore, the river centric environment has been a potent subject not only in the musical genres, local sayings and folklores but also in the rich repertoire of Bengali literature.

Bengal's unique river centric identity has been explored not only in Bandopadhyay's *A Boatman of Padma*; Mallabarman's *A River Called Titash* and Basu's *Ganga* but also in other Bengali novels like Abu Ishaq's *Paddar Polidip (River Padma's Silt bed)*; Amarendra Ghosh's *Charkasem (Kasem's Silt bed)*; Sayyid Waliullah's *Kado Nadi Kado (Cry River Cry)* etc. These novels narrate the daily experiences of fishermen, boatmen and small farmers as these vulnerable communities continue to inhabit one of the most disaster prone regions of the world. The deltaic region of lower Bengal is annually affected by floods and often by cyclones. Nowhere is the struggle for survival and resilience, more evident than in this part of the world.

### ***Political context***

This section explores why historically Bengal became an important center of Left politics since the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Along with its agrarian economy, largely affected by the Permanent Settlement of 1793, the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the emergence of the quintessential middle class Bengali *babu* (English educated Bengali clerk or official). At the turn of the century as job opportunities declined, a disgruntled group of educated middle class or *bhadralok* comprising a large group of professional people, minor bureaucrats and *rentiers* emerged.<sup>17</sup> This group of "angry, articulate, over educated

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river is used as a metaphor for life and death in these ballads. The women of the coastal region left behind as their husbands venture out for work generally sing *Majbi* song or the song of the boatmen.

<sup>17</sup> Bengal's agrarian society in the early twentieth century was dominated by five distinct elements- the declining landed proprietors, the emerging class of *jotdars*(rich peasants)/ moneylenders/ traders, the impoverished peasants, the colonial state and the new middle class intelligentsia emerging out of the declining *rentier* classes.

and underemployed men,”<sup>18</sup> constituted the middle class intelligentsia who provided the actual (and not just cultural) leadership in the subsequent uprisings. Needless to say, when the Communist Party of India was founded, this class provided the first group of communist leaders in Bengal’s political spectrum. Subsequently, this landless middle class intelligentsia organized the small landholders, cultivators and subsequently factory laborers in the cities into a consolidated working class. The class base of the Indian National Congress in Bengal constituting of the traditional landed proprietors, weakened as a result of this new power shift.

If the economic policies of the colonial state resulted in changing the traditional social structure, strengthening the position of emerging classes and making marginalized classes conscious of their plight, contemporary national and international events, too, influenced the mindset of the people in general and intellectuals in particular. In terms of national politics, Bengal witnessed a surge of nationalist unrest in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the 1905 Bengal Partition, Swadeshi movement, transfer of capital from Calcutta to Delhi and the financial crisis succeeding the First World War. Additionally, international events like the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 had insurmountable impact on Bengal’s educated middle class. The victory of Japan in the 1905 Russo- Japanese War bolstered the nationalists’ struggle against the colonial state. Coupled with these events, within India, Communism became a threat for the colonial administrators from the 1920s. In 1924 the colonial state arrested and convicted S.A. Dange, Nalini Gupta, Muzaffar Ahmed and Shauqat Usmani in the famous Bolshevik Conspiracy Case. All four were sentenced to imprisonment but Muzaffar Ahmed was later released on the ground of failing health. Thus the new cultural awakening of the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which I will explore, emerged as a response to the decade’s general anxiety and uncertainties.

### **New Culture**

The political angst of the early twentieth century provided impetus for a new cultural awakening. This new cultural movement was “earmarked by a distinct break from the traditional pattern both in

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<sup>18</sup> Robert Darton, “Literary Surveillance in the British Raj: The Contradictions of Liberal Imperialism”, in *Book History* 4(2001), p.150.

form and content.”<sup>19</sup> These intellectuals were influenced by Marxism as well as by writings of Maxim Gorky, Zola and Hamsun.<sup>20</sup> Yet what was distinctive about this literary epoch? The river- centric landscape, as a literary subject, has been explored in various literary forms by earlier number of authors. It is treatment of realism that makes this literary genre unique. Then the inevitable question arises in what sense is realism used in this literary genre? Friedrich Engels wrote,

Realism, to my mind implies, besides truth of detail, the truthful reproduction of typical characters under typical circumstances...The rebellious reaction of the working class against the oppressive medium which surrounds them, their attempts- convulsive, half conscious or conscious- at recovering their status as human beings- belong to history and must lay claim to a place in the domain of realism.<sup>21</sup>

In the same letter, on the subject of the political ideology of the author Engels writes explicitly, “the more the opinions of the author remain hidden, the better for the work of art.”<sup>22</sup> However he does not call for the absolute negation of the political ideology of the author. Terry Eagleton in his explanation of Engels’ realism clarifies the advantages of political ideology. Since realist writing re-enacts the actual social forces, ideology of the author is necessary.<sup>23</sup>

Further, on the subject of realism, Eagleton prioritizes Bertolt Brecht’s concept of realism over Georg Lukacs’. Unlike Lukacs’ emphasis on existing literary forms as the basis of understanding realism, “realism for Brecht, writes Eagleton, “is less a specific

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<sup>19</sup> Angshutosh Khan, Goutam Bose and Debaprasad Chakrabarti, “Left Cultural Movement in West Bengal: An Analysis”, in *Social Scientist* 6, no. 6/7 (Jan- Feb:1978), p.115.

<sup>20</sup> Malini Bhattacharya, “The Class Character of Sexuality: Peasant Women in Manik Bandopadhyay”, in *Social Scientist* 15, no.1 (Jan: 1987), p.56.

<sup>21</sup> Friedrich Engels, “On Realism 1888” in Terry Eagleton and Drew Milne, ed. *Marxist Literary Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers; 1996), pp.39-40. This passage is from the letter addressed to Miss Margaret Harkness.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p.40.

<sup>23</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (London: Routledge; 2006), p.22.



literary style or genre, 'a mere question of form,' than a kind of art which discovers social laws and developments, and unmask prevailing ideologies by adopting the standpoint of the class which offers the broadest solution to social problems."<sup>24</sup> Thus for Brecht, "...realism must be wide and political, sovereign over all conventions...we must not derive realism as such from particular existing works, but we shall use every means, old and new, tried and untried, derived from art and derived elsewhere, to render reality to men in a form they can master."<sup>25</sup> Brecht's definition, probably, comes closest to the new literary genre that will be discussed. It explains to an extent why the existing literary forms of novels, short stories, plays and poems were used by the avant-garde litterateurs and transformed to voice their opinions. This also justifies the need to move away from the traditional idealist Bengali literary tradition.

In the 1920s a group of avant-garde intellectuals emerged associated with periodicals like *Kallol* (Rippling Current, 1923); *Sanhati* (Unity, 1923), *Langal* (Plough, 1925), *Ganabani* (Popular Voice, 1926), *Kalikalam* (Ink and Pen, 1927), *Pragati* (Progress, 1928), and *Parichay* (Acquaintance, 1931) and began to explore themes like class exploitation, poverty and sexuality. Achintya Kumar Sengupta, one of the stalwarts of the *Kallol* movement [steadfastly] pointed out, "*Kallol* had moved away from Rabindranath...into the worlds of the lower middle classes, the coal mines, slums, pavements, into the neighborhoods of those rejected and deceived."<sup>26</sup>

Demonstrating a commitment to vocalize working class dissent, these periodicals marked a distinct departure from traditional elitist Bengali literature. In addition, these periodicals paved the way for subsequent Leftist political rhetoric and can be categorized into two distinct groups. While *Kallol*, *Kali-kalam* and *Pragati* engaged more with transforming the literary style and content of Bengali literature by integrating sexuality and social realism in their writings, *Sanhati*, *Langal* and *Ganabani* were vehicles for revealing class exploitation and less concerned with stylistic details. In retrospect, these periodicals

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p.33-34.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p.33.

<sup>26</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton :Princeton University Press; 2000), p.157.

were trendsetters and, at the same time, crucial in bridging the gap between the Romantic idealism of traditional Bengali literature and subsequent incorporation of Leftist political rhetoric of class exploitation. Exploring the full potential of this trend calls for a separate discussion on this subject which is beyond the purview of this paper. In the following section *Kallol* is discussed since it is crucial in mapping the integration of the nature- human interaction in Bengali literature.

***Kallol: “World too Ordered and Stable, too Beautiful and Sober, to be real!”***

*Kallol* emerged as the chief mouthpiece of Bengali avant-garde literature. Its publication was begun in 1923 by Gokulchandra Nag and Dineshranjan Das. It provided a much needed literary platform for writers like Kazi Nazrul Islam, Mohitlal Majumdar, Prabodhkumar Sanyal, Premendra Mitra, Achintyakumar Sengupta, Buddhadev Bose, Jivanananda Das, Sailajananda Mukherji, Sarojkumar Raychaudhuri, Tarashankar Banerjee, Manik Bandyopadhyay and many others. *Kallol* demonstrates what Achintyakumar Sengupta refers to as the “malady of the age,”<sup>27</sup> challenging colonial repression and Bengali elitism. In the literary realm, these new writers sought “to retrieve Indian literature from its elite, sentimental cast which remained trapped in the bourgeois outlook of its historically middle class authors.”<sup>28</sup>

Their writings enriched by exposure to the literary tradition of realism and the political ideology of Marxism dealt primarily with the struggle for survival of marginalized classes and communities. Emphasizing economic inequalities and class oppression within contemporary Bengali society, these writers tried to quell? counter? the communal streak in Bengal politics. Nazrul Islam’s spirited and feisty poems voiced his resentment against caste, class and communal divisions that plagued Bengal’s society. Nazrul Islam’s poems were subsequently banned by the colonial state and the poet arrested. It is from the pages of this periodical that we see the emergence of Manik

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<sup>27</sup> Achintyakumar Sengupta, *Kalolyug (Era of Kallol)*

<sup>28</sup> Ulka Shapiro Anjaria, *Novel Forms: Literary Realism and Imaginations of Modernity in India, 1930-1940*, Ph.d Dissertation, Stanford University, 2008. p. 128.

Bandopadhyay, author of *A Boatman of Padma*. Ray identifies the general trend of the writings in this periodical as a revolt against existing indigenous traditions in fiction. A marked characteristic of this genre of writing was to portray lower class life.<sup>29</sup> Jivanananda Das (1899-1954), a Bengali poet, captures the essence of Kallol, “the post-Tagore period started from the publication of Kallol,....Here there is no single Rabindranath [Tagore] but there are some poets present here who do away with the necessity of a second Rabindranath.”<sup>30</sup>

These periodicals not only contributed to cultural awakening but also played a crucial role in strengthening the Communist Movement in Bengal. Through this political ideology the educated Bengali middle class took the initiative to bridge the cultural gap between themselves and the workers, peasants and other marginalized communities. As a result the Progressive Writers Union (1936) and Indian Peoples Theatre Association (IPTA, 1942) were formed in an attempt to organize men and women from different backgrounds including lawyers, professors, students, musicians, journalists, playwrights, farmers, trade union leaders and workers groups. These organizations contributed towards challenging the colonial state and forging awareness among the masses towards colonial repression, fascism and bolstering the struggles of peasants and workers. For the first time lives of workers and peasants were represented in popular art forms – literature, plays, paintings and films.<sup>31</sup> The three writers whom I will discuss were members of the Progressive Writers Association. Plays like *Nabanna* based on the Bengal famine of 1943 were staged to create awareness and at the same time to provide a platform for such representation. In the draft constitution of IPTA the organizers described it as,

...a movement which has its roots deep down in the cultural awakening of the masses of India, no[t]...a movement which discards our rich cultural heritage, but one which seeks to revive the lost in that heritage by interpreting, adopting and

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<sup>29</sup> Rajat Kanta Ray, *Exploring Emotional History: Gender, Mentality and Literature in the Indian Awakening*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press; 2001. p.82.

<sup>30</sup> Sukumar Sen, *History of Bengali Literature*. New Delhi: Sahiya Akademi; 1960. p.341.

<sup>31</sup> Anjaria, *Novel Forms*, p.115.

integrating it with the most significant facts of the people's lives and aspirations in the people's epoch.<sup>32</sup>

the idea of cultural awakening and revival of folk heritage had two purposes for the Marxists in Bengal. It provided, on the one hand, an opportunity for identity building among the middle class intelligentsia in the colonial set up, along Marxist lines; while on the other it helped the communist leadership to bring within its fold a sizeable number of ordinary people through the revival of familiar art forms.<sup>33</sup> Having set the stage for the three authors, I will now discuss the rationale for my choice of these authors and their writings.

### **Authors as Producers**

Manik Bandyopadhyay (1908- 1956); Advaita Mallabarman (1920-1951) and Samresh Basu (1928-1988) are eminent Bengali authors. Bengalis even now avidly read their novels and short stories. A closer look into the works of these writers demonstrates commonalities, not only in the literary content and form, but also in their ideological stance as well. [In terms of time] all three writers faced the reality of the 1947 partition of Bengal and the communal tensions which preceded as well as succeeded partition. All three authors were members of the Communist Party of India, and their writings not only criticized capitalism but recognized abstraction of human labor in the production processes. One finds stories of marginalized groups- lives of landless peasants and factory workers woven into their narratives.

The novels underline nature's crucial role in the lives of these marginalized communities and correspondingly their alienation from the products of their labor. Additionally, these novels describe exploitation of these communities at the hands of affluent classes who own the means of production. The novels focus on the obvious paradox embedded in the nature-human relationship. Between the fishing community and the river lie a series of class ordained inequalities. The fish as a commodity with its value in the market

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<sup>32</sup> Nandi Bhatia, "Staging Resistance: The Indian People's Theatre Association." Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd ed. *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*. Durham: Duke University Press; 1997. p.432.

<sup>33</sup> Rajarshi Dasgupta, "Rhythmic Revolution: Marxism and Culture in Colonial Bengal" in *Studies in History* 21, no. 79 (2005); p.82.

represents the objectified labor of the fishermen. The class of moneylenders who own the boats and nets exert twin pressure on the fishermen. While on one hand the moneylenders own fishermen's labor power (or time) for a definite money value; on the other hand they take away the fishermen's means of subsistence (for the fishermen no longer produce for themselves). Thus the river centric environment no longer remains the passive backdrop but emerges as a vibrant entity playing a significant role in the struggle for survival in Bandopadhyay, Mallabarman and Basu's writings.

The river centric environment exerts itself actively in the production process. All three novels depict the day to day struggle for survival and how this process of interdependence and cooperation between the fishermen, boatmen, small farmers and their river centric environment affect each other's existence. As Williams' aptly points out, "when nature is separated out from the activities of men, it even ceases to be nature in any full and effective sense."<sup>34</sup>

All three seminal novels Bandopadhyay's *Padma Nadir Majhi* (*Boatman of Padma*), Mallabarman's *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam* (*A River Called Titash*) and *Ganga* were written in the mid decades of the twentieth century indicate this shift. According to Joya Chatterji, the [decades of the] 1920s and 1930s affected the "political literary traditions"<sup>35</sup> of its writers profoundly. The sudden emergence of the "representation of the peasant, the artisan, the factory worker or the fisherman becomes such a crucial challenge to writers of fiction, itself shows a certain responsiveness to social change."<sup>36</sup>

***Manik Bandopadhyay: Padma Nadir Majhi (The Boatman of Padma)***

Manik Bandopadhyay's novel *A Boatman of Padma* was published in 1936. Much has been written on his political stance. An active member of the *Kallol*, his writings sought like other writers of the movement to provide a voice to the struggles of marginalized groups divided along caste lines. His criticism against/of the bourgeois class

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<sup>34</sup> Williams, "Ideas of Nature". p.81.

<sup>35</sup> Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition 1932- 1947*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 2002) p.167.

<sup>36</sup> Bhattacharya, "The Class Character of Sexuality", p.47.

is evident in this novel, which he perceived as a disruptive force within the society, confining material gains to them. This particular novel was written prior to his formal induction into the party. His novels are “considered brutally naturalistic and nihilistically unsentimental.”<sup>37</sup> In his novels critics see his language as terse and analytical, his attitude objective and the world that he represents as morbid and grotesque.<sup>38</sup> While commenting on Bandopadhyay’s novels, Dipesh Chakravarty writes, “Thus the ultimate ingredient of the novel, in Bandyopadhyay’s reckoning, is a rational outlook on life.”<sup>39</sup> While commenting on his own work Bandopadhyay once pointed out, “will not literature reflect that life [...] which, while roving in villages and towns all over Bengal, I have myself experienced—life in its rugged nakedness that repeatedly tears off the veil of sentimentality because of the contradictions and conflicts one feels within oneself? I mean the life lived by real human beings.”<sup>40</sup>

Bandopadhyay’s *The Boatman of Padma*, narrates the story of a poor fishermen community residing on the banks of the river *Padma* in a fictitious village called Ketupur in present day Bangladesh. Perennially dependent on the river for fish, the lives of the fishermen community form the focal point of this river centric novel. The novel revolves around Kuber, a poor fisherman. Sole breadwinner of his family, he resides, with other members of the fishermen community on the fringes of Ketupur where he lives with his wife, daughter and two sons. In his daily quest for survival he befriends a local businessman Hossain Miya, a small businessman suspected of human trafficking and other clandestine activities. At the heart of Hossain Miya’s ‘rags-to-riches’ story stands Moynadip, a remote siltbed island or *char*. It is to this *char* that Hossain Miya takes settlers from different parts of the region to build up a settlement. The settlers, hapless victims of either natural calamities like floods and cyclones or social ostracism, accompany him in search of new beginning. Ironically, in the end Kuber embarks on the journey to Hossain

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<sup>37</sup> Anjaria, *Novel Forms*, p.118.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p.118.

<sup>39</sup> Chakravarty, *Provincializing Europe*, p.154.

<sup>40</sup> Anjaria, *Novel Forms*, p.118.

Miya's river island to avert a false charge of theft. The *Padma* is at the center of the lives of the marginalized communities of fishermen, boatmen and small peasants. The river silently witnesses their daily chores, small joys and sorrows.

Written prior to World War II, the novel criticizes the society that supports the elites, while inhumanly exploiting the underprivileged and impoverished class of fishermen. Even for small matters the fishermen community depends on the local landowner's mercy and charity. The importance of the novel lies in the fact that it ushers in a new hope for the inhabitants who are ultimately able to break away from the cruel nexus of corruption and exploitation at the hands of the social elites and begin a new life. Kuber's journey to Moynadip clearly indicates the dawning of the new era where people like him have the choice whether or not to accept their destinies unquestioned. His transition marks the ultimate cross over to a new world order that abounds in equality and justice. Moynadip is thus a metaphor for liberation where people work together without being exploited by privileged classes

Many scholars have discussed Bandopadhyay's representation of sexuality. He is widely hailed as a novelist "of the subconscious mind and its symbol."<sup>41</sup> His novels explore repressed sexuality - a subject traditionally avoided by nineteenth century writers. In the novel Bandopadhyay accords a unique place to the female characters. But women in this novel play an important yet a subservient role.

### **Advaita Mallabarman: *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam (A River Called Titash)***

Advaita Mallabarman's novel *A River Called Titash* was completed in 1950 and published as a book in 1956 after his death in 1951. His novel demonstrates what Kalpana Bardhan refers to as "a superb blend of ethnography and the poetry of folk expression."<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ray, *Exploring Human History*, p.82.

<sup>42</sup> Advaita Mallabarman, *A River Called Titash*, Translated with an Introduction, an Afterword and Notes by Kalpana Bardhan (Berkeley: University of California Press; 1993) p.1.

Mallabarman's *A River Called Titash*, is a story of the Malo community residing on the banks of *Titash* (North-west Bangladesh) a 150- mile long channel that meanders away from the mainstream of the *Meghna* River. A Member of the Communist Party of India, his writings demonstrate a strong commitment towards social equality. The novel has four parts with two chapters in each. The first part captures the quest of a young man, Kishore, eager to explore unknown terrains and sensual experiences. The second part narrates the story of a young bride, referred to as Ananta's mother, in search of her husband and the last describes the story of a small boy, Ananta, who through education is able to relinquish his social inhibitions. In this novel the river, *Titash*, and the humans living alongside its banks evolve together.

At the beginning, *Titash*, is a source of livelihood and identity, but in course of the novel, changes its nature as it gradually dries up.<sup>43</sup> The communities of fishermen lose their livelihood and gradually fall prey to starvation. The poignant narrative ends as the river and its inhabitants on the banks gradually die out. As is the characteristic of rivers of Bangladesh, the course of the *Meghna* has changed, considerably altering the landscape since the time the novel was written. Monsoons result in the inundation of the banks. *Meghna*, like *Padma*, carries large amounts of silt that fall into *Titash*, and gradually choke the river resulting in the development of the siltbed (*char*) of *Titash*.<sup>44</sup>

While describing the *Titash* Malos' as independent full time fishermen, Bardhan emphasizes their close family relations and "rich abundance of community culture."<sup>45</sup> Since the *Titash* ensures a year round supply of fish to its fishermen, it provides ample time for them to enrich their community culture. However as the silting of the *Titash* forces them to take up menial labor, this rich culture began to diminish. As Bardhan aptly points out:

The Malos' oral culture that thrives on a stable and secure subsistence environment perhaps impedes their adaptation in the face of drastic natural change; fishing

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., pp.3-4.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p.280.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., pp.277-78.



communities that live along the changeable, violent Meghna or *Padma* learn to survive under harsher conditions, but their life of constant stress and vigilance exacts a cultural price.<sup>46</sup>

According to Bardhan, the *Titash* Malos encounter the problem of reestablishing themselves as fishermen after the river dries up, mainly due to two reasons. First the partition of 1947 displaced this community. Second, the restrictions imposed on fishing in open water. As fishing in the ponds, rivers and marshes began to get highly regularized by leases issued by district administrators, the Malos, dependent on age-old customs began to lose their rights to the rich and affluent class of moneylenders and landowners. The men who over generations used these natural resources suddenly became outsiders. Their rights were usurped and the leases were granted to the new influential class. This novel written in the 1940s coincides with the first appearance of the silt beds in the lower bends of the river near the Gokanghat village.<sup>47</sup> The 1940s represent a time of great chaos as the region was gearing up for a series of political events.

The river is present in all facets of the novel, in the imagery, in the metaphors, in the music, and in the lifestyle, culture, festivals, and customs. The last paragraph aptly describes the constant flow of the river “From far south the current pushes upstream in small waves and ends here in the ground of the Malo neighborhood, as always. But now the ground is all that it is left of it. The Malo neighborhood is no more.”<sup>48</sup>

### **Samaresh Basu : *Ganga***

*Ganga*, written by Samaresh Basu, depicts the life of the fishermen on the banks of the Ganges. This novel was published in 1957 in a journal called *Janmabhumi* (Birth Place). The author has written extensively on factory workers and working class issues. Prior to becoming a writer by profession, Basu was a worker in a jute mill. His writings demonstrate his strong ties to Marxism. As in *Boatman of*

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p.278.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., p.267.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., p.257.

*Padma* and *A River Called Titash*, thematically this novel narrates the story of the river Ganges, revered and venerated throughout its journey in India. The novel narrates the story of fishermen who undertake an annual expedition to the mouth of the river in search of fish. Living on smaller channels of mighty rivers, the community usually owns small boats which are useless on bigger rivers. They await the monsoon eagerly as it provides them with the opportunity to embark on the Ganges in search of the most coveted catch—hilsa fish.

This annual expedition to the mouth of the *Ganga* is like a ritual to the fishermen of different communities, namely the Kaivarta, Nikiri, Cunuri, Mala, and even for those fishermen communities who have given up their traditional livelihood to become agriculturists, like the Rajbanshi communities in north Bengal. *Ganga* revolves around the Malos of southern Bengal. Unlike Mallabharman's *Titash*, Basu's *Ganga* speaks primarily of this ritualistic annual venture to the Ganges proper.

*Ganga* is the story of Panchan and Bilas, an uncle and nephew team and their experience during this annual journey. As fishermen assemble on the banks of the Ganges, a few of them including Bilas dream of embarking on the high seas of the Bay of Bengal in search of a better catch some day. The sea continues to entice the fishermen with its bounty but poses a great threat to their lives as well. The novel provides a deep insight into the oral tradition of the Malo community. Bilas, the protagonist of the novel bears an uncanny resemblance to his father Nibarman who was killed in one such expedition to the seas. A taciturn man in nature, he closely mirrors his posthumous father in vigor, strength and arrogance. He stands up against injustice. His caustic tongue and brash behavior are always a source of anxiety to his uncle. Yet as the novel progresses, the uncertainties of the river mellow Bilas. Even so, his aspiration remains to venture to the high seas like his father in search of better prospects. His proximity to Himi, a young female fish wholesaler who challenges the male dominated social norms, breaks all the social constraints.

As seen in the context of *Boatman of Padma* and *A River Called Titash* the social restrictions are less pronounced among the Malos. The quest for survival breaks down man-made divisions based on caste, creed and gender. While men risk their lives to catch fish, the women act as the retailers, and sell fish to wholesalers in the city

markets. The restrictive society of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries assigned specific roles to upper class women, yet it could not restrict these women to the private quarters of their houses. They interacted with the men and developed business relationships over the years. Although the male dominated society reaps the benefits of their labor, it is not ready to acknowledge their contribution. The river banks provide refuge to these so called “fallen” women. One such woman is Himi, along with her grandmother Damini. Damini worked with Bilas’s father while Himi works with Bilas. Although Himi had the choice of moving away from this uncertain lifestyle, she comes back and starts to work with her grandmother as a fish wholesaler. She is willing to leave everything, get married and live with Bilas, but at the end, the perils of fishermen’s lives, forces her to change her mind.

The author very poignantly mentions the lifestyle of the women who are left behind waiting for the return of their husbands. These women exhibit great courage that goes unrecognized and unappreciated. Undaunted by the calamities of the land, they bravely battle the seasonal droughts. As the fishermen venture out to Ganges in search of fish, the women who are left behind rarely sleep peacefully, always anxious for the well being of their men. Being the wife of a fisherman, as the author narrates, is not easy. Only a woman of strong will is able to withstand this life of high risk and resilience.

The novel captures post partition Bengal and the biased attitude of the local people towards those fishermen who seasonally migrate from East Bengal to the Ganges in West Bengal. The man-made boundary successfully divides the people and the dislike for the migrant East Bengal fishermen irrespective of their religion becomes highly pronounced. The fishermen of West Bengal resent the coming of these migrants to share resources that they believe belong only to them. While the river flows as before, the people create these discriminations based on man-made borders.

Its treatment of the river differs marginally from the other two novels discussed in this section. The femininity of the river is largely emphasized. The river is compared to a benevolent mother, its maternal instincts much pronounced. Here the river does not have the restlessness of the *Padma* as in *Boatman of Padma*, nor does it symbolize death as in *A River Called Titash*. In this novel, despite the uncertainties, the river is much calmer. But the note of the novel differs from the somber note of the other two novels. In *Boatman Of*

*Padma*, Kuber embarks on the journey to Moynadwip, leaving behind his family to escape the social humiliation. In *A River Called Titash*, the novel ends as a swan song of the vibrant Malo settlement. But *Ganga* ends on a buoyant note, fulfilling the long lived dream of Bilas, as he embarks on the journey to the seas leading a shoal of boats like his father.

### ***Conclusion***

In this paper, through the three Bengali authors, I have discussed the changing representation of nature, more specifically the river. However their writings belonged to a new literary genre conditioned by the uncertainties of colonialism. The writings differ markedly from preceding generations as nature and humans evolve through a symbiotic relationship and highlight the impetus provided by the political ideology of the authors. The rivers in all three novels change lives of the communities dependent on it, in the process the humans, too, change the river centric landscape.