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Reception of Socialist Realism in Bangla Progressive Literature and Alternatives to It: 1930s to 1990s

Socialist Realist ideas came to India indirectly. And by the time they came, Dutta Gupta had demonstrated the brutal stranglehold of Stalinism on the CPI. This meant a two-stage revolution theory, a subservience, now to British imperialism, now to the Indian bourgeoisie. After independence, the same two-stage theory and the doctrine of popular frontism meant that the main inner-party debate was, where is the progressive bourgeoisie located? Inside or outside the Congress? Proletarian class independence could not flourish. Thus, the best of Bangla progressive literature was created in the 1970s and beyond, not through the Socialist Realism of the model of Saroj Dutt from 1938 or even Gorky, but through a rejection of ruling class hegemony and the articulation of polyphony, heteroglossia, alternative realities and fantasy.

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The term Socialist Realism arose in the Soviet Union between 1929 and 1934 and was codified at the (in)famous Writers' Congress. While more intellectual glosses would be put from time to time, by a range of Marxist/Moscow-oriented intellectuals, in origin it was worked out as a party line, with Maxim Gorky and Andrei Zhdanov in charge. Indian writers were not often exposed to Lukacs, Brecht, to say nothing of Bloch, Benjamin etc, in the 1930s and 1940s. In the main, they were influenced by what came out of the Soviet Union. With the Communist International having decided, after the downfall of M.N. Roy, to ask the Communist Party of Great Britain to look after India, they were in addition under the influence of CPGB ideologues, which had mixed results. The influence of Ben Bradley (who even presented the India report at the 7th Congress of the Communist International) and R. Palme Dutt produced a deadening Stalinist rigidity, especially in matters of class collaboration at the political level (Dutta Gupta, 2006). However, culturally, this would also mean the influence of Ralph Fox and Christopher Caudwell, who were less rigid Stalinist figures (Ahmed, 2009).

Papers from the erstwhile USSR, or papers dealing with specifically Soviet literature, may deal at a greater length with how the term emerged, and what it meant at particular moments. My work is focused mainly on its reception in India, particularly in Bangla. In the hands of Gorky and Zhdanov, the party leader entrusted with overseeing culture, it became a highly propagandistic trend. Socialist Realism was required to present a highly optimistic image of life in the Soviet State, hence was a romantic imagination rather than a social realist presentation. The hardship precipitated by Stalinist rule - and, indeed, by the civil war during 1917-22 - was not an acceptable subject for critique: authors and artists were required to toe the line in their choice and depiction of subject matter (Clark, 1989).

However, when Socialist Realism travelled beyond the USSR, it had a more complex life. The Communist International had a troubled relationship with the Soviet State under Stalin. It had been originally built as a revolutionary world organization, and the debates in the first four Congresses and other meetings of that era showed that non-Russians had ample voice and role in policy making (Riddell, 1987; Riddell, 1991; Riddell, 1993; Riddell, 2010; Riddell, 2011; Riddell, 2015). And while Stalinism saw a regular

shift in personnel and increasing Moscow control, the activists, indeed the majority of the leaders, were still revolutionary in intention for a considerable period. As a result, Stalin was never too comfortable with the organization and ended up closing it down.

When we look at the cultural productions by revolutionaries who were members of the various Communist parties or stood very close to them, therefore, we see the persistence of the dream of revolution and the creation of a more just and equitable society, not simply, or even mainly, a submission to ideas emanating from Moscow. Of course, such revolutionary imagination did also come into conflict with the pressures from the Comintern, as I have shown elsewhere (Chattopadhyay, forthcoming 2024).

Perceptions about the Indian progressive cultural movement vary widely. Katerina Clark claims that Mulk Raj Anand has to be seen as the most significant figure in the Progressive Writers Association, and using David Damrosch's criteria considers him a figure in world literature (Clark, 2021, pp. 284-5). She wants to downplay the role of the Urdu writers, especially Sajjad Zaheer, who by contrast are made absolutely central by Carlo Coppola (1974) or Talat Ahmed (2009). Snehal Shingavi likewise looks closely at the Indian English writers. As a Comparatist, Clark would have been better served by looking at the range of languages and literature produced in India. While Anand certainly was an important figure in the PWA, he was hardly as pivotal as Clark portrays him, and one feels that the focus on English language writers only reinforces the model of World Literature in which the languages of domination continue to be privileged.

The Bengal Context:

My aim is not to displace one 'hero' by another. Rather, it is to attempt a degree of decentering. As Steven Lee points out, there was a wide consensus about building a Soviet-led world revolution, but within that, there were considerable divergences as well (Lee, 2020, pp. 4-5, 12-16) Lee also emphasises how World Literature models, not only of Damrosch but even Casanova or Moretti, ignore the attractions of communist internationalism and foreground the West (Lee, 2020, p. 4).

The Progressive Writers Association saw the coming together of the first generation of communist writers and cultural activists with many other authors and intellectuals. The Second All India Conference of the PWA was held in Kolkata, in late 1938. In a paper elsewhere, I made a remark on the conceit of Bengali intellectuals of later times, who even while deriding the PWA, would say that whatever it achieved was mainly the work of the Bengalis (Chattopadhyay, 2019, pp. 695, 700-701). Nor however was it essentially an achievement of the Urdu speakers. In the 1930s and 1940s, there were considerable and autonomous developments in many Indian areas and languages (e.g., Manipuri) so that a comprehensive history of the PWA has to consider the cultural specificities and distinctive features along with an all India (or, considering the subsequent division of the country, a pan-South Asian) picture.

In the 1938 Conference of the PWA in Calcutta, Buddhadeva Bose, and Samar Sen both delivered speeches in English (e.g., Sen, 2013). They were clearly looking at the all-India audience, as was Mulk Raj Anand, who called upon Indian writers to "adopt the point of view of the man in the street" (Anand, 1979, pp. 5-24). However, both Bose and Sen were Bengali poets and would collaborate for several years in the literary magazine *Kavita*. So, their immediate interest was Bangla poetry – no doubt in synchrony with poetry in other parts of India as well as abroad, as well as diachronically, but Bangla poetry still. The debate over what constituted progress and how the writers should assess it was initiated by Saroj Kumar Dutta in the pages of *Arani*, a Bangla Marxist cultural monthly published with Prafulla Gupta as editor, and with the participation of Debkumar Gupta, Advaita Dutta, Birendra Majumdar, Chinmohan Sehanobis, and a little later, Saroj Dutta, Sudhi Pradhan, Anil Kanjilal, and others. In February 1939, Dutta wrote an article attacking Buddhadeva Bose for his stance. Dutta was both indignant and sarcastic at finding in Bose a contradiction, namely, his acknowledgement of a lack of experience about the working class and its life, and consequently, his inability to write about them, and yet his calling himself a progressive writer (Dutta, 2013A, pp. 379-80). During his polemics with Samar Sen, he was heaping ridicule on Sen for supposedly

inventing a charge that he was being asked to write stirring poems about workers and peasants, the Red Flag, and barricades (Dutta, 2013B, p. 383). Now if indeed, this was a fake charge dreamt up by Samar Sen, we could say that Sen was creating a dummy to be able to knock it down with ease. Yet Dutta's essay on Bose indicates just such a prescriptive attitude. He had told Bose that he had to either orient himself for the ideological clarity of the declassed destitute of the lower middle class or retire from the field of literary creation (Dutta, 2013A, p. 380).

Bose of course presented an easy target, because of an internal inconsistency. He had often talked and written that the poet should avoid politics, and this was to be in fact, his main grouse against one of the outstanding Marxist poets of Bengal, Subhas Mukhopadhyay. Yet he supported the Progressive Writers' Association, which by definition was a politically oriented organisation. At the same time, the attack on Bose revealed an inability to think of culturally united fronts. This was the period when Bose was closest to progressives, due to the Spanish Civil War and the anti-fascist outlook that it generated among a generation of Bengali writers and artists. Many of the non-Marxist writers who came close to the PWA did so due to the Spanish Civil War, the Japanese invasion of China, and the Italian invasion of Abyssinia. The idea of building a cultural front bringing together communists, litterateurs close to the communists, and those who were not communists, but were nonetheless anti-imperialist and anti-fascist, had a sound basis. But Dutta seems to have seen it from a much narrower perspective.

It was the debate between Dutta and Samar Sen that set the trend for much of future Bangla progressive discussions. Sen took a sophisticated position, arguing that progress was not linear, and while it existed, it could not be viewed through narrow prescriptive means. He rejected the idea that crude workerism and rejection of literary subtleties in the name of being understood by the workers and peasants was the essential definition of progressivism. Dutta responded with a sharp attack, the assertion that the poetry of Samar Sen was devoid of direct experience, romantic, lacked any contact not only with the working class struggles of the present but also the middle class led struggles of the past, and ended with a very brief look at the question of presentation or form. He ended with the claim that form had become superior to the question of the content and the source of poetry. According to him, the novelty of content would dictate a new form (Chattopadhyay, 2023, pp. 111-128). The debate continued, and Dutta continued to insist that "progressive" must mean "communist", and exposing the decadence of society did not involve progressivism unless it looked at the workers and peasants and their struggles. He would also sharply attack Bishnu Dey and Samar Sen, two of the most significant Marxist or Marxism-inspired poets, for their language, form, etc.

This debate about poetry set the trend. The field of progressive literature came to be pre-empted by a strong party-minded attitude. The Bengal Famine of 1943 saw a revival of the progressive cultural movement. A fairly huge body of literature was generated concerning the famine, reactions to it, and its aftermath. One can suggest that this is the real starting point for prose fiction and plays in Bangla looking at the working people in a big way. A reading would however show that the texts did not often depict proletarian heroes. Rather, the focus was primarily on the sufferings in rural Bengal owing to the famine. The hero figures of novels of this period tended to come from the middle classes turning to the left.

In 1947, the Second Party Congress of the Communist Party of India saw a drastic change in line. The outgoing General Secretary, P.C. Joshi, was condemned as a right deviationist. This was a turning point. It was after this, that the CPI turned to a strong policy of cultural control, certainly in Bengal/West Bengal. If one looks at Sudhi Pradhan's English collection Marxist Cultural Movement in India (Pradhan, 1979), one is stuck by Pradhan's editorial decision to include both Mulk Raj Anand's essay "On the Progressive Writers' Movement" and Ahmed Ali's "Progressive View of Art". Shingavi (2020) points out:

"Both of these essays contain terms that either the communist-affiliated wing of the AIPWA or those who left the AIPWA could find to support their positions. Anand's defence of Lenin's

historical materialist reading practice is coupled with his belief that good writing and class allegiances may not work in the same direction. Ali's sense that "progressive" and "revolutionary" art were separate entities did not prevent him from endorsing socialist realism as the form that literature would need to take in the modern period" (p. 115).

In the early period, therefore, modernism and realism jostled within the framework of the Progressive Movement. The late 40s began a significant transformation. In the pages of *Marxbadi*, a Bangla party journal, considerable space was given to cultural issues. Bhabani Sen, a Politbureau member, and Pradyot Guha, an important party ideologue, wrote essays, both titled 'Bangla Pragati Sahityer Atmasamalochana' [Self Critical Reflections of Bengali Progressive Literature], which sparked off a huge debate. *Parichay*, a leading monthly under CPI influence, carried out an extensive debate, as did other periodicals. Guha (penname Urmila Guha), Sen (penname Rabindra Gupta), Nabagopal Bandyopadhyay, and Shitangsu Maitra focused on, what they called, the bourgeois-semi feudal literary heritage of the 19th century and sharply reviewed the role, spirit, and actions of the pillars of what is often called the Bengal Renaissance. Bhowani Sen contended that this renaissance was reactionary from its inception and so were its creative statements. The detractors even widened the ambit of their critical exploration and crossed over from literature to socioeconomic and political views of Rammohan Roy, Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, Michael Madhusudan Datta, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and others, maintaining that this was a comprador and semi-feudal literature. Whatever reforms were done were still collaborationist in character. Unfortunately, the persistent hegemony of Stalinism on the left in India has meant that critical voices were often simply labelled pro-Congress, right-wing, etc by the main anthologist, Dhananjay Das, who ignored the journal *Purbasa*, mostly ignored *Chaturanga* and other non-CPI progressive voices.

This, however, makes it easier for a reader today to focus on the purely CPI and fellow traveller contingent. The party's sharp left turn, under partially Communist Information Bureau's pressure, resulted in an attempt to push a stronger sense of party line in cultural matters. The culture and partisanship tussle in West Bengal came to a head with the so-called Garaudy debate. Roger Garaudy, a French Communist, had written about the freedom of the writer. This generated a strong controversy. Those who held a more flexible attitude, says Subhoranjan Dasgupta, were in all likelihood influenced by Trotsky's position in *Literature and Revolution*, though they were in those days not willing to cite him. Dasgupta advances in his support of the later advice by Bishnu Dey to Dasgupta himself, to read Trotsky (Dasgupta, 2016, p. 8). A public disputation during the Garaudy debate was conducted in such a way that defenders of flexibility got greater opportunity. However, the overall verdict and thrust was for the production of texts where a revolutionary outlook must be highlighted.

In reality, much of the writings produced focused more on middle-class revolutionary cadres 'enlightened' by the party, than on proletarian heroes. It is especially piquant, that Narayan Gangopadhyay, one of the leading voices for a proletarian line in the debates, wrote in a very different vein. His novels, *Shila Lipi* (Inscription on Stone) and *Lal Mati* (Red Soil), loosely dealing with the same central character, show the transformation of a young revolutionary nationalist believer in armed terrorism into a communist advocating mass action and trying to organic workers and adivasis (the so-called tribals). In *Samrat O Shresthi* (The Emperor and the Merchant), the plot ultimately turns into a conflict between a landlord and a merchant. Failing to defeat the merchant on her own, the landlord seeks to harness the support of the peasants. This is hardly a focus on the working class or even a militant peasantry.

The first proletarian hero was created by someone from outside the Communist Party camp. This was Satinath Bhaduri in *Dhorai Charit Manas*, in which the freedom movement through three significant stages, the initial rise of Gandhi, the struggle in the 1930s (what Bipan Chandra calls Pressure-Compromise-Pressure) and the Quit India Movement is viewed through the perspective of a landless person, Dhorai, who belongs to the socially marginal Tatma caste-community. No mentor really promotes his development, and

at the end of the novel, in what is social realism but definitely not the tenets of socialist realism, Dhorai finds that he and people like him are repeatedly betrayed by landed elements and dominant castes within the nationalist movement.

It is actually in writers like Manik Bandyopadhyay, not very strong on accepting the party line theory, that one can see radicalism expressed in forms that are also aesthetically valuable. One thinks both of novels like *Padma Nadir Majhi* (The Boatman of the Padma) and short stories like 'Chhoto Bakulpurer Yatri'.

The dominant trend, however, came to be one where a horizon of expectation was created, wherein literature was to promote revolutionary fervour. Barring a small number of authors like Samaresh Bose, few were actually aware of the working class and the industrial processes. Consequently, middle-class heroes of former rural (often landed) ancestry and peasants were the principal subjects. This would continue to be the staple diet of much literature dealing with the 1970s and after with the Naxalite movement, as a perusal of the novels, or even Phatik Ghosh's book on them (Ghosh, 2012).

Questioning the Paradigm:

In many ways, the most significant progressive authors of the 1970s and beyond broke out of this paradigm. We can think about Mahasweta Devi, Debes Roy, and Nabarun Bhattacharya among the authors of West Bengal, and Akhtaruzzaman Ilyas among the novelists of East Bengal/Bangladesh. All had strong progressive links, with Mahasweta Devi having been a member of the Mahila Atma Raksha Samity, a women's organisation initiated and led by CPI women, Debes Roy having been a member of the CPI till his death, Nabarun Bhattacharya having been close to the CPI(ML) Liberation and an office bearer of a cultural organisation sponsored by it, and finally Elias having clearly left leanings.

All of them write novels that move out of the paradigmatic progressive model. In terms of form, Elias writes a text titled *Khwabnamah*. The Namah, or Nama, originated in Persia and travelled to India. It is a narrative mode of writing with different possibilities from biographical (*Iskander Namah*), historical chronicles with a focus on royal/imperial biography (*Shah Jahan Namah*), manuals like *Andarznamah* (a manual on etiquette) (Chanda, 2011, p. 2). By bringing an essentially non-fiction mode in conjunction with the novel, Elias seeks to blur the boundaries between history and fiction. *Khwabnamah*, or the namah of dreams, is engaged in an interaction of the Islamic tradition of dream interpretation, along with the novel genre. The Islamic tradition goes back to the Quran and the book of the sayings of the Prophet, *Sahih al Bukhari*. Toufy Fahd says "A collection of dreams presupposes an accumulation of experiences which allows conclusions drawn from the frequency of occurrence and the diversity of people and situations.... Conversely, oneiric imagery and symbolism reflect the dreamer's times, his cultural level and the thoughts agitating his period while at the same time continuing to reflect all that is durable in the ideas, images, and relations mankind carries with it through the ages." (Fahd, 1966, p. 362).

The 'present' of the novel is the mid-40s of Bengal when three different movements are at play. There is secular nationalism, there are the two (Hindu and Muslim) religious nations forming movements (Chatterjee, 1994), and there is the class struggle that takes shape in the form of the Tebhaga movement, a struggle by sharecroppers demanding two-thirds of the crop and an end to extra coercions (Chattopadhyay, 1987). The 'past' is history remembered through dreams and memories woven into dreams and songs. Finally, there is the presence of the author, the time of the composition and the reception of the novel, when communalism was again becoming a strong force in independent Bangladesh. The last battle of peasants in Bengal, the Tebhaga movement, has had histories. But historians have too infrequently asked why Muslim peasants were not adequately drawn in, a major flaw since the majority of the population and the majority of the peasants were Muslims. Ilyas examines the interplay of class and caste solidarity among the poorer folk, including the Muslims, and the idea spread by the Muslim League that Muslims had to unite only on the basis of Islam. But the collective memory of the peasants also goes back to the origins of British rule in

Bengal. The rebellion by Sanyasis (Hindu mendicant Holy Men) and Fakirs (Muslim Holy Men) is remembered, both by references to Cherag Ali, the ancestor of Kulsum, stepmother to Tamij, the central character of the novel, and by the idea of the ghost of the Munshi, who was a Muslim general of the Fakir Majnu Shah, who had fought alongside the Sanyasi Bhawani Pathak, and had died, and now whose spirit lived in a tree by the side of the Katlahar Bil, a large water body. By invoking the Sanyasi-Fakir rebellion, the author also challenges one of the oldest Bangla novelistic themes. Since Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and his *Debi Choudhurani*, Bhawani Pathak has been shown as a leader of a Hindu rebellion. In another novel with similar settings, the *Anandamath* (tr. as *The Sacred Brotherhood* by Julius Lipner), Bankim Chandra categorically pushed the agenda that the goal was to end Muslim rule because Muslim rulers had been incapable of protecting the subjects, but not British rule, because British rule would bring modernity, western knowhow, and empower the motherland (Chattopadhyay, 2005). Cherag Ali's song, where Bhawani Pathak and his 'Pathan commander' go to battle together, completely overturns this schema.

The *Khwabnamah* is a book that is an interpreter's manual, as Chanda argues. Within the novel, there is a long passage that explains this significance. A poet who cannot write, and wants the book as inspiration, discovers this. It is a set of geometric figures and some lists and scribbles so that only a trained interpreter can understand it. But it is a manual that shows how legends and symbols can be used to understand past, present, and future.

Elias does not see Muslim nationhood as a positive ideal. But it is still a potent idea. Unity is based on religious identity and the idea of communal unity against common enemy/enemies coexist and battle. The formation of Muslim League hegemony necessitates subduing all identities to an ostensible Muslim (united) identity. The marriage between Gafur, the oil presser, and Bulu Majhi's divorced wife causes tension, and he is ostracised by the fisherfolk who see the oil pressers as belonging to a lower caste.

While criticising the new members of the League Altaf Mandal of Chandigarh says:

"What kind of Mosolmans are they? They regularly hobnob with the Santhals....and under their leadership, these guys are collecting grains for their own home. The Santhal mosolman adhiyars [sharecroppers] are united, what Pakistan are you imagining?" (Elias, 1998, p.120).

The formal acceptance of Islam has not meant the disappearance of caste. This lived reality of India, poses a real problem for an ideology seeking to build a power base through unity of all adherents of one religion. So, Kader meets the leaders of the fisherfolk and tells them that practising casteism will lead to their exclusion from the Muslim Quam (nation/community).

Sharafat or Kalam Majhi are as keen on using caste power as the Muslim League leaders are keen on using religious unity as an instrument for power.

Against both, there is also class-based secular unity. The Tebhaga movement was launched by the AIKS and the CPI, among other reasons, to foster class unity and contest communalism (Chattopadhyay, 1987, pp. 25-26). But the historical reality is the eventual setback, in which communalism played an important role. But the tradition of communal unity, which was seen explicitly in Neelphamari (Chattopadhyay, 1987, pp. 47-48), was also remembered and articulated in popular memory and dreams. Cherag Ali's song is remembered by Tamijer baap [father], where Bhavani Pathak's war against the East India Company, was fought in alliance with Muslim fakirs: "Bhavani enters battle the Pathan general alongside/ Thundering his order, cut down the whites" (Elias, 1998, p. 41).

The Pathan general was Majnu Shah or one of his followers. Himself a fakir, Cherag Ali followed the fakir tradition of interpreting dreams. He sings songs that bring back historical memory and also recite 'sholoks' (slokas, verses, going back to Sanskrit roots, showing once again the interpenetration of communities, here in the very stuff of language) which interpret dreams.

The inspired song of Keramat at a later stage is shown to be different. Cherag Ali, the long-dead fakir, in a conversation with Keramat, makes the distinction between the *paona sholok* and a song. The *paona*, a play on a word meaning 'due' in Bangla, is something the fakir gets. He does not make the song. A *sholok* is a Bengali reduction of the Sanskrit word *sloka*, meaning verse. Sanskrit and Bangla are pressed into service to explain the difference between the acquired verse and the made song. The *Khwabnamah* as a genre does not contain poetry. It is the science that is pressed into service to explain one way in which poetry may function. But Keramat's song, in praise of Tebhaga, brings the reader back to the present. The pulls on Tamij, between Tebhaga and Pakistan, his support to the Muslim League in the hope of land, the failure of the hope and his turn to the more militant stage of the peasant struggle, and his death, bring us a tale of struggle by the exploited peasants, but in a language that is entirely theirs. As Ranajit Guha argued, challenging the idea that peasants were powerless agents whose rebellions were blind ones, they had awareness and a will to effect political change. This long-term subaltern tradition had to be factored in to understand the mass struggles of the twentieth century (Guha, 1983). This differs sharply from the urban party-trained hero who brings in consciousness.

Another novel, written much earlier, that also questions some of the orthodox Communist discourses on the Tebhaga movement and Socialist Realist writing in Bengal, is Sabitri Roy's *Paka Dhaner Gaan* (tr. as *Harvest Song*) (Roy, S, 2005 and Roy, S., 2004). It is a work of great significance, written much before Ilyas and looking at the CPI closely. Roy was either a CPI member for only one year or only a sympathiser. But her husband had been a veteran CPI member. She had a thorough idea about the workings of the party, and how its ideology operated, but as Marik has argued (Marik, 2022), *Paka Dhaner Gaan* moves around issues of economic exploitation and political struggles. The power of landlordism, the rising prices, war, speculation, the black market, industrial wages, strikes, and unemployment, as well as the diverse professions and their practices, from spinning and weaving to nursing and school teaching all by foregrounding women. Since women were defined as backward politically, this questions the formal structure of the dominant Bengali Progressive novel. It is Debaki, Bhadra, Meghi, Ketaki, Saraswati, an entire range of women through whose eyes, and whose repeatedly foregrounded household work, that much of the narrative flows. This is brilliant social realism. But it does not follow the path of socialist realism – not as Gorky wanted, not as Lukacs wanted, and certainly not as Zhdanov wanted. My reading is heavily indebted to Dr. Marik's paper and accordingly, I would not elaborate on this text further. However, it is necessary to stress that Ilyas by challenging the canons of the Western novel, by bringing together the *Khwab*, the *Namah*, and the novel, achieves his goal. In this novel, he constructs an account of the Partition (east), which departs from every mainstream historical position—Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi. The *Khwab* enables him to examine the views of the exploited poor peasants in a way that a realist novel does not permit. And in bringing the orature of folk memory into play, he reminds us of Bakhtin's comments about dialogism: 'Dialogism continues towards an answer' (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 280). Here the falling back on orature and tales handed down push the reader to search for answers.

Moving to the authors from West Bengal, let me emphasise how they all question form, language, and the meaning of realism in their quest to represent the oppressed. In Mahasweta Devi's *Operation? Basai Tudu*, there exist three registers of language – one for the state bureaucracy (including the police), one for the revolutionary cadres, and one for the Santals. Debes Roy in his novels set in North Bengal looks at identity from multiple perspectives and seriously undermines not only bourgeois nationalism of the pan-Indian type, but also Bengali nationalism/regionalism, and the orthodox discourse of the Communist Party and therewith the socialist realist narrative. Roy's Bagharu is a propertyless figure. But he fits into no schema for proletarian heroes. Roy has novels which he titles *Brittanta* (*Teesta Paarer Brittanta*, *Mufassali Brittanta*). In a book written when the impact of Bakhtin and narratology was coming into Bangla literary thinking, and in subsequent debates, Roy suggested that the novel was a colonial importation and needed to be recast in Indian terms (Roy, D., 2005). *Brittanta* was one of the suggestions he came up with. Like Ilyas in

Khwabnamah, his Brittantos seek to weave a different genre with the novel. Brittanto carries the connotation of narrative, covering the fictional and the reporting type (e.g., bhraman brittanto, or travel narratives).

In *Teesta Paarer Brittanto*, the state decides to build a barrage on the river Teesta. Local inhabitants are not consulted, nor is their eviction considered a great issue. But we do not have a narrative of proletarian resistance. Instead, we have mutual incomprehension, an emergent eco-criticism, and an identity that escapes any neat definition.

Bagharu, a marginalized Koch-Rajbangshi character in the novel, understands the river better than anyone in that area. As Ray writes, he understands the language of the river: “Bagharu, just like a Sal Tree, stood still in the middle of the river”. (Roy 2012: 95)

Bagharu uses a language that is not the “pramito” Bangla of the Kolkata-based educated middle class, the principal consumers of thick novels. This language use also thwarts his communication with a big landowner like Gayanath. Also, Bagharu doesn’t have an identity card which can prove his existence. Under the hegemony of the local landowner, an innocent Bagharu comes to believe that everything on the bank of Teesta belongs to Gayanath, who aggressively tries to snatch local ‘Adhiyars’ (landless peasants) land by any means and even takes control over a part of River Teesta by bribing a government official.

As Gramsci pointed out, the subalterns have less control over their own representation and less access to cultural and social institutions. In *Teesta Paarer Brittanto*, Bagharu does not understand the language of his elected Member of the Legislative Assembly and the MLA does not understand him. Bagharu has a dream of having his own plot of land. When sent off to a forested area by Gayanath as a punishment, he builds his own hut and feels free for the first time.

“Gayanath has sent me to this unknown land, and I have built a house. This is *Bagharubari*, the house of Bagharu. I’ll tell idiot Gayanath that the house of Bagharu exists where his vested land and control ends. Where will that idiot find me?” (Roy, 2012, p. 96)

As Prabuddha Ghosh expresses it, his subaltern language comprises signs, gestures, and broken words. His language is ‘uncouth’ and challenges the language of the bhadralok. He reaffirms his marginal cultural position vis-à-vis the hegemonic culture (Ghosh, 2020).

Bagharu fits with ‘nature’, but not with civilisation, even though civilisation perpetually exploits him. In his monologues, we hear his own voice and narration as the author doesn’t forcefully control the diversity of voices and heteroglossia. He is present at every significant event that happens on the banks of the Teesta but, he doesn’t fit into those. His primordial appearance challenges the aesthetic of a popular cultural event: “Bagharu’s nakedness was an insult to the audience. Bagharu along with his prominent nakedness stuck in front of the stage. He was standing as such he was the symbol of a rebel” (Roy, 2012, p. 416). Bagharu is present everywhere and at every event – at a temporary Government camp built for the census, at the movement of the separatists, at Operation Barga, during the flood, at the political programmes and celebrations of workers and peasants and at a dance event of the famous actress of the 1980s-90s named Sridevi. But, at the same time, he is a ‘no one’ at these events; power-holders use him for their self-interest and then neglect him. Nor is there the correct communist line leading to any progress of Bagharu.

To return to Gorky, we hear him saying at the Writers’ Congress:

“As the principal hero of our books, we should choose labour, i.e., a person, organized by the processes of labour, who in our country is armed with the full might of modern technique, a person who, in his turn, So organizes labour that it becomes easier and more productive, raising it to the level of an art” (Gorky, 1934).

In Roy, in Mahasweta Devi, or Nabarun Bhattacharyya, we find the most oppressed and exploited, the marginal, and the precariat. The full might of modern technique is viewed with a suspicious eye by all three authors. The languages of their characters embody the concrete moments of social conflict and class identity of the marginalised and exploited, but thereby they have to reject the schema of socialist realism.

Gorky in his speech also talked about the proletariat in power, building its own state. In his Belomor, the proletarian state and the discourse of development had sought to prettify the forced labour that went into the making of the canal. Nabarun Bhattacharya and Debes Ray challenge this statist vision and place the quest for desalinated subjecthood at the centre. But it is not through the agency of the wise and enlightened communist party that this is happening. In Bhattacharya, the Fyatarus are part of the precariat. And they reject statist solutions, seeking to overturn the power structures without necessarily placing a complete alternative. In *Teesta Paarer Brittanto*, the building of the barrage signifies statist modernity, which is to overturn the old order [a majority of Indian activist leftists would use the term semi-feudalism, but the present author does not accept that characterisation] and create full-fledged bourgeois modernity. Bagharu rejects both. It is through Bagharu's rejection, as well as the successful use of polyphony and heteroglossia in the novel, that Ray creates a successful modern leftwing critique, but as I have already said, that is by no means a socialist realist novel.

In Bhattacharya's novels, language is taken up again, and in his case with a frontal attack on the prudish language of the bhadralok, which has often been the language of the progressive cultural movement as well. Thus, in *Kangal Malsat*, the Raven scolds the curator of the Museum in the following way

“চার্নক ওয়াজ এ গ্রেট বাল। ওই বোকাচোদা এল আর গঙ্গার পাড়ে হেগে কলকাতার পত্তন করল- তোর মতো হারামি না হলে ওই লুটেরা মাগিবাজটাকে আদিপিতা বলে চালানো যেত?”

Job Charnock is traditionally treated as the founder of Calcutta, though had there not been a pre-existing flourishing settlement the British would hardly have made it their base. This is being commented upon in the extract.

“Charnock was a great public hair. That stupid-fucker came, shat by the side of the Ganga, and founded Calcutta! Had it not been for a great sinner like you, how could that looting and whoring man be passed off as the founding father?” (Bhattacharya, 2010, p. 295)

The mere use of vulgarisms has spawned pseudo-imitations of Bhattacharya, that, however, failed to do what he did, which was to link the politics of the elite language with the class conflicts. These come with an invocation of a counter realism, which cannot be and should not be assimilated to Latin American Magic Realism, because Bhattacharya was drawing on a pre-existing Bangla alternative tradition. The coming of ghosts, the existence of tantra and magic, do not evoke fear as much as bringing in fantasy within the novel. What they do remind us of is a carnivalesque atmosphere (Bhattacharyya, 2008, p.150).

The police commissioner's head is cut off by a flying disk. But he continues to speak normally, continues to have normal thoughts about his wife, and is ashamed that he has been beheaded without prior warning and in front of his servants. He even meets the representatives of the state in that state. As a result, an alternative reality is invoked. One can use an Indian term and say that *adbhut rasa* is applied here. Tzvetan Todorov believes that the fantastic genre is a transaction between reality and dream. Bhattacharya seeks to reject the reality where the ruler is using power to make everyone acknowledge the ruler's domination again and again, in Herbert, in *Kangal Malsat*, in *Yuddha Paristhiti*, he seeks to challenge and reject the reality that legitimises eviction for development, the ouster of adivasis from centuries-old homelands so that corporate loot can follow, that kicks out slum dwellers so that high rise buildings can come up. And, in doing so, the author pushes forward characters like the Fyatarus, who I see as the

precariat, but who could also be portrayed as lumpen proletariat by more dogmatic readings of certain Marxist texts. An alliance of Fyatarus and Chokhtars bring about a moment of anarchy. The mask of the legitimacy of the ruling class and the liberal state is torn off, but again, not through Socialist Realist modes. It is a matter of some interest that the CPI(ML) Liberation, one of the principal heirs of the original CPIML, one of whose leaders had been Saroj Dutta, saw fit to accept Nabarun Bhattacharya as a leading cultural voice of its own mass front.

Let me end with once more returning to Mahasweta Devi. In *Operation? Basai Tudu*, we come across Basai, the Adivasi rebel who leaves the CPIM, and though it is not stated that he becomes a Naxal, he clearly has an affinity with their style of armed politics. We also come across Kali Santra, a party full-timer. Kali is an honest communist in a reformist party becoming integrated with a bourgeois state. That makes him expendable. He is made to go and identify Basai. Then secret reports are written, warning that Santra is dubious because he mixes with Basai. Higher party leaders treat him as a distant person. As Basai tells him: “Kalibabu, you too should have been a Santal, a naked man”.

The Socialist Realist ideas came to India, as I said, indirectly. And by the time they came, Dutta Gupta had demonstrated the brutal stranglehold of Stalinism on the CPI. This meant a two-stage revolution theory, a subservience, now to British imperialism because it was a wartime ally of the Soviet Union, now to the Indian bourgeoisie. After independence, the same two-stage theory and the doctrine of popular frontism meant that the main inner-party debate was, where is the progressive bourgeoisie located? Inside or outside the Congress? Proletarian class independence could not flourish in fiction where it was snubbed as “Trotskyite” in real life. Thus, the best of Bangla progressive literature was created, not through the Socialist Realism of the model of Saroj Dutt or even Gorky, but through a rejection of ruling class hegemony and the articulation of polyphony, heteroglossia, alternative realities and fantasy.

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