Postgraduate English

www.dur.ac.uk/postgraduate.english

ISSN 1756-9761

Issue 40 Summer 2020

Editors:

Kashish Madan and Anna-Rose Shack

Those Backward Hordes: Representing the Indian Peasant as a 'Rebel' in Early Indian Fiction in English

Swati Moitra

Gurudas College, University of Calcutta

Those Backward Hordes: Representing the Indian Peasant as a 'Rebel' in Early Indian Fiction in English

Swati Moitra

Gurudas College, University of Calcutta

Postgraduate English, Issue 40, Summer 2020

Introduction

On most occasions, Reverend Lal Behari Dey's *Bengal Peasant Life* (1878; titled *Govinda Samanta*, or *The History of a Bengali Ráiyat* in its first edition, published in 1874) exists in the annals of literary history and criticism in India as a part of lists enumerating early Indian novels in English. It is often a passing reference, with occasional notes on its 'unusual' subject matter and words of praise for its realistic representation of life in a Bengali peasant village. For instance, G.S. Sarma inducts the novel into his pantheon of 'nationalist' novels and praises its 'nationalist purpose'.[1] Meenakshi Mukherjee, in her pioneering study of early Indian novels in English, takes note of *Bengal Peasant Life*'s firm avowal of literary realism.[2] Mukherjee goes on to rank the novel amongst what she terms nineteenth century literature of protest, alongside texts such as Dinabandhu Mitra's *Neel Darpan*, Mir Musarraf Hussain's *Jamidar Darpan* and Dakshina Charan Chattopadhyay's *Chakar Darpan.*[3] The novel's commitment towards a realist representation of the oppression of Indian peasants in the hands of planters and wealthy landlords, Mukherjee argues, stands as a marker of the novel's true worth and a sign of its anti-imperialist agenda, despite its many faults.[4]

Curiously, *Bengal Peasant Life* came into existence as a novel courtesy of a contest held by a wealthy landlord. In 1871, Babu Joykissen Mookerjea, the zamindar of Uttarpara, offered a hefty sum for the best novel written in Bengali or English, describing the 'Social and Domestic

[1] G.S. Sarma, *Nationalism in Indo-Anglian Fiction* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1978), pp. 36-40.
[2] Meenakshi Mukherjee, *The Perishable Empire: Essays on Indian Writing in English* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 56-57.
[3] Ibid., pp. 56-57.
[4] Ibid., pp. 56-57.

Life of the Rural Population and Working Classes of Bengal'. The unique circumstances of the novel's composition appear to demand verisimilitude, while the oft-repeated truth claims of the novelist in the text reinforces this documentary intent. The novel's documentation of oppression, however, is punctuated by hopeful interjections about the future of the humble *ryot* (tenant farmer or peasant) under the benevolent British Government. For example, Dey writes:

> The year 1859 witnessed a great change in the status of the Bengal ráiyat. Act X of that year is justly regarded as the Magna Charta of the peasantry of Bengal; and though, owing to causes inherent in the ráiyat himself, namely, his ignorance and the consequent want of spirit, that celebrated piece of legislation has not done him all the good it is calculated to do, it must be admitted that it has effected his legal emancipation.[5]

The above lines, when read in the context of the abject historical failure of the Act X of 1859 to safeguard the rights of tenants, other than the large-landholding occupancy *ryot*s, puts into question the novel's commitment to justice for the Bengali peasantry. Mukherjee, in fact, finds the aforementioned lines a show of abject 'political acquiescence'.[6] Such acquiescence could very well have had to do with the 'adjudicators in England', whose input would eventually determine the fate of the novel in Mookerjea's contest.[7] Regardless of authorial motivation, it is of note that Dey's 'authentic history' of the Bengali peasant holds the 'natural' characteristics of the Bengali peasantry responsible for their state of poverty and backwardness.[8] It places the sole onus for the progress of the Bengali peasantry on the benevolent colonial state. In the process, the novelist manages to erase a very significant aspect of the history of the nineteenth century Bengali peasant: that of the 'material constitution',[9] of economic backwardness of the peasant in rural Bengal. The systematic economic drain of the province post-1757 led to economic backwardness. The educated

[5] Lal Behari Dey, *Bengal Peasant Life* (New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1984 [1878]), p. 364.
[6] Mukherjee, p. 57.
[7] Dey, *Bengal Peasant Life*, p. vii.
[8] Ibid., p. 3.
[9] Prathama Banerjee, *Politics of Time: "Primitives" and History-writing in a Colonial Society* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 17.

middle classes of Bengal, as collaborators of the East India Company and parasitic absentee landlords, played an active role in this process.

This essay seeks to consider the question of this claim to authenticity of the 'authentic history' of the Bengali peasant, contained within the pages of the 'modern' novel written in the language of the Empire. While addressing debates on the so-called 'Bengal Renaissance' is well beyond the scope of this essay, it is important nonetheless to note that the Bengali *bhadralok*'s claim to modernity did not come without a set of problems. The so-called *bhadralok* was a social class constituted by the transformation of occupational structures in colonial Bengal, the benefit of which was primarily claimed by the Hindu upper castes. The time of modernity, by its very nature, might be inhabited only by the truly modern, while 'others, with other histories and other temporalities, can no longer by themselves appear on the stage of world history to disrupt its script'.[10] The upwardly mobile Bengali *bhadralok*, while on their determined leap forward through an agenda of improvement and reform, found many such 'others' in their midst, whose presence disrupted and threatened to upset the possibility of a painless transition into modernity.

'Bengal must have her own history. Otherwise there is no hope for Bengal. Who is to write it?', argued Bankimchandra Chatterjee's clarion call for a history of Bengal's own.[11] This dispute with the truth claims of colonialist narratives allowed the educated Bengali middle classes to produce a coherent historical narrative of their own, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. This history of one's own created a sense of continuity with India's past, offered a rational explanation for her present state of subjugation, and had the potential to offer hope for future progress. More significantly, it served as an effort on the part of the educated Bengali *bhadralok* to reconstitute themselves as modern subjects, present on the stage of world history. It marked them capable of representing themselves, and of belonging to the same time as the colonizing British. It allowed them to overcome the perpetual time-lag imposed upon them by colonialist assertions of a historically stunted society, living in another time.[12] However, the logic and coherence offered by such historiography had its own share of pitfalls. 'Historical explanation,' as Prathama Banerjee

[10] Ibid., p. 6.
[11] Ranajit Guha, *An Indian Historiography of India: A Nineteenth-Century Agenda and Its Implications* (Calcutta: Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, 1988), p.1.
[12] See for instance James Mill, *The History of British India, Vol. I* (London: Baldwin, Cradock, and Joy, 1817); James Mill, *The History of British India, Vol. II* (London: Baldwin, Cradock, and Joy, 1826).

points out, 'by its very nature, required that the present fallen state of the colonized be explained in terms of political contingency of colonialism. The question now was—what lay in the nation's past that led to its present subordination.'[13] The answer, Banerjee argues, boils down to the presence of 'primitive' indigenous or *adivasi* communities within the nation, whose backwardness posed a challenge to the task of becoming modern.[14] Furthermore, between the two extremes of the civilized high caste male *bhadralok* and the *adivasi*, there existed other social groups who were, in varying manners and degrees, backward and non-modern. Such groups were deemed to pose similar threats to the possibility of becoming truly modern. The so-called introspective inward turn of the *bhadralok* in the nineteenth century led to the identification of many such pockets of unacceptable backwardness 'within', from the primitive Santhals to the opposite sex to the humble peasants of rural Bengal. These pockets, then, became 'objects of [the] reform/revivalist discourses' that proliferated in nineteenth century Bengal.[15]

This essay seeks to consider Reverend Lal Behari Dey's quest to write an 'authentic history' of the Bengali peasant in English in this particular context, in the light of the fact that the humble Bengali peasant and their native rural Bengal would steadily become a staple of discussion in the nineteenth century. The peasant featured prominently in economic and historical narratives, in the pages of newspapers, periodicals and novels, almost always in terms of their 'backwardness' or their status as a foil to the urbanized *bhadralok*. The first section of the essay addresses the claim to authenticity in terms of the predominance of visual descriptions in the narrative technique, in keeping with the novel's realist mode of representation. Following that, the essay argues that the novel's claim to authenticity lies in a narrative construction of rural Bengal as a changeless idyll, untouched by the experience of colonial modernity. The essay then goes on to consider the material constitution of the backwardness of the Bengali peasant, in the context of transformations in rural land ownership and rent structures, following the Permanent Settlement. The fourth and final section of the essay addresses the question of a rebellious peasantry, and the narrative foreclosure of the possibility of an agrarian unrest that might lead to lasting social change.

[13] Banerjee, p. 9.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 172.

Narrating the Past

Much of *Bengal Peasant Life*'s claim to authenticity rests in its detailed, documentary representation of the backward Bengali village of Kánchanpur, 'about six miles to the north-east of the town of Vardhamána, or Burdwán' and the residence of the protagonist, Govinda Samanta. In his *Sabhyatar Itihash I* (*The History of Civilization I*), Srikrishna Das wrote, 'Travel to the interior villages of Bengal, and you will see that the *adim kal* is present again'.[16] *Adim kal* might be understood as 'primordial times', qualitatively different in nineteenth century jargon from the *prachin* or ancient past reclaimed in the history of one's own. It is 'the underside of history', a fruitless temporality without progress, incapable of 'causing civilization by its own internal logic'.[17] The interiority of the villages in question serves as an indication of their distance from the hub of modernity, the colonial city. The physical distance from the city signifies distance from modernity itself, modernity being that exalted stage of progress one must move towards on a linear route. Lal Behari Dey, in his account of his first journey to Calcutta in his memoirs, thus offers a vivid description of the remoteness of his native Talpur. Dey speaks of the absence of *dak* (postal services) and rail-roads—in other words, modern modes of communication.[18] The village depended on the sole messenger, the *Kasid*, to ferry letters, money and articles of household consumption, 'especially in the shape of luxuries, which could not be procured either at Talpur or in the neighbouring villages, such as cocoa-nuts, betel-nuts, oranges, sweet-plums, dates, cardamums, and the like' over 'thirty miles of water and forty miles of land'.[19] The route itself was perilous, 'as the river was in those days infested with pirates' and the roads with 'robbers, and clubmen', all tangible reminders of the difference between Calcutta and Talpur.[20] The young Lal Behari's own journey began with the family priest and the astrologer's benediction, with superstitions about 'weeping at such a time' and 'looking behind' at the start of a journey, with incomprehensible prayers chanted by the priest and female relatives and neighbours.[21] The journey involved four days of walking and a day aboard a boat. It ended at Jagannath's Ghat in the city, close to the Mint. Young Lal Behari then found himself at a 'monstrous' building owned by the

[16] Banerjee, p. 67.
[17] Ibid., p. 55.
[18] Dey, "Recollections".
[19] Ibid., p. 459.
[20] Ibid., p. 460.
[21] Dey, "Recollections", pp. 462-463.

Maharaja of Burdwan, where his father lived. The building, the author points out, was inhabited 'by at least five hundred traders and merchants, who had come from all parts of India, from Behar, from Oudh, from the North Western Provinces, from Rajpootana and from Punjaub'.[22] The cosmopolitanism of the modern city stands in sharp contrast with the closed and superstitious domain that is the village, where omens and the priest's words still hold greater sway than the allure of the Mint, a living symbol of British economic might in India. The past, one might say, is another country, and it is this distance from the modern that allows the paradoxical presence of the primordial past in the present.

This conflation of the spatial with the temporal would be a characteristic aspect of nineteenth century Bengali thought, with the proliferation of western models of cartography and navigation as a practical mode of time-reckoning and the acceptance of 'the spatial intent of time'.[23] Time-reckoning in early India did not preclude chronological time-reckoning but, rather, co-existed with other forms of time-reckoning.[24] The proliferation of the Gregorian calendar and the modern clock in British India followed the administrative imperative for a unified system of time-reckoning across the entire territory. The conflation of the spatial and the temporal allowed the educated *bhadralok* to interpret difference as distance, and to conceive of progress in terms of location. Every mile away from the colonial city could thus be imagined as a step away from civilization, into the backward villages of rural Bengal and further away, into the untamed forests and hills, the domain of the incorrigibly primitive *adivasi*.

The narrator's roving eye in *Bengal Peasant Life* maps the terrain of the fictional Kánchanpur with the meticulousness of a landscape painter or the 'visualism' of the anthropologist.[25] The early chapters document the main street cutting through the village, the mud huts with thatched roofs, the two Siva temples, the shops selling everyday necessities, and so on. Everything is categorized and classified. Trees come with their scientific names; an entire chapter is devoted to paddy and its cultivation. Bengali ghosts get their own (tongue-in-cheek) catalogue, as do the three kinds of friends that a Bengali peasant boy is likely to have, with an almost scientific precision and a remarkable attention to detail. There is similar exactitude in the delineation of the

[22] Ibid., p. 463.
[23] Banerjee, p. 64.
[24] Romila Thapar, *Time as a Metaphor of History: Early India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996).
[25] Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 106.

habits and customs of the natives of Kánchanpur as the author offers thick descriptions of an exorcism or a *sati*, a village women's 'parliament' or a day in a *páthsala*. One can almost visualize a rural establishment not unlike Hunter's rural Bengal, wherein the pulse of life did not 'move a single beat faster for all the calamities and panic of the outside world'.[26]

The predominance of visual description in Dey's narrative technique is striking. It is in vogue in the eighteenth and nineteenth century realist novel, which, in an 'incessant need to authenticate [the] 'real'', sought to develop newer, more complex and appropriate techniques of representation of reality.[27] Visualization, as Johannes Fabian points out, renders the object of knowledge concrete and distinct, translates it into an entity separate and 'distant from the knower'.[28] The Kánchanpur in the pages of *Bengal Peasant Life* is far away, physically and temporally, from the modern city of the reader where time moves too quickly. The peasant inhabitant of Kánchanpur, with his non-modern beliefs and practices, his mode of life, attuned to the demands of cultivation and the seasonal variations of nature, is by no means a contemporary of the upstart denizen of Calcutta and the novel's intended audience. The visual, furthermore, as a privileged mode of knowing in empiricist and positivist theories of knowledge, bolsters the narrator's claim to history and truth-telling.[29] It sets him up as a dispenser of authenticity, justifying the ways of the peasant to his readers who are—having chosen to read beyond the first, prefatory chapter, accepting all his terms and conditions—now contract-bound to accept his claim to truth.

The Authenticity of the Bengali Peasant

The claim to authenticity in *Bengal Peasant Life*, however, is not merely derived from the narration of a true history of the Bengali peasant. The claim is also a product of the very nature of the subject of the narrative. It is an authentic history because the Bengali peasant and the world they inhabit is authentic, pure, untouched by colonial modernity, unlike the colonial city and its citizens. It is important to note at this point that the nineteenth century *bhadralok*, 'far from being a purely

[26] H.H. Hunter, *The Annals of Rural Bengal* (New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1975 [1868]), p. 8.
[27] Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language* (United Kingdom: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1984), pp. 127–140.
[28] Fabian, p. 121.
[29] See Fabian.

metropolitan phenomenon cut off from the countryside', had deep ties with rural Bengal.[30] Calcutta, as the headquarters of the British government in India and the hub of British commercial activity in India in the nineteenth century, commanded unparalleled significance in the colonial economy at that time. The government and mercantile offices located in Calcutta employed a significant bulk of the educated middle class. The colonial educational institutions based in Calcutta provided formal education in the English model, which had become essential to gain a foothold into white collar professions. The decline of once-thriving urban centres like Krishnanagar, Nabadwip, and Murshidabad, and the burgeoning culture of print, added to Calcutta's prominence as a cultural hub in nineteenth century Bengal. A significant section of the Calcutta-based middle classes were in fact first-generation immigrants to the city who retained ties with their ancestral villages through family members who continued to live there, through annual trips during Durga Puja, or through rentier income. The bustling colonial city moved in its own rhythm. The days were bound by clocks and calendars, dictated by the demands of waged employment and the whims of employers, leaving one exposed, among other things, to racist humiliation. Nineteenth century narratives of the city thus speak of narrow alleys and confined spaces—the single, rented room or the all-male *messbari* (communal living space, deriving its name from the military 'mess'). They speak movingly of the often-degrading experience of putting up with one's distant, well-off relatives or acquaintances hailing from the same village. Lal Behari Dey's recollections speak of mosquitoes and illnesses, another common complaint about the city.[31]

The changeless Bengali village served as a counterpoint to the city and its inexplicable combination of the wonderful and the terrible. In *Sekal ar Ekal* (*Then and Now*; 1874), the author Rajnarayan Basu, in a moment of what Sumit Sarkar calls 'rural retrospect', laments the overwhelming selfishness of the new English-educated *bhadralok* and their wives.[32] Basu argues that virtues such as empathy and respect for age-old customs and norms of behaviour might still exist, but only in the distant villages that remained untouched by the corrupting influence of European civilization.[33] In texts like Bhabanicharan Bandopadhyay's *Kalikata Kamalalay* (*Calcutta, the Abode of Kamala*; 1823), the figure of the country bumpkin raises uncertain

[30] Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, p. 170.
[31] Dey, "Recollections".
[32] Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, p. 201.
[33] Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, p. 201.

questions about the transgressions of existence in the modern city, 'Is it true, he asks, that the residents of this city go out to work after an early meal and don't come back home until fairly late at night, and that too simply to eat and sleep in before leaving for work first thing next morning?'.[34] The figure of the city-dweller assuages the visitor's worries, but the anxieties remain pertinent, always under the bright surface of optimism about modernity and development, threatening to overwhelm order. Thus, the unnamed rural women in *Bengal Peasant Life* observe while discussing husbands:

> A man may load his wife's person with ornaments, and yet may not love her. I have heard many rich people of Calcutta are of this sort. Their wives are adorned in every limb, and have jewels the very names of which I never heard; and yet those rich Bábus seldom sleep at night at home. They sleep at Máchhuá Bázár. But your husband is very good; after candlelight he never goes out of doors; he is very gentle; he never beats you, nor rebukes you.[35]

The changeless rural society, constant in its authenticity, offered relief from the ever-changing city. Its so-called backwardness, paradoxically, became the principal source of its attraction. Sumit Sarkar notes this strand of overwhelming longing for the rural in the parables of the popular mystic, Sri Ramakrishna, arguing that his appeal to the urban middle classes lay in his 'rustic' dismissal of the city and its impositions of salaried employment, 'His earthy parables seemed to bring back a rural world from which the city *bhadralok* now sometimes felt they had unwisely uprooted themselves'.[36] A similar vein of nostalgia and desire runs through *Bengal Peasant Life* as the narrator meticulously describes the terrain of Kánchanpur and the activities of its inhabitants, with details seamlessly woven in from Lal Behari Dey's own life and childhood. Indeed, much of the novel's charm lies in the seductive manner in which the narrative lingers over the intricacies of life in rural Bengal, be it in the description of a traditional Bengali wedding and its many,

[34] Ranajit Guha, "A colonial city and its time(s)," *Indian Economic Social History Review*, 45(3) (2018), pp. 329–351 (pp. 332-334).
[35] Dey, *Bengal Peasant* Life, p. 179.
[36] Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, p. 296.

distinctively rural, rituals (*Malati's Marriage*) or the tongue-in-cheek classification of Bengali ghosts and the exorcism of Áduri (*The Village Ghost*). It manages to shine with a sense of good-natured affection for the quaint charm of a world where ghosts and exorcists are real. Elsewhere, in his memoirs, Dey writes about the performance of certain rituals in his childhood in a manner that is particularly illuminating in this aspect:

> At this distance of time I do not remember the details of the ceremony [performed on the day he attended school for the first time], but this much I recollect that I put on new clothes, that I had to repeat some words, that I had to bow down several times with my head to the ground, that the family-priest received gifts in money and clothes, that presents were sent to the *gurumahasaya* or schoolmaster of the village who was to initiate me into the mysteries of reading and writing, and that a piece of *khadi* or ochre, (the equivalent of chalk in the villages of Bengal) was put into my hand. I was thus solemnly and religiously commended to the especial favour of the goddess of learning and wisdom.
>
> In this age of rampant unbelief, all this may be deemed a silly superstition. But silly it certainly is not; and if it is somewhat superstitious, it is only the excess of an essentially good feeling. It cannot be denied that the most important epoch in the history of a child is the period when he is sent to school; and it is doubtless attended with the most beneficial affects both on the child and on his parents, if that period is entered upon with a sense of the importance of the occasion, and with an invocation of the divine blessing.[37]

The superstitious, which belongs to the domain of the irrational and the non-modern, is rationalized citing universal truths. It therefore follows, without a shadow of doubt, that the superstitious ritual in question holds value for the child and his parents. The superstitious nature of the ritual is then redeemed by the fact that it is organized in good faith, and any critic who fails to discern this intent is one corrupted by the seeds of doubt that define modern times.

[37] Dey, "Recollections", pp. 450-451.

The seemingly changeless rural society becomes a palimpsest upon which multiple, conflicting emotions play out, 'exposing difficulty and ambivalence'.[38] H.H. Hunter, in his chronicling of rural India, argued that the 'true' India lay in the history of the 'silent millions'.[39] The changeless Asiatic village of the colonial imagination, as Prathama Banerjee has pointed out, was 'appropriated by Bengali historians, who argued that the real history of India was not the restless ephemerality of the politics and regimes, but the unperturbed community of restful villages'.[40] The claim to authenticity in Govinda Samanta's history, as narrated by the novelist-historian in *Bengal Peasant Life*, is drawn from the same source as Rajnarayan Basu's moment of 'rural retrospect'— from the fact that the Bengali peasant and his world could be said to remain untainted by modernity, belonging to another time.

The Changing World of the Bengali Peasant

The nostalgic narrative of the changeless domain of the Bengali peasant had little room for certain realities about the economic history of Bengal post-1757. The economic history of Bengal following the Battle of Plassey is a history of rapid, constant change, and the inevitable tension that accompanies colonisation and the 'confrontation of two alien systems of political economy'.[41] At the heart of this tension lay the question of land revenue, which would become the principal source of income for the British government in India and go on to fund further efforts for expansion of the Empire: wars, as well as the Company's trading activities in China.

The Permanent Settlement, in its bid 'to transform a semi-feudal social system into a 'money economy' by resuming the rent-free service tenures which sustained it' and to provide 'an economic and political framework for creation of land market', ended up creating a rentier class whose 'entrepreneurship lay in land-speculation' and money-lending.[42] The rent-receiving

[38] Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, p. 302.
[39] Hunter, p. 6.
[40] Banerjee, p. 61.
[41] Chittabrata Palit, *Tensions in Rural Bengal Society: Landlords, Planters and Colonial Rule, 1830–1860* (Calcutta: Progressive Publishers, 1975), p. 1.
[42] Palit, pp. 1-6.

landlords, while educated and organized, were seldom the 'improving' landlords promised by Permanent Settlement. The Settlement served to corner most of Bengal's agricultural income in favour of the non-productive classes, but did little to improve the state of the Bengali peasant. On most occasions, the *bhadralok* landlord's dependence on rent outweighed his capacity to contribute towards the improvement of the state of the agricultural land or its produce. This task was quite beyond most *ryots* except the large *jotedars* (landholders), who themselves indulged in little actual cultivation, preferring to indulge in moneylending and trading in agricultural produce instead. Multiple levels of *patni*s (sub-tenants) further ensured the segmentation of the zamindaris, with 'every patnidar fulfilling his responsibility by paying his share of rent to the one above him'.[43]

As the dispenser of the 'authentic history' of Bengali peasant life, the narrator of *Bengal Peasant Life* is contract-bound to speak not only of the authentic backwardness with nostalgia, but also of the material constitution of backwardness in rural Bengal. And therefore, as the narrative progresses, the novel's tone grows considerably darker as one catastrophe after the other befalls the rural idyll. The stock figure of the 'bad' zamindar, Jayachand Ráya Chaudhuri, demands *máthot* (a form of tax) from an already indebted Govinda, who earns the zamindar's wrath by failing to pay the surcharge. The peasants' bid to support Govinda fail to protect him, whose house is set on fire by the zamindar's *láthial*s (stick-wielding enforcers, noted for their brutality). Govinda sinks further into the moneylender's debt-trap. His brother, Kálamanik, dares to stand up to the landlord and thereafter, falls prey to the fatal sticks of the enforcers. Meanwhile, Mádhava, Govinda's brother-in-law, is forced to accept the indigo planter Murray's advance. Even the so-called 'Bengali heroism' of the peasants of Durgánagar, and the active support of the 'good' zamindar, Nava Krishna Banerjea, fails to save Mádhava from meeting an untimely death. This is followed by an epidemic and a famine. Govinda takes on even more debt, and eventually loses his land. It leads him to the city, and into the life of a daily-wage labourer, wherein he dies a lonely, miserable death and is finally 'delivered from all his troubles'.[44] Even the benevolence of another 'good' landlord, Máharáját Mahtáp Chánd Bahádur, is insufficient to rescue Govinda's fortunes.

[43] Sandip Bandopadhyay, "*Gram Bangla: Unish Shatak*," in *Unish Shataker Bangalijibon O Sanskriti*, ed. Swapan Basu and Indrajit Chaudhuri (Calcutta: Pustak Biponi, 2003), pp. 55–71 (p. 58).

[44] Dey, *Bengal Peasant* Life, p. 375.

The landlord duo of Nava Krishna Banerjea of Durganagar and Jayachand Ráya Chaudhuri of Kánchanpur stand as an instance of the 'good' zamindar/ 'bad' zamindar binary that is a recurring trope in the narratives of the period. The narrator-historian is quick to observe:

> I beg the reader not to run away with the idea that all zamindárs of Bengal are like Jayachand Ráya Chaudhuri, of Kánchanpur. Amongst landholders, as amongst every class of men, there are black sheep as well as white. Before this story is wound up I hope to present to the reader the picture of a just, humane, and philanthropic zamindár—the father of his people; but the lines of our hero had fallen on unpleasant places, and it was his fate—so Govinda expressed himself—to have his homestead in the zámindari of a man who was a Bengal tiger in human shape.[45]

There is a clear distinction drawn here, a reassurance—not *all* landlords are like the 'bad' zamindar—which is then rationalized with the statement of a universal truth, 'Amongst landholders, as amongst every class of men, there are black sheep as well as white'. It is Govinda's fate that has placed him in the wrong zamindar's domain, the narrative points out:

> *Govinda.* 'The fact is, though the *Kompáni Báhádur* is just and merciful, it has made laws on the supposition that the jamidárs have common honesty and humanity. The *Kompáni Báhádur* never dreamt the jamidárs would be so wicked.'
>
> *Rasamaya.* 'But you don't mean to say that all jamidárs are wicked. The jámidar of my maternal uncle in Zilla Hugli is said to be a very good man. My uncle says that that jamidár is the father of his ráiyats. He not only does not exact

[45] Ibid., p 262.

> illegal cesses, but in a season of drought, or of inundation, he exempts the ráiyats from paying rent.'[46]

In this vision of the structures of power in rural Bengal, spoken by the peasants themselves, the East India Company is a paradigm of justice. 'Good' landlords uphold the paternalist ideal of tenant–landlord relationship. The 'good' landlord, though clearly in a position of power over the tenant, is nonetheless a positive figure because of the benevolent nature of his actions. It is a happy social hierarchy where there is no oppression, no internal strife or desire for upward mobility, no sense of resentment in the consolidation of land and property rights in the hands of the upper caste zamindar. It is telling that while the 'bad' zamindar in the novel appears to not have the benefit of either a Sanskrit (classical) or English education, the 'good' zamindar is an alumnus of the Hindu College and is a member of the British Indian Association, a thoroughly 'modern' man.

Meenakshi Mukherjee is of the opinion that the 'later chapters' of *Bengal Peasant Life* 'lift the novel above its documentary status'.[47] It is however, possible to argue that these later, darker chapters further circumscribe *Bengal Peasant Life* in its 'documentary-ness'. This is evident in the shift in title in the expanded second edition—which contained these chapters—from *Govinda Samanta* to *Bengal Peasant Life*, from the story of an individual Bengali peasant to an 'authentic history' of the Bengali peasantry. It is this shift that necessitates the presence of the 'good' zamindar and the 'bad' zamindar in the narrative. The *bhadralok* imperative to improve the backward masses who could not progress themselves, and the reality of the landlord's role in the structures of power, presents a moment of disjuncture. The narrative of *Bengal Peasant Life* cannot admit to this contradiction any more than it can surrender the longing for a changeless rural idyll and its authenticity. The figure of the 'good' zamindar appears in the novel almost as a desperate measure, an idealized figure that serves to erase the culpability of the *bhadralok* in the material constitution of the backwardness of the peasant. The narrator of *Bengal Peasant Life* thus 'crowns'

[46] Dey, *Bengal Peasant Life*, p. 270.
[47] Mukherjee, p. 58.

Nava Krishna Banerjea with 'complete success,' despite his evident failure within the narrative to prevent his *ryot*s from being assaulted by the planters' men or tortured into accepting the advance:

> As in the course of this narrative we shall not have occasion to mention the name of Nava Krishna Banerjea, the zamindár of Durgánagar, we may remark once for all that, though often opposed by the indigo-planter of Nildángá in his honest endeavours to protect his tenants and to ameliorate their condition, his exertions were crowned with complete success; and there is no name in the long roll of zamindars of Bengal which stands higher for philanthropy, liberality, uprightness of conduct, and public spirit than the honour name of Nava Krishna Banerjea. Concerning Mr. Murray, of whom the reader will not hear again, we may state that the Rob Roy principle which he adopted—"the simple plan that they should take who have the power, and they should keep who can"—did him little good. His oppression created universal disaffection among the peasantry, and produced an outbreak some years afterwards; and he had so completely mismanaged affairs that the Bengal indigo concern, of whom he was a servant, were obliged to shut up shop and sell the factory to the highest bidder.[48]

The upholding of Act X of 1859 as the deliverance of the peasantry of Bengal is an instance of similar desperation, because the alternative is an admission of failure and culpability. Furthermore, it might lead to an acknowledgment of the possibility of a peasant revolt *unsanctioned* by the 'good' zamindar, unlike in the events of the novel. In the words of Bankimchandra Chatterjee in his sociological essay, *Bengal's Peasants*:

> Whose prosperity is the country's prosperity? I see your prosperity and mine, but are you and I the country? And how many people do these peasants represent? If you leave them out, how many people will be there in the country? According to the figures, it is they who are the country—the majority of the people of the country are peasants. What can you and

[48] Dey, *Bengal Peasant Life*, p. 344-45.

> I accomplish? But if all the peasants were to run amok, who would be left anywhere? What would not happen?[49]

The Peasant as a Rebel

What would happen if the Bengali peasants were to 'run amok'? What would *not* happen? Bankimchandra Chatterjee's use of the Bengali word '*khepile*' for anger is instructive, referring to the Bengali '*khepe jawa*', rendered irrational by anger. *Bengal Peasant Life* ponders upon these problems as the peasants of Kánchanpur and Durgánagar are angered to the point of rebellion. Some of the most powerful episodes in the novel feature the peasants' discontent, giving voice to their complaints and their righteous anger. Despite the ultimate profession of faith in the Company's benevolence and paeans to the Act X of 1859, the criticism of the colonial administration and its failure to uphold its promises—often veiled with irony, and downright direct on occasion—serve as a strident intervention:

> The object which Government had in giving such extraordinary powers to landholders was to enable them to realise their rents regularly, and transmit them punctually to the public exchequer; but in consulting its own interest, the Government virtually consigned the entire peasantry of Bengal to the tender mercies of a most cruel and rapacious aristocracy. Happily, a more enlightened and humane legislation has taken away from the code those iniquitous regulations, but it is worthy of note that, for half-a-century, those horrible engines of oppression were allowed, by a Government calling itself Christian, to grind to the dust many millions of probably the most peaceful people upon earth.[50]

[49] Bankimchandra Chatterjee, *Bankim Rachanabali Vol II* (Calcutta: Sahitya Samsad, 1936), p. 117.

[50] Dey, *Bengal Peasant Life*, pp. 361-362.

The 'denunciation of planter oppression and colonial misrule,' as Tanika Sarkar observes in a different context, 'is on the grounds of peasant distress, the peasant emerging as the litmus test for the nature of government'.[51] It is easy to see why *Bengal Peasant Life*, in the few instances it has found a place in critical discussions, has been primarily considered a novel of 'resistance' or 'protest' in the league of *Neel Darpan* or a proto-nationalist enterprise. Intriguing, however, is the fact that while the peasants do voice their righteous anger and rebel, howsoever briefly, their ultimate fate is either subjugation or wretched death. Unlike the rebellious peasant–hero of *Neel Darpan*, Torap, the peasants in *Bengal Peasant Life* do not even have the satisfaction of physical retaliation, that of beating the planter biting his nose off as revenge for the loss of his left hand. Any material triumph remains out of the question, as though the proud waves of 'Bengali heroism' can only go this far and no further. The narrator forecloses all routes to success for the rebellious peasant: the only possible narrative of a peasant protest, in Lal Behari Dey's 'authentic history', can be a narrative of tragedy.

The seeds of the tragic outcome are strewed within the narrative itself, as the narrator–historian reminds his readers:

> We have represented the Águris to be a spirited and brave class; but it must be remembered that they are spirited compared only with other Bengali ráiyats, and Bengali ráiyats are, as a rule, a sheepish and submissive race. Were Bengal peasants like Irish cottiers, Orangemen, Ribbonmen, and the rest, zámindari oppression would be impossible.[52]

The Águris, prior to this, had been identified as a caste group '[somewhat] fairer in complexion than Bengal peasants in general, better built, and more muscular in their corporeal forms'. They are described as a 'bold and somewhat fierce race,' with a fierce 'sense of honour'. This is in sharp contrast to the 'ordinary Bengali ráiyat', who is represented as one who is 'content quietly to

[51] Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001), p. 179.
[52] Dey, *Bengal Peasant Life*, p. 280.

submit, even without a protest, to any amount of kicking,' 'accustomed' 'to be daily beaten, cuffed and kicked by the zámindar and his deputies'.[53] The fierceness of the Águris as a caste, as opposed to the *Sadgopa*s and 'other classes of husbandmen' is again represented as a natural quality, as is the passivity of the other castes.[54] The natural meekness and passivity of the Bengali lower caste peasant, then, is the key to their own tragedy.

The narrative foreclosure of the possibility of a non-tragic demonstration of peasant strength and heroism in *Bengal Peasant Life* is accompanied by lamentations on the passing of an authentic rural aristocracy, one that does not necessitate a show of heroism on the peasant's part in the first place. The 'good' indigo planters, *Ma–báp* (mother and father) of the rural peasantry, are a dying race, like 'good' zamindars. They belong to another world—that of the changeless, authentic Bengali village. They belong to another, uncorrupted time, when social hierarchy was a happy hierarchy, without a murmur of discontent, wherein every imbalance in power was a benevolent and natural one, as natural and nourishing as the relationship between parent and child instead of one based on economic exploitation. The fruitless, tragic peasant uprisings in *Bengal Peasant Life* do not take place in order to upturn social hierarchy but to inspire those in the upper rungs of the social ladder and restore it to its true state. In this vision of social order, a dutiful administration—be it that of the landlord or the government—watches over a contented peasantry in a just, benevolent fashion. They are fruitless and tragic *because* they must restore social order, the tragic tale of their heroism an inspiration for the society at large. Kánchanpur, after all, as has been repeatedly asserted, is a rural idyll, one without internal politics, without strife and tension between castes:

> [...]short of eating, drinking, and intermarrying, there is a good deal of intercourse and kindly feeling between members of different castes. An Águri may have a *goála* (milkman), or a *sadgopa* (agricultural caste), or a man of any other caste, as his most intimate friend, although they may not enjoy each other's company at dinner[...] [55]

[53] Dey, *Bengal Peasant Life*, pp. 277-280.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Dey, *Bengal Peasant Life*, p. 184.

Trouble is brought on only by the perverse forces of the 'bad' zamindar, much like the 'bad' planter in Durgánagar or Swarpur, the peasant village that forms the backdrop of *Neel Darpan*.

The fear of an angry peasantry that runs as an undercurrent throughout the novel should be taken into account in the context of intermittent agrarian unrest in various parts of colonial Bengal, of which the Indigo Rebellion was but one. While the debates on peasant 'consciousness' that has often been the staple of the historiography of agrarian unrest and popular acts of resistance is well beyond the scope of this essay, it is particularly interesting to consider the Pabna uprisings of 1873.[56] These uprisings were 'provoked by zamindar efforts to restrict the scope of occupancy rights created by Act X of 1859, peasants of Yusufshahi *pargana* (an administrative block) fought back the claims of 'high landlordism' through largely legalistic and predominantly peaceful methods'.[57] The final chapters of *Bengal Peasant Life*, composed well after 1873, would have had occasion to take note of this distinctly modern strain of agrarian uprising that made use of colonial law:

> They organized an agrarian league which raised funds to meet litigations expenses (for the 'Rampa' tribals, in contrast, the law court had been an utterly alien institution) and used collective non-payment of rent as a weapon to win specific demands like an end to arbitrarily short standards of measurement (which automatically enhanced the cultivated area and therefore the rent), abolition of illegal cesses, and some reduction in rents. Even the most radical demand occasionally raised by the Pabna peasants—to be "ryots of Queen of England"—reveal no trace of conscious anti-imperialism; but rather an appeal to the distant overlord as against the immediate oppressor, not uncommon in peasant movements elsewhere. [58]

[56] See for instance Ranajit Guha, "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India," in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies 1: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982); Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988).
[57] Sumit Sarkar, *'Popular' Movements and 'Middle Class' Leadership in Late Colonial India: Perspectives and Problems of a "History from Below"* (Delhi: Aakar Books, 2015 [1983]), p. 32.
[58] Ibid., p. 62.

Incidents of violence in Pabna—despite the largely peaceful and indeed, *legal*, means of protest on the part of the peasantry—would invite condemnation from none other than Bankimchandra Chatterjee, who wrote in the *Bangadarshan* that he was 'pained and disgusted by the conduct of the Pabna ryots'.[59] The largely Muslim peasant body of Pabna and their opposition to the Hindu zamindar also earned concerns about the so-called communal nature of the uprising from the *Hindoo Patriot*, despite the presence of a leadership that included members of both communities. This delegitimization of the Pabna protesters on account of their 'excesses', especially in a pre-Gandhi India, must be understood not in terms of a commitment to a politics of non-violence but rather, a fear of transformative social change leading up to loss of authority and wealth, and a breakdown of caste-class hierarchies. Such manner of rebellion cannot be allowed to exist in the narrative universe of *Bengal Peasant Life*, because that way lies 'madness'. The 'authentic history' of the Bengali peasant and the polite fictions of a changeless, strife-less rural idyll, considered in this light, falls apart, and what is unleashed are the deep-seated contradictions of the society, determined by caste, the rentier economy, and ownership of land.

[59] Ibid.

Works Cited

Bandopadhyay, Shibaji, *Bangla Upanyashe "Ora"* (Calcutta: Papyrus, 1996).

Bandopadhyay, Sandip, "*Gram Bangla: Unish Shatak*," in *Unish Shataker Bangalijibon O Sanskriti*, ed. Swapan Basu and Indrajit Chaudhuri (Calcutta: Pustak Biponi, 2003).

Banerjee, Prathama, *Politics of Time: "Primitives" and History-writing in a Colonial Society* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006).

Barthes, Roland, "The Reality Effect," in *The Rustle of Language* (United Kingdom: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1984).

Chatterjee, Bankimchandra, *Bankim Rachanabali Vol II* (Calcutta: Sahitya Samsad, 1936).

Dey, Lal Behari, "Recollections of My School-Days," in *Bengal Peasant Life. Folk Tales of Bengal. Recollections of My School-days*, (Calcutta: Editions Indian, 1969).

———*Bengal Peasant Life* (New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1984 [1878]).

Fabian, Johannes, *Time and the Other* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

Guha, Ranajit, "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India," in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies 1: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982).

———*Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983).

———*An Indian Historiography of India: A Nineteenth-Century Agenda and Its Implications* (Calcutta: Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, 1988).

——— "A colonial city and its time(s)," *Indian Economic Social History Review* 45(3) (2008), pp. 329–351.

Hunter, H. H, *The Annals of Rural Bengal* (New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1975 [1868]).

Mill, James, *The History of British India, Vol. I* (London: Baldwin, Cradock, and Joy, 1817).

———*The History of British India, Vol. II* (London: Baldwin, Cradock, and Joy, 1826).

Mukherjee, Meenakshi, *The Perishable Empire: Essays on Indian Writing in English* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Palit, Chittabrata, *Tensions in Rural Bengal Society: Landlords, Planters and Colonial Rule, 1830–1860* (Calcutta: Progressive Publishers, 1975).

Sarkar, Sumit, *Writing Social History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997).

———*'Popular' Movements and 'Middle Class' Leadership in Late Colonial India: Perspectives and Problems of a "History from Below"* (Delhi: Aakar Books, 2015 [1983].)

Sarkar, Tanika, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001).

Sarma, G.S *Nationalism in Indo-Anglian Fiction* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1978).

Thapar, Romila *Time as a Metaphor of History: Early India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996).