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## A Geographical Analysis of a River-centric Bengali Novel: Titash Ekti Nadir Naam

**Dr. Ananta Gope**

Assistant Professor, Department of Geography, Vivekananda Mahavidyalaya  
Burdwan, West Bengal, India

### **Abstract:**

Written texts are the storehouse of knowledge of a particular area and its population and can quest the underlying social structures, individual experience and at the same time their implications on the background of a specific time as per the vision of the writers. Interpretation of the written text in qualitative way is more effective in acquiring specific cultural information related with the beliefs, values, opinions, behaviours, and social contexts of a particular community. In this respect novels produce a sense of sharing, and endorse an understanding of different sections of people, place and their different cultural values and at the same time explore how different groups reflect their own imprints on cultural landscape. This paper through a study of Bengali novel-Titash Ekti Nadir Naam written in the middle of the twentieth century searches the different aspects of a marginalized community's age old culture that evolved along the natural course of a river and try to re-visit an idea that when rhythmic behaviour of natural element, like a river's natural flow fluctuates then it brings an unwanted social change in inter community culture as well as intra culture among the communities living within its basin.

**Keywords:** Community, culture, environment, novel, river, subaltern

### **1. Introduction**

The human life is always vibrated amidst the conflict between these two entities-rest and motion. The flow and pattern of life is captured under the grasp of the river. Life gets its fullness by the combination of river current and riverside. So many novels in the world literature have written concerning the river. It is noteworthy to mentions some of them like, 'Life on the Mississippi' by Mark Twain (1883), 'Rider to The Sea' of J. M. Synge (1904), 'Fishermen of Santa Barbara' by Anna Seghers (1928), 'And Quiet Flows The Don' of Mikhail Aleksandrovich Sholokov (1928), 'The Son of Fisherman' of Vilictz Latzish (1934), 'The Oldman and The Sea' of Ernest Hemingway (1952). Many river-centric novels have been seen the light of the day by the writers of different languages in India. Among them *Chingri* (*Chemmeen* in Malayalam) of Thakazhi Shibshankar Pillai(1956) is worth mentioning.

The tale of the river spread throughout many works such as *Charyapada*, *Shrikrishnakirtan*, *Vaishnav Padabali*, *Manashamongal* and *Chandimongal* (Chattopadhyay,2008). The novelists such as Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyay, Tarashankar Bandopadhyay, Bibhutibhusan Bandopadhyay have referred to in their works, the descriptions and importance of the river in their own style. Rabindranath himself was a poet of the river. Rabindranath wanted Padma with him for ages and the next lives to come.

“O my Padma,  
Meeting of you and me for hundreds of times.”  
Poem, *Padma* in *Chaitali* (1895)

Keeping the pace with the world literature, the Bengali literature also has produced numerous novels based on life giving river like, *Padma Nadir Majhi* (Manik Bandopadhyay, 1936), *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam* (Adwaita Mallabarman, 1956) and *Ganga* (Samaresh Basu, 1957). In those novels, the diverse aspects of life and culture of fishing communities have captured that float along the flowing currents of the river.

#### *1.1. Objective*

The objectives of the present paper are as follows:

- i. To enquire, how the novelist interrelates and interprets the relation between river and the man from the geographical point of view.
- ii. To revisit the inter-relation among the river, man and society by studying the river-centric Bengali novel-*Titash Ekti Nadir Naam* written in the twentieth century.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The present paper is based on primary as well as secondary sources of information, all of which are available in the published form. Actually, the primary source of information is based on the novel itself, and on the other, the secondary sources of information are gathered from the works of earlier researchers belonging to different disciplines of knowledge. The methods and techniques applied in this research are interdisciplinary and qualitative in nature.

### 2.1. Previous Study

Good deals of works and criticisms of its inner meaning have been done regarding Mallabarman's Perception on man- environment relationship of a fishing community who live beside the river Titash in his novel. These are; Padma-Titash and Ganga by Mitra,2008; Impact on Bank Material on Channel Characteristics: A Case Study from Tripura, North –East India by Das and Wadadar,2012;River Centric Narratives: The Factors and Methodology of Filmic Translation by Pramanick,2012;The Epic Vision and the Crisis of Partition in Ritwik Ghatak's films by Mukherjee,2015;Understanding Dalit Chetna in Adwaita Mallabarman's Titash Ekti Nadir Naam, a River Called Titash by Bargi,2016 and The River as a Character in Adwaita Mallabarman's A River Called Titash by Sadhu,2016.

Although a considerable work has done on Mallabarman's novel from literature point of view, yet no work has done separately on geographical analysis of this river-centric novel. River centric novels in Bengali literature are the storehouse of geographical information. The author has given an attempt to bring out the geographical interpretation of river, riverine economy and culture of a community who lived in a hereditary way besides the river and faced uncertainties in livelihood as per the text of '*Titash Ekti Nadir Naam*'.

### 2.2. Adwaita Mallabarman as a Writer (1914 –1951)

He was born in a *Malo* family at Gokarnoghat village beside the river Titash near Brahmanberia town in Comilla District of undivided Bengal in 1914. He was the first child from the *Malo* community of the village and nearby area to finish school education. He wrote in magazines, Navashakti, Mohammadi, Azad, Desh and the daily Ananda Bazar Patrika. A member of the Communist Party of India, his writings demonstrate a strong commitment towards social equality (Biswas, 2011). He wrote the novel- *Sada Hawa* though he was mostly known for his memorable novel *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam* (A River Called Titash) which was published in a monthly magazine named Mohammadi in 1956 five years after his death in 1951. It is among the most highly acclaimed novel in Bengali literature. A unique combination of folk poetry and ethnography, Adwaita Mallabarman's tale of a *Malo* fishing village at the turn of the century captures the songs, speech, rituals, and rhythms of a once self-sufficient community and culture swept away by natural catastrophe, modernization and political conflict. Both historical document and work of art, this lyrical novel provides an intimate view of a community of Hindu fishers and Muslim peasants, coexisting peacefully before the violent partition of Bengal between India and East Pakistan.

### 2.3. An Overview of the Novel

Adwaita's ancestral home was in *Malopara* of Gokarnaghat which was situated on the outskirts of Brahmanberia of Tripura. To the *Bhadra Samaj* (Civil Society) this *Para* (locality) was known as *Gabar Para*. *Gabar* means trifling illiterate and downtrodden. *Gabars* are those who oar their boats in the breast of the river. They perform their work with intense minute care. The so-called civil society has looked them with derision. Perhaps, sometimes with contemplations Adwaita surfaced in from the deprived section. Adwaita, a son of *Malo* family has written from his own experience the novel, *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam* which is a real documentary of the river centric livelihood of *Malos*. Actually the *Malo* fishermen eke out their livelihood from the river Titash. The community includes both Hindu and Muslim families, although Hindu characters dominate the narrative. The central figures are Basanti, a young girl; Kishore, a fisherman; Rajar Jhi, Kishore's bride; and Ananta, Rajar's son. Adwaita has given enchanting description of the cultural aspects, like lifestyle, hopes and desires, festivals, ceremonies and tradition of the fisherman living in the riverside. When the stretch of the river is silted up, farmers appropriate it for paddy fields, and the *Malo* village, which has no other resource, begins to die and its culture begins to die with it. A hint of social evolution of *Malo* people is glittered in this novel. By reviewing the English translation of the book Lago (1995) commented that 'the lyrical note of the early chapters becomes a eulogy for a lost culture'.

### 2.4. Ethnography

Colonial administrative scholars and ethnographers like Buchanan Hamilton, Dr. James Wise and H.H.Risley made significant contribution to the ethnography of *Malo* community. As per their observation, *Malos* are not occupational group; they are the remnants of a distinct aboriginal tribe and have been living in Bengal Delta since time immemorial. Dr. Wise considers that *Malos* are undoubtedly the representatives of the pre-historic dwellers in the Gangetic delta. According to Buchanan, *Malo-Patni*, is a Dravidian boating and fishing caste (Risely, 1891). They came from Western India. They are short, dark-brown coloured, often verging upon black. The whiskers and moustaches are thin and scrubby, the lips often thick and prominent, the nose short with the nostrils expanded. The physiognomy indicates good temper, sensuality, and melancholy rather than intelligence and shrewdness (Risely, 1891). As per *Brihadharmapuran*, *Malos* fall in the *antayja* category (Roy, 1412). They are fish catcher and seller.

The social rank of the *Malos* is low. Brahmins did not take water from their hands. The marriage ceremony is of the orthodox type. Widows may not marry again, nor is divorce permitted. The dead are usually burned on the bank of a river, and the ashes cast into the water.

### 3. Discussion

Man is the central theme in the subject matter of a Novel. Human life evolves depending on society. Therefore, a novel is not a neutral narration of society. A river centric novel is one in which the river is the main stay to influence directly or indirectly peoples, life, livelihood, trade, economy and culture and which preserves the picture of those lives and livelihoods or the regional and spiritual emotions of human beings. The current of the river which controls the creation and destruction, which exists in sub-conscious minds of the fisher folk, which forms the dreams and desires of man, which attaches both the attainments and un-attainments, which defines the life and death ultimately finds its grandeur in the novels of the novelists with their own styles and languages (Naskar, 2002). In the present novel, the river is present in all facets: in the imagery, metaphor, music, lifestyles, customs and rituals, festivals, and above all, in the culture of the fisher folks. The river is only the hopes and confidence of their unending distress.

At the origin of river both the scientist and the poet express their surprise. Acharya Jagadish Chandra Bose (1894) opined in his *Bhagirathir Utsa Sandhane* (In Search of the Source of the Bhagirathi) that 'it seems to me that a river is like a dynamic organism'. In the expression of Kabiguru:

“Ami bose tai bhabhi  
Nadi kotha hote ela nabi”  
‘I thus think on sitting  
From where does the river descend?’  
Poem, Nadi, 1895

Likewise, the novelist has given an excellent description of the source and mouth of the river Titash in such a literary way that it touches our mind and spirit:

“...She has never found the taste of joy of coming from the spring drawing water... never face the joy of self-sacrifice in the mammoth kissing with the limitless sea...” (Mallabarman, 2013).

In this novel, the philosophical attitude of a river gets a specified dimension:

“...River flows on; the time also goes on ceaselessly. The history of time does not end. The river has no end of its flow...” (Mallabarman, 2013).

The picturesque landscape of river has been variously expressive to the life of *Malo* people. As per the opinion of Adwaita Mallabarman (2013):

“...like the little gap between the two ends of a metal bangle such as village women wear, a small gap separates two ends of Titash, its deep arc in a similar circular shape...the sky that looks at its own face in the clear mirror of Titash’s water...”

In this novel the divine nature has been ascribed on river:

“...Ananta would never come in close touch with it. But the Gods are satisfied. They have cast a similar picture on the fixed water of Titash...” (Mallabarman, 2013).

The above quotations make it clear that the river Titash is not only a part of nature but it is the multi-facets of nature. The river is the part and parcel of the people who live nearby. The beauty of glittering morning sun, azure lustre during sunset on the breast of river makes human being free from illusive world. He has given an enchanting description of the stretching banks of the river and exposes the beauty of reddish muddy water during rain which flows into thousands and hundreds of micro channels on the fields. This water after mixing with the water of Titash creates an illusory world and a lighted sweet passionate world of rainbow. The colour of small ripples in the breast of Titash during the morning sun looks like silvery garland. In the month of autumn, the feathery white clouds float in the sky free of moisture but the river is still in full bosom of water. The river regime, its charming riverine landscapes have been variously expressive to the people who live next to the river.

A large number of rural poor people, all over the world depend to a large extent on the natural resources of land, water, forests and fisheries for the supply of daily basic necessities of life. In the lower Bengal plain, the origin, growth, spread and development of riparian settlement prospered along the rivers. In the opinion of Radhakamal Mukherjee(2009):

“The Ganges plain is a regional entity, possessing what Vidal de la Blache calls an adapted and traditional genus of life ... man and the wider environment, indeed, have evolved together through mutual influences...land, river, tree and man are by no means separate and independent factors, for by reciprocal influence they form a natural equilibrium...fishes are abundant here throughout the year...man here is essentially a child of the rivers...”.

The river Titash itself has assumed a character. It has neither a foreground, nor a background, even not a container, but it is directly seen as a character. Titash also has spent her life time with Kisore, Basanti, Ananta and other. The perennial status of the meandering course of the river supplies a rich variety of small fishes to sustain their (*Malos*) steady life. Titash is not just a river in this novel; it is the very source of life, the means of sustenance of the people who live along its banks. It is the real economic world of the *Malo* community.

As the author was born and brought up within the *Malo* community, he was able to visualize directly their inherent social and cultural bond. The intra socio-cultural relation with other community was not always reciprocal. *Malos* always faced social injustice and humiliation by the Upper castes. The class and external characteristics contiguously rotate around Titash. Besides these poor *Malo* people, there are also many landless farmers such as Bande Ali, Karam Ali etc. The un-communal consciousness of the exploited people of both the groups have been depicted realistically. Class friction can also be found within the *Malo* society. To save the boat in the high currents of Meghna, Subal dived into it but Kalobaran did not get into the water. Though it was stated “...we are also going to jump with him...” (Mallabarman, 2013). The conflicting relation between the exploiter and the exploited, the limitless power and influence of the exploiter is not however at all uncontrollable. In Adwaita’s narration this reality gets sociological expression:

“...though they lose the courage to protest against injustice, they do not put up with it in any age. So, though they cannot come forward in different ages and places, these inexpressive communities demonstrate their protest sometimes by laughing, sometimes by whistling...” (Mallabarman, 2013).

Society- be it extremely emaciated- continues to flow depending on its internal force. Titash is ‘indeed’ a dynamic documentary of the fact that how the stable society went on incessantly in spite of social heterogeneity and how it relives itself based on daily activities of the people (Ghosh, 2014). Once, the river which was the common property of *Malos* became the commodities or private properties to rich farmers. As their cultural cohesion loosened, the economic pressure broke up the *Malo* way of life. In this regard the opinion of Vandana Shiva (1991) is noteworthy:

“...For centuries, vital natural resources like land, water and forests had been controlled and used collectively by village communities thus ensuring a sustainable use of these renewable resources ... Colonial domination systematically transformed the common vital resources into commodities for elite minorities leaving aside the access of common resources to the marginalized majority...”

In the beginning, one can find the bio-organizational integrity and order of the *Malo* society. But slowly the community breaks up and the *Malos* start fighting amongst themselves as new cultural influences from the city start penetrating into their lives. The life of the community and that of the river is intimately tied. Their ends come together: as the river dries up, the community dies too. Adwaita Mallabarman has left best literary illustration about the condition of the nature-inducing and crisis-inducing forced migration of the *Malos* in the following manner:

“...Malo had occupancy on the water, within the unrest bare liquids of the river. Never could they find the deep touch of reality. Never did they find a strong stay! They did not find a hard place to keep the legs. So they are floating...they float on the water as many days as the river contains water. When the water evaporates, they also disappear with the water...” (Mallabarman, 2013).

After being displaced from fishing areas, they had no access to farming. The novelist’s image has an appeal in the context of environment-inducing forced migration or crisis inducing forced migration of the fisher folk. The *Malo* fishermen were displaced or compelled to migrate because of crisis of alternative occupation that affect their livelihood due to the change of the river course and the formation of sand bar naturally, as well as economic pressure led by others. Many took to wage labour, many went to West Bengal in search of work and the youths moved into other professions. The adults who stayed on losing their profession ultimately invited their death. Thus, the novel weaves into its texture this subtext of impending tragedy (Byapari & Mukherjee, 2007).

At the end of this novel, the writer painted the pitiful tenor of *Malo* society: “... The paddy fields get exhausted on the silt bed (sand bar); there is deep water due to the rains. The wave comes from the far end of the south and washes in the *Malopara*. But there is nothing left except a little land of *Malopara*. The trees and shrubs have overgrown in that deserted land. There a chiming sound issues due to gentle breeze. Those people, who died here, perhaps leave sighs through this sound...”

#### 4. Conclusion

Adwaita tried to understand the problems of the *Malo* community as its member and his analysis of the social evolution of the *Malos* came up from his real day to day experience of their socio-economic and cultural lives. He established their problems in the developmental background of productive power and production system. This is the continuous transformation of the role of labour in the system, influenced both by natural as well as socio-cultural factors and the analysis is presented by the writer in the humanistic perspective of cultural dissolution of a community.

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