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Representing Marginality: A Case Study of Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay

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The critical issue of representing marginality often tends to locate 'authenticity' as one of its major concerns. However, to insist that without being an 'insider' to marginal experience, one has no right to represent it, is to fall into the same binary politics of exclusion. In reality, the power-relations among individual identity, gender, religion and creeds are so complex and diverse even within a 'marginal' community that they can challenge any established notion of the binary. Several works by Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay are remarakble for his representation of marginality. Of the rich ethnic variety of people appearing in his works, this paper proposes to study the Bedias and the Santals, as portrayed in *Nagini Kanyar Kahini* and *Aranya Banhi*.

It has been argued that Tarashankar himself belonged to the rural gentry, so his intimacy with the margins, however sincere, cannot be 'authentic'. On the other side, at the early phase of his career as a struggling writer, he was treated by his urban and elitist contemporaries as 'rustic' and marginal. Neither did he qualify as a radical Communist like most of the Kallol-group writers. Yet his claim was of a different kind, which we can proceed to examine .

Tarashankar's fond engagement with myth and orality helped him represent closely and convincingly the voices of such communities that hardly depend on writing. In

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terms of modern anthropology, their cultural memory can be categorised as what the UNESCO calls the 'intangible heritage', which needs 'protection' from oblivion. Diana Taylor critiques this protective attitude towards the 'other' (mostly non-Western) modes of cultural memory, for it "barely conceals a deep colonial nostalgia"(24). Taylor is interested in paying attention to the cultural 'repertoire' which contains speeches, songs, prayers, story-telling and even non-verbal gestures and embodied action or performance. These modes of transmitting cultural memory have long been considered 'subaltern' in comparison with dominant historiography. Interestingly, these theoretical developments were yet to be conceptualised when Tarashankar wrote *Nagini Kanyar Kahini* (1951), making use of story-telling and songs — which hold together the fragmentary experiences of Shivaram, Pingala and Shabala.

Nagini Kanyar Kahini (*Tale of the Snake Girl*) is narrated by Shivaram Kaviraj, an old ayurvedic practitioner. In earlier times, poison (in prescribed quantity) was used for preparing medicine. So Shivaram became friendly with a group of Bedias (snake-charmers). Shabala and Pingala, the two 'snake-girls', took this Kaviraj as a brother-figure. Shivaram's narrative is often intertwined with stories told by Shabala and Pingala. The illustration of myths through songs and legends also forms a large part of the narrative. Thus the novel tells us how the Bedias of Santhali had lost their place and later settled in the Gangetic lowlands, surrounded by deep woods. Their lifestyle remains pre-agrarian, since they had been cursed by Chand Sadagar:

> I take away your footing from this hill—this land, this society. Your habitat is gone, your caste, your honour, your wealth. . . Nobody will touch you, none will take things touched by you, nor will give you shelter in the locality[1] (Bandyopadhyay 1951, 90).

The story of their marginalisation is traced back to an 'untold' part of the *Manasamangal-kavya*. As a penalty for giving shelter to the female snake (Kalnagini) who killed Lakhinder, Chand Sadagar drove the snake-charmers away from Santhali. The Kalnagini's 'guilt' of destroying Behula's marital bliss, is visited upon the 'snake-girl': she is believed to be the reincarnation of the Kalnagini. Being the priestess of the goddess Manasa, and communicator of the Deity's will to the community, she is strictly excluded from love and conjugality. One snake-girl's youth passes by; and she is succeeded by another, mystically 'chosen' from the community.

The snake-girl's identity is constructed in a complex pattern of myth and taboos

which juxtaposes the 'natural' or the 'elemental' with the human world. There are some animals who attract their mates by using their body-smell as a signal at the mating time. This biological evidence of desire for conjugality is brilliantly woven into a dominant Hindu myth, which the Bedias have manipulated in their own terms. In *Srimadbhagavatam*, the story of 'Kaliyadaman' (subduing the snake Kaliya by Krishna) is well known. The Bedias have developed the story: Kaliya's daughter desired Krishna as her husband. Krishna left after the battle, winning the snake's daughter as a promise in marriage. He never came back; and the yearning bride became a subject of ridicule for other snake-girls. She cursed them: they too will suffer from pangs of love, and it will be revealed through the champa-fragrance from their bodies. The legend has been rendered into a passionate song:

O what fire you have burnt in my bosom – O what pain!

In that pain my venom burns, and turns into honey

Come and eat that honey from the poison-cup of my mouth, O Love.

(Bandyopadhyay 1951, 196)

This is too poor an attempt to translate the incantatory verse and its lyrical charm, captured by Tarashankar's mastery in the Bedia-dialect of Rarh Bengal. However, the song gives the image of a dark-skinned, passionate non-Aryan female, who is remarkably different from 'Radha'—the ideal stereotype of the Vaisnavic divine love. Unlike Radha, who selflessly submits her body and soul solely for the pleasure of Krishna, here we have a different kind of 'nayika' who asserts her own desire. The song, therefore, is the voice of a representative self under a threefold oppression – as woman, non-Aryan, and excluded from her own people – yet a voice that dares to speak .

This myth of the champa-smell forms the core of Pingala's story. Tormented by her own feelings towards Nagu Thakur, she grows suspicious of her very identity: is she a woman of normal human passions or a serpentine spirit in human shape ? Is her 'shame'— her unspeakable feeling— to be exposed by her body-aroma? Despite all her efforts to prove her innocence, she is exhausted by a struggle with her own emotions. Gangaram, the evil and cunning chieftain, secretly goes on spraying a champa-flavoured liquid around her cottage, to drive her into panic, shame and agony. What torments Pingala can be best expressed in her own words, spoken sympathetically

about Shabala's unrequited love:

> *Naga* and *nagini*, having their desire fulfilled, go back to their separate places. There is no love in that. But when the snake-girl takes a human shape, gets a human heart – then mere physical satisfaction cannot quench the thirst of the heart; the heart yearns for love. (Bandyopadhyay 1951, 149)

Shabala followed her impulses. She grew desperate enough to avenge the murder of her lover and leave the community. Pingala, on the contrary, ritualises herself so keenly that she has become the community. Her agony ends in her self-immolation, which falls as a curse on the community, causing its extinction.

There are many layers of the narrative that can be read from psychological, anthropological and mytho-critical perspectives. A 'Subaltern-Studies' approach will be especially interested in the ways used by the marginalised Bedias, to manipulate and modify the dominant structures of religious belief. Between the high scriptural authority of the Puranas and the oral mode of story-telling embraced by the marginal communities, we have in rural Bengal popular traditions like performing the Mangalkavyas and *SriKrishnakirtan*. These were enjoyable to the common people across class and caste division. It was probably through Manasa's 'jagan'-performances and the palakirtan-modes of circulating 'Krishnakatha' (legends of Krishna) in 14th and 15th century Bengal, that such lower-order communities as Santhali's Bedias grew familiar to the traditions. They have made the stories their own. The Muslim snake-charmers also partake of similar cultural and mythical beliefs. At the end of the novel, Shabala comes back as a Muslim Bedia's wife, followed by a re-organised group formed out of the wreck of the old community. Shabala and Pingala thus represent two aspects of the woman's position and her ritual self constructed by the community. The element of oppression is there, yet what is unmistakable is a strange power that belongs to both the snake-girls. This reflects the potential of social mobilisation and the dynamics of making a gendered identity among the so-called 'subaltern' women. The barriers which threaten the hegemonic order, are much more flexible and inclusive at the 'lower' levels of society, where different modes of marginality can co-exist irrespective of caste, religion, and gender.

Nagini Kanyar Kanini is closer to fantasy and myth than history. Shivaram does not belong to the community; but as a 'confidante' he listens to the stories from

the margin, which he recollects from memory. He never pretends to be the representative 'authority', yet he is the one who connects reality with myth and fantasy. *Aranya-Banhi* (1951) is rather 'historical', although the sense of history here gets merged with orality, myth and visual storytelling .

The Santal rebellion marshaled violence against the colonial rulers as well as the Hindu usurers, native police and jaminders. So for the Bengalee gentry, the Santals had long been associated with a negative memory. In *Aranyak* by Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay, the reference to the Santal Rebellion was somewhat respectful. Bibhutibhusan's approach was basically romantic, whereas Tarashankar's engagement with the Santals developed through a more complex journey of the 'memory-self'[2]. This calls into critique the vanities of the Bengalee 'bhadralok' class, who either joined the British historians' misrepresentation of the Rebellion, or remained blissfully indifferent to the marginal and tribal 'other'.

The journey of Tarashankar's narrator begins with an epiphanic realisation, when his car got damaged on the road. His upper-caste, middle-class gentlemanliness gets disarmed by the simple nobility of the Santals who help him to reach the dakbungalow. The narrator offers them some money, but they refuse, in the name of their heroes — Sidhu and Kanho, who taught them to help one in trouble but accept nothing in return. The old rumours about the Santal rebels used to describe them as fierce, demonic and primitive. On the contrary, what the narrator encounters now is the sign of purity and authenticity of a culture so far marginalised . He also learns that the dakbungalow is located near the place where Sidhu and Kanho performed Durga Puja before their last battle. From the Subaltern Studies perspective, this could be seen as the tribal leaders' attempt at 'Khatriyisation' and social reintegration. Nevertheless, there was something more passionate and deeper in their faith which made a synthesis between their God Bonga and the Aryan warrior-goddess. Fascinated by all he has heard, the narrator dreams of Sidhu: the hard, angry yet painful face seems to ask him, "Haven't you seen anything else"? The shocking question wakes him up. The vision of the night is not merely a bhadralok-sympathiser's romanticisation of the 'noble savage'. This can be seen as a symbolic awakening to the need of a search for that "something else" which does not feature in textbook history. And this search must begin from the margins.

The narrator moves from Dumka to Sahebgunj, and finally comes to the old

patua Nayan Pal whose grandfather made the Durga-idol for the Santals. His father painted 'patachitras' of the Hool; his uncle joined the Santals in the battles. The introduction between the narrator-self and Nayan Pal is worth quoting:

> Pal said with a sigh: "You want to hear about Sidhu-Kanho?... What for?
>
> —I write books. I'll write about them.
>
> —You, a Brahmin?
>
> —Yes.
>
> Pal said, "penam baba" and then, after a pause, "What will you write—that this black barbaric Asuras chopped how many people, set how many houses to fire? Alas, people say so. That's the fate of Sidhu Kanho.
>
> — *Naa*. Then why have I come to you? (Bandyopadhyay 1966, 334)

This bold 'Naa' coming from a Brahmin bhadralok writer, is at once a self-critical gesture, a denial of all possible misrepresentations of the heroic uprising from the margins, and a commitment to listen to the voices so far ignored. Then comes the moment when the binary between the centre and the margin gets blurred and the possibility of a 'canon from the margin' becomes strong. Pal binds the narrator-researcher, as if to a sacred contract: he asks him to write about Sidhu-Kanho, as 'Kavikankan' Mukundaram had represented Kalketu— another lower-class hero in the *Chandimangal-kavya*. Marxist critics like Pradyumna Dey may find in this analogy an attempt at Sanskritisation. However, what is more important here is a broader sociological understanding of how the lower-order Hindus, the Santals and their Brahmin friend Tribhuban – all suffering under some kind of imperial or social oppression — became part of the same folk-cultural imagination and religious zeal to fight back. This aspect has been emphasised by Ranajit Guha. The statements given by the captured rebels claimed that they were performing under the instruction of their god Bonga. Regarding the religious agency behind the statements, Guha says—"Uttered by men of a tribe which, according to all accounts had not yet learnt to lie, these represented the truth and nothing but the truth for their speakers."(80) Even so, as Dipesh Chakraborty aptly points out, Guha's approach is not altogether free from the modern Marxist historian's bias. It is unable to fully accept the idea of a supernatural agency in its anthropomorphic incarnation. This shows the limitation of disciplinary history as well.

Nevertheless, Chakraborty also argues that the relation between 'subaltern pasts' and the practice of historicising is not one of mutual exclusion. Rather, "'subaltern pasts' that belong to the 'time-knots of human existence', "can act as a supplement to the historian's pasts and in fact aid our capacity to historicise"(479)**.** This is how the narrative works in *Aranya Banhi*. Throughout the text there are attempts to find missing links between facts recorded in archival history, and the repertoire of a larger history produced and owned by the margins. The most important missing link, perhaps, is hinted at in a report from the *Sambad Prabhakar* (May 1854):

> A few days ago the Sahibs of Rastabandi abducted three women of that jungle-dwelling tribe (i.e., the Santals), and some of them attacked those Sahibs, killed three of them and rescued the women.(Bandyopadhyay 1966, 332)

The report also speaks of "one person" (possibly Sidhu) who was encouraging his followers in the name of a divine promise of their success against the rulers. This religious faith was one important factor behind the tribal insurgency in Colonial India, as theorists like Ranajit Guha have also pointed out. However, the narrator was intrigued by a different question:

> Among these women, was there someone dear to Sidhu or Kanho? Sister? Wife? Daughter? Beloved?... What fire of passion drove their bows and arrows, tangi and sarki against the guns and canons of the mighty empire? (Bandyopadhyay 1966, 332)

Pal's visual story and panchali gradually unveil how love and desire, religious zeal and a sense of political-economic rights, the personal and the collective came together as if in a whirlwind, and caused explosion. The storm and the fire are not merely metaphors in *Aranya Banhi*. It is the real thunder-storm of 1854 that brought disaster in the lives of Rukni, Tukni, Manki and the sanyasini-daughter of Tribhuban Bhatchaj. The Santals were already much tormented by economic exploitation, persecution by police and the missionaries' attempt at forced Christianisation. Above all, *this* attack on their mother, sister and beloved-figures was unbearable. The panchali sings how this terrible sin shook the divine abode of Marangbonga and Chandika, and sent down a signal through thunder and lightning to Sidhu and Kanho, calling them to rise against the sinners. The call for rebellion is given a vivid picturesque account in the narrative:

> Sidhu said, "they dare to take our women?" "Our sisters", said Kanho. …Rukni came forward, saying "Look at me. I've escaped, stabbing that Sayeb". The Bhairabi … stood up and said, "I am [your] mother. They've assaulted me, can't you take revenge?"
>
> At once, there was explosion. Exploitation for years turned these simple hearts to hardened magma; and now that surface cracked, the volcano burst forth (Bandyopadhyay 1966, 411).

This account illustrates that marginality is no homogenous and monolithic concept. It involves gender, culture, economy, religion — forms in which oppression works in various degrees. Rukni was marginalised within the tribe for being promiscuous, and getting allured to the promises of the Christian missionaries. It was only through her revenge upon the Englishman who molested her, and her participation in a self-torturing ritual to bring retribution upon the sinners, that she could reclaim the community. The Bhairabi (Tribhuban Bhatchaj's daughter) was marginalised as a widow — excluded from all auspiciousness in Hindu society. The violence upon her body places her on the same platform with the abducted Santal girls. Tribhuban himself was a Brahmin outcaste — partly due to his esoteric Tantrik practices, partly for the misfortune of his daughter and also possibly for his free mixing with the Santals. For him, there was no difference between the Santals' Marangbonga and his black goddess. He composed a 'panchali', imagining Sidhu and Kanho to be the reincarnations of Kalketu and Birupaksha of the *Chandimangal*. It is that panchali which Pal sings from memory. Pal, a lower-order Hindu whose ancestors were with the Santal kings, had to hide the 'patachitras' for fear of persecution— both from the colonial police and the upper-caste Hindus. As he says, they expose not only the Sahibs' evil rule but also the upper-caste Hindus' shame ('kalankakatha'). Through this complex web of connection between events and characters, marginality appears to be a far greater experience than we think of. The narrative also shows that the Hool was a ritualised uprising, in which several strands of marginality gave voice to their anger, loss and pain, driven by a common belief in divine vengeance .

The patachitras displayed along with Pal's panchali-song, and his rural archaic mode of speech create a nineteenth century rural ambience in which the modern Westernised historiography seems to be irrelevant. Pal's performance which combines orality with visuality, mythohistory with natural images and actions, opens up a vast

repertoire — a site for embodied and lived experience. The success of this 'performatic' and visual narrative is evident in the narrator's gradual transformation into one who feels to be 'present' in the past. His language is no longer that of an objective researcher: it is passionate with wrath and involvement :

> That Englishman is dead. Drunk with the dream of colony, dead in the midst of his lust. No loss, no regret at his death. Then there will be cyclone. Sound of bullets, smell of gunpowder-smoke. (Bandyopadhyay 1966, 403)

The narrator seems to immerse his self in the living story issued from the margin. At the same time, he tries to maintain a historical framework. It is not academic history with a search for documented facts that gives validity to the account from the margin. It works rather in a reverse way: the 'other' modes of recalling cultural memory become central, and historical facts only support the alternative version. One significant turn comes towards the narrative's end when Rukni, imagined as the 'Shakti' behind the ritualised Hool, deliberately escapes history. Her story goes on even after the ethnographer has stopped taking notes and simply listens to Pal's narration.

It is the moment of discarding the tool of modern ethnography and trying to feel the 'life' of a culture; and here that life seems to be pulsating in the character of Rukni. Her end apparently falls in the same trope of self-immolation as Spivak has noticed in Bertha's death in *Jane Eyre*. She reads it "as an allegory of the general epistemic violence of imperialism, the construction of a self-immolating colonial subject for the glorification of the social mission of the colonizer"(251), which *Wide Sargasso Sea* critiques intertextually. Bertha/Antoinette's setting fire to Thornfield Hall and throwing herself into it has been interpreted as a symbolic attempt to gain 'power' through self-immolation and thereby demolish the order of patriarchy and empire. The fire-imagery is no less vivid and significant in Rukni's self-assertion and self-immolation. Both as a strong individaul woman and the embodiment of the rebellion, she *does* express, exhaust as well as liberte herself in the forest-fire, literally and symbolically. So the fire-imagery represents her role as the 'spirit' of the Hool, and of the community as well. The idea can also partially be applied to the ritual self-sacrifice of Pingala in *Nagini Kanyar Kahini*— a possibility which Shabala has turned down. Rukni's agency is of a different kind. History cannot claim or disclaim her story, she is liberated from it altogether. As the narrator concludes, "Rukni has got her freedom in the sacrificial

fire, but Sidhu has not. History has not freed him"(Bandyopadhyay 1966, 450). The narrator-researcher himself wonders at the end whether he is really free of his 'task' of representing the margin. Has he been successful in speaking for a very different canon, in its own terms? Tarashankar's strongest claim as a sincere representer, is perhaps this: he never claims to know the inside of a culture. He rather goes through a self-evaluation, analysing his own responses and struggles with the demand of a modern rationale and the power of a different world of myth, ritual, passion and belief—while remaining a good listener instead of the 'authorial' self.

Tarashankar's representation of marginality thus remains not only a textual subject of literary criticism, but it intrigues the readers regarding their own position, attitudes, and understanding of what they have so far known as the 'other'. His stories and novels dwelling on marginality tend to pose a problem, questioning the essentialisation of marginality, and the burden of representation exclusively imposed upon a certain kind of marginal experience. The way he portrays marginality points towards a possibility where the questions of 'right' and 'authenticity' can be reformulated and reviewed from a broader perspective.

Notes

1. All translations and paraphrases from the original Bengali texts are mine.
2. This is a translation of the expression 'smriti-sattva' in Bengali, a concept used by the poet Vishnu Dey in his book, *Smriti-Sattva-Bhabisyat*. The idea is about a self-identity constructed through the interactions between the past, present and future, in which memory acts as the synthesising force .

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