

# **History, Fiction and Imagination: Investigating the historical novels of Saradindu Bandyopadhyay**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Historical recording of events and literary recording of events each have their characteristic identity. Yet it has been observed that they may be deeply interconnected. There are certain elements in the literary domain which are so extensively embedded in history that it becomes difficult to demarcate the context as solely literary.

Renowned historian Ashin Dasgupta had observed that, there is no history without humans, nor is there the history of a lone man. The lone man is reflected in literature. To cite an example, the protagonist of Sirshendu Mukhopadhyay's 'Ghunpoka', was in search of a language devoid of any crude words, to woo a young maiden. This man holds value, but is insignificant to History.

A historian is an observer of historical events, striving to provide a historical narrative based on facts and devoid of prejudices, as far as possible. An author, on the other hand, has the autonomy to add fiction or imagination to a historical period, event or character, in order to depict the human condition with a richer texture. Several historians believe that an understanding of human nature and attitude, which literature provides us, is necessary for an in-depth comprehension of a historical event.

It has recently been acknowledged that there are elements of imagination in historical interpretation. However, historical imagination differs from the creative imagination of authors or novelists. Moreover, though History is a social science and its methodology strives to remain scientific, the manner of its documentation has always revealed the profound imprint of literature.

Saradindu Bandyopadhyay had written "My novel is not fictionalised history, but is historical fiction". Fictionalised History is set in a real place, during a culturally recognizable time. The details and the action in the story can reflect a blend of actual events and one from the author's imagination. Characters can be pure fiction or based on real people. However, in a work of Historical Fiction, the story takes place in the past, but characters, actions and other details are fictionalised. It conveys a flavour of the period— its sights, sounds, smells, and milieu.

Saradindu Bandyopadhyay, a stalwart of Bengali literature, had used the canvas of history and the tools of literature to create unforgettable works. Using his historical novels as a case study, we attempt to traverse the challenging but fascinating frontier between History and Literature in order to locate the elements which have made the works so meaningful and enduring.

## **OBJECTIVE**

Our research focuses on the intriguing blend of history, fiction, and imagination in Saradindu Bandyopadhyay's historical novels. It aims to delve into how Bandyopadhyay skilfully reconstructs historical figures, events, and cultures while striking a delicate balance between factual accuracy and artistic creativity.

Our investigation aims to explore how Bandyopadhyay blends historical authenticity with fictional elements, addressing the challenges of writing historical fiction in a post-colonial setting. It also examines how his novels contribute to the collective memory of key historical events and figures. Additionally, the research highlights the role of imagination in filling gaps in historical records, enabling Bandyopadhyay to breathe life into past worlds in a way that resonates with modern readers.

The decision to pursue this research arises from a growing interest in the impact of literature, particularly historical fiction, on shaping our perception of the past. Saradindu Bandyopadhyay's novels provide a distinctive viewpoint, merging meticulous historical research with creative storytelling. Considering the complexity of historical fiction and its role in cultural memory, an analysis of his works can offer valuable insight into how authors balance historical accuracy with artistic liberty. This research aims to contribute to larger conversations about historical narratives, post-colonial literature, and the function of fiction in reinterpreting history.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The topic of our investigation centres around Saradindu Bandyopadhyay's historical novels and their fascinating fusion of fact, fantasy, and imagination. It seeks to explore the ways in which Bandyopadhyay deftly reassembles historical personalities, occasions, and cultures while maintaining a delicate equilibrium between artistic license and factual authenticity. In order to confront the difficulties of producing historical fiction in a post-colonial context, our inquiry seeks to understand how Bandyopadhyay combines fictional components with historical reality. It also looks at how his books affect people's collective recollections of significant historical moments and personalities.

In order to analyse the impact of mainstream literary discourse on cultural memory, we have employed textual analysis in our research process. Textual analysis is a research method in which spoken, written, or visual messages are reviewed critically and up close. It describes the process of dissecting a work to uncover its underlying themes, meanings, and symbols in order to comprehend the goals, drives, and viewpoints of its authors. We, through this approach have analysed three historical novels of Saradindu Bandyopadhyay, with respect to the author's colonial context.

Textual analysis is to investigate the complex relationships and hidden structures found in a text, moving beyond a purely descriptive approach. It includes reading, comprehending, and interpreting the text in light of its larger social, historical, or political context in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of its content. Textual analysis is not limited to written texts. It accepts a variety of communication mediums, including spoken words, images, symbols, and multimedia data. We have incorporated other domains of expression like songs and poems, to analyse the intellectual or ideological context of the author.

Apart from textual analysis of our subjects of case study, we have also indulged in qualitative analysis of the socio-political context of the author, and analysed other literary outcrops of the time. We have incorporated the social and political transformations of the colonial and post-colonial context of the author, in order to understand his perception of certain elements of the past, which he had presented in the veil of literature. In-depth examination is beneficial for studying the past as it offers a more comprehensive view of occurrences by incorporating a broader array of materials. Additionally, it aids scholars in grasping the subtleties of human experiences and viewpoints, challenging to encapsulate through numerical approaches.

With the use of textual analysis and qualitative analysis, we have endeavoured to draw a tangent between the author's socio-political context and his perception of the past. We have further analysed the significance of the tangent drawn in his intellectual milieu and also in contemporary society and polity.

Despite great efforts, there are certain limitations of the research, which should be identified and addressed. A fundamental critique of text analysis, especially from individuals with a positivist or postpositivist perspective, is that it is not objective. This means that the interpretations of text meanings are influenced by the author's perspective. Thus, the analysis



of the texts is based on our experience and knowledge, which is quite limited. We were unable to employ much primary sources, and had to rely largely on secondary sources. Our investigation was majorly focussed on Bengal literature, for our obvious fluency in the language. We could not include many historical literatures of other Indian vernacular languages. While recognising and addressing all our limitations, we can claim that we have tried to traverse the challenging but fascinating frontier between History and Literature in order to locate the elements which have made the works so meaningful and enduring, in popular historical imagination.

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## Literature: A Priceless Historical Artefact:

Artistic works using historical elements have often faced opposition and outrage. Ideas in people's popular historical imagination, often based on popular representation of history, have an intense impact on their sense of identity, regardless of their academic credibility. A major controversy was reported when filmmaker Sanjay Leela Bhansali created an Indian Hindi-language historical drama film based on the epic poem *Padmavat* by Malik Muhammad Jayasi. A huge wave of protests was triggered, as many communities considered it as a distortion of history, an attack on their pride and valour. This was widely reported in the media—

‘The *Padmavat* controversy took an ugly turn today when a fringe Rajasthan group called the Karni Sena threatened actor Deepika Padukone of physical harm. The film *Padmavat* that is slated to release on December 1 stars Deepika Padukone, Shahid Kapoor and Ranveer Singh. The movie has been embroiled in one controversy after other and the former royals of Jaipur are calling for a complete ban on the movie, stating that Sanjay Bhansali's film shows queen Rani Padmini in bad light.’<sup>1</sup> – NDTV

‘A member of the Kshatriya Samaj has put a 50 million rupees’ bounty on the heads of Deepika Padukone and Sanjay Leela Bhansali. The amount of the “reward” was doubled by Suraj Pal Amu, a member of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and until recently a member of the government of the state of Haryana.’<sup>2</sup> – THE DIPLOMAT

Jayasi's '*Padmavat*',<sup>3</sup> written in the second quarter of the 16th century, is a master-piece of Hindi poetry. It contains much useful material which can supplement our knowledge of the society and culture of the medieval times, but, so far, it has not been fully utilized. The name of Padmini, the historicity of which has been questioned, first found mention in this work. Padmini is the central character around which the depictions of social and political life of the time takes place.<sup>4</sup> Over the years, the character of Padmini as delineated by Jayasi, has acquired dimensions of its own generating varied interpretations.

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/what-is-Padmavat-controversy-10-developments-on-sanjay-leela-bhansali-s-film-1776389>, November, 2017, accessed on 06.05.2024.

<sup>2</sup> <https://thediplomat.com/2017/12/the-distortion-of-a-distortion-indias-Padmavat-movie-controversy/>, accessed on 06.05.2024.

<sup>3</sup> Malik Muhammad Jayasi, *Padmavat*, Lokbharti Prakashan, Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> B.K Singh, “Some aspects of society and polity as depicted in Jayasi's *Padmavat*”, Indian History Congress, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44304084> JSTOR, accessed on 18 Feb 2024.

Amar Chitra Katha, the English-language comic series (first published in the 1970s to acquaint children with the "Glorious Heritage of India") presented Padmini as a perfect model of Indian womanhood. Ramya Sreenivasan traces the history of this legend over five centuries, from its earliest extant retelling in Malik Muhammed Jayasi's *Padmavat* (c. 1540) to its adaptation in Bengal in the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> These versions, in a variety of languages (Urdu, Persian, local Hindustani dialects in Rajasthan and Awadh, and Bengali) can be divided into three main traditions- the *Padmavat* tradition, the Rajasthani tradition, and the nationalist tradition of nineteenth-century Bengal. There is significant divergence in the depiction of Alauddin Khalji in these versions. The Urdu *Padmavat* presents the ruler as generous, merciful, and wise—“Having lost Padmini, he is not interested in retaining control over Chittor. He accepts Padmini’s son Kanvalsen as the new king of Chittor. Nor is his Muslim identity particularly significant”.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, the retelling of the Padmini story in Ranganlal Bandyopadhyay's *Padmini Upakhyan* (1858)<sup>7</sup>, Jyotirindranath Tagore’s play *Sarojini ba Chittor Akraman* (1875)<sup>8</sup>, Kshirodprasad Vidyavinod's play *Padmini* (1906)<sup>9</sup> and Abanindranath Tagore's *Rajkahani* (1909)<sup>10</sup> present the legend in terms of the "patriotic Hindu" resisting the "Muslim invader".<sup>11</sup>

Several scholars have emphasised that Padmini is a fictional character. According to Aditya Behl, Jayasi’s utilisation of the well-known Rajput tale of queen Padmini, which is considered a "key historical fiction of later Hindu nationalism," can also be interpreted as an example of the reuse of Rajput martial text tropes, which Jayasi transformed into a romance and contextualised within the framework of Turkish political consolidation in North India.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Dr. K. R. Qanungo has stressed that "there is not even tolerably reliable evidence of the existence Padmini as a historical personage of flesh and blood, and that

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<sup>5</sup> Narayan A. Shyamala, Review of “*The Many Lives of a Rajput Queen: Heroic Past in India, c. 1500-1900*”, by Ramya Sreenivasan”, University of Washington Press, 2007, p.632,

<http://www.jstor.com/stable/40540770>, accessed on 06.05.24

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Ranganlal Bandyopadhyay, 'পদ্মিনী উপাখ্যান', পদ্মিনী উপাখ্যান পুস্তকালয়, কলকাতা, 1905.

<sup>8</sup> Jyotindranath Tagore, 'সরোজিনী বা চিত্তর অক্রমণ', Sri Kalidas Chakroborty, Kolkata, 1883.

<sup>9</sup> Kshirodprasad Vidyavinod, *Padmini*, Kalika Press, Kolkata, 1921.

<sup>10</sup> Abanindranath Tagore, 'রাজকাহানী', Sishu Sahitya Samsad Pvt. Lmt, Kolkata, January, 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Narayan A. Shyamala, Review of “*The Many Lives of a Rajput Queen*”, p.632.

<sup>12</sup>. Samira Sheikh, Review of “*Love’s Subtle Magic: An Indian Islamic Literary Tradition, 1379–1545*”. By Aditya Behl, Edited by Wendy Doniger”. *Journal of American Oriental Society*, 137 (3), 2017, p. 635. <https://doi.org/10.7817/jameroriesoci.137.3.0634>.

Padmini was purely a creation of Jaisi, whose literary genius practised a bluff on credulous chroniclers and the Bhats of Mewar of later times.<sup>13</sup> Despite this historical scrutiny, Jayasi's *Padmavat* became an integral part of popular culture that resonated with a large number of people and touched the ethnic sentiments of various groups. The debate over her historicity did not prevent Padmini from becoming a legend who could bring thousands of people on to the streets, protesting against her perceived dishonour. Thus, history in popular literature can prove very enduring in people's historical imagination. In turn, historical literature may also reflect more sharply the political, social and intellectual concerns of the milieu in which they were *written*, rather than the one they depict. In this paper we will explore one dimension of this through an exploration of three of Saradindu Bandyopadhyay's' popular historical novels. Before that let us look at some of the elements which influence popular perceptions of

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<sup>13</sup> Cited in Dasharatha Sharma, WAS PADMINI A MERE FIGMENT OF JAYASI'S IMAGINATION?" *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 24 (1961): 176–77. Accessed at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44140738>. 16.07.24

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## A Journey through Time and Space: History in popular imagination

Popular culture, encompassing books, films and TV series, frequently provides a starting point for discussing historical subjects. Scholars have studied this phenomenon. Historians like Robert A. Rosenstone have examined how historical films despite their frequent departures from facts, can affect the public's perception of the past.<sup>14</sup> Films like "Braveheart" (1995) and "Gladiator" (2000) have influenced how the general public views mediaeval history, though they have significant historical inaccuracies. Hayden White has studied the narrative devices used in popular culture to see how they affect historical storytelling and has shown how popular culture presents a selective account of historical events, which helps to build national identity and collective memory.<sup>15</sup> Pierre Nora, too has examined how popular culture affects national identity and cultural memory.<sup>16</sup>

The late 20th and early 21st centuries saw a global high for popular historical narratives. The expansion of free time and the ensuing desire for entertainment, together with cultural tourism and other demands, are important contributors to this development. Furthermore, as Susanne Popp has demonstrated, a rise in the anniversaries and commemorations that are reported in the mass media can be seen as a vehicle for political pronouncements that are true to propaganda and as a tool for addressing group identities and allegiances.<sup>17</sup>

People use the past, not only in order to educate themselves, but also to tackle current situations and to find guidelines for the future. Sometimes these processes concern questions about their identity and roots, and sometimes they seek anchor in the past in reaction to the current rapid pace of change in the world, which has disturbed the previous security of their worldview. The scholarly-scientific use of history is mainly used by historians and history teachers. It aims to assess the veracity of historical materials and to scientifically interpret, contextualize and communicate the results of the interpretations. Most of us have experienced this approach to history in the school and university. It is based on a need to discover new interpretations about the past. Since, the past mainly serves as background to the present, this creates a potential time movement, from then until 'now'.

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<sup>14</sup> Robert A. Rosenstone, 'History on Film', *History on Film/Film on History*, Routledge, London, 2013, p.3

<sup>15</sup> Hayden White, 'Introduction', *The Historical Text as Literary Artefact*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, United States, 1978, p. 27.

<sup>16</sup> Pierre Nora, 'Introduction', *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past*, Columbia University Press, New York City, 1996, pp. 9-12.

<sup>17</sup> Susanne Popp, "Popular History Magazines between Transmission of Knowledge and Entertainment – Some Theoretical Remarks." In *Commercialised History: Popular History Magazines in Europe: Approaches to a Historico-Cultural Phenomenon as the Basis for History Teaching*, edited by Susanne Popp, Jutta Schumann, and Miriam Hannig, NED-New edition, pp. 41–70. Peter Lang AG, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv9hj7qx.5>

Marianne Sjöland has demonstrated that in an existential use of history, the direction of time is the opposite; people turn to history in order to orient and anchor themselves due to major changes or crises in contemporary society, or in a private context.<sup>18</sup> A moral use of history aims to bring to light immoral acts in the past which for various reasons have been deliberately hidden by authorities over time. An ideological use of history means that practitioners, such as politicians, are using the past to provide historical facts with new meaning and thus justify actions and reinforce positions of power. Often, the history in question is commoditized and explicitly introduced to support the purpose and ideology of the users. A politico-pedagogical use of history emphasizes similarities between the past and the present in order to, among other things, achieve political success.

The commercial use of history appears mainly in artifacts such as film, magazines, literature and advertising. The producers are driven by interests of profit, which, through the commercialization, increases the value of history. This use of history reaches many consumers and will consequently have a widespread impact on people's view of history, but also of the present and the future.

The representation of history, which is for each one of us a discovery of the world, of the past of societies, embraces all our passing or permanent opinions so that the traces of our first questioning, our first emotions remain indelible. History is a journey through both time and space. As the quality of reflecting moving images from the past for it is not simply that this past is different for everyone but that everybody's memory changes with time and that these images alter as knowledge and ideology develop, and as the function of history changes within society. Mark Ferro emphasises that it is necessary to confront these differing presentations of the past for with the widening of the world's horizons, with its economic unification but continuing political disunity, differing views of the past have, more than ever, become one of the factors in conflicts between states combinations, cultures and ethnic groups.<sup>19</sup> He adds that to control the past is to master the present, to legitimize dominion and justify legal claims.

In addition, the literary theory-inspired "linguistic turn" in historiography highlights the significance of language in forming historical comprehension. Michel Foucault and other postmodern historians contend that language shapes our understanding of reality and emphasise the importance of literary devices in historical discourse.<sup>20</sup> Literature and history have a vigorous and reciprocal relationship in which each informs and enriches the other.

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<sup>18</sup>Marianne Sjöland, "The Use of History in Popular History Magazines.: A Theoretical Approach." In *Commercialised History: Popular History Magazines in Europe: Approaches to a Historico-Cultural Phenomenon as the Basis for History Teaching*, edited by Susanne Popp, Jutta Schumann, and Miriam Hannig, NED-New edition., 223–38. Peter Lang AG, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv9hj7qx.11>.

<sup>19</sup>Mark Ferro, 'Preface', *The use and abuse of History*, Routledge Classics, London and New York, 2003, pp. IX-X

<sup>20</sup> Michel Foucault, 'The Archaeology of Knowledge', Translated by A.M. Sheridan Smith, Pantheon Books, New York, 1972, p. 49.

A study of historiography reveals that while historical events serve as the inspiration for literary works, literary works themselves function as priceless historical artefacts. An appreciation of this interdependence enables a better comprehension of the past and indeed, of the human condition itself. Our research question demands an analysis of Indian historical literature in the colonial context.

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## **The Present Changes the Past: The colonial context and the need for historical literature**

In the absence of a strong political organisation and viable programmes in colonial India in the nineteenth century, there could hardly be any political novel in the modern sense of the term. The authors' political aspirations were manifested chiefly through their constructions of utopias, valorising the past or visualising the future.

The exposure to the European concept of history created a tension within the Indian psyche which manifested itself splendidly in historical novels and plays. The Indian mind is dominated by a different chronological structure, where time is not neatly sliced into the past, present and future and which does not conform to the linear or unidirectional construction of time. The interpretation of the artificially imposed tripartite division within the existing Hindu concept of time made the Hindus' response to time both complex and enigmatic.<sup>21</sup>

What distinguished the literary historical writings was the conscious attempt to reconstruct the past according to contemporary needs under the compulsions of colonial rule. Patriotism became the driving force to express the political ideal and to a great extent, shaped the thought process behind a particular piece of writing. Patriotic writings as spontaneous expression of the people against foreign domination began to emerge in the nineteenth century much before organised political movements for independence. The patriotic songs, poems, novels, plays and other forms of writing foregrounded two important features which provided ideological sustenance to the subsequent political movements. The first feature is the recurrence of the theme of economic exploitation of the country by foreigners. In the patriotic songs, one notices an anticipation of the economic drain theory postulated by Naoroji and R.C Dutt. Whether they are true or false, the very idea of the flight of wealth from the country caught the imagination of the people and strengthened the programmes of economic swadeshi. It identified the reasons for poverty, and prompted the middle class to look back to the past with a nostalgia for a golden age. The metaphor of the golden past and the identification of the foreign rulers with the villains of mythology are the recurrent features of patriotic literature.<sup>22</sup> This feature is exemplified by various poems and songs like '*Mayer dewa mota kapor*' by Rajanikanta Sen, '*Amar Sonar Bangla*' and '*Banglar Mati, Banglar Jol*' by Rabindranath Tagore.

The second feature being, inspired by the ideas of social reform, Indian historical writing gradually became overtly anti-imperialist as it was conditioned and influenced by 20<sup>th</sup> century

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<sup>21</sup> Sisir Kumar Das, *A History of Indian Literature 1911-56 Struggle for Freedom: Triumph and Tragedy*, South Asia Books, 1995, p.6.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p.6.



political developments which sharpened the edge of the freedom struggle.<sup>23</sup> The Bengali patriotism of the swadeshi days, writes Sumit Sarkar, ‘brought forth an extremely impressive cultural outcrop’. The impact was visible not only in the field of literature and theatre, even music and art got revitalized in novel ways.<sup>24</sup>

Bipan Chandra argued that in order to build up a feeling of national pride and self-respect in response to the imperialist critique of India’s past, the Indian historians made a zealous effort to revamp the image of the nation’s past and provide an ideological weapon to the freedom movement. The glorification of ancient India by nationalist historians meant the glorification of what appeared to them as Hindu India that is the period up to 1200 CE. The ancient period of Indian history, identified with the Hindu period in James Mill’s periodization, was regarded as one of prosperity and general well-being.<sup>25</sup>

In his celebrated work, published a quarter of a century ago, Benedict Anderson had argued that nations are ‘imagined communities’ given concrete shape by institutions, such as print capitalism. In Anderson’s words, there is a ‘paradox’ between the ‘objective modernity’ of nations to the ‘historian’s eye’ and their ‘subjective antiquity’ in the ‘eyes of nationalists’. This tension—of creating the nation while positing its long, unbroken existence—that lies at the heart of nationalism, makes the study of both nations and nationalisms fascinating, yet difficult.<sup>26</sup> This contradiction has also shaped the Indian historical political novel. When analysing it in the context of Bengal, it is important to take into account Rabindranath Tagore’s emphasis on ‘*manab itihās*’, that is social history.

Tagore’s analysis of Indian history has been an influential illustration of his life-long interest in *manab itihās* (history of man) which prompted him to interpret the history of India as a social history, and not a political one. In his view, this is where European historians have erred in their interpretation of Indian history. When they (and many of their Indian counterparts) complain of the absence of any organized history of India, they seem to make an issue only of India’s poorly documented political history. By pointing to the error in the basic premise of their research, Tagore rescued India, as it were, from its ‘historylessness’.<sup>27</sup>

The idea of historical novel was analysed as a critical category by Rabindranath Tagore. He found this intense human history of India where it unites with the whole world through meaningful bonds established between the local and the global, and incorporating (instead of resisting) all the rich elements lying outside it. When the necessity of a meaningful bond between the global and the local is being emphasised with increasing globalisation, they are

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<sup>23</sup> Bipan Chandra, *A Brief History of Modern India*, Spectrum Books (P) Ltd, New Delhi, 2018, pp.14-15

<sup>24</sup> Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India 1885-1947*, Pearson India, Uttar Pradesh, 1989, pp. 96-106

<sup>25</sup> Bipan Chandra, *A Brief History of Modern India*, Spectrum Books Ltd., 2018, p.17.

<sup>26</sup> Ishita Banerjee Dube, *A History of Modern India*, Cambridge University Press, Delhi, 2014, p.179

<sup>27</sup> Amrit Sen, *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* (ISSN 0975-2935), Vol 2, No 4, 2010, Special Issue on Rabindranath Tagore, <http://rupkatha.com/V2/n3/05TagoreasHistorian.pdf>, 06.05.2024

only following Tagore, who decades back, foretold this as the only path to India's success. In his view, Truth would ultimately evolve from the juxtaposition of these two forces and it will then be understood that Indianness can be realized through internationalism and the vice-versa.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

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## **It takes a Great Deal of History to produce a little Literature: The Indian historical novel**

One of the most significant events of this period is the growth of the political novel in Indian languages. This new genre cannot be fully and adequately analysed within the framework of Western political novels. The Indian political novel, unlike other Indian literary genres, was directly related to the Indo-British interactions and the people's response to British rule. The politics of a subject nation is understandably unidirectional, that is to free itself from foreign domination.

Due to the early spread of western education and access to western literature in Bengal, one of the first Indian political historical novels, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's *Ananda Math* was written in Bengali. It is a construction of the past with inaccuracies distorting the historical facts of the Sannyasi Rebellion which supplies the 'stuff' of the novel, and is more a vision for the future, providing a blueprint as it were, for the revolutionary organisations to be born in the next century. It is irrelevant whether it was conceived as a 'political' novel or not. The idea of the secret organisation, the identification of the country with divinity, the assertion of patriotism as the highest form of religion and the song 'Vandemataram', the paean of the revolutionaries—all were appropriated by different political parties in varying degrees later. This work, though written in the nineteenth century and not acclaimed by critics for aesthetic excellence, became most influential in the twentieth-century political history of the country.<sup>29</sup>

The rise of historical novels and plays in Indian languages were more or less simultaneous with that of the writings of Indian history itself. When historical fiction writing began in India by Indian scholars themselves, they followed the existing trends of historiography in England. The models of historical novels came from Walter Scott, of historical plays from Shakespeare and of poems from the Romantics. It is the external structure of this work (i.e. the treatment of a particular time, a part of the past, identifiable mainly by certain incidents such as battles, the abdication of power, murder or conquests in which eminent men and women were involved) that made the Indian writers interested.<sup>30</sup> Some works produced during the time include, Harish Chandra Datta's 'Aitihaasik Kahini Somogro'<sup>31</sup> in Bengali, Hari Narayan Apte's Marathi novel

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<sup>29</sup> Marianne Sjöland, "The use of history in popular history magazines. A theoretical approach", Peter Lang AG, p.70, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv9hj7qx.1>, accessed on 06.05.24

<sup>30</sup> Marianne Sjöland, "The use of history in popular history magazines. A theoretical approach", Peter Lang AG, p.70, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv9hj7qx.1>, accessed on 06.05.24, p. 94

<sup>31</sup> Harish Chandra Datta, *Aitihaasik Kahini Somogro*, Dey's Publishing, Kolkata, 2005

‘Chandragupta’<sup>32</sup> K.M Munshi’s ‘Gujarat no Nath’<sup>33</sup> in Gujarati and Kalki Krishnamurthy’s ‘Ponniyan Selvan’<sup>34</sup> in Tamil.

The early writers exploited the sources available, most of which were either in English or translations from Persian into English. They created characters many of which more anachronistic, and described situations and events which were completely imaginary. Their readers never questioned their authenticity but were enamoured by the magic of the reconstruction. Many of these writers and readers were familiar with British historians like Edward Gibbon, Thomas Babington Macaulay or James Mill, the masters of narrative prose, who provided the closest approximation to imaginative writings and inspired the Indian authors in their endeavour to reconstruct the past.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Hari Narayan Apte, '*Chandragupta Hindi*', Kamal Prabha Prakashan, Pune, 2012.

<sup>33</sup> K.M Munshi, '*Gujarat no Nath*', Pravin Prakashan, Gujarat, 2014.

<sup>34</sup> Kalki Krishnamurthy, '*Ponniyin Selvan*', Set of five parts (Tamil), MBF Publisher, Chennai, 2022.

<sup>35</sup> Sisir Kumar Das, "*A History of Indian Literature, 1911-1956*" Sahitya Akademi, Kolkata, 2005, pp.94-95.

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## The historical novel in Bengal

The early 20<sup>th</sup> century Bengali literature that incorporates historical narrative in its corpus, had an overwhelming influence on the minds of thousands of readers, which comprised mostly the Bengali educated class and middle class. The nationalist endeavour to encompass national history, in the literature of the time, was crafted to create in the collective consciousness of the society, an alternative narrative to the colonial historiography. Each age looks back to its past differently so did the nineteenth and twentieth century colonial India. The question of absolute accuracy was subordinated to the urgency and necessity of the time, people accepted the reconstructed past as truth. The relation between the professional historians and writers of fiction became more crucial now than in the last century, because some of the historians were themselves writers of fiction and they gave a new dimension to the nationalist movement and in fact created a dispersive nationalism and of the interpretation and understanding of the past.<sup>36</sup>

Some of the most eminent works of historical fiction in Bengali literature of this time include Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Anandamath*<sup>37</sup>; Tagore's *Bouthakuranir Haat*<sup>38</sup>, Romesh Chandra Dutt's *Madhabi Kankan*<sup>39</sup> and *Rajput Jiban Sandhya*,<sup>40</sup> Rakhal Das Banerjee's *Pashaner Kotha*<sup>41</sup> and Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay's *Anguriyo Binimoy*<sup>42</sup>.

A new reading public was created by the journals published from different towns. Multilingual cities such as Bombay, Calcutta and Madras with better infrastructure including printing presses, competent personnel and a sizable readership took the lead. The areas impacted by the new education and emerging social and religious issues discovered the potential of journalism and of prose fiction. An intellectual ferment, albeit limited, is very evident and the themes discussed in these journals present a sharp contrast to the literature of the past. A new literature concerned with contemporary reality was struggling to emerge. The majority of the writers associated with the journals either knew English or were exposed to the English language and this conditioned their worldview and literary style to a great extent.

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<sup>36</sup> Sisir Kumar Das, "A History of Indian Literature, 1911-1956", pp.96-97.

<sup>37</sup> Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, *Anandamath*, Dey's Publishing, Kolkata, 1882

<sup>38</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Bouthakuranir Haat*, Visva-Bharati, Kolkata, 1913

<sup>39</sup> Romesh Chandra Dutt, *Madhabi Kankan*, Ananda Publishers, Kolkata, 1962

<sup>40</sup> Romesh Chandra Dutt, *Rajput Jiban Sandhya*, Ananda Publishers, Kolkata, 1975

<sup>41</sup> Rakhal Das Banerji, *Pashaner Kotha*, Ananda Publishers, Kolkata, 1990

<sup>42</sup> Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay, *Anguriya Binimoy*, Ananda Publishers, Kolkata, 1987

The awareness of the social problems, a rational approach as opposed to a theocentric view, a spirit of inquiry, a desire to examine one's past heritage -- all these appeared in prose rather than in poetry.<sup>43</sup>

The main readership of the historical novel in Bengal was the educated Bengali middle class, often referred to as the 'Bhadralok'. This class, bound largely by ties of common economic interest, lifestyle and status, was composed of merchants, absentee landlords, clerks in the lower rungs of the colonial administration, and later those in independent professions, such as law and medicine. It was a heterogeneous group but it constituted itself as a recognizable social category, the *bhadralok*, over the course of the nineteenth century by virtue of its activities with relation to the state and society.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Sisir Kumar Das, 'A History of Indian Literature, Volume III, 1800-1910, Western Impact: Indian Response', Sahitya Akademi, Kolkata, 1991, pp. 104 - 106

<sup>44</sup> Ishita Banerjee Dube, '*A History of Modern India*', Cambridge University Press, Delhi, 2014, p.181.

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## Historical novels of Saradindu Bandyopadhyay

Historical romance was a genre which lent itself well to a number of features of the Indian literary tradition as argued by Rachel Van M. Baumer. The characters of the romances were of a type extremely familiar to the Bengali and Sanskrit stage—heroes and heroines, kings and queens, members of the wealthy classes, their servants, their priests and their soldiers. When literature takes refuge in history for storytelling, the labelling of ‘heroes’ and ‘villains’, and ‘us’ and ‘them’ is inevitable. The socio-political context of the author, often shapes his/her perception of ‘good’ and ‘evil’.<sup>45</sup>

Among the stalwarts of Indian literature, Saradindu Bandyopadhyay, who turned 125 on 30 March 2024, occupies an extremely prominent place and his oeuvre is as varied as it is impressive. Though Bengal produced many eminent novelists, none could match Bandyopadhyay’s incredible capacity to bring to life the long-buried past. Though best known for creating the iconic character of the fictional detective Byomkesh Bakshi, he has also written numerous novels (both historical and contemporary), plays, short stories, and film scripts. His works continue to be in print and have been adapted for radio, film and television repeatedly.<sup>46</sup>

Bandyopadhyay’s historical novels, in particular, remain in the sphere of contemporary literary discussion.<sup>47</sup> This paper focuses on three of his very popular historical novels— ‘*Tumi Sondharo Megh*’ (1899), ‘*Tungabhadrar Teere*’ (1966), and ‘*Kaler Mandira*’ (1951).

In his introduction to a compilation of Bandyopadhyay’s historical novels, Sukumar Sen, has asserted that Bandyopadhyay was not a historian, he was a storyteller for passionate history aficionados.<sup>48</sup> He argued that as the stories were primarily romances, they would retain their original plot and beauty even if the historical context was completely removed. Noted poet and essayist, Mohit Lal Majumdar agreed, commenting that that romance was Bandyopadhyay’s main inspiration and that like Keat’s ‘Nightingale’ he wanted to escape into the spring of life and nature. However, Majumdar also described Bandyopadhyay’s *Bagher Bachha*, short story about Shivaji’s childhood, a ‘reconquest of antiquity’. Ramesh Chandra Majumdar too praised his works for its Indian ideological context.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Rachel Van M Baumer and Joseph M. Kitagawa eds. *Aspects of Religion in Indian Society*, Abingdon Press, United States, 1974, pp.120-135

<sup>46</sup> Tapan Sinha, Jhinder Bondi, released on 8<sup>th</sup> June 1961; Satyajit Ray, Chiriakhana, released on 29<sup>th</sup> September 1967; Anjan Dutt, Byomkesh Bakshi, released on 13<sup>th</sup> August 2010

<sup>47</sup> See for instance <https://www.getbengal.com/details/saradindu-Bandyopadhyay-not-just-detective-byomkesh-but-a-master-writer-of-historical-novels>

<sup>48</sup> Sukumar Sen, ঐতিহাসিক উপন্যাস (Historical Novels), (ঐতিহাসিক উপন্যাস), Ananda Publishers, Kolkata p. 820.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

The question arises is why did Saradindu Bandyopadhyay choose history as the context to create romantic stories? History was the need of the hour in the socio-political context of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Jagadish Bhattacharya in his introduction to *Saradindu Bandyopadhyay's Sreshto Golpo*, had pointed out that History as a tool of literary endeavour was not a common practice in Bengali literature. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and Ramesh Chandra Majumdar had taken the initiative but it was short lived. Pre-Islamic history seemed to be lost from the collective consciousness of Bengal; it was Bandyopadhyay's writings that created a place for Sasanka and Dharmapal in the hearts of Bengali readers. Saradindu had himself written that in many of his stories which reflect ancient Indian culture were written as an attempt to familiarize Bengalis with their traditions. He wrote, "*Je jatir itihās nai, tahar bhoḃishhot nai.*"<sup>50</sup> The aim was to generate historical consciousness which would give rise to national consciousness and herald a brighter future.

The agitation against the 1905 partition of Bengal provided a backdrop to Bandyopadhyay's literary ventures. The unity of the English educated *bhadralok* and its greatest creation, Bengali literature of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, reflected the popular consciousness. Calcutta had become the real metropolis for the whole of Bengal. With the nationalist movement there was a quest for a past which had to be glorious, but in Indian context it took the form of Hindu revivalism. The Bengali intelligentsia was deeply influenced by these trends.

The mood of self-reliance and confidence in the heritage of the east was enormously strengthened by events abroad. The Boer war (1899) had tarnished the image of British imperial rule. The unexpected victory of Japan over Russia (1904-05) blew up the myth of European superiority which was constantly highlighted by Bengali newspapers. The ground had been well prepared in Bengal for a decisive turn away from the moderate approach favoured by mainstream political leaders, and for a close association of the new radical politics with Hindu revivalism.<sup>51</sup>

It would not be wrong to state that Bandyopadhyay's writings were historically influenced by the political need of the particular period in which he is writing— early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century when the concept of nationalism was on in full swing in India. Indian nationalism is predominantly studied in its connection with the national struggle for freedom, and this again is mainly investigated in its political and socio-economic dimensions. But the socio-economic and political aspects are not the only and, in many instances, not the determining factors for either the growth of nationalism or the course of the National Movement. For instance on the question of reform, there was almost unanimous agreement amongst all prominent Indians in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as to the desirability, if not necessity, of reform in the social and economic field, and of change in the spiritual and religious sphere.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid

<sup>51</sup> Sumit Sarkar, "The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-1908", People's Publishing House, New Delhi, November 1973, pp. 9-30

<sup>52</sup> Johannes Voigt, "THE GROWTH OF NATIONALISM IN 19TH CENTURY INDIA." *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 24 (1961): 242–53. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44140761>.



Johannes Voigt argues that nationalism in this sense is a spiritual phenomenon, which developed in India during the nineteenth century in a particular, "Indian" way, and expressed itself later politically in the national movement. Without the growth of nationalism and its agitation, it is most unlikely that the partition of Bengal in 1905 would have roused that fervour of opposition as it did. Indian nationalism was neither a side-effect, nor the result of the National and Freedom Movement, but its cause. The national awakening in the nineteenth century in Bengal as well as in the whole of India is usually termed as "Renaissance" or "Revival". But these terms obscure the fact that something completely new had been born: a consciousness of belonging to, and being part of a nation. Former expressions of patriotism and loyalty to the state differ considerably from this new national consciousness, which developed over time, changed in character, and grew in intensity.<sup>53</sup>

It is with this backdrop in mind that we embark upon an exploration of the selected historical novels by Saradindu Bandyopadhyay. The interplay between history and literature is unique in these works and which emerges dominant remains much debated.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid

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## A Voice of Her Own: Reflection of the ‘new woman’ of 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal in Saradindu’s novels

The novel, *Tungabhadrar Teere* is set in the Vijayanagara kingdom (1336-1646) in Southern India. It weaves a tale of political intrigue and secrets within the framework of the historically significant marriage of the princess of Kalinga, in modern-day Odisha, to Deva Raya, the ruler of Vijayanagara. *Tungabhadrar Teere*, an epic romance, may also be viewed as expression of the feminine ‘voice’ and how female characters have been moulded according to the needs of the hour.

The two contrasting characters of Bidyunmala and Monikonkona (both Kalinga princesses) proceed on their maritime journey to the powerful South Indian kingdom of Vijaynagara where they are to wed Deva Raya —a royal marriage which is in reality a political alliance.<sup>54</sup> Bidyunmala is a woman, who in her subtle sense of self is ahead of her time. She is portrayed as being of ‘pure’ royal blood, born to an Aryan queen. At a time when polygamy was a widespread practice particularly among royalty, she despises it and is disgusted by the idea of sharing her husband. Saradindu Bandyopadhyay recreates the medieval Indian period, but his own consciousness, trained in European rationalism, can’t help but question practices like polygamy through a character like Bidyunmala, whose strong views mark her out as a woman far ahead her time. This provides a sharp contrast with her step-sister, Monikonkona, the daughter born of a non-Aryan woman, who, like most other women of her time, accepts the social reality of polygamy and is unperturbed by it. She is enamoured by the valour and greatness of Deva Raya and falls in love with him at first sight. Monikonkona finds her sister’s disgust for monogamy to be silly, since it is not only the norm but the destiny of royal princesses. Moreover, Bidyunmala contrary to societal expectations, doesn’t abide by her father’s decision to marry her off to Deva Raya, and is surprisingly vocal about her own free will. Risking Deva Ray’s wrath, she is forthright and direct in informing him of her decision to marry the man of her choice, Arjunbarma, a commoner.<sup>55</sup> Throughout the novel The characters of Bidyunmala and Monikonkona provide an intriguing contrast between the traditional and new ideals of womanhood as they played out in late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Bengal.

The pre-independence women’s movement that began in the late 1800’s and continued till around 1947, involved two main strands. One consisted of the social reform movements led by men for the upliftment of women from the ‘shackles of tradition’ and the other comprised women’s involvement in the national movement.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Maitreyee B. Chowdhury, <https://www.himalmag.com/culture/a-tale-by-the-tungabhadra?access-token=ee16ed45-db24-411b-ab3f-28b5c7b2474f-1711809753108>

<sup>55</sup> Saradindu Bandyopadhyay, ‘□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□ □□□□□□’, ‘Tungabhadrar Teere’, Ananda Publishers, Kolkata, 2021. pp..693-815.

<sup>56</sup> B. Ramaswamy, ‘Women Movement in India’, Isha books, New Delhi, 2013, pp 21-23.

From social reforms on women's issues advocated by men of upper class and caste, to women's participation in their own autonomous organisations in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, <sup>57</sup> the women's movement in India had influenced the psyche of educated Indian men. This is reflected in the literature of the time. Bankim Chandra's *Devi Chaudhurani*, Tagore's *Chitrangada*, and Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Bamuner Meye* are some evergreen classics that can be cited as examples. This trend of giving women an individual identity beyond her narrow domestic orbit, is also portrayed in some other novels of Bandyopadhyay.

Another aspect that influenced Bandyopadhyay's writing was the notion of 'colonial masculinity', i.e. the creation of the 'manly Englishmen' and 'effeminate Bengali' typologies, that became central to the political structure of nineteenth century. <sup>58</sup> When the educated elite appealed to the British for racial equality to secure a greater role in the colonial state and society, the British ruling class in India stubbornly opposed broadening native participation. They justified the preservation of racial privilege by calling into question the masculinity of natives: that is, their physical fitness and social accomplishment. <sup>59</sup> The position of native women, and the ability of native men to protect them, were questioned. Bandyopadhyay's emphasis on empowered women in the India's past, was possibly one of the responses of the Bengali *bhadralok* to this attempt to emasculate them.

*Tumi Sondhyar Megh* offers further opportunity to explore Bandyopadhyay's depiction of women assuming the right to make autonomous decisions especially in matters which concerned their own future. Joubonoshree, the female protagonist of the novel, stands out as an epitome of decisiveness, strength and integrity. She holds her ground against her father who has organised a *swayamvara* <sup>60</sup> for her, deliberately excluding the man of her choice, Bigrahapal, the prince of Magadha. However, she also refuses to elope with the latter when he urges her leave secretly with him, as it would bring shame to her paternal and marital families. Joubonoshree thus is portrayed as a strong, woman driven by independent, rational thought who is not afraid to challenge social norms but is also strongly attached to cultural values and principles. Bigrahapal had initially been attracted to her beauty, but when she takes a strong stand by refusing to elope, she earns his respect. Though the decision would involve a great deal of risk and danger, Bigrahapal comes to appreciate her value and recognise that only such a woman could be worthy of being queen of Magadha.

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<sup>57</sup> Anuradha Jaiswal, 'The proceedings of the women's movement in colonial India', Indian History Congress, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26906294>, 7.41.223 on Wed, 10 Apr.

<sup>58</sup> Surojit M. Gupta, 'Reviewed Work(s): Colonial Masculinity: The "Manly Englishman" and the "Effeminate" Bengali in the Late Nineteenth Century by Mrinalini Sinha', University of Hawai'i Press, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20068606>, 7.41.223 on Wed, 10 Apr 2024.

<sup>59</sup> Douglas M. Haynes, 'Colonial Masculinity: The "Manly Englishman" and the "Effeminate Bengali" in the Late Nineteenth Century by Mrinalini Sinha', Oxford University Press, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2651845>, 7.41.223 on Wed, 10 Apr 2024.

<sup>60</sup> It is a type of marriage mentioned in Hindu mythology where a woman chose a man as her husband from a group of suitors.

*Kaler Mandira* is set in a period after the death of the Gupta emperor, Kumaragupta, when his eldest son Skanda Gupta ascended the throne. The story depicts the defeat of the Pushyamitras by Skanda Gupta after a long and exhausting war, as well as his fight against the Hunas to save his homeland from invasion. In the novel, Ratta Jashodhara is a fascinating female character who visited Skanda Gupta's camp to enlist his support to rescue her father from enemies. She introduced herself as a Hun, born of a Hun father and Aryan mother. She is unapologetic about her family identity and impressed Skanda Gupta with her fearless approach. Skanda Gupta acknowledges that no woman would have the courage to enter the military camp of such a large and powerful army; and it was very brave of Ratta to have entered it. He admires her strength of will and courage, to have reached him after travelling through extremely difficult terrain. Ratta is shown as a woman who is catapulted out of her safe domestic space into the treacherous, overwhelmingly male world of politics and war. She remains undaunted and proves herself worthy of facing and overcoming the challenges she is faced with. Ratta, thus, may be seen as an embodiment of the ideal early 20<sup>th</sup> century women reflected back into the past.<sup>61</sup>

Early 20<sup>th</sup> century Bengali literature shaped by the rising tide of nationalism, attempted to construct a new ideal of womanhood (albeit restricted to the middle class). The female characters in the works of exponents of leading writers such as P.C. Mitra, Rabindranath Tagore, and Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay show the contradictory aspects of nationalism through the definition of gender roles. Both in politics and in literature, the answer of Bengali women to the dominant discourse was not uniform as caste and class divisions generated different responses. Despite such divisions, the hesitant critiques by nineteenth-century women changed into a more assertive self-awareness and induced them to consider critically the imposition of stereotyped roles within the dominant nationalist ideology.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> 'Kaler Mandira', pp. . 277-376.

<sup>62</sup> Simonetta Casci. "NATIONALISM AND GENDER IDEOLOGY IN BENGALI LITERATURE." // *Politico* 64, no. 2 (189) (1999): 277–91. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43101881>, Accessed on Fri, 9<sup>th</sup> August, 2024.

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## The Barbaric Invader as the ‘Other’ in Bandopadhyay’s Novels -

One of the striking themes in the scholarly literature on nationalism is that nationalism is both the curse and the blessing.<sup>63</sup> It has been argued that it promotes a sense of identity, acknowledges the legitimacy of different cultures and histories and brings awareness of injustice and oppression; it also validates common legal and human rights and brings to light the obligations and flaws of existing institutions. Yet nationalism can also be viewed as a curse in that it breeds political and social intolerance and conflict. As the level of group consciousness in its political, cultural, economic, social, territorial or religious dimensions crystallizes into a desire for self-realization and resistance to exploitation or injustice increases, support for basic human and democratic rights for all tends to disappear and is replaced by a more minacious view of those viewed as ‘outsiders’.<sup>64</sup> Emile Durkheim has explored anti-Semitism in his sociological analysis of how groups and communities are held together. In his view, "anti-Semitism, served as a social function by designating the Jew as adversary, restored social solidarity and hatred of the Jew". In Durkheim’s own words, people "felt comforted" simply by virtue of knowing “whom to blame for their economic troubles and troubles and moral distress,” and it seemed that everything was already better. Under ordinary conditions, there was no need for such pathological sources of solidarity, but during social crises "antisemitism arose as a substitute for the sense of community, without which social cohesion (was) impossible.”<sup>65</sup> A broad survey of race debates and, in particular, the writings of Immanuel Wallerstein and Etienne Balibar show that the concepts of nationalism, ethnicity and race were inherent to the development of the modern nation-state. The divisions between ethnicity, race and nationalism are not mutually exclusive. The linkages between these divisions have not only been complex but also contingent on specific historical conditions to create conditions for racialised nationalism.<sup>66</sup> Thus, scholars have argued that nationalism as a phenomenon demands an ‘other’, around which a social cohesion or mobilisation is possible.

Interpretation of history has remained a contentious ground for academicians and politicians since India’s independence.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>63</sup>Darren W. Davis and Ronald E. Brown. “The Antipathy of Black Nationalism: Behavioural and Attitudinal Implications of an African American Ideology.” *American Journal of Political Science* 46, no. 2 (2002): 239–52. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3088374>, p. 239.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Goldberg, Chad Alan, and Emile Durkheim. “Introduction to Emile Durkheim’s ‘Anti-Semitism and Social Crisis.’” *Sociological Theory* 26, no. 4 (2008): 299–323. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20453114>, p. 303, 304

<sup>66</sup> Tejaswini Patil, “THEORISING MUSLIM OTHERING AS ‘RACIALISED NATIONALISM’ IN THE INDIAN AND AUSTRALIAN CONTEXTS.” *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 74, no. 4 (2013): 699–710. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24701166>, p. 706.

<sup>67</sup> Somshankar Ray, Views on History ~ I, <https://www.thestatesman.com/opinion/views-on-history-i-1503182922.html>, May 2023.

In the 1950s, the legendary historian Dr R C Majumdar got involved in an imbroglio about writing an officially authorised history of the Indian Freedom Movement. Before and after this incident the veteran scholar repeatedly lamented the disinterest in history among his countrymen. The situation has worsened over the years.<sup>68</sup> Antiquarians, politicians, media professionals and even social media experts have joined in to present their own version of historical events, which usually presents ancient India as a 'Golden Age' in contrast to the 'Dark' period of Islamic rule in the medieval period. The contours of a reliable history of ancient India took shape owing to the researches of scholars like Rajendralal Mitra, R. G Bhandarkar, K P Jayasawal, Rakhaldas Banerjee, R. K. Mukherji, H. C. Raychaudhuri and R C Majumdar. New vistas were opened up by the work done by D. D Kosambi, Niharrajan Ray and D. N. Jha. These professional historians attached due importance to the traditional literary sources like the Vedas, the epics and the Puranas but studied them in keeping with the methodology of critical historical analysis.<sup>69</sup> In Romila Thapar's view, those who claim that ancient India had the potential of modernity but could not achieve it because of the medievalism imported into India by Islam, wish to yoke history to the politics of communalism and actually represent a "dressing up of the colonial view".<sup>70</sup>

European Orientalist historians frequently portrayed Muslim rulers as violent conquerors who forced their religion and culture upon native populations during the colonial era. Edward Said's "Orientalism" (1978), demonstrated how Western academics portrayed the Orient as exotic, archaic, and inferior. Said contended that by depicting Muslims as illogical and despotic rulers, Orientalist discourse justified colonial dominance.<sup>71</sup> Colonial writing has frequently involved stereotypes and caricatures that serve to uphold ideas of cultural superiority and identification of Muslims as "others." Works that perpetuated preconceptions of Oriental authoritarianism and exoticism, such as Rudyard Kipling's "Kim" (1901) and T.E. Lawrence's "Seven Pillars of Wisdom" (1926), portrayed Muslims as cryptic and mysterious characters. These representations validated colonial dominance and the West's attempt to bring about civilization. These ideas influenced Indian writers who were born and raised in this intellectual milieu.

The nationalist goal-oriented history writing, was reflected in popular literature of the time. The search for a glorious 'Hindu' past, deemed necessary for national rejuvenation, often excluded from the corpus, the Buddhists, Sakhas, Huns, Kushanas, and the Muslims. In Bengal the writers selected themes which would help to construct for Hindu Bengal (and by extension India) a heroic history.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Somshankar Ray, Views on History ~ I, <https://www.thestatesman.com/opinion/views-on-history-i-1503182922.html>, May 2023, accessed on 25.05.24

<sup>69</sup> Ibid

<sup>70</sup> Anirudh Deshpande. "COLONIAL MODERNITY AND HISTORICAL IMAGINATION IN INDIA." *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 72 (2011): 1311–24. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44145742>.

<sup>71</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Vintage Books, New York, 1978, pp. 40-50.

<sup>72</sup> Joya Chatterji, 'Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition (1932-1947)', Cambridge University Press, Foundation Books, New Delhi, 1962, pp.159-161

As Meenakshi Mukherjee has argued, Bankim's 'real concern was the identity of the Bengali people, and in order to arouse them, he did not hesitate to resurrect rumours of a colonizing the past.'<sup>73</sup> Romesh Chunder Dutt conjured up the spectre of Muslim tyranny— 'The Moslem rulers of six centuries might sweep over this hoary town and demolish its towers and temples but the faith of a nation lies not between the hands of an iconoclast.' Similarly in his epic poem *Polashir Juddho* (The Battle of Plassey), Nobinchandra Sen portrayed Siraj-ud-daula as a vicious, cowardly and debauched young man surrounded by a harem of dancing girls, torn between fear and lust. Joya Chatterji contends that these descriptions were doubtfully derivative— they took on board many of the assumptions of European imperial discourse on Islam as well as the paradigms of colonial and Indological writings on India history.<sup>74</sup>

In Saradindu Bandyopadhyay's, historical novels, these ideas find some resonance in the demarcation of the 'enemy'. The setting of *Kaler Mandira* is the later Gupta age (c. 455 – c. 467 CE) when the 'barbaric' Huns invaded India. They were defeated by the Gupta ruler, but later settled in eastern India. Labelled '*Roktopipashu*' or bloodthirsty, they are portrayed as an inherently cruel and brutish group, with no human compassion whatsoever. However, they are gradually assimilated into the 'civilised' Indian society. The Huns look back to their glorious past, when they had conquered Bitonkorajya and captured its capital, Kopotkut in a bloody war. The story unfolds at a later moment in time, when the Hun ruler is said to have adopted Buddhism, and forsaken the path of violence. At the climax, the throne of 'Kopotkut' is restored to its legitimate ruler, the Aryan heir, 'Tilak Barma', who marries the Hun princess. Tilak Barma later joins Skanda Gupta against the 'Huns', invading India.<sup>75</sup> The novel thus, remains within the framework of the dominant Aryans subjugating 'others' and incorporating them into a hierarchical social order.

In *Tungabhadrar Teere*, Arjun Barma, the soldier 'hero', is compelled to escape from his native city, Gulbarga, the capital of the Bahmani kingdom (1347-1527 A.D.). He calls the city *Jaban Rajdhani*. The term *jaban* is used here to indicate (derogatorily) the alien, foreign nature of the Muslim dynasty who rule the city. Arjunbarma chooses Vijayanagar, a Hindu kingdom as his refuge from the cruelty of the *jaban* dominance. His friend Balaram is also shown as having left his homeland, *Bangabhumi* (Bengal—then under Sultanate rule), for similar reasons. At the end of the story, Arjunbarma risks his life to save the Vijaynagar kingdom from their enemy, the Muslim Bahmani kingdom.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid, p. 159.

<sup>74</sup> Joya Chatterji, 'Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition (1932-1947)', Cambridge University Press, Foundation Books, New Delhi, 1962, pp.159-161.

<sup>75</sup> Saradindu Bandyopadhyay, '□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□ □□□□□□' '*Kaler Mandira*', Ananda Publishers, Kolkata 'pp.277-376.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, '*Tungabhadrar Teere*', pp.693-815.

The opening scene of ‘Tumi Sondharo Megh’, presents Atis Dipankar, a dedicated Buddhist monk and an academician, who is very worried about the threat of invasion by the invaders from the north-west, and fragmented political scenario of the natives, who would be incapable of protecting themselves. The invaders are described as being very powerful and cruel, who would use brute force in order to assert their power.<sup>77</sup>

Thus, the Muslim invaders who invaded India, and went back and the Muslim rulers who had settled in India, are seen in the same light. Whereas, the others, who invaded India and settled down are shown in positive light, when they get assimilated into the mainstream Aryan culture.

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<sup>77</sup> Saradindu Bandyopadhyay, ‘□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□ □□□□□□’, Tumi Sondharo Megh’, Ananda Publishers, Kolkata, 2021. pp.493-633.



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## Bandyopadhyay's vision, a new dimension?

It would be wrong to state that the writers before Saradindu Bandyopadhyay did not use historical elements in the writings or to say the presence of 'lively' characters or any kind of relation with them was missing. But it could be stated that the introduction to those stories became lively due to the ray that came from outside i.e. the magnificent representation by the author who was successful in expressing or kind of giving it that kind of shape that the novel required. But it is to say that Bandyopadhyay's writings became full of colour and full of light not due to external light but with the light that each of the characters or the circumstances portrayed from the inside. It was not through his explanation but the farsightedness that brought the introduction to the historical platform it provided the readers and gave him the scope to do the puppetry with its wonderful characters in the contemporary society where the story has been given birth.<sup>78</sup>

The intellectual movement in Bengal in the first half of the nineteenth century was the work of the new middle class and the new elite which emerged in Calcutta, then the capital of India, and produced new learning and new literature in the age of Michael Madhusudan Datta and Bankim Chandra Chatterji.<sup>79</sup>

□□□□□□□□ □□ □□□□□□□□? (Historian or a fiction writer?)

Several aspects of Bandyopadhyay's world remain a broad topic of historical and literary speculation. His works were not only a broad canopy of diversity, assessing various historical pursuits yet giving it a literary shape and colour, it could be stated that his works identified aspects of a religious colouring as well as understanding the need of the hour to focus on popular history also popular culture as one of the main themes of his work to get the prestigious accolades and even an immense readership till date. The most important aspect identified would be his relevance to the period he belonged to as well as the current decades.

Historians are finding that their work is more and more driven by the realisation that understanding popular culture is essential to historical studies and history, as popular culture academics are also working to comprehend the present. Historians are realising more and more how crucial it is to comprehend popular culture to do their jobs well. Let me define popular culture so that we are clear about our boundaries. In any given society, popular culture represents the style of life that the majority of people lead.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Sukumar Sen, □□□□□□□□ □□□□□□ □□□□□□, (□□□□□□□□), Ananda Publishers, Kolkata p. 820

<sup>79</sup> K. Santhanam Ed. An Anthology of Indian Literatures, 1969, p. 154

<sup>80</sup> Ray B. Browne, *The Voice of Popular Culture in History*, American Historical Association, <https://www.historians.org/research-and-publications/perspectives-on-history/may-1997/the-voice-of-popular-culture-in-history>

Historical fiction was one of the few literary vents available for the growing political and intellectual aspirations of the educated 'Bhadralok'. To unite the nation against the colonial rulers, the creation of a valiant and glorious ancient past seemed to be the need of the hour. These were primarily Hindu histories, their heroes were Hindu Kings and Chieftains, who valiantly fought the domination of 'invaders'. The driving sentiment behind these romantic histories was patriotic: past heroism against 'alien' rulers were recalled or invented to inspire the Hindu 'nation' of the day to fight its foreign overlords.<sup>81</sup> As Bandyopadhyay joined this crusade for the reconquest of the past, he wrote in his diary on historical fiction,

“ইতিহাস অবলম্বন করিয়া কাহিনী লেখা বঙ্গভাষায় প্রচলিত নয়। বঙ্কিম ও রমেশচন্দ্র উহার সূত্রপাত করিয়া ছিলেন, কিন্তু সে সূত্র ছিঁরিয়া গিয়েছে। প্রাক-মুসলমান যুগের ঐতিহ্য বাঙালি যেন ভুলিয়া গিয়েছে। রাখালদাস স্মরণ করাইয়া দিবার চেষ্টা করিয়েছিলেন, কিন্তু তিনি ইতিহাসবিৎ ছিলেন, গল্পলেখক না, তাহার চেষ্টা সার্থক হয়ে নাই। বাঙালি জাতির হৃদয় শশাঙ্ক, ধর্মপাল স্থান করিয়া লইতে পারে নাই। বাঙালি যতদিন না নিজের বংশগোরিমার কথা জানিতে পারিবে ততদিন তাহার চরিত্র গঠন হইবে না, ততদিন তাহার কোনো আশা নাই। যে জাতির ইতিহাস নাই তাহার ভবিষ্যৎ নাই।”<sup>82</sup>

In other words,

Historical fiction in Bengali literature was initiated by Bankim Chandra and Ramesh Chandra, but these early efforts were not followed up. Bengalis today, have forgotten their pre-Islamic history. Rakhal Das Bandyopadhyay's efforts failed to rejuvenate it because he was a historian and not a novelist. There is hope for the Bengalis only if they learn about their ancestors and their past. The nation or community without a history, can have no future.

Literary fiction could never be meaningful to the masses if the language is not lucid and striking, Saradindu Bandyopadhyay worked his craft in such a way so that it would make a strong appeal to the general public. His alluring language and skilful use of historical elements resonated with them and have ensured that his works have never been out of print. His charismatic characters, like Bigrahapal, Joubonoshree, Arjunbarma, Bidyunmala, and Rutta Joshodhora have become so dynamic and life-like that it is difficult to remember the gap between history and literature and that they exist only in the imagination.<sup>83</sup>

With the example of '*Padmavat*' cited earlier, we have shown how an intense association of identity and belongingness, with any particular narrative can be socially and politically exploited. In any work of popular historical fiction, it is crucial to maintain the thin line between fact and fiction and not mistake one for the other.

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<sup>81</sup> Joya Chatterji, 'Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition (1932-1947)', Cambridge University Press, Foundation Books, New Delhi, 1962, pp. 159-161

<sup>82</sup> Shovon Basu, *বঙ্গের ইতিহাস* (History of Bengal), (১৯৬৬), p. 835.

<sup>83</sup> <https://www.getbengal.com/details/saradindu-Bandyopadhyay-not-just-detective-byomkesh-but-a-master-writer-of-historical-novels>

The reader gains knowledge of the past which elicits pride and inspiration but knows that not every word is 'fact' and not every character is 'real'. At the same time, he or she is gripped by the story and experiences joy, misery, anger, hope and despair along with characters in it. It is this interplay of fact and imagination, this adroit balancing of literary and historical elements to create a story which touches the hearts of the reader and fulfils the political- intellectual – cultural needs of the hour that makes for great historical fiction. Without a doubt, Saradindu Bandyopadhyay excelled at this.

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