Asian Studies

Vols. XXXIX **January 2021 – December 2021** **Nos. 1 & 2**

NETAJI INSTITUTE FOR ASIAN STUDIES

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Annual Subscription Rates:

	Individuals	Institutions
Indian	Rs. 100/-	Rs. 150/-
Foreign	US$ 6	US$ 10
Single Copy	Rs. 60/-	Rs. 100/-

These rates include potage, packing and delivery.

Asian Studies

Vols. XXXIX January 2021 – December 2021 Nos. 1 & 2

Registration Number 42096/83-RNI

1. Title : ASIAN STUDIES

2. Language : English

3. Periodicity : Bi-annual

4. Place of Publication : Kolkata, P.S. Bhowanipur

5. Name of Publisher : Director
Netaji Institute for Asian Studies
1 Woodburn Park,
Kolkata 700020

6. Name of Owner : Director
Netaji Institute for Asian Studies
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Kolkata 700020
E-mail: netajiinstitute1981@gmail.com
Website: www.netajiinstitute.in

ISSN 0970-7301

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Ref. No..... Date .....

MESSAGE

In view of the current disruption caused by the pandemic ***Asian Studies*** (Vols. XXXIX, Nos. 1 & 2) is now being published in online mode. We may consider to have a print version of the volume at a later date.

Suranjan Das
Hony. Director
NIAS.

At the Warfront during the Mesopotamian Campaign in 1914-1918: Soldier's Reminiscences in Bengali periodicals

Sarvani Gooptu

Contrary to western colonial stereotypes about the lack of awareness of the educated colonised subjects regarding international events and affairs, an intellectual campaign was pursued by the vernacular newspapers and literary periodicals in the first half of the twentieth century, whereby Indians were kept abreast of politics and events occurring in Asia and the world. Much of these discussions in the Bengali periodicals were in the form of informative and analytical essays wherein the threads of cosmopolitanism and nationalism were closely woven to provide a composite mosaic for the eager reader.[1] Some of the articles in these widely-read literary periodicals were travelogues in which a few were recollections of wars and battlegrounds by soldiers belonging to the British Indian army. In this article I have discussed two articles by soldiers who travelled with their regiments to the Mesopotamian Campaign during the First World War. One was Ashutosh Roy's *Autobiography of a war prisoner*, which came out in *Bharatvarsha*[2] and the other was the reminiscences of Sitanath Bhatta, a clerk in the 6th Poona regiment, which was written by Krishna Kumar Roy, and published in *Manashi O Marmabani* as *The autobiography of a Bengali imprisoned by the Turks at the Kut war*.[3] The similarities between the two were not only that they were both about the same campaign but that they were both published in 1919 and both were memoirs of war prisoners. Unfortunately, Roy's autobiography was not continued so we only get the descriptions of the initial successes of the British army, rather than the capture and retreat which presumably was the real intention of the writer as is borne out by the title, whereas Bhatta's tale of capture by the Turks is evocative of his fear and horror at what he considers the inhumaneness of his Asian compatriots and the judgements he makes about the war combatants. It is important to locate these two war reminiscences not only in the context of the war which they describe as participants but also in the context of other contemporary narratives on the same campaign like the anonymous *On the Road to Kut- a soldier's story of Mesopotamian campaign*,(1917)[4] or the military journalist Edmund Candler's 'eyewitness' account, *The Long road to Baghdad* (1919)[5], or the war diaries of Colonel William Spackman, *Captured at Kut: Prisoners of the Turks*.[6]

Besides providing interesting and readable material for the Bengali readers, these war stories undoubtedly were attempts to disown the stereotypical characterisation of the Bengali as non-martial and cowardly, not only by the colonial masters but inherently believed by Bengali intellectuals themselves. It is small wonder then that these soldier's tales must have made exciting reading, along with other essays which provided meticulous data on the Bengalis in army service. Though Bengalis were not recruited in the British Indian Army in the post 1857

[1] See Sarvani Gooptu, *Knowing Asia, Being Asian: Cosmopolitanism and Nationalism in Bengali periodicals (1880-1940),* Oxon: Routledge, 2022.
[2] Ashutosh Roy, Juddhabandir Atmakahini, 3 parts *Bharatvarsha,* 7(1)(6), 1919 , pp.782-85; 7(2)(2), 1919 ,pp. 194-197; 7(2)(4), 1919, pp. 509-514.
[3] Krishna Behari Roy(for Sitanath Bhatta), Kut juddhe Turkihoste Bandi Bangalir Atmakahini, *Manashi O Marmabani,* 11 (2) (2) 1919, pp. 121-125
[4] Anonymous, *On the Road to Kut- a soldier's story of Mesopotamian campaign,* London: Hutchinson and Co., 1917.
[5] Edmund Candler, *The Long road to Baghdad,2 vols*, Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1919.
[6] Tony Spackman ed., *Captured at Kut, Prisoners of the Turks: The great war diaries of Col. W. C Spackman,* Barasley: Pen and Sword Military, 2008.

revolt army reorganisation, the losses encountered in the First World War necessitated the induction of many of the so called non martial races into the army[7] and posters were seen all over Bengal exhorting Bengalis to fight the stigma imposed on them, 'Who says that Bengalis are not a martial race, who says they are cowards? It is our duty to erase this stigma on our race and only the Bengali youth have the power to do so. Jump in with lion-like valour and join the Bengali Regiment and put an end to our ill repute.'[8] The famous Bengali poet Kazi Nazrul Islam was one of those who were inspired to join the 49th Bengali Regiment for three years but there is doubt among his contemporary and later biographers[9], whether he actually travelled to Mesopotamia, as blogs and newspaper articles claim in recent times.[10]

An army doctor, Nibaran Chandra Mitra, writing in 1925 in *Bharatvarsha,* about (Bengali at the warfront- *Juddhe Bangali*), tries to explode the prevailing myth of the Bengalis being '*nanir putul* (dolls made of butter)' or '*bheto Bangali'* or rice eating Bengalis as being incapable of military service or withstanding hardship in the battlefield. He writes, 'all Bengalis want to join the army now.' Apparently, not only are spoilt Bengali brats escaping from home to earn their living in distant lands, that they are now visible at battle fronts too which is remarkable.[11] Mitra writes about the different jobs that Bengalis were assigned in the British army as well as how the different people he met coped in unforeseen and situations. He differentiates between those who are forced to travel abroad due to economic hardship like the coolies of plantations who 'are like a flock of sheep' despite 'their smiling countenances' and those who join the army to become soldiers or perform other services with elan, like 'medical services, working in railways, hospitals, commissariat, as labour in ships and core labour. The last group comprising of farmers' sons were sent to Africa and Mesopotamia as well as frontier areas. Though they dressed like soldiers their main work was to build roads, clear forests and build trenches.'[12] According to him even Bengali army doctors who were not trained to fight battles, become assets in treating battle wounds round the clock as well as travelling large distances with their regiment in adverse weather. They often get special mention and praise in the army despatches and records. 'The picture of the Bengali that Macaulay had drawn has become faint and faded away and instead a new picture of a strong bodied, deep-chested and broad shouldered, spirited, and dynamic Bengali soldier may be seen.'[13] Touring war fronts and battle fields and writing about them became a means to promote a new fearless identity as article, where Hemendra Kumar Ghosh writes about the tour of a group of Bengali journalists to the French battlefield[14] or when two army doctors accompanied by their wives travel to post-world war torn Belgium to Ypres, described by Himangshubala Bhaduri are printed in the literary journals.[15] But none of them compare to the excitement generated by soldier's tales as they describes their experiences in battlefields in Asia.

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[7] See details in Kaushik Roy, *Indian Army and the First World war, 1914-1918*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018.
[8] Shailajananda Mukhopadhyay, *Amar Bondhu Nazrul,* Calcutta: Haraf Pub., 1965, p.138
[9] Sushil Kumar Gupta, *Nazrul Charit Manas,* Calcutta: Bharati Library, 1960, Shailajananda Mukhopadhyay, *Amar Bondhu Nazrul*, opcit, Dakshinaranjan Basu*, Kheyali Kobi Sainik,* Calcutta: Popular Library, 1959 among others.
[10] The Statesman- 24th May 2015, https://www.thestatesman.com/supplements/kazi-nazrul-islam-65247.html and Millennium Post-26th May 2017 http://www.millenniumpost.in/kolkata/kolkata-243960 accessed on 02.01.2022.
[11] Nibaran Mitra, Juddhe Bangali, *Bharatvarsha,* 12(2)(5), 1925,pp. 667
[12] Ibid. pp. 667-668
[13] Ibid., pp. 669-670
[14] Hemendra Prasad Ghosh, Yuddhakshetre, *Bharatvarsha,* 7(1)(4), 1919, pp. 485-494.
[15] Himangshubala Bhaduri, Bahirer Pothe, *Bangalakshmi*, 8(10), 1932, pp. 615-619

Mesopotamia became a focus in the Middle Eastern theatre of the First World war when the Allies represented by the British empire, troops from Britain, Australia, and vast majority from British India fought against the Central Powers- Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria and mostly the Ottoman Empire, though in the large tomes on the First world war the Mesopotamia is only a tiny speck, a campaign that many historians consider a political blunder or one which no one takes responsibility for[16]. The British interest in Mesopotamia, started with a trade agreement between the British East India Company and the Shah of Persia which led to the increase of her influence in the Persian Gulf. It was not simply commercial interests of the merchants but also the growth of British naval power that led her to police the region and extend her influence. The internal turmoil in the region where the Arabs were divided into two great confederacies- those on the Mesopotamian side who resented the Turkish overlords and those on the Persian side who resisted the latter's interference into their ancient rights and liberties. Their own chieftains, Sheikhs of Kuwait and Mohammerah maintained friendly terms with Britain.[17] The Anglo Persian Oil company founded in 1908, following the discovery of an oilfield in Iran had obtained exclusive rights to petroleum deposits throughout the Persian empire with some exceptions. In 1914, the British Admiralty tried to get control of the private company but was not supported by Whitehall. When the war broke on this front, it became necessary to protect their interests in Abadan.

A.J Barker points out how Germany skilfully and diplomatically turned the prevailing situation in their favour in Mesopotamia. Her dream of *Drang Nach Osten*, and her desire to break free of 'encirclement' and find new markets for their developing commercial interests, turned their eyes towards the East. They were able to reduce through diplomacy the dependence of the Turks on Britain and increase their own hold on the region through control of the railway networks. They extended the German controlled Anatolian Railway to the Persian Gulf and also developed a scheme for a Berlin Baghdad railway which could pose a threat to Britain's Indian empire. The final straw was the bombardment of Russian Black sea ports which led to the exodus of British, French and Russian diplomats from the region and the declaration of hostilities by the British. The situation was exacerbated with rumours of German agents backing Enver Pasha's Young Turks' dream of a Holy War and the British support to Shias who were loyal to the Shah of Persia.[18]

On October 16, 1914, the 16th Brigade of the 6th Indian Division became the spearhead of the Indian Expeditionary Force D in Mesopotamia and Brig.-General W. S. Delamain, was tasked with defensive action at Abadan, and then with proactive action against the Ottoman forces. Skirmishes and battles broke out immediately between the expeditionary British forces and the defending Turks, with the 16th Brigade crossing the Shatt al-Arab waterway. Men and material were rushed from India to boost British forces, and on November 14, Lt.-General Arthur Barrett, GOC 6th (Poona) Indian Division, took charge of the operations. The Battle of Saihan (November 15, 1914) and the Battle of Sahil (November 17, 1914) caused

[16] Charles Townshend, Desert Hell: The British invasion of Mesopotamia, Cambridge Mass.: The Belknap Press, 2011;

[17] Eleanor Franklin Egan, *The war in the cradle of the world*, New York and London: Harper and brothers pub, 1918 and A J Barker, *The Bastard War: The Mesopotamian Campaign of 1914-1918,* New York: The Dial Press, 1967, p. 4; or James M. Perry, *Arrogant Armies: Great Military Disasters and the Generals behind them,* NJ: Castle Books, 2005, pp. 246-247 who summarily blamed Maj Gen Townshend for his injudicious obstinacy for the suffering of the Indian army; or Briton Cooper Busch, Britain, India and the Arabs 1914-1921, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971, pp. 35-40, who shifts blame to 'authorities' in India and England for the 'confusion in military and political objectives'.

[18] A.J Barker,opcit., pp. 8-10 echoing the analysis of Eleanor Franklin Egan, opcit, pp. 83-84

heavy casualties amongst the defending Turks as well as amongst the British forces.[19] After a string of early successes, the 6th Division led by Major General Barrett and then Major General Townshend, was delivered a setback at the Battle of Ctesiphono in Nov 1915. The division then withdrew to Kut where Townshend made the decision to hold the city. However, after a lengthy siege by the Ottomans, Townshend surrendered on April 1916. 10, 061 troops and 3, 238 followers were taken captive. Following the surrender, the garrisoned force conducted a forced march back to Anatolia. The suffering of the enlisted soldiers was particularly egregious and over 4,000 were taken captive.[20] All these incidents were discussed in their own unique way by the two Bengali soldiers.

Ashutosh Roy's *Autobiography of a War Prisoner*[21] starts with the caveat that it took him three years since his return from the terrible campaign to gather courage to reminisce about that time. He left for Bombay via Jhansi from Lucknow with by SS Arunkola of the British India Steam Navigation company, and crossing Aden, Muscat and Bushire finally docked in Basra. There were 1200 passengers in that ship according to him and another description of a troop ship carrying British and Indian soldiers to Mesopotamia by the Englishwoman Eleanor Franklin Egan, making a long roundabout journey from Japan to Baghdad to join her soldier husband stationed there, speaks of 1000 soldiers of British and Indian origin.[22] Giving a background to his story of Basra, Roy writes, 'Muscat is located near a mountain and there is a British army camp located in this healthy spot which is famous for its dates and the sweet dish halwa. On the sixth day we entered the mouth of Shatt al Arab river. On either side of the river are rows of date trees standing in queues like soldiers at attention but as we moved forward the trees receded into the background. We landed at Abadan in the afternoon. The Anglo Persian Oil company is located here... and the first clashes with the Turks took place here. Initially our soldiers were not very successful here but when the armed Cruisers[23] stormed in with cannons, then the Turks scattered like sheared grain. From there the Turks were chased into Basra from where they reassembled in Ahwaz and prepared for battle with Arab forces. On their retreat to Basra, the Turks had sunk the two steamers in the Sheikh of Mohammera region in the hope of impeding the advancing British army.'[24] In Roy's descriptions there is a distinct flavour of pride in being a part of a victorious imperialistic power. This is most evident during the descriptions of the battle with the Turks though there is some sympathy for the locals for the inevitability of their defeat. In most of the writing Roy is a soldier under British command and identifies with the victories and defeats of the Army he serves under. He describes the war strategy of the Turks as being as ineffective as the Chinese strategy of 'holding up their round Buddha hats for protection against cannons' and the British success in 'winning over the local Arabs to help in the clearing of the river of debris left by the Turks to hamper the progress of the British war ships'.[25] The detailed description of the support extended by the Sheikh of Mohammera[26] in pushing the Turks

[19] Sharmishtha Roy Chowdhury, *The First World War: Anti-colonialism and Imperial authority in British India 1914-1924*, Oxon: Routledge, 2019, p. 15
[20] F.W. Perry, *Order of Battle of Divisions Part 5B, Indian Army Divisions*, Newport: Ray Westlake Military Books, 1993, p. 78.
[21] Ashutosh Roy, Juddhabandir Atmakahini, 3 parts *Bharatvarsha,* 7(1)(6), 1919 , pp.782-85; 7(2)(2), 1919 ,pp. 194-197; 7(2)(4), 1919, pp. 509-514.
[22] Eleanor Franklin Egan, *The War in the cradle of the world,* opcit, pp. 72-74
[23] Cruisers *Emden* and *Konigsberg* as part of the *Espiegle,* sloop of the Britannic Majesty's mission, A. J.Barker, opcit, p. 18
[24] Ashutosh Roy, Juddhabandir atmakahini, *Bharatvarsha,* 7(1)(6), 1919, p. 784
[25] Ibid., p. 784
[26] Sheikh Khazal

back towards Basra in pursuance of the tradition of friendship they shared with the British, indicates intimate knowledge of the writer on international affairs in that period.

Roy continues, 'Just 8/9 days before our arrival at Basra, heavy fighting between the English and the Turks took place at Sahaba where the destiny of Mesopotamia was decided. If the outcome of the battle had been the other way round and the Turks had won instead of the English, the latter would probably have had to abandon their hopes of holding Mesopotamia. But what a glorious game the god of fortune played. The Turks lost so heavily in this battle that their future battles in different parts of Mesopotamia were also doomed. Our soldiers showed their bravery and unprecedented courage in the battle of Sahaba which is praiseworthy and a matter of pride for us. To stand in waist-deep water for 4/5 hours in the face of a veritable rain of shelling in order to force the enemy back takes infinite fortitude and unbelievable courage.'[27] His lack of sympathy towards the Turks is revealed when he makes a joke about the alleged hope of the Turks, that they would be able to hold off the British army from Basra, which he hold akin to 'the fairy tales of Arabian Nights.'

On their arrival at the occupied Turkish camp Roy describes in the second issue how the Turks when they fled it left everything intact making it easy for the British army to settle down there. 'Most of the Turks had fled from Basra but we soon heard rumours that a few dozens were moving around brazenly in the town hiding among the local Arabs, Armenians and Jews. The rich Armenians soon started making friendly overtures to the British commanders and started inviting the General to their homes. It is possible of course that this friendliness may have been genuine since we heard that they were most disgusted with the Turkish oppression and were willing to welcome the British with open arms.'[28] In the descriptions of Basra, we find Roy comparing the '*Kawakhana*' or coffeeshops with the Indian teashops with the difference that 'in India the teashops are crowded during the morning and evenings while the kawakhanas have a full house at all hours of the day...the Arabs barely go home and are quite content to feast on 4/5 loaves of *kuboos* (bread made on tandoor ovens) and some meat.'[29] Roy gives descriptions of the town and Arab people and ends the second issue with descriptions of the fruits and vegetables which are available in Basra.

In the third issue, Roy describes how mines were deciphered in the Shatt al Arab river and how the British troops were ordered to destroy them. 'We had no idea about mines nor how they were to be defused but we enthusiastically reached the river side to learn how to. The ships were all removed from the region where the mine had been detected and we were instructed to shoot at a spot from the water's edge. We couldn't make out where the mine was but suddenly a loud bang was heard and the mud-filled water rose up almost twenty feet. We realised the mine had been destroyed.'[30] Roy is filled with pride of belonging to the 6th Division stationed at Ashar though he claimed that he had, 'no idea that the 6th Division would take the lead in the Mesopotamia war or that its name would remain carved in the history of the world. After almost one and half month halt at Ashar, we were ordered to move to Kurna...under the leadership of General Fry. I sailed with a full white regiment -the Norfolk Regiment. We were guarded in front and at the back by two cruisers. The war ships looked very elegant, snow-white in colour, yet inside they carry the most fearful firearms and

[27] Ibid. p. 785
[28] Ashutosh Roy, Juddhabandir atmakahini, *Bharatvarsha,* 7(2)(2), 1919, p. 194
[29] Ibid., p. 195
[30] Ashutosh Roy, Juddhabandir atmakahini, *Bharatvarsha,* 7(2)(4), 1919, p. 509. Vivid details of this can be found in Conrad Cato's *The Navy in Mesopotamia 1914-1917*, London: Constable and Co., 1917.

cannons...We were also accompanied by some other smaller war-supply carriers and an aeroplane flew low above us to provide information about the enemy sighting. The Arab women and children who had lined up along the river to watch our movements were frightened by the monster-like plane and ran away wailing in fear to the shelter of their villages. It was an amazing sight. I felt as if we had been transported into the world of Arabian novels where jins and demons could carry away humans from their safe havens...We reached Kurna(also Qurna) on the third day...and were welcomed warmly by Turkish shelling. This was not the hollow cannon firing for honoured guests, this was a purposeful presence of the god of death Yama...While the welcoming continued, an observation post was set up on the banks of the Tigris river. We did not offer any counter to the shelling of the Turks and most of their strikes were aimless. Gradually the shelling stopped for the day and our ships lowered their anchor midstream of the Tigris-Euphrates river and we retired for the night...The next morning the Turkish *marhaba* was resumed with more frequency. Finally, we retaliated from the cruiser behind us. Unlike the Turkish attacks this one found their mark and created mayhem in the Turkish camp...Binoculars showed the picture of complete devastation of the soldiers in the enemy camp and... within a few hours the white flag was flying. Then our troops moved in mahellas (Arab river craft larger than a bellum and fitted with mast and sail) towards the Turkish army and presently brought back hundreds of prisoners. A total of 700 Arab and Turks were taken prisoners that day by the British.'[31]

The travelogue claims to be an autobiography of a prisoner of war possibly supposed to describe the retreat of the British army but the part that was published in the journal is really the story of a victorious campaign where the British army, Roy included, overcomes difficulty to pursue the Turks to Amara. The three- part article ends with the British army pursuing the fleeing Turkish army by river made hazardous by the mines they placed in the waters and finally their halt at Ezra's tomb. It is tragic that this fascinating series was not continued by *Bharatvarsha* and we are deprived of the descriptions of the retreat.

More of an autobiography of a war prisoner are the memoirs of Sitanath Bhatta which was published in *Manasi O Marmabani* rewritten by Krishna Behari Roy.[32] He follows the adventures of Sitanath Bhatta, employed in the Supply and Transport Department of the Indian Government, who was sent to Mesopotamia as a clerk during the siege of Kut-al-Amara. The Siege of Kut al Amara took place between 7th December 1915 and 29th April 1916, when the British Indian garrison was besieged at Kut followed by the surrender of the 6th Poona battalion. One follows his experiences on the battle field of Kut, the trials and tribulations of the English and Indian soldiers under Turkish attack from three sides. Bhatta refers to both the Major General Patrick Hehir, heading the medical facilities and Lieutenant Colonel Gerard Leachman, but not by name. Bhatta's description of the battle takes a loyalist line, since he was literally on that side of the war and was soon captured by the Ottoman forces who in his eyes were devils incarnate. 'Very soon we discovered they were bearing upon us gradually and the next day they stationed themselves at a distance of ten miles from the English camp and targeted us with firearms at a furious pace. The melodious clash of the British war drums and the deep sounds of the war bugles echoed in the desert lands, the waters of the Tigris river and the distant horizon...All around us the well-equipped soldiers desperately tried to fulfil their duties. The incessant raining of British and Turkish armaments covered the skies. There was hardly a break in the continuous warfare during the day or night.

[31] Ibid., pp. 510-513. One of the maheilas had been converted into an amphibious hospitals, Conrad Cato, opcit, pp. 63-73.
[32] Krishna Behari Roy, Kut juddhe Turkihoste Bandi Bangalir Atmakahini, *Manashi O Marmabani,* 11 (2) (2) 1919, pp. 121-125

The food stuff that had been carried for the expedition was gradually being depleted and by February it was all gone and the camp faced starvation. On three sides the English camp was surrounded by the enemy and the only way the supplies could be brought in was by the river behind us. Those supplies which were airdropped every two to three days were hardly adequate for forty thousand brave soldiers. An attempt was made to send one ship with supplies to the camp but unfortunately it got grounded on a silted bank and could not proceed. ..I was impressed by the English courage, commitment and tolerance which I perceived at first hand. From March every person at the camp were given a ration of three ounces of *atta* and some horse meat. With that meagre food in their bellies, the Englishmen showed their mettle in war. Every other war-supply was plentiful and the lack of food ultimately was the reason of defeat. On 28th April when the supplies finished the commander raised the flag declaring an armistice...'[33]On the 30th April, the camp was invaded by Turkish soldiers who looted all the property of the soldiers of the English camp, including those of Bhatta who had to leave the camp dressed in pajamas, shirt and socks and shoes. They were taken to Chamran prison on foot which was 70 miles away through the desert sands. Bhatta has described the journey to Chamran very evocatively where he describes how the lack of food, water and sleep kept slowing the prisoners down and the Turkish soldiers kept using hunters or the rifle-butt to hurry the straggling men along. 'I saw another interesting punishment in Turkey which surprised me, they would force the prisoner to take off his shoes and cane the bare soles. Many of us could not bear the pain of their torture nor the walk through the difficult terrain, and became ill. Some of us were taken to a hospital, but this was nothing like an English hospital, not even like the Calcutta Medical college, Campbell School or the Sambhu Nath Pandit hospital. All the patients, no matter what they suffered from were taken to a hamam for bathing. Then only a privileged few were given dry clothes to wear so one can surmise from this what the medical treatment would be like or how many patients would be able to join the human race on being released from that hospital. Having spent two and half years with the Turkish people I have realised only too well that their hearts are harder than stone, and they are without any kindness or compassion. They are very mercenary and treat people without money inhumanly...It is as if, barbarianism is their ornament and harsh torture their innate nature.[34] Bhatta describes how he and his Indian compatriots paid out of their way with money they had managed to hide in their clothes and reached Chamran prison camp[35] finally. They stayed there for six days and then were transferred to Re-el-am which was 700 miles away. From Chamran, the British and Indian officers were given a transport cart though Bhatta, being a subordinate clerk had to walk. They reached Res –el Am on 3rd July where they stayed for six months. They were then transported by rail to Constantinople where he claims the Turkish soldiers submitted them to unspeakable torture. 'I broke into tears at times from the humiliation the soldiers inflicted on us with their satirical comments and abuses. I tried to keep my thoughts above my present situation by recalling sweet memories of my family life... In Constantinople we lived in half starvation and in tattered clothing. I didn't expect any better since the British officers too looked like Digambara sadhus wearing only a loincloth...Mesopotamia is a beautiful city but we were too weak and starved to appreciate any of its beauty... In October 1918, we were transferred to another camp where we were given clothes and food by the British government through the consulate at Aleppo... thereby saving our lives. Finally, in November we were freed and sent

[33] Krishna Behari Roy, opcit, pp. 121-122
[34] Ibid. p. 123
[35] Could be Shumran which was one of the Turkish prison camps. The horrific tale of the prison camp that Bhatta tries to articulate can be read in detail in Website of the Royal Hampshire regiment, *The Hampshires in Mesopotamia 1915-18 and the Siege of Kut-al-Amara* https://www.royalhampshireregiment.org/about-the-museum/timeline/mesopotamia-1915/ accessed on 03.01.2022

to Egypt from where we came via Suez to Bombay. From Bombay I was able to send a telegram in the name of my son announcing my return to my country.' The description of the siege and surrender caused more by starvation than exigencies of war of Bhatta has a curious corroboration in the descriptions of the army doctor Col. William Spackman where he alone among the other British writers on the retreat refer to the plight of the 9,500 Indians with sympathy. [36]

This genre of writing i.e. of reminiscences by 'war prisoners' was embraced by both Indians, Bengalis here, and British officers. It was probably out of a sense of shock for the latter and that of disbelief and dejection by the Bengalis. For the British the defeat and retreat after the siege of Kut, overshadowed their subsequent gains and victory of the western powers at the end of the world war. As Edmund Candler writes when 9000 men (6000 British and 3000 Indians) surrendered at Kut, it was a 'disgrace… attached not to the soldiers but to the politicians who were responsible for the disaster. There has been no surrender on the same scale in the history of the British army.'[37]

Despite the fact that these writers professed to be describing their prisoner days, parts of their writing were dedicated to descriptions of local people, landscapes and politics. One can see a similarity in the writings of British soldiers which has been described by a recent historian as transforming the 'imperial territorial imaginaries' due to the enforced immobility due to captivity and deprivation.[38] For Ashutosh Roy, it was probably more reflexive action when he wrote the memoirs for the readers of the literary magazine, where describing the locale was the norm in any kind of travelogue from the early twentieth century. Similarly, in both the articles one can notice, even in the anguish and trauma of the war, a constant comparison with Bengal and India, in minutest details.

Unlike the 'disgrace' of the surrender that was felt by the British soldiers who ended with the final recovery of the lost position in Mesopotamia by the British, for the Bengalis it signalled an end of the martial experiment which had started at the turn of the century with their participation in the campaign against the Boxers in China. In the articles sent to the Bengali journals, there was despite their association with the British Army, a sneaking sympathy for the indigenous Chinese people's nationalism, a pride in their rejection of foreigners and a sadness about the inability of Indians to unite in a similar rising against the 'common' enemy.[39] But in the case of the Mesopotamian campaign the patriotism that accompanied the participation of an overseas military campaign by Indians was only confined to a sense of pride in being a part of a successful war machine that they visualised the British army to be. This was allegedly the main reason why Kazi Nazrul joined the army according to his friend and compatriot, Shailajananda Mukherjee, that it was important to learn the art of combat in order to fight a colonial regime. [40] But Bhatta who actually participated in the campaign and suffered along with his British officers concluded that having closely interacted with three strong independent races- English, German and Turkish, it was the English who were 'innately kind, compassionate, benevolent and fair-minded.' He even attests from personal experience that the 'stories of atrocities of the Turks and Germans that have been published in the newspapers' were true.[41]

[36] Tony Spackman ed., Captured at Kut, opcit., pp. 80-85
[37] Edmund Candler, The Long road to Baghdad, pp. 211-212
[38] Sharmishtha Roychowdhury, opcit, p. 51
[39] Sarvani Gooptu, *Knowing Asia, Being Asia*, opcit, pp. 37-41
[40] Shailajananda Mukherjee, opcit, p. 137
[41] Ibid pp. 124-125

The publication of these Reminiscences which were strikingly different from the other travelogues which combined nationalistic as well as cosmopolitan tone in their descriptions of different races of Asia and the world must have evoked mixed feelings in the readers. There was on one hand pride in proof of Bengali *singha bikram* (lion-like courage) in these soldiers who went to battle, suffered hardship and torture and survived to share their tales, yet there must have been some underlying discontent at the use of Indians by the British to fight their own battles which many nationalists later highlighted during the nationalist movement. It could also be the reason why in the post- First world war, there were hardly any travel tales by soldiers which were published in the journals. But the fact that so many Indians and Bengalis travelled long distances as part of an army belies the stigma of immobility that still attaches to them.

Colonial Forest Policies, Forests And Graziers In Darjeeling, Kurseong And Kalimpong

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The Himalayan Encounter

During 1641-1817, Sikkim was engulfed in a series of wars. The first attack came from Bhutan in 1706 during the reign of Chakdor Namgyal. Kalimpong, a part of Sikkim, was lost to Bhutan. In 1788-89 Rabdanste[1], the then capital of Sikkim was devastated. Subsequently, the entire west of river Teesta was conquered by Nepal. In 1791, Tibet was invaded by the Gorkha army, bringing the Chinese intervention. The Chinese defeated the Gorkhas, and the Sino-Nepalese Treaty was signed. Though monarchy was restored in Sikkim, yet owing to the absence of their representative at the time of signing the treaty, Sikkim had to surrender a vast territory to Nepal. Sikkim lost to Nepal the entire lower Teesta basin, and the whole eastern region of Teesta, including Kalimpong to Bhutan, and the Chumbi valley to Tibet.

The British East India Company's encounter with the eastern Himalayas primarily sought to wayfind a possible trade route to Tibet, and Sikkim provided the most feasible. A conflict of interest to occupy the Terai region ultimately culminated in the Anglo-Gorkha war of 1814-16. The British wanted Sikkim to be an ally, and it was promised that Sikkim's lost territories would be restored. The British won the battle. The treaty of Segowlee/ Sugauli was signed on 2nd December 1815 and ratified on 4th March 1816 between East India Company and Nepal. The Raja of Nepal agreed never to molest the Raja of Sikkim, and in case of any differences between them, the British Government will arbitrate.

Nepal also surrendered the entire hilly region to the east of the Mechi River and west of the Teesta river. The East India Company resorted to a tract extending over 4000 square miles, including Darjeeling, which the former had annexed from Sikkim in 1788-90. Finally, in 1817, through the Treaty of Titaliya, the British restored the same area to Sikkim.[2] Article-3, and 8 of the treaty gave the British their long-cherished goal to control the polity and economy of Sikkim. Article-3 mentioned: 'that he (the King of Sikkim or Chogyal) will refer to the arbitration of the British Government any disputes or questions that may arise between his subjects and those of *Nepaul* or any other neighbouring State, and to abide by the decision of the British Government.' The British also successfully used Sikkim as a buffer between Nepal and Bhutan as a strategic vantage point.

The trade interest of the East India Company was also protected through this treaty. Article-8 of this treaty stated that: 'that he (the King of Sikkim or Chogyal) will afford protection to merchants and traders from the Company's provinces and he ensures that no duty shall be

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levied on the transit of merchandise beyond the established custom at the several golahs or marts.'

G.W.K. Lloyd, along with J.W. Grant, while coming to Sikkim for an arbitration, spent a couple of days in a small place called 'Old Gorkha Station' on a ridge called Dorje-Liang (modern Darjeeling).[3] The favourable climatic condition of Darjeeling encouraged them to write to the then Governor-General of Bengal, Lord William Bentinck, the suitability of the place as a sanatorium and its occupation for military purposes as the key of a pass into the territory of Nepal. Bentinck deputed Captain Herbert, the Deputy Surveyor-General, with Mr. Grant to carry on the feasibility of occupation of Darjeeling. On receipt of the report from Captain Herbert and Grant, the Court of Directors accepted the proposal to use Darjeeling as temporary reception of European recruits and a permanent cantonment for a European regiment. General Lloyd was entrusted negotiating with the Raja of Sikkim for the cession of Darjeeling in place of an equivalent in money or land. During this time (1834-35), a group of Lepcha refugees from Nepal made an inroad to Sikkim Tarai, for which Lloyd was deputed to quell the disturbance. He did it successfully and demanded the Raja of Sikkim to give the grant to occupy Darjeeling. Finally, on 1st February 1835, the Raja of Sikkim signed the grant deed to hand over Darjeeling Hill tracts to the East India Company. The deed mentioned:

> "The Governor-General having expressed his desire for the possession of the Hill of Darjeeling on account of its cool climate, for the purpose of enabling the servants of his Government, suffering from sickness, to avail themselves of its advantages, I the Sikkimputtee Rajah, out of friendship for the said Governor-General hereby present Darjeeling to the East India Company, that is, all the land south of Great Runjeet river, east of the Balasur, Kahail and Little Runjeet rivers, and west of the Rungno and Mahanuddi rivers."[4]

In addition to the health ground and strategic point as military base, the economic gain through mercantile pursuits propelled the uphill movement of the Raj[5] to the eastern Himalayas. As a matter of fact, the tea plantation in Darjeeling was started on an experimental basis in 1840 and by 1860 tea industry had emerged as a large-scale industry. However, Sikkim was bypassed even though the place was as conducive as Darjeeling for the cultivation of tea. The place was also identified as a suitable place where Sikkim and Tibet could be monitored closely. Finally, in 1835, Darjeeling was ceded to the British. In the Treaty of Tumlong (1861), Sikkim lost all freedom of action and became a de facto protectorate of the British.[6]

Colonial Administrative Mind in operation: Regulation and Control

The Raj's encounter with the trans-Himalayas[7] led to the development of Darjeeling and the surrounding hills as a sanatorium,[8] a military depot, an educational centre and a plantations area for tea.[9] By the early decade of the 19th century, the Colonial Administrative mind had felt the need of establishing a hill station in the vicinity of Calcutta since the sojourn in the hill stations of North India was both time consuming and costly.[10] Surveys, navigations and wayfinding through the deep, dense forests across the Mahananda and up across the Mahabharata ranges of the trans-Himalayas marked the preoccupation of Colonial Administrative Mind. Not to mention, there was also the Raj's paternalistic consideration to intervening in Tibet's politics under the guise of trans-Himalayan trade.[11]

Darjeeling as a hill station became a bastion for colonial activity.[12] The British incorporated the natives, such as the Lepcha and the Bhutia, within the greater colonial framework. The people found themselves in a new set-up merged with the flow of migrants from surrounding regions.[13] It was a paradox that although in the colonial social imagery, Darjeeling and surrounding hills were imagined as an exclusive space for the White population. The multifarious demand for operating the imagined exclusive space led to the opening of the floodgates to the melange of natives from across contemporary South Asia. These migrant workers provided the much needed labour and workforce to realise the desired leisurely life for the colonial masters. The natives as servants, porters, shopkeepers, traders, water carriers, masons, butchers, washermen, dandy bearers, butlers, ostlers, battiwallas, carpenters, blacksmith, construction workers, tea labourers, the middle and upper-class Bengali *bhadraloks* and also the Balmiki community[14] helped weave the imagery of a leisured white lifestyle in these hill stations.

The natives and the masters encountered each other in seemingly unique positions of regimentation and control. Though the spatial lines of existence between the masters and the natives were stylised and choreographed to fit the theme of power and control; as well as emulate the earlier sensibilities of the native social ordering of things.[15] It is really interesting to find that the masters did engage in activities that challenged and defied the norms of spatiality in everyday life. For instance, though the natives were projected to be a reservoir of disease, and to be distanced beyond the spatially demarcated zones "whites only" areas.[16]

The colonial project of making the mountains their 'home' indeed introduced anthropogenic interventions at a relatively faster scale in the construction of roads, buildings and other establishments. The *Lepchas* and *Bhutias* were reluctant to offer their labour, partly because of their age-old inhibitions and partly because of their better economic position; the Nepalese from Nepal were sought to provide to fill the much needed human resource and labour services. [17] The *Lepchas* and *Bhutias* were thus systematically regulated elsewhere. [18]

Regulating and Controlling the Forests

The contestation over resources and politics of control and regulation as operative during the Raj can be gleaned through the shape-shifting Colonial Forest Policies.[19] The Forest Policy systematically weeded the native's notion of communally owned land and replaced it with an idea that forest were realms outside the community and belonged strictly to the Colonial State. The colonial administrative minds visions of Empire building fostered the notion of timber as green money and forests and their resources as commercially exploitable. The Colonial States imperial eyes asserted its proprietary rights over forest and its reserve. Thus a fundamental feature of the Colonial Forest Laws was its space-extending/expanding nature to reconstitute from time to time any forest land or wasteland as a Reserved Forest. Commercial interests directed the considerations in declaring forests reserved under the provisions of the Forest Acts.[20] Forests were turned into strategic resources and came to be viewed as a valuable natural assets and a source of capital.

The colonial policies of regimentation and control to (i) tightened state control over forests areas, (ii) banned or restricted shifting cultivation, (iii) curbed hunting, timber use and grazing and (iv) eased the inflow of outsiders from the plains (moneylenders, traders, land grabbers, contractors, coolie, etc.) into the forests.[21]

The Colonial government apprehended a possible dissent or uprising to the Indian Forest Act of 1878. When the Act was in place, the peasant and tribes resisted the operations of the Forest Department through arson, breaches of the forest law, attacks on officials and government property, and coordinated collective social movements aimed at restoring local control over forests. These rebellions formed part of broader nationalist upsurges throughtout British India.[22]

The Forest Act of 1865 outlined the blueprint for forest exploitation, management, and preservation.[23] For the first time, an attempt was made to regulate the collection of 'forest produce' by native forest dwellers. Thus, the socially regulated practices of the indigenous people were restrained by colonial law. By, 1878 the *Raj* thought it necessary to increase its control over forests and a new Act was passed, which was more comprehensive than the Forest Act of 1865. At the same time, it is undeniable that the 'new Act' was more comprehensive and stringent and further cut into the local use of forest than ever before. The Colonial Government held absolute rights of ownership in reserved forests, and their products were not to be used by locals unless permitted explicitly by way of grant of privilege and not as a matter of rights. Even access to these forests was restricted, except as thoroughfare in permitted routes. Cattle-trespass Act of 1871 prohibited pasturing of cattle in the reserved forests. By 1894 the forest policy injected two significant arguments, namely: 1). Claims of cultivation are more substantial than the claims of forest preservation; 2). The public benefit was the sole object of forest administration.

The spirit of the Colonial Forest Policies was to restrict those claims which were inconsistent with the material interests of the Empire. Restrictions were thus craftily imposed on forest dwellers like the *Lepchas* that led to them being uprooted and disassociated from the 'forests', and the same administration encouraged the commercial exploitation of forests through the issue of permits to the professional contractors.

The Colonial Forest Policies firmly extended the grip of the Raj over the ecology of the eastern Himalayas. The Forest Department was entrusted with powers to regulate people's rights over forest lands and produce through the Indian Forest Act of 1927. Between the 1870s- 1930s, Forest Imperialism through the politics of regimentation and control provided a rich ground for extension of capitalism and imperialism. Who could enter the forest and use its resources were well charted by the colonial imagination of control and visibility. For instance, the economic elites (predominantly white) entered the scene and used forests as a means of participation in the growing economy.[24] The visibility of the native forest people was curtained, and they were replaced by native coolies/labour forces from elsewhere across South Asia to assist the Whites in forests. Thus, the Colonial forest policies introduced new dimensions of commercial use, forest management, and forest protection from the natives.

Forest Policy versus Cattle Graziers of Darjeeling

Intending to regulate and control, the Forest Department engaged in operations to protect the forest reserves from the cattle graziers (lit., (in Nepali) *Charawne, Gothale/Gothwala*). The colonial administration identified the Cattle graziers as causing a large amount of damage to the forests in the region. The gradual but inevitable extinction of the only fir forests, Abies *Webbiana*, in the Singalila Range was a great concern of the Forest Department.[25] The causes of this destruction was identified as sheep grazing and the fires lit by graziers to produce young grass. The Colonial Administrators held the sheeps responsible for feeding on young fir seedlings and destroying forests.[26] The matter was referred to Government at Calcutta and

following its orders, the forests were visited by the Deputy Commissioner and the forest officer. Chester's Report[27] on grazing mentioned:

> It may be noted that to one who remembers the forests as they were before 1882 when the Inspector General's Memorandum and the Government orders on it localized the grazing, significant improvement is noticeable in the closed block, where the ground vegetation is growing up and includes several seedlings and shoots from young stools of the better trees. Even in the blocks open to grazing, although seedlings are of course absent, and the soil is exposed and poor, the lopping of branches is not as common as before, and the effect on the growth is visible. The treetops, however, which initially spreading out in all directions touched each other interlacing their branches, forming what in forests parlance is termed canopy, and protecting the soil and the carpet of decaying leaves, will- thanks to the lopping and former heavy fellings-never reform that state of the canopy so necessary for the protection of the hummus and of the seedlings which do occasionally succeed in establishing themselves on the impoverished soil.[28]

While admitting that the above causes are affected the extinction of the forests, the officer still deprecates any restrictions being placed on the grazing in the interests of the Darjeeling mutton market.[29] It may be here noted that in Paragraph 5 of the Administration Report for 1875-76, Dr. Schlich proposed that these forests, which were at that time the property of Cheboo Lama, should if possible, be saved from the total destruction. It was suggested that the Deputy Commissioner should be asked to exert his influence to prevent this by getting the owner to institute a rotation of blocks which would be opened to grazing. The Government approved these views.[30]

In the year 1880, Mr. D. Brandis, Inspector General of Forests, drew up suggestions regarding the management of the Darjeeling Division, which were communicated to the Government of Bengal, and which have, generally speaking, been acted on during the next two years.[31] In Brandis' proposal, the question of cattle grazing was not fully dealt with.[32]

However, the question of Cattle- grazing soon became an important issue, as some difficulty was experienced in arranging for it without excessive damage to the forests.[33] The primary concern being the number of cattle to be permitted in these forests. Preliminary inquiries made it appear that about 330 Milk cows and 120 Draught cattle were grazing in the reserves at any time of the year.[34]

In addition to the numbers mentioned above, a considerable number of cattle grazed on *Khas Mahal* (Government Estate), private estates, and municipal lands.[35] In the early 1880s, cattle grazed in most parts of the Ghoompahar Range, in Sonada, Chattackpur, Sepoydura, Poomong, Rangjo, Rangbi, and Takdah. The cattle were partly used for draught purposes and milk. The draught cattle grazed at or near Sonada, which was halfway between Kurseong and Darjeeling, and the necessary grazing grounds were provided in two forest blocks, namely Pachim and Chattackpur.[36] Of the milk cattle, twenty were shown as grazing in the Chattackpur blocks. They were presumed to supply local wants. There remain then 310 head of milk cattle, which supplied Darjeeling and Jalapahar with milk and butter.[37] The main problem faced by the forest department was that in arranging for their grazing, it was to be borne in mind that the *gwallah* (lit., milkman) who take the milk into Darjeeling town must be located within a reasonable distance of the station. Again, the *gwallah* objected to being located near the cart road for fear of cattle disease to jump from the draught cattle.[38] Another

point was that land was required at a different elevation, high land for summer and low forests for winter grazing. Taking all aspects into consideration, Dr. W. Schlich, in his Memorandum, explained the arrangement which he had decided on for the next eight years.[39]

The Rangbul and Dooteriah Blocks were lately cut over and planted up, and no grazing could be permitted in them at that time. Besides, the former block fed the Darjeeling waterworks, and for that reason cattle grazing was excluded. Though planting was done in Rangnu, Ranigirum and Dawaipani Blocks to serve other purpose. For instance, Rangnu and Ranigirum supplied timber and fuel to Jalapahar until 1890. Rangbi, Rishap, and Sureil, besides being far from Darjeeling, were handed over to the Forest Department on the distinct understanding that cattle grazing would not be allowed in them. Poomong, Hoom, and Takdah were in great need of protection, but the forest administration decided to keep one of the blocks to remain open for grazing. Accordingly, Dr. Schlich selected Takdah for the purpose. After closing the blocks mentioned above for grazing, the department set apart 2372 acres of forest in Senchal, Tiger hill, and Ranjo Blocks.[40] On the Ghoompahar range, tree cutting was permitted until 1890 in Tungsong, Pubong, and Balasan blocks. Apart from these in Nai and Risihat blocks, cuttings were to begin in 1891. The above five blocks were closed for grazing in Ghoompahar Range. Excluding these five blocks, a compact area of 4473 acres was set aside for grazing in Ghoompahar Range. The table below shows the acres of forest and the number of different types of cattle prescribed for the Darjeeling Division.

Table 1: Area Of Forest In Acres And The Number Of Different Types Of Cattle Prescribed For The Darjeeling Division

BLOCKS	HEADS OF CATTLES TO BE PROVIDED FOR			AREA OPEN TO GRAZING IN ACRES	
	MILK	DROUGHT	TOTAL	TOTAL	PER HEAD OF CATTLE
SENCHEL TIGER HILL RANGJO	90		90	2372	26
BALASAN CHONGTONG PARMAGIRI PALANGDONG PAGRAINBONG	200		200	4473	22
TAKDAH	20		20	668	33
TOTAL DARJEELING SUPPLY	310		310	7513	81
ADDITIONAL					
PACHIM CHATAKPUR	20	120	140	1343	10
GRAND TOTAL	**330**	**120**	**450**	**8856**	**91**

Source: Memorandum on the management of the forests in the Darjeeling Division, Bengal, by Dr. W. Sclich, Officiating Inspector general of Forest, dated Simla, the 21st of April 1882, as found in Appendix B, p. vii of the *Progress Report of Forest Administration in Bengal* for the year 1882-83 by A.L Home, Conservator of Forest of Bengal.

The above table (Table 1) shows that the area set aside for grazing was purely for the milk supply of the hill station of Darjeeling and the Cantonment of Jalapahar and Sonada town. The Forest Department was entangled in the debate on the exact number of areas to be allocated for grazing activities and for forest conservation. The department provided five times the area required for Darjeeling and twice that required for Sonada.

Following the orders passed on the Inspector-General's suggestions for managing the forests in the division, arrangements were carried out locating graziers in certain blocks in consultation with the Deputy Commissioner.[41] Accordingly, all graziers were called up to the divisional office on the 20th of December 1882, and their names were registered, the number of their cattle, the localities in which they were grazing, and those in which they elected to graze. Then it was explained to them which block would be closed. Eventually, the graziers were located in the following blocks of the Darjeeling Division.

Table 2: Grazier and allocated Areas in different Blocks of Darjeeling Division (1882-1883)

The Graziers, Bathans & the re-located Range	Block	No of Graziers	No of Bathans
Senchal	Senchal Sonada Pachim	5 3 4	10 .. ..
Mahalderam	Chattackpur	8	8
Tukdah	Rangjo Tiger Hill Rangbi Tukdah	5 1 6 7	10 2 12 14
Ghoompahar	Nai Balasan Chongtong Purmaguri Palangdong Pagrainbong	6 6 4 13 14 9	12 9 8 26 28 18
Total		91	157

Source: *Progress Report of Forest Administration in Bengal* for the year 1882-83 by A.L Home, Conservator of Forest of Bengal, p.36

Table 2 gives an idea that there were about 91 graziers and 157 *bathans* (lit., Herds pen) in Darjeeling Division. Little opposition was experienced in re-locating the graziers, as every endeavour was made to meet their wishes, and with very few exceptions. The first time when grazing rules were introduced in Darjeeling, very little opposition was experienced in re-locating the graziers, as every endeavour was made to meet their wishes.[42] Every grazier had been allowed his choice of grazing ground, except he selected a closed block, in which case he was allotted the open block nearest to the one selected. For instance, in the case of buffalo graziers, who were all *Paharias*, while the cow-graziers were principally Bhutias, every

grazier had been allowed his choice of grazing ground, except where he selected a closed block, in which case he was allotted the open block nearest to the one selected.

The wanton destruction of the forests on all sides of grazing *bathans* could not escape the observation of anyone who visited these localities. As early as 1880, the forest administration of Darjeeling contemplated the need to issue fixed rules and enforce them strictly. It was the only possible way to stop the unnecessary and destructive habit of lopping branches and cutting saplings that the graziers adopted whenever they could do so without being detected. It was to be in the interest of the forest and in consideration of the probable increase in demand for forest produce that might be expected owing to the continual growth of the station of Darjeeling and the expansion of the tea gardens in the vicinity. The first comprehensive Grazing rules were enacted in the year 1880 for the Darjeeling Division.[43]

The grazing of cattle for the milk supply of Darjeeling has always been an essential consideration in the management of the lower and middle hill Forests. With the reservation of the forests in 1864, the grazing was placed under the control of the Conservator of Forests.[44] The extensive sale of wasteland for tea cultivation gradually led to a very significant increase in grazing within the reserved forests. However, the question was not acute until 1879-80 when Sir William Schlich first realized the necessity of restricting grazing activity. Schlich's Memorandum of 1880-81 kept 11,397 acres of the forests open to grazing and closed 12891 acres for the period 1882- 92.[45]

In 1891-92 the introduction of the Manson Working Plan necessitated a revision of the arrangement. The area open for grazing from 1892-95 was 13422 acres, that is, 2027 acres more than that opened during the preceding 10 years.[46] The Darjeeling Grazing Rules were revised in 1913 by a notification No. 388 M.R, dated the 22nd of November 1913. Under the revised rule, the area to be kept open for grazing was reduced to a maximum of 8,008 acres, and the number of cattle grazed was limited to 533.[47] The area open to grazing during 1913-21 was 6,905 acres. Seven Government *bathans* and five private *bathans* with the capacity of accommodating 412 heads of cattle were constructed between 1916 and 1921. From 1921 to 1928, 4 more Government *bathans* and 2 private *bathans* accommodating 132 cattle were constructed. Consequently, all open grazing, except that covered by the lease held by Edward Keventer, ceased in the Lower and Middle Hill Forests.[48] The Teesta Valley Forests had been closed to grazing since reservation, and the only grazing allowed was in the Turzam Forest Village (265 acres) for the villagers only.

Prevention of Cattle Grazing and Protection of Forests in Kurseong Division

In the Kurseong Forest Division, grazing was permitted in most of the forests, except during the season of jungle fires, when special measures were adopted for their protection and in those forests closed for reproduction/ mating season.[49] The rates for fodder grass were reduced by 50 percent due to diminishing grazing in the reserves. In the year 1882-83, the question of grazing cattle for the milk and butter supply of the Dow Hill School in the Dhobijhora forest remained under discussion, and in the meantime, the graziers were restricted to the railway settlement land.[50]About 5628 cattle grazed in the Kurseong Forest Division in the year 1882-83.[51]

Prevention of Cattle Grazing and Protection of Forests in Teesta Division

The rules under which grazing should be permitted in the Teesta Division were thoroughly discussed by the authorities in 1881-82. These resulted in newer sets of rules being passed by the Government.[52] Accordingly the forests in this division were divided into two classes.[53] In the upper forests, grazing was reserved principally for the inhabitants of the division under a low scale of fees and lower forest in which grazing was only allowed in exceptional cases and under ordinary rules and rates. These rules were published in the Calcutta Gazette on the 21st of February 1882. The grazing rules of the Teesta division were strictly enforced. Grazing in the lower forests was only permitted with the special sanction of the Conservator.[54] The number of Cattle grazed in this forest Division was 5,015 in 1881-82 and the revenue collected amounted to Rs. 603.

A significant aspect of the Colonial Forest Policy concerning restrictions imposed on cattle grazers in the reserved forest of Darjeeling District was the tax regime on grazing in the reserved forest. The rules under which the grazing fees were levied were regulated under Bengal Forest Rules and any person grazing cattle on these reserved forests could be made to pay grazing tax.

These Grazing Rules were operational in Teesta Division during 1882, and similar laws were also proposed in Darjeeling Division around the same time. The revenue from grazing for the year1882-83 was Rs. 6619, compared with Rs. 5811 in 1881-82.[55] The number of cattle grazed during the two years has been 24,405 and 20,645.[56] In Darjeeling Division, there were about 91 Graziers and 157 *bathans* in 1882. The graziers grazed their cattle mainly in Senchal, Sonada, Pachim, Chattacpur, Ranjo, Tiger Hill, Rangbi, Tukdah, Nai Balasan Chongtong, Purmagiri, Palangdong and Pagrainbong blocks of Senchal Mahalderam, Tukdah and Ghoompahar ranges of Darjeeling Division.[57] The buffalo graziers were *pahariahs*, and the cow graziers were principally Bhutias.

Till 1916 the Graziers could keep in their possession as many cattle as they required, and permits were issued to them accordingly. However, in 1916-17 following the orders of the government, grazing arrangements were revised, and Rule 3 of Darjeeling Division Grazing Rules were modified, vide Calcutta Gazette notification no MR; dated the 2nd of November 1913 and again in 1916-17.[58] These modified rules had entailed great hardship on the graziers. During winter, when the demand for milk was less in Darjeeling, they kept a lesser number of cattle, and during summer and autumn, when the demand was higher, they kept a more significant number of cattle. Formerly they were permitted to graze their cattle on fallow land in the forest or wherever they chose to without any restriction. Further, some piece of land was invariably kept fallow that was attached to the compound of each grazier. After the enactment of the modified rules, cattle were to be kept confined in their cattle shed. Some of these professional graziers were served notices to leave the forest though they had been living there since their ancestors time with their family and children, in the houses they erected at great expense. This was done to utilize the land occupied by them for planting trees to meet the future demand for fuelwood. Government notification for the Regulation of Grazing in the Reserved Forest of Darjeeling No 1816 T-R; dated the 21st of October 1916, the maximum grazing area was reduced to 7738 acres, and the minimum number of cattle to be grazed was limited to 515.[59]

As early as the 2nd of February 1894, Pem Chuda Lama and twenty-five others, the *ryots* of Toosongpong in Tukdah *Khas Mahal* in Darjeeling, submitted a memorandum to the

Lieutenant Governor of Bengal through the Deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling.[60] They were all cultivators and were the principle milk and butter suppliers of Darjeeling. They kept nearly three hundred cows and bullocks. In the year 1872, Major Morton, the then deputy commissioner of Darjeeling, granted them a regular wasteland lease of thousand acres conferring rights of alienation, inheritance, and renewal to Pem Chuda and others for a term of thirty-one years and six months at the rent of six *annas* per acre per annum They had the right of common over these land. They were also given the right to graze cattle over 479 acres of land covered with forest adjoining the said one thousand acres. Unfortunately, this lease or *pattah* was never submitted to the Board of Revenue for the lower provinces, subject to whose sanction and confirmation the said lease or *pattah* had been granted. At the time of their renewal of the lease or *pattah*, the Government did not entertain their request. After repeated petitions on the 16th of September 1878, that is nearly a year after the order passed by the then Lt. Governor to grant a lease for ten years only. The lessees there accepted this new lease under protest and approached the deputy commissioner of Darjeeling to restore their rights over the land. The Deputy Commissioner forwarded their Memorandum to the Lt Governor:

> Your Honuor's memoradist under the circumstance most humbly submits that even if by the circumstance mentioned above most unfortunate to them, they happen to have no proper legal rights of common over the plot of Forest land in question, their equitable right with same are most--- (illegible); and your Honor's humble memorialist hope that your honour will with your honour's well-known sense of justice and equity, be pleased to consider the representation contained in this humble memorial and your Honor's humble memoradist pray that the rights, for such a long time enjoyed by them and their predecessors in till, of pasturage, taking of fallen timber and dry wood for firewood and other rights be granted to them over the said plot of forest land and that thus they are enabled to live where they have lived so long and usually with milk and butter supply of Darjeeling.[61]

Mr. Noden Bhutia and other graziers submitted a Memorandum to the Governor of Bengal in 1917 asking for the redressal of their grievances. Their Memorandum mentioned:

> Your Excellency's poor memorialists beg to submit that if the rules as stated above be enforced by the Forest Department, the poor memorialist will be ruined and homeless beggars, so they have come to your Excellency with a hope that your Excellency would graciously take into your Excellency's kind consideration their genuine grievances and would redress them.[62]

Debates ensued in the Bengal Legislative Assembly on the condition of graziers. While participating in the debate of the 3rd session of the Bengal Legislative Assembly, Honourable member Rai Harendra Nath Chaudhuri brought before the Assembly, the problems of graziers:

> Forest's contribution to the maintenance of India's livestock should be recognized. How is our forest department going to help that?- well, by punishing on the whole about 2,000 to 3000 men for grazing offences per year. Sir, to relieve these poor people, I can only present this Government with a suggestion on the lines of what has been done by the Madras government….. Where is the message from our ministry? Our ministry, on the contrary, is going to continue unabated the grazing fees and the policy of punishing the people behind the offending cattle. It is surely, Sir, a policy of resurrection of a man behind the plough and that with a vengeance indeed.[63]

Thus the policy of forest reservation of British India as implemented in Darjeeling hills disturbed the pre-colonial system of the competing communities. Before that, they had control over the means of production over the resources needed to reproduce themselves. Nevertheless, the forest reservation and policy followed struck at the root of the forest dwellers' traditional social and economic organization. The Colonial forest policy operated on radically different principles from the customary use of the forest by the indigenous communities across South Asia. The takeover of the Darjeeling forests from the Raja of Sikkim and Kalimpong from the Raja of Bhutan and their subsequent management on purely commercial lines were at once a denial of the earlier traditional obligation met by the Sikkim and Bhutan Governments and a threat to the subsistence level of the forest dwellers.

Provisions for declaring forests, as reserved by abolishing the rights of the tribal people, were contained in the Indian Forest Act of 1865. This Act was modified and re-enacted in 1878 and then in 1927. Bypassing these Forest Acts, the Government's claim over the forests became legitimate, and the forest dwellers traditional rights of hunting, food gathering, *Jhumming*, grazing, cutting trees or bamboos for house building, etc., became illegitimate. While asserting legal rights of ownership over forest resources, the British Government brought a highly developed legal and administrative structure to bear on its management. The new legal and administrative framework thrust upon the forest dwellers was bound to generate a new sensibility as to what would be a crime, what would be private property, what would be justice, what would be injustice, what would be legitimate, what would be illegitimate, what would be ordered and what would be disorder.

The Forest Policy was first formulated as such in 1894. It was based primarily on the recommendations contained in the Report of Voelcker on Indian agriculture in 1893. It recognized the close relationship between forestry and agriculture and argued that forestry activities were justified by their direct and indirect contribution to the development of agriculture. Such an approach facilitated the extension of agriculture into forest areas. This primarily benefited landed interest and adversely affected forest dwellers, among whom the concept of property rights over land was almost unknown. They were accustomed to forest life but were brought out of their habitat. The perception of the natives and that of the Colonial administrators came into conflict in the forest matters. The British law and Acts created a whole new legal category of forest crime and doctored the lines of regimentation and control. Violation of the forest law led to criminalization with punitive action. Colonial forest management appeared unintelligible in the eyes of those who had been using the forest from time immemorial.

The forest- dwellers in Darjeeling hills till the arrival of the British depended on the forest for their livelihood. State reservation of forest greatly affected the subsistence activities of these indigenous communities. Over time, they remained un-reconciled to the colonial forest policy and refused to accept the validity of the Government's claim. British compelled the *Lepchas* to leave Darjeeling for Kalimpong. When Kalimpong was taken over by the British Raj and converted to a white town with sprawling Missionary engagements, the Lepchas were once again hemmed and cordoned to the adjoining slopes and lower gradients. Contradiction and selective treatment marked the functioning of Colonial laws. For instance, when the tribals hunted, the Colonial Forest Laws declared them poachers or criminals. In contrast, when the local European residents, tea garden managers, and soldiers did the same, it was called 'sport', 'gaming'. The forest policy of 1894 mentioned:

> The sole object with which State forests are administered is the public benefit. In some cases, the public to be benefited is the whole body of taxpayers; in others, the people on the track within which the forest is situated; but in almost all cases, constitution and preservation of a forest involve, to a greater or lesser degree, the regulation of rights and restriction of privileges of users in the forest area which the inhabitants of its immediate neighbourhood may have previously enjoyed. This regulation and restrictions are justified only when the advantage to be gained by the public are tremendous. The cardinal principle to be observed is that the rights and privileges of individuals must be limited otherwise than for their benefit, only to such degree as is absolutely necessary to secure that advantage.[64]

Grazing fees were yet another source of revenue for this forest division. Two classes of permits were issued for grazing in the open block, namely quarterly permits for grazing in the upper forests and monthly permits in the lower forests.[65] Only the tenants of the colonial Government in the Kalimpong civil division were allowed to graze their cattle in the upper and lower forests by accruing monthly and quarterly permit.[66] Persons other than the Kalimpong subdivision tenants could also graze their cattle but only in the upper forests.

The following table illustrates the amount fixed for the government tenants for quarterly and monthly permits and the monthly permit and its amount for graziers other than government tenants.[67]

Table 3: Types of Animals Grazed in the Teesta forest and their charges.

Types of animals	**Quarterly permits**	**Monthly permit**
Buffaloes	Each 12 *annas*	6 *annas*
Bullocks, cows, & ponies	Each 2 *annas*	2 *annas*
Goats	Each 1 *anna*	2 *annas*
Sheeps	Each 1 *anna*	1*anna*
Monthly Grazing permits for people other than Government Tenants		
Types of animals		
Buffaloes		6 *annas*
Bullocks, cows, & ponies		2 *annas*
Goats		2 *annas*
Sheeps		1*anna*

Source: Working Plan for the Forests of the Teesta Division More Especially the Sal Forest, No. 155W.P; Dated the 14th of December 1892, Calcutta, Bengal Secretariat Press. p.14

The governmental control of minor forest produce of Darjeeling created huge profit for the Government at the cost of tribal forest dwellers like *Lepchas*. Developmental programs designed for their benefit only reinforced the process of land alienation and the dislocation of the subsistence tribal economy. All this antagonized the forest dwellers of Darjeeling District, but strangely no open revolt against Colonial Forest Policy was expressed in Darjeeling nor put on record.

Closing observations

The above discussions on Colonial Forest Policies and the case of the Graziers in Darjeeling bring to the fore the webbed nature of protection amidst exploitation of forest reserve. The colonial forest policies took stringent measures to protect the forest and its commercially valuable produce from fire. Steps were also taken to protect reserved forests from unauthorized grazing of cattle so that the growing saplings were not destroyed. The first comprehensive grazing rules were enacted in the year 1880 for the Darjeeling division. The grazing of cattle for the milk and butter supply of Darjeeling has always been an essential consideration in the management of the lower and middle hill forests. Sir William Schlich first realized the necessity to restrict grazing in his memorandum of 1880-81 and kept 11397 acres of the forest open to grazing and closed about 12891 acres. In the Kurseong division, the supply of milk and milk products to the Dow Hill school became the priority and accordingly, approximately 5628 cattle were grazed in the Kurseong forests. In the Teesta division, special rules were published on the 21st of February 1881-82. Here again, the Hill Station and the Cantonment's demands for meat, milk and milk products primarily determined the grazing policy in the reserved and protected forests of all the forest divisions in Darjeeling.

Notes and References

[1] Tensung Namgyal, the immediate successor of Phunstok Namgyal, had shifted the capital from Yoksom to Rabdanste.

[2] L.S.S. O'Malley. *Bengal District Gazetteers: Darjeeling.* Alipore: The Bengal Secretariat Book Depot. Government Printing Press, 1907.

[3] H.H. Risley. *Gazetter of Sikkim*. New Delhi: D.K. Publishers Distributions Pvt. Ltd. 1928, p.74.

[4] O'Malley. *Op.cit*. p. 21.

[5] The British colonial government that ruled India in various forms over two centuries. Empire building or the Raj making involved engagements in ever changing borders, frontiers. The spaces of the Raj witnessed the flow of a multitude of people/races/ethnicities/religions etc., the spectre of which visits the everyday of contemporary South Asia (ASC).

[6]Anjan Chakrabarti. 'Migration and Marginalisation in the 'Himalayan Kingdom' of Sikkim', *Journal of Exclusion Studies*, Vol. 2, No.1, February 2012.

[7] C.U. Aitchison. *A Collection of Treaties, Engagements and Sanads*. Vol. XIV, Calcutta: Government of India Publication Branch, 1929, p.46.

[8] In February 1829, Lloyd was impressed by Darjeeling for a sanatorium. He urged the British Government to secure possession of such a strategically located place, commanding the doorway to the neighbouring countries of Nepal and Bhutan. For the nearest road to Lasha from the British territory lay through Darjeeling. Captain Herbert supported his views, the Deputy Surveyor-general deputed by the Government. Based on their reports, the Court of Directors approved the project of having a sanatorium for invalids. Governor-General William Bentinck ordered Major Lloyd to open negotiation on the 23rd of January 1835, offering land or money and making the Raja understand that the British only wanted Darjeeling for the sanatorium. See, Consultation Fort William the 23rd of January 1831, No. 1 in Fred Pin. *Darjeeling Letters- A Road to Destiny*. Calcutta: Oxford University Press, p.89.

[9] E.C. Dozey. *A Concise History of the Darjeeling District since 1835 with a complete Itinerary of Towns in Sikkim & the District*. Calcutta, 1916.

[10] H.V. Bayley. *Official Records of Government Regarding Darjeeling (Compiled Work of Political Department) Based on the Reports and Memoranda furnished by Mr. J.W. Grant, Captain Herbert, Lieut.-Col. Lloyd, and Dr. H. Chapman*. Calcutta: Bengal Military Orphan Press, 1836, p.11.

[11] Jahar Sen. *Darjeeling a Favored Retreat*. New Delhi: Indus Publishing Company, 1989, p.12; Schuyler Camman. *Trade Through the Himalayas: The Early British Attempt to Open Tibet*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1951; Francis Younghusband. *India and Tibet: A History of the Relations which have Subsisted Between the Two Countries from the Time of Warren Hastings to 1910*. London: John Murray, 1910.

[12] O'Malley. *Op.cit*. p.19. Also see, H. Hosten. 'The Centenary of Darjeeling' *Bengal Past and Present*, Vol. XXXIX, January-June, Calcutta. 1930.

[13] R. D O'Brian. *Darjeeling The Sanatorium of Bengal and Its Surroundings*, Calcutta: W. Newman &Co, Ltd, 1878, p.12

[14] The Balmiki community is an interesting case of migration into the hills of Darjeeling following the growth of Darjeeling Municipality in the 1850s. The Balmiki (Dalits) are the predominant workforce of the municipal body, scavenging and managing the disposal of waste. Over the years, the Balmiki or the 'Sweeper Caste' (in colonial administrative parlance) have been branded as the '*Jamadar*' category that is the lowest in degrees of the category of the 'Others'.

[15]Michael Edwardes. *Warren Hastings: King of the Nabobs*. London: Hart-Davis, 1976; Michael H. Fisher. *Counterflows to Colonialism: Indian Travellers & Settlers in Britain, 1600-1857*. Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004; Suresh Chandra Ghosh. *The Social Condition of the British Community in Bengal, 1767-1800*. Leiden: Brill Archive, 1970.

[16] Kenneth Ballhatchet. *Race, Sex & Class Under the Raj: Imperial Attitudes & Policies & their Critics, 1793-1905*. New York: St. Martin,s Press, 1980; Pat Barr. *The Memsahibs: The Women of Victorian India*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1976.

[17] Samit Ghosal. *Lepchas of Darjeeling and Sikkim: A Study in Cultural Ecology and Social Change*, Unpublished PhD thesis submitted to the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, University of North Bengal,1990, pp.65-66, 227.

[18] *Progress Report of Forest Administration in the Lower Province of Bengal for the Year 1874-75*, Calcutta, Bengal Secretariat Press, p.3. Also see, *Proceeding of the Government of Bengal in the Revenue*. Forest Department for the month of April 1921. Calcutta, Bengal Secretariat Press, 1921.

[19] Deepak Kumar, Vinita Damodaran & Rohan D'souza. (ed.). *The British Empire & the Natural World: Environmental Encounters in South Asia*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011.

[20] Sharad Singh Negi, *Forest for Socio-Economic and Rural Development in India*. New Delhi: M.D publications Pvt. Ltd, 1996.

[21] K. J. Joseph. 'British Forest Policy and Forest-Based Popular Resistances in Darjeeling' in Padam Nepal and Anup Shekhar Chakraborty. (Ed.). *Politics of Culture, Identity and Protest in North-east India*. Vol. 2. New Delhi: Authorspress, 2012, pp. 387-419.

[22] Madhav Gadgil & Ramachandra Guha. *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India.* Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992, p.1; Ramachandra Guha. *The Unquiet Woods: Ecological change and Peasant Resistance in the Himalayas*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996. Also see, Pabitra Mohan Barik. The Paik Rebellion of Khurda of 1817. *Orissa Review.* Feb-March 2008, pp. 51-52.

[23] B.G. Karlsson. *Contested Belonging: An Indigenous peoples Struggle for Forest and Identity in Sub-Himalayan Bengal*. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000.

[24] By the early nineteenth century, the idea of sport was associated with leisure pursuits. A sporting world came to constitute the various outdoor pursuits of 'hunting, racing, shooting, angling, cricket, walking.' The hill stations and the cantonments of Darjeeling became the arena where the imperial imagination of leisure, recuperation and good health was displayed in replication and made operative in South Asia (ASC).

[25] *Progress Report of Forest Administration in the Lower Provinces of Bengal for the Year 1882-83*, prepared by A.L. Home Conservator of Forests, Bengal, Calcutta, Bengal Secretariat Press, 1883, pp.32, 37

[26] *Ibid*

[27] E.G Chester. *Annual Progress Report on Forest Administration in the Presidency of Bengal for the year 1895-96*, officiating Conservator of Forests, Bengal, Alipur, Government Printing Press, 1896, p.4.

[28] *Progress Report Of Forest Administration in the Lower Provinces of Bengal for the Year 1884-85*, prepared by A.L Home (Conservator of Forests, Bengal), Darjeeling, Bengal Secretariat Press, 1885.p.20.

[29] *Ibid*.

[30] *Ibid*.

[31] Dietrich Brandis. *Suggestion Regarding the Management of the Forests in the Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling District*: *Bengal* (Simla the 1st of November 1880), Calcutta: Home, Revenue and Agriculture Department Press, 1881, pp.1-26.

[32] Memorandum on the management of the forests in the Darjeeling Division, Bengal, by Dr. W. Sclich, Officiating Inspector general of Forest, dated Simla, the 21st of April 1882, as found in Appendix B, p. vii of the *Progress Report of Forest Administration in the Lower Provinces of Bengal for the Year 1882-83*, prepared by A.L. Home Conservator of Forests, Bengal, Calcutta, Bengal Secretariat Press, 1883.

[33] *Ibid*, p. x.

[34] *Ibid*.

[35] *Ibid*.

[36] *Ibid*.

[37] *Ibid*.

[38] *Ibid*.

[39] *Ibid*.
[40] *Ibid*.
[41] *Ibid*., p.37.
[42] *Ibid*.
[43] Bengal Forest Manual, Part 1 Rules issued under Act by F. Trafford (2nd ed), Calcutta: The Bengal Secretariat Book Depot. 1911.
[44]Calcutta Gazette, the 5th of September 1886, part 1 P. 1555.
[45] Working Plan, for the Darjeeling Forest Division Northern Circle Bengal for the period 1929-30 to 1936-37, Prepared by S. Chaudhuri (Conservator of Forests) p.7.
[46] *Ibid*.
[47] *Ibid*.
[48] *Ibid*., p.8
[49] *Progress Report of Forest Administration in the Lower Provinces of Bengal for the Year 1882-83*, *Op.cit*., p.38.
[50] *Ibid*
[51] *Ibid*
[52] Government Notification dated the 21st of February 1882 published on page 175, part 1 of the Calcutta Gazette of the 1st of March, 1882.
[53] *Progress Report of Forest Administration in the Lower Provinces of Bengal for the Year 1881-82* prepared by J.S Gamble (Officiating Conservator of Bengal), Calcutta, Bengal Secretariat Press, 1882, p.22.
[54] *Progress Report of Forest Administration in the Lower Provinces of Bengal for the Year 1882-83*, *Op.cit*., p. 38.
[55] *Ibid*, p.37.
[56] *Ibid*.
[57] *Ibid*.
[58]Proceeding (A) of the Hon'ble. Lt. Governor of Bengal Revenue Proceeding, Forest, No 1563 Dated Darjeeling, the 19th of July 1917, Report on cattle Grazing in the Darjeeling Forests from Sir H.A. Farrington Bart officiating Conservator of Forests Bengal to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal revenue Department. No.4.
[59] Letter from L. Birley Esq; Secretary to the Government of Bengal Revenue Department, No. 1799, dated Calcutta the 22nd of February 1918, No.6.
[60] The Humble Memorial of Pem Chuda Lama and other 24 Ryots of Toosongpong in Tukdha Khas Mahal was submitted to this Honor Lt. Governor of Bengal through the Deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling on the 2nd of February 1894 as found in the Proceeding (B) of the Lt Governor of Bengal Revenue Department Forest Branch, File No. 8P/3 of November 1894.
[61] Letter from J.H. Lewin Esq; to the Lt. Governor of Bengal the 2nd of February 1895 as found in the Proceeding (B) of the Lt Governor of Bengal Revenue Department Forest Branch, File No. 8P/1 of February 1895.
[62] The Humble Petition of Norden Bhutia and others submitted to His Excellency the Governor of Bengal in Council on 17th October 1917 as found in the *Proceeding Volume 5 of the Government of Bengal in the Revenue Department Forest Branch*, September 1918.
[63] Official Report of the Third Session of Bengal Legislative Proceeding held on 18th, 19th , 21st, 22nd 23rd, 24th , 25th , 26th, and 28th March 1938, Alipore, Bengal Government Press, 1938, p.395.
[64]Sharad Singh Negi, *Forest for Socio-Economic and Rural Development in India*. New Delhi, M. D Publications Pvt. Ltd., 1996, p.34.
[65] *Ibid*
[66] *Ibid*.
[67] *Ibid.*

Dr. Ma Saw Sa: The First Lady Doctor and Parliamentarian of British Burma (1884-1962)

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Born on August 1, 1884 to Christian parents, Dr. Ma Saw Sa also called Daw Saw Hsa or Dr. Saw Hsa holds the distinction of being the first Burmese woman to earn an advanced medical degree, and the first woman to serve in the upper house of the colonial parliament. Her father Po Saw was a government official (*wundauk*) of Prome. She studied in the Mission schools of Danubyu, Bassein and Zigon and passed her First Arts Examination from the Baptist College of Rangoon (Judson College) in 1906. After earning a LMS degree from the Calcutta Medical College she went to Dublin for two years as a state scholar. She dedicated her life for the welfare of the Burmese women and played an important role in formulating the new constitution of Burma.

American Baptist Missionaries in Burma

Saw Sa's family was third generation Christian. Her affiliation with the Baptist Missionaries was largely instrumental in achieving her dreams. Even before British annexation of Burma in three phases (1824, 1852, 1885) Baptist Missionaries were active in Burma as early as 1813. Adoniram Judson (1788-1850), a pioneering American Baptist missionary and his wife Ann Hasseltine relocated to Rangoon in Burma from India. He founded Myanmar church, established schools, and trained preachers. His tireless efforts led to the rise of a Baptist Christian community composed of Burman, Karen, and others amounting to about 500,000. Judson combined translation and literary work with evangelism, and in 1834 he completed the task of translating the Bible into Burmese. Other Baptist missionaries like Mr. and Mrs Vinton who landed in 'Maulmain' in 1834 sensitised the people about the 'human body and its ailments, and also the inculcation of the most needful lesson that "cleanliness id next to godliness."[i] In 1853 when the Burmese King Mindon came to the throne he showed more tolerance than previous Burmese rulers towards western Christian missionaries and their work with the hope to establish more favourable relationship with the British who were taking gradual control of Burma. The king ensured Dr. J. E. Marks, an Anglican bishop, his patronage and gave him some uncommon privileges: "Do not think me an enemy to your religion. If I had been, I should not have called you to my royal city. If, when you have taught people, they enter into your belief, they have my full permission," and then, speaking very earnestly, "if my own sons, under your instruction, wish to become Christians, I will let them do so. I will not be angry with them." King Mindon even gave Dr. Marks permission and support to build a Christian school in the King's capital and promised to send his sons there to study under Christian missionaries. After some time, however, King Mindon terminated his patronage to Dr. Marks when he realized that he had achieved no political advantage from the British. Education and health were the two key areas where the missionaries worked in earnest. The converted Burmans received better education and had the privilege of using the opportunities offered by the missionaries. Saw Sa had the support of the missionaries.

As a devout Christian Saw Sa visited hospitals of Rangoon and 'what she saw awakened her to the needs of Christian women doctors and she resolved to study medicine'.[ii] In Burma no health issue was as neglected by indigenous doctors as child birth. The brutality of the *wan zwes* or Burmese midwives and the concepts of spirits and nats during childbirth was a peculiarity of Burma. Burmese women in general were not bound by the limitations of the *purdah* system like India and were much liberal in their outlook yet they were subjected to inhumanness of the *wan* zwes. It was indeed an enigma. Perhaps it was more a matter of perpetuation of cultural tradition than being gender specific.

Wan Zwe **System**

The delivery of baby was done generally in the upper room in the house and it was separated from the rest of the house by hanging a thick curtain or screen across it. As the Burmese believed that the burning smell of oils and fat from cooking could cause illness and death, the labouring room was shut tightly as possible to protect the mother from the odour. In that air tight room, the mother would be surrounded by her relatives and the *wan zwe*. The amount of pressure put on the mother during the entire birthing period was appalling. This violent act of pushing the mother's abdomen by the *wan zwe* began with the commencement of labour. 'A Burman woman....is laid on a mat on the bamboo floor, and without the least idea of position or presentation, with every pain is subjected to such pressure as the midwife may think the case demands, in order to press the child downwards. As it descends, a piece of cloth is bound tightly around the mother to prevent its retrieving to its former position. If kneading the mother with the hands does not produce the desired effect, the mid wife as her assistant she herself by holding on to some object, places one part above the child, and with heel and toe movements, tries to press the child down. Should this means fail then other methods are employed. The most common is to take a bamboo yoke such as used by the coolies and watermen in carrying their burdens, lying it across the child, two persons sit one on either end of the bamboo, and press the child steadily down. This is constantly done in cases of abnormal position and almost always end in rupturing the uterus, and often in killing both mother and child.'[iii]

The excessive brutal force during childbirth was not without a cause. It was mainly due to the fear of bad spirits, nats. It was considered to be a more serious concern than the health of the mother or child. To ward off the evil spirit, the birthing process was followed by a special ceremony as the new born baby was washed. The grandmother and the closest family relations of the new mother jostled along the floor saying, "Here witches came and take it. Here devils came and eat it". The main purpose was to appease all the spirits so that the child is not harmed. But when the child was convulsing and would be in a state of shock (which was very common) the whole house would say, "The Nats have caught it" and immediately offering would be given to ward off the nats. If in the whole process the baby died, it was not allowed to stay in the overnight because it was believed that the mother would not conceive any more.[iv]

The brutal process was horrific for the missionaries and the white population in Burma. Mary Douglas, a British anthropologist known for her writings on human culture and symbolism mentioned an incident in her doctoral thesis. She referred to a case where a Christian missionary nurse tried to prevent four deliveries cases done by the *wan zwes* closer to their

Missionary House in Moulmein. However, she was unable to stop the *wan zwes* from carrying out their mission. In another incident in Moulmein, a druggist Mr Wilkes became extremely upset at the *wan zwes* and obtained permission for the post-mortem of a dead mother along with an arrest warrant of the *wan zwe*. The report of the post mortem said, 'The uterus had been ruptured from side to side, the body of the child forced into the cavity of the bowels, and the child's head separated from the body by the pressures that had been used.[v]

Combating the *Wan Zwe* System

Burmese practices of childbirth was perceived as 'culturally determined and less gender specific but still dangerous practice'[vi] by the medical missionaries operating in Burma. The medical missionaries in order to combat the *wan zwe* system took the initial initiative in training indigenous women in nursing and midwifery. American Baptist missionaries dominated the medical work in Lower Burma after its annexation in 1885. Dr. Ellen Mitchell was the first missionary doctor in Burma. She started her work in Moulmein at the age of fifty and continued to dedicate her service for the last twenty-five years of her life for the Burmese women. She died in 1901. Although she was not very successful but possibly succeeded in sensitizing people about the necessity of indigenous women doctors to combat the *wan zwes*. [vii]

Lady Dufferin, wife of Lord Dufferin came to India in 1885 with a mandate from Queen Victoria to improve the healthcare for the women of India. The 'Countess of Dufferin's Fund for Supplying Female Medical Aid to the Women of India' or Countess of Dufferin Fund made considerable contribution in educating indigenous medical women in Rangoon. The Dufferin Hospital was opened in Rangoon in 1887 in a large rented bungalow and funded by local government and Municipal Committee of Rangoon each contributing Rs 4000 each. The government's Annual Report on Hospitals in the Colony for 1902 called the Dufferin Hospital in Rangoon, 'the only institution of the exclusive use of females, combining a maternity and lying in hospital with the treatment of general diseases of women and children and providing for the training of nurses and midwives.'[viii]' Apart from the Dufferin Hospital, formalized training institutes were also set up in Moulmein and Bassein. Dr. Mary Fowler Thompson an American Baptist Missionary as well as the President of Women's Christian Temperance Union was appointed to serve in Carpenter Memorial Hospital in Bassein. Here she started nurses training class for girl students of seventh standard. The main purpose was to make medical treatment affordable to poorer Burmese women by training young women with the award of scholarships and stipends. Besides the Burma Branch of the *Red Cross* was active in Burma and enthusiastically undertook its programme of educating mothers and training midwives. Thus hospitalisation during child birth by trained nurses and midwives was being encouraged by the white population in Burma. The medical education of the indigenous women developed by the joint efforts of American missionaries and Lady Dufferin Fund. In 1923 when Burma gained limited self-rule and education and health responsibilities were given to the ministers then the local government began to take interest in medical education of women.[ix]

Medical Education of Dr. Saw Sa

Baptist missionaries were realising the necessity of providing medical education to Burmese women to fight the *wan zwes*. Ma Saw Sa with her elitist background and academic prowess became a natural choice of the missionaries. She herself was interested in alleviating the sufferings of the Burmese women. The Baptist missionaries were willing to fund her medical education in India. India, and Bengal in particular, offered higher education to the middle class or affluent Burmese. The Hindu College, Calcutta University and the Calcutta Medical College were all popular destinations for well-off Burmese.[x] Much later, Aung San Suu Kyi, Burmese leader and Noble Prize winner was educated at the Lady Shri Ram College in Delhi. The unstable administrative structures and political uncertainties in the mid-nineteenth century prompted British administrators to try to centralise the bureaucracies of Bengal and Burma; thus Judson College and Rangoon College were both affiliated with Calcutta University. Saw Sa was given a medical scholarship and she spent five years at Calcutta Medical College. In 1911 she was awarded the degree of licentiate in midwifery and surgery, the first Burmese woman to earn a medical license. [xi] She gained further training in public health at the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons in Dublin, where she was the first Burmese student to win a fellowship. She went there on state scholarship and attained two degrees FRCSI and DPH. King and Queen's College of Physicians later known as Royal College of Physicians opened their doors to women medical students in 1877 earlier than their British counterpart Royal College of Physicians in London. The later did not open its doors to women until 1909. By 1898, for example, women made up approximately 0.8% of medical students matriculating at Irish universities. Medical education at Dublin was a serious undertaking because it involved long and severe course of study, laboratory and classroom work and subsequently long hours in the wards of a hospital gaining clinical experience[xii]. Two foreign degrees from such a distinguished Medical College enhanced her status as a doctor and endeared her to the Burmese women. She was the only woman physician in Burma at that time. She became a role model for the Burmese girls who wanted to join the medical profession.[xiii]

Professional Career of Dr. Saw Sa

Upon her return to Burma she was appointed as the Assistant Superintendent in the General Hospital. Next year she joined as Superintendent of Dufferin Maternity Hospital in Rangoon and performed her duties with notable success. Here she not only worked as a physician but also trained native nurses whose services were desperately required in Burma.[xiv] As a Superintendent of the Dufferin hospital she had the entire responsibility of the administration of the large hospital on her shoulder. In 1921 Dr. Saw Sa compiled a medical text on midwifery in Burmese. [xv] In 1927 she went to John Hopkins in USA to pursue further studies in medicine. [xvi]This was not uncommon. Bengali women doctors of India like Kadambini Ganguly or Jamini Sen went abroad to update themselves on the new frontiers of medicine. Jamini Sen introspects, 'I began to feel that my knowledge was getting timeworn while science has been progressing continuously. I haven't been able to keep up pace with it and hence I'm lagging behind. I have a lot of responsibilities towards my sisters in my country. The dearth of women doctors in our country is a very serious issue. We need able doctors to tackle and cure female ailments. What I learnt as a student regarding operative surgery and gynaecology has progressed over time. Thus, if I wish to serve my sisters in this country then I must learn the modern procedures. And for this reason it is necessary that I should visit the hospitals in England to learn and improve my skills as a doctor.'[xvii] Ambalika Guha argues that there was a push to be 'better doctors' with 'wider medical outlook' and greater

'scientific spirit' and 'women physicians had to keep abreast of modern methods and continually improve their standard of practice.'[xviii] Dr. Ma Saw Sa resigned from Dufferin Hospital and set up her own private practice. She used one part of her house as a private hospital.[xix] In December 1927 she served on the Burma Local Committee of the Seventh Congress of the Far Eastern Association Of Tropical Medicine at Calcutta.[xx] The headquarters were in the School of Tropical Medicine and the adjacent Calcutta Medical College. Important researches on obstetrics and gynaecology were discussed in the Congress. Indian Medical Gazette reported 'Miss Margaret Balfour's study of the special diseases of pregnancy in India, with special reference to communities, is a very fine piece of work'……[xxi] Participation in these medical conferences was indeed an honour for Dr. Saw Sa as well as a learning experience.

How did the Burmese women respond to the western medicine? Certain parts of Burma where Christian population was prevalent appreciated the work of western trained midwives. In 1915 in Sagaing when a civil hospital was opened with 'well equipped' maternity ward it became popular among the local population having forty-five admissions within just six months. [xxii] On this positive response a local newspaper commented, 'The splendid result would not have been possible without the cooperation of the Burmese ladies and elders of Sagaing generally who have been instrumental in preaching the benefits of the maternity wards and inducing patients to attend.'[xxiii] However in different parts of Burma where Christian population was less prominent like Mandalay local population continued to resist western medicine. Interestingly in 1920 Burmese *wan zwes* were still more popular among the local population than the western trained midwives. Among 55,000 registered births in Mandalay only 950 mothers took the assistance of trained midwives rest 4,600 resorted to the *wan zwes* to attend in labour knowing well that it would lead to higher rates of mortality both for mother and child. In Mandalay especially tetanus took away many infant lives.[xxiv] In spite of these detriments Dr. Saw Sa worked tirelessly among the Burmese women to sensitise them about the benefits of western medicine.

Political Engagement of Dr. Saw Sa

The popularity and reputation of Dr. Saw Sa as a lady doctor brought her into the broader arena of politics. She took this opportunity of propagating the individuality of Burmese women on the global platform. As a Burmese delegate to the Joint Select Committee on Indian Constitutional reform she spoke in favour of married Burmese women's suffrage. In her memorandum she stated, 'We claim wifehood franchise for the wives of all men who vote on other qualification also, for the same reason.'[xxv] She further stated, 'On the principal status of equal status with men, we are not all in favour of having seats reserved for women. The Burmese women are fully emancipated and our regarded by men in our land as equal partners with them in home, economic and political matters as borne out by the unanimous support of our claims.'[xxvi] In another instance before the members of Women's Freedom League in London, she gave a more detailed description of the exalted position of women in Burma. 'A Burmese woman has a joint ownership in her husband's property. She inherits the whole of it on his death, and has the right, if she marries again to retain half of it, the rest going to his children. She is the mistress of the house, holds the family purse.....Burmese women have individual al names but no surnames and so women do not change their names after marriage.'[xxvii] She also felt that she independent women deserved position in the Constitution. The members of Women's Freedom League in London were greatly interested

and surprised at the emancipation of Burmese women in the third decade of twentieth century.

Dr. Ma Saw Sa played an important role in the discussion of the scheme of Constitutional reform in Burma. By the Government of Burma Act 1935, Burma was separated from India and granted a Constitution in 1937. In the new legislative body Dr. Saw Sa was elected as a member in the thirty- six seat Senate of Burma.

Conclusion

Dr. Ma Saw Sa broke the glass ceiling when she became the first qualified woman doctor of Burma in 1911. Her indomitable quest for medical knowledge took her to Dublin where she received two foreign degree making her a well- qualified M.D doctor. She was a devout Christian and devoted her life for the well-being of the women and children of Burma. She represented Burma abroad on various occasions and propagated the independence enjoyed by the Burmese women. She took a keen interest in Burmese politics and became the elected member of Senate in 1937. Like many women doctors of her time she chose to remain unmarried. She spent her life with her mother and sisters. Dr. Ma Saw Sa passed away at the age of seventy-seven on 28 February 1962.

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Melodramatizing History/Historicizing Melodrama: Interrogating the Role of Historical Soap Operas in Creating an Alternative Historical Narrative

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All authorities require a cultural frame or a master fiction to define itself and put forward its claim[i]. Interpretation of ideologues provide a foundation to the images, identification with which remain quintessential for the realization of the politicized social self[ii]. But who are these ideologues? Nationalist movement had a set group of ideologues- the nationalists. The brave sons of the soil who toiled hard to set it free from the clutches of the colonizers. Since 1947 India has laid her claims to independence and republicanism. The war continues even though the battle is won. Nationalism continues to be defined where power is emblematically entrusted to the people who apparently are not empowered to apply it. They are made the Herculean giant who is strong but a dumb force. They are made to speak words that they hear, see and internalize. A splendid and robust performance is organized where the authorities justify their presence, their role and their requirement in the evanescent system. Borrowing from Max Weber and Durkheim, Gerard Bouchard highlights values, beliefs, ideals and traditions that underlie the sense of belonging of a people to an institution, structure their vision of the past and the future, inspire collective choices and circumscribe public debate[iii]. Collective imageries[iv] as Bouchard identifies it forms the umbrella of master narratives/fiction. A master fiction has been created in India since 1947 through various media or exhibitions. Of carnivalesque nature the spaces of performance open up other alternatives as well. We will discuss shortly the sources of these alternatives. But suffice to say that these alternatives are born from the full-fledged performance which in the words of Marvin Carlson is a haunted space imbued with too many memories. As a result, the haunted space opens up a liminal space where meanings, conditions, norms, rules, rites, and cults lay betwixt. To put it more simply, it emerges as a space with many possibilities. It is in this space of performance that the meant meets the understood. If rather bluntly put, it is in this space meanings flowing from the stage meets with the interpretations from the other side of the stage. This is where an alternate narrative of the master fiction is created. It is in this space an alternate historical narrative is created both by the director/script writers of soap operas and by the viewers as well.

History was, and remains, a matter of public passion in Indian life. Historical narratives have always played a categorically significant role in underlining the collective memory of the nation. Along with print media performative media remains a key discursive medium for instructing public mind in an order of indigeneity. Rising popularity of prime time soap operas in Indian television (particularly the Hindi prime time operas), since 1990s, has led the soap operas to assume a discursive role. Various Hindi channels airing soap operas with a historical plot have started attracting increased viewership from Indian household. Historical figures have gained the status of sitcom heroes who combine two identities- one of protagonist of a melodramatic genre, and secondly, of a hero of a historical temporality. Historical narrative merges with the soap operatic progression model of idyllic life, crisis, amelioration of the crisis and the eventual restoration of the old order. The larger-than-life image that historical figures attain in this praxis, surmounting to a superhuman stature, results from a curious intermixture of fantastic elements of soap operas and historical narration.

Mythification of history in this structure occurs through melodramatic form of representation. In this paper I will be looking closely at the melodramatic narrative structure of three soap operas, *Akbar the Great* (1988), *Bharat ka veer putra-Maharana Pratap* [The Brave Son of India- Maharana Pratap] (2013), and *Jodha-Akbar* (2014) to interrogate the historical consciousness engendered by soap operas and to what extent this has ordered the national collective memory of the soap-opera viewers.

What is History?

A perennial question that has perplexed the academia concerns the nature of history. How should a historian narrate the past? Empiricism demanded historical retelling should be a narration of the facts acquired from the sources. Historian remained a third-party narrator in this structure of narration. The role played by the narrator remained an increasingly questionable one. Empiricism and Subjectivism remained loggerheads over the question- can there be a proper history[v] or does history amount to a metanarrative[vi]? Interpretative nature of historical narration has gained stronger grounds lending historical study a subjective nature where narration is not seen free from the ideas and psyche of the narrator creating a metafiction. The past thus seems, under the current light, a layered film of multiple narrations. These narrations serve the purpose of engendering and nurturing a social myth that holds generations together in a collective consciousness.

The argument though quite convincing remains unassuming on one point- the receptor's role. Collective consciousness engendered through social myths first of all needs to apply to the widely held believes and customary traditions of people. But then again, these traditions and believes may vary from one place to another, or one culture to another. At every stage where the narrative is received, consumed, internalized and even performed it undergoes the passage of internal understanding of the recipient. From that vantage point, history becomes an act of private and public understanding of the past. Stretched between the two acts, rather caught between the acts, of public/private dichotomy, narration of the past (i.e. history) acquires more than one form and expression, something I will be interrogating in the course of this paper.

Performing History: Historical soap operas

Being a matter of public passion narration of the past (socially identified as history) has seldom remained restricted within the walls of academia. It has been retold through various media that has often been didactic as well as entertaining. Theatrical and cinematic performance/narration of the past has acquired public approval and accolade all over the world. Dramatization of the past narration isn't something new. But the commercialization of television enterprise in India since 1991, with the onslaught of liberalization, has indeed hijacked past narratives from the hands of the state or few hegemonic authority. What had been under the controlled purview of the state-run television enterprise- Doordarshan- passed onto the commercialized realm of private television enterprise that brought in a new value denominator- TRP (television rating point). Entertainment, many claimed, post-liberalization became an unbridled horse of profiteering. How many audiences were watching a particular show determined the value of the show, meaning how to change it, reinvent it, and if necessary, discontinue the show altogether. Narrative of the shows telecasted lay at the mercy of the viewers whose taste was quantified held coterminous with the frequency of their switching on the channel to watch the particular show. Narratives of historical dramas are subject to similar bargains, where even the historical narration lie at the mercy of the viewers.

No doubt, every such dramatic representation of historical events or persona gives out a declaration at the beginning of each show that facts have sufficiently been dramatized for the purpose of entertainment. But are such declarations enough to make the viewers turn a blind eye to the narration; and does it prevent them from believing in the veracity of the events shown in it?

For a clearer understanding of the role played by liberalization I have selected the historical soap opera *Akbar the Great* from the pre liberalization era and two other historical soap operas, *Bharat ka Veer Putra Maharana Pratap* and *Jodha Akbar*, from the post-1991 era to understand in what ways dramatization to melodramatization, and nationalization to liberalization, has affected the narrativization of the past. The televised presentation/performance of the narrative will be put through a critical literary and discursive analysis to identify the pattern (if they have any) and to discern the narrative structure of social myth.

Melodramatization of History

If History remains an unending dialogue between past and present, then the interaction is mediated by a storyteller- someone who retells the past. In the case of soap operas, the role is assumed by the script writer (often the dialogue writer), the director, the producer and, last but not the least, the viewers. Umberto Eco identified the narrative structure of a soap opera as a closed text- one that has a closure. Aired in the pre-liberalization era, the serial *Akbar the Great,* a historical soap opera, operated as a closed text; it had a closure. Post-liberalization textual nature seems to have undergone a marked change. Soap operative narrations of *Maharana Pratap* and that of *Jodha Akbar* lacks such closure. Despite being drawn from collectivized past memories the narrative pattern belies its initial source- history- and like a prodigal offspring eludes closure evident in the former. If the former soap opera functioned as a historical dramatization of the past, the latter two served as melodramatization of the past. In the course of the content analysis I will show how.

The first roadblock that one faces while attempting a content analysis is the detextualised status granted to soap operas. Robert Clyde Allen examined soap operas as aesthetic objects by implementing poetics/science to determine "not the actual literature/form but the possible literature/form."[vii] Based on his analysis it can be said that soap operas are entrusted with a function by the producer and a meaning that the viewer read from it. This process grants soap opera textuality[viii]. A popular sitcom of Doordarshan, *Akbar the Great*, aired between 1988-89 gained popularity as a magnificent television epic. One of the costliest shows produced for Doordarshan (state run television channel) Akbar Khan, director-producer, of the sitcom hugely invested in the show to recreate the grandeur of the Mughal era. A team engaged in recreating the Mughal era not only consulted historical works to tell the story of Akbar as it was, they also borrowed antiques from Museums to bring alive the time. Shot and completed in just 58 episodes the verbal structure of the narrative aimed to bring alive the age of the Mughals, particularly that of Mughal emperor Akbar. It aimed to portray the administrative achievements and personal life of the emperor. For the Doordarshan viewers to whom sitcoms were still a novelty back in the 80s this weekly telecast held a didactic value[ix]. True it did not employ any melodramatic mode to justify the emotional outpour of the characters. Yet through their performances, adoption of authentic sartorial style, speech stylistic of the Mughals, their artefacts, the entire set of the sitcom did succeed in dramatizing the life and times of Akbar. They gathered their sources in the most authentic manner as possible and allowed the sources to speak for themselves, instead of embellishing it with melodramatic

excesses. The verbal structure of the narrative defined as the "intersubjectively verifiable instructions for meaning production"[x] in the case of this specific sitcom lay encrusted in the dialogues, stylistic lingo, set, props, costumes and make up used to make the Mughal times come alive onscreen. In the very first episode the serial set the structure in which to decipher meanings from this production. A third person voice over narrated the pragmatist and esoteric nature of the Emperor who created and ruled over a huge empire[xi]. The style used in the sitcom produced a "seamless, possible world, detached from our own yet governed by a real world sense of plausibility"[xii]. Specificities of the elements used in the production of the sitcom served as a guide for the readers to respond (in a certain manner) to this "illusion of reality"[xiii].

Post-liberalization, particularly with the growing popularity of Balaji Telefilms production house (under the able leadership of Ekta Kapoor), a new genre of soap operas flooded the Indian televisions. These were no longer once in a week affair. Prime time soap operas began to appear daily and created a new work-leisure time order for many, especially women. Making a fortune with melodramatic genres like *Kyunki Sans Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi*, *Kahani Ghar Ghar Ki*, *Kasauti Zindagi Ki*, *Kusum*, and similar drawing room dramas, it was in the 2010s that the production house turned it's attention to historical genres. Zee television aired the serial on 18th June 2013 and it continued till 2015 with a huge fan following. The verbal structure of the soap opera was set to tune by the theme song (one of the specialties of any Ekta Kapoor serial that have had amazing tunes and songs as its theme song) and the banner of Balaji Telefilms (having an array of drawing room romances to its credit). Both intersubjectively (through the songs, dialogues and costumes) and beyond it (through propaganda) a framework for discerning meaning from the narrative text presented itself before the viewers. The serial *Jodha Akbar* (JA) began with a declaration presented through a conversation between the two protagonists of the narrative. The exchange clearly stated that it intended to deal with the romantic relationship between valiant yet by nature cruel Akbar and his beloved Hindu wife. Unlike Akbar Khan's serial *JA* delved not into the public figure of Akbar but his private life and emotions[xiv]. Glamorous sets and costumes helped create an onscreen image of historical characters[xv]. Performance of actor Rajat Tokas who played Akbar and of Paridhi Sharma (Jodha Bai) recreated the private romance of a man known to posterity (especially through historical accounts) as an eclectic and a man of political genius. These elements present in the text led to encrustation or "accretion of meanings around soap opera"[xvi].

Almost at the same time Sony television aired another historical soap opera *Bharat ka Veer Putra Maharana Pratap* produced by Cantiloe entertainment. Decked with magnificent costumes and setting that kept to the historical time yet added a glamour to the presentation. The booming voice of Amitabh Bachchan set the framework right for the intersubjective textuality of the narrative. First of all he set the records right by pointing out that this was a dramatization of a period taken from the pages of history; and secondly, it narrated the story of an "avatar" born at a time when darkness threatened to descend over the destiny of "Bharat" and how the avatar of Eklinga (as the song that quickly followed this declaration clarified) acted as the saviour of the land with his heroic efforts and "deshbhakti" (patriotism) [xvii] . The soap opera set the framework of meaning making through this declaration that gained further attestation in the prop-based character-building efforts of such genre of text. On the whole, the verbal structure of these soap operas gained prominence through excess. The over dramatic music, ostentatious sartorial repertoire, and overtly pronounced gesture and dialogic structure made the operatic performance loud and overstressed though holding onto an illusion of life.

Historicization of Melodrama

In an online symposium organized in honour of the 90th birthday of Dr. Irfan Habib Romila Thapar drew a clear distinction between 'popular history' and 'professional history'[xviii]. She called the former 'fantasized history' as it failed to sift fake from fact. A week before Zee Television aired the show *JA* in an interview given to *Times of India* Ekta Kapoor said that history to her is eighty percent history and twenty percent folklore hence always has grounds for interpretation[xix]. But going beyond what the author of the text has to say about the narrative, interpretation of the reader/viewer allots adds another layer of meaning to it. Reader oriented criticism of television brings us to newer grounds where ethnographic television studies allows a space to the reader/viewers engagement with the televised text[xx]. Though considered a private act of meaning reading two aspects of television watching that is often ignored is that: first of all, it's a process of habitual viewing done by millions at a time because of simultaneity of television broadcasting; secondly, it encourages a beyond the text discussive framework or fandom amongst the readers/viewers. These two aspects associated with television watching creates what Mary Ellen Brown refers to as a 'gossip network'[xxi]. Such networks of post-viewing exchanges or 'gossip' has become widely available post web revolution. Virtual social spaces that has turned into latest hangouts of people of all generations provides ethno-sociologists a mine of information. Fandoms of soap operas have come up virtually where readers/viewers freely opine on their favourite show and discuss about their shared interest. This is where historicization of melodramatic genre occurs.

In suspended disbelieve reader/viewer develop a shared emotion for the text/narrative. In the virtual fan club loyal viewers of soap operas discuss these emotions in a contemplatory manner. This, according to M. E. Brown forms a gossip network. Use of the term 'gossip' can raise few eyebrows, no doubt. But in this case, as Brown clarifies, "The form of gossip includes reciprocity and paralinguistic or non-verbal response- the raised eyebrow, the sigh, the silence- forms that assume and articulate the shared experience…"[xxii] Post 2000 a burst of such virtual sites of discussion has created a more accessible network. People from different parts of the country engage in discussion about their favourite soap opera in these sites. Allen shows that "Not until this verbal structure is engaged by the reader, until its potential is actualized, is meaning constructed"[xxiii]. Whether the structure aimed at by the serial *Akbar the Great* found meaning in text-reader engagement is hard to gauge because the pre-liberalization era provided little or no gossip network particularly for a historical serial. But it is interesting to note that there has been a renewed interest in the serial owing to the popularity of the historical character Akbar through the soap opera *JA*. Fandom of *JA* drew the meaning that Akbar's political genius was a reflection of Jodha Bai's influence and brilliance. The repeated comments and discussions in India forum and Facebook fan pages show that they believe Akbar's esoterism was the reflected glory of Jodha Bai, a message deeply entrenched in the verbal structure of the soap opera. Suspending disbelieve they associated the actors and actress playing the character of Akbar and Jodha with their performed identity. Akdha[xxiv], a joint form of Akbar and Jodha, has been created by the fans to refer to the eternal bonding and love of the two historical figures. Allen is of the opinion that sometimes "Meaning produced by the interaction of the text and reader is neither private/arbitrary nor totally determined by the verbal aspect of the text."[xxv] Long discussions occur in fan groups online where over smitten readers/viewers have started re-reading new meaning into the older serial *Akbar the Great*[xxvi]. Even while discussing the serial of the erstwhile era the readers/viewers began to read meanings into it not supported by its verbal structure. They began to read into it meanings that arose through an exchange between the verbal structure and readers/viewers of the soap opera *JA*. One of the so called Akdha fan

writes in the discussion forum that he/she loved the fact that *Akbar the Great* also highlighted the romantic attachment of Akbar and Jodha (though apparently the serial concentrated more on the political personality of Akbar) and how it had few scenes similar to that of *JA*[xxvii]. An attachment developed by the readers/viewers with the characters (even though they are historical figures) giving rise to a sense of interpersonal familiarity that makes them refer to Akbar as Jallu and Jodha Bai as Jo[xxviii]. The attestation that they find in the previous serial about Jodha Bai and Akbar's love convinces them that it must be true and a historical fact[xxix]. Another participant in a different forum applauds the historical value of the soap opera *JA* that allows the readers/viewers a glimpse into the Mughal era and went as far as equating its value with a historical text[xxx]. Such opinion has been expressed by Priti Pandey (aged 20) and Pinki Singh (aged 18) who believe that the episodic incidents depicted in it are factual and holds immense historical value[xxxi]. Rohit Kumar Chowdhury (aged 20) said that he became interested in history books after watching *JA.* Rahul Kumar Thakur (aged 19) says he has been watching and closely following the episodic movement in the historical soap operas and feels that it can "help to study". The melodrama of the soap opera as one of the survey takers noted though not palatable to her seemed to have hooked many others. They have expressed through their opinion that it can easily be a substitute means for learning about the past thereby according the role of history writing to the melodramatic genre.

Similar fan groups exist for the romantic duo of Maharana Pratap and Ajabde from the soap opera *Bharat ka Veer Putra Maharana Pratap*[xxxii]. Portrayed onscreen by Faisal Khan and Roshni Walia (when the characters were young), by Sharad Malhotra and Rachana Parulkar (when they grew up) the chemistry of Rana Pratap and his beloved wife Ajabde left a deep impact on the fans of the soap opera. For the readers/viewers the historical representation of *Maharana Pratap* (MRP) onscreen went beyond the personal identity of the actors. Their screen identity coalesced with the personal identity. Jyoti Mali (aged 20) admitted in the survey report that she was *mugdha* or mesmerized with the acting of Rana Pratap. To her the personal identity of Faisal Khan or Sharad Malhotra seemed too insignificant before the screen identity of MRP. From the verbal structure of *MRP* has emerged a superhuman personality who is no less daring and righteous than the Marvel comics or DC comics superheroes. In connection with melodramatic soap operas of historical genre Nayna Shaw (aged 20) admits that she likes such soap operas because they are *rochak* which can mean both spicy and entertaining (and going by the melodramatic structuring of soap opera texts these indeed are both). In fact, the proceedings of the episodes became a matter of much consternation and debate amongst the readers/viewers. They started contesting each other on the historical veracity of the love that Rana Pratap had for his spouses. *MRP* fandom engaged in a headlong debate over the divinity and truthfulness of the love that Rana Pratap shared with Ajabde and with Phool Kunwar. In one of the debated held in the Bharat ka Veerputra Maharana Pratap forum a respondent said there was no Praphool (Pratap and Phool Kunwar) and the PrAja fans hated Phool because she had insulted Ajabde[xxxiii]. They even predicted the outcome of forthcoming episodes where they said PrAja will come true[xxxiv]. History became a matter of debate as well where one participant though admitting that Rana Pratap had nine wives it was Ajabde with whom he had a 'divine' relationship, and the other wives, including Phool Kunwar, who apparently has no historical value has been granted one by the screenplay of the soap opera[xxxv]. Though the reader/viewer was conscious of the make believeness of a performance and its difference from reality, yet the world of performance held them in a close knot with the text. For them it gained profound reliability that under no circumstances could/should be disturbed.

Intra-textual debate amongst readers/viewers often spilled into comparative analysis of historical soap operas. Bittu Chauhan (aged 21) wondered why Akbar always bags all the attention in school history textbooks and Shivaji or Maharana Pratap lags in popularity. He is not the only person wondering this. Rajasthan's education minister Vasudev Devnani drummed the same message in 2015[xxxvi]. Though professional historians are upset with the development the newspaper assiduously pointed out that "…they've yet to learn the great lesson of entertainment television- never let facts stay in the way of a zealous, hot-blooded story."[xxxvii] The assumption has been proven right. Jyoti Kumari (aged 20) in the survey taken reiterated the Education minister's question- "if Akbar had won then why did he attack six times?" Nitu Kumari (aged 20), Anjali Chowdhury (aged 19) believes the same. Puja Shaw (aged 21) believes it would allow us to learn new things about history. Newspaper report from the year 2015 when both the soap operas about Rana Pratap and Akbar was in full swing noted, "A smear campaign against the emperor seems to be currently running in social media. Tweets, Facebook posts, blogs and chainmail are calling Akbar a "rapist, looter and killer coming from a family of drunkards, illiterate, homosexuals and child molesters."[xxxviii] The report said that "…all sorts falsehoods culled from TV serials, myths, legends, and propaganda are being passed off as the real history of Akbar."[xxxix] One of the bloggers told the reporters of *Times of India* that her neighbour, a five year old child, uninitiated to school history text books, has already started hating Akbar because of the portrayal of the ruler in the soap opera *MRP*[xl]. Thus, Maharana Pratap, Akbar, suddenly have a newer avatar, an upgraded version, and have donned an attire of sensation, exaggeration, that is *rochak*.

Ground Zero

History, if it is a retelling of the past, is being *re-retold*. A new sense of past, of collective memory, is being weaved. Academia upset by this new development has continuously been trying to draw a line of separation between professional and popular aka 'fantasized' history. These attempts and appeals have not been very convincing. Life for the newer generation revolves around not academia, public intellectuals, but around social media. In this upgraded public sphere readers/viewers of historical soap operas are gathering factual information to substantiate their argument. As in the case of *JA* fans who considered the Jodha-Akbar love angle shown in erstwhile serial *Akbar the Great* a proof of veracity of the narrative/text. Fans of *MRP* are discussing and debating amongst themselves about veracity of Maharana Pratap's personal and emotional life. Perhaps, the time for an emotional history is ripe but through a mode of excess and exaggeration has created excessive emotional history! Virtual reality though ephemeral isn't absent. And even in its absence it has begun to imprint in the minds of masses (that is being re-recreated on a daily basis) parallel alternate history.

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[i] Lynn Hunt, "Hercules and the Radical Image in the French Revolution', in Fary Kates ed. *The French Revolution: Recent Debates and New Controversies,* London: Routledge, 1998, 166-185, p. 167

[ii] Lynn Hunt showed how the French Republicans after the Revolution to persuade the popular mind in the necessity of republicanism, celebration of manual labour, passionate revolutionary ideas that required the guidance of the more refined thinkers of their society. This is where representators of the people assumed the role of interpreters. This seems an oft repeated practice in history something that Marx and later Gramsci pointed out.

[iii] Gerard Bouchard. *Social Myths and Collective Imageries*. Tr. by Howard Scott. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 2015. 3-4

[iv] "The concept of collective imagery refers to all the symbols that a society produces and through which its members give meaning to their lives." Bouchard. *Social Myths and Collective Imageries*. 13

[v] A process of explaining historical process instead of interpreting the facts

[vi] Explanation and interpretative aspects of the narration runs together.

[vii] "Thus our examination of the soap operas as aesthetic object focusses on the distinctive features of the soap opera form in general, rather than on individual episodes. For our benefit poetics or science is

implemented to determine not the actual literature/form but the possible literature/form." Robert C. Allen (1985). *Speaking of Soap Operas*. University of North Carolina. pp. 62-63

[viii] Postmodernist interrogation has drawn our attention away from the work and the author as a result textual analysis of soap operas has been hypothesized on two grounds referred to as 'verbal' and 'affective' by Wolfgang Iser. Ibid. p.63

[ix] Growing up in that era I remember my mother allowed me and my sister to watch this particular sitcom because she felt it would help us learn more about our past. This meant a lot because to the children growing up in the 80s there weren't many options in terms of channels and television was still a mythical land that parents denied regular access as it was considered a source of addiction. Despite such reservations permission to watch this show simply because of its educational value definitely says something of its perception amongst viewers.

[x] Ibid., p.63

[xi] *Akbar ne purani rewaiyato pe chalne ki wajey waqt aur mauke ki munasibat se kaam kerna behtar samjha…apne mukharifo ko shaktisali sathi bana lo, wajay isske ke wo kamzor dushman bane rahe. Nafroto ki deewar bekhabrio pe he, ye deeware utha di jaye, kyunki charag se charag jalte he.* [Instead of following the old customs Akbar thought it prudent to go by the demands of his time…make your enemies your strong allies, instead of allowing them to resist as weak opponents. Lack of knowledge leads to hatred, so do away with these barriers, because one light of hope will light another.] Akbar Khan produced and directed, *Akbar the Great*, 1988-89, episode 1.

[xii] Ibid.,p.68

[xiii] Ibid.,p.68

[xiv] *Charso saal baad abhi bhi log humari mohabbat ki dastan kehte he. Lekin asal me kya huya wo to buss aap aur me hi jante he. Jab hum sirf Jalal the. Wo Jalal jo ek hi rang janta tha, ek hi rang samajhta tha, ek hi rang bahata tha; khoon ka rang.* [People reminisce about our love even after four hundred years has elapsed. But only you and I know what actually happened. A time when I was simply Jalal. That Jalal who just knew one colour, understood one colour, spilled one colour; the colour of blood.] Balaji Telefilms, *Jodha Akbar*, Zee Tv, 2013-15, episode 1.

[xv] Dorothy Hobson observed that fictional representation of a character on television is done through a certain appearance and costumes. This creates a ground for the viewers to make an estimation of the character as intended by the text. See, Dorothy Hobson, *Soap Opera*. London: Polity Press, 2003, p.68. It is interesting to note in this context that personalities of the past having an image created by text book or academic historical accounts was provided a second coat of understanding in popular imagination through onscreen narration.

[xvi] Robert C. Allen, *Speaking of Soap Operas.* p.61

[xvii] *Iss bhumi ka damakta suraj ast hote nazaar aa raha tha. Tabhi kaal aur niyati ke ashirvad se ek avatar ne janm liya, Maharana Pratap.* [The brightest sun of the land was set to drown. With the blessings of fortune in that very time was born an avatar, Maharana Pratap.] Cantiloe Entertainment, *Maharana Pratap*, 2013-15, episode 1.

[xviii] *In Defence of History*, a virtual symposium organized by Sahmat, Social Scientist and Tulika Books on 12/08/2021

[xix] Roshni Olivera, 'I have sleepless nights because of Jodha Akbar: Ekta Kapoor', *Times of India*, 7th June 2013.

[xx] Robert C. Allen, 'Audience Oriented Criticism', in Robert C. Allen ed., *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled Television and Criticism*, University of North Carolina, 2010, 101-137, pp.133

[xxi] Mary Ellen Brown, *Soap Opera and Women's Talk*, London: Sage Publication, 1994, p.31.

[xxii] Ibid., p. 31

[xxiii] Robert C. Allen, *Speaking of Soap Operas*. p.63

[xxiv] https://www.facebook.com/groups/445367786586529 ; https://www.facebook.com/pinaa.pinaa.3511; https://www.facebook.com/akdha.parijat.18;

[xxv] Robert C. Allen, *Speaking of Soap Operas*. p.63

[xxvi] Jodha Akbar Forum, 'Akbar the Great old serial', https://www.indiaforums.com/forum/topic/4049847

[xxvii] Ibid. Comment thread of forum participant Fringe. https://www.indiaforums.com/forum/topic/4049847

[xxviii] https://www.indiaforums.com/forum/topic/4049847

[xxix] Ibid. Comment thread of forum participants AbHer_neha, ShadeOfWhite, Arieltabi. https://www.indiaforums.com/forum/topic/4049847

[xxx] Comment by akshararuhee5 in the Jodha Akbar discussion thread on 7/10/2018. https://www.mouthshut.com/product-reviews/Jodha-Akbar-reviews-925755184

[xxxi] Information gathered based on a survey I conducted through google forms amongst the residents of Purba Bardhaman, particularly Mankar, Budbud, Paraj, Galsi, Rajbandh and Durgapur.

[xxxii] https://www.facebook.com/pratap.ajabde/photos; https://www.facebook.com/RoSal-Roshni-Faisal-PraJa-Pratap-Ajabde-1118128001554853; https://www.facebook.com/groups/773431042706868

[xxxiii] Comment by _ashi_ in the thread Stop blaming/targeting Praphool fans. https://www.indiaforums.com/forum/topic/4084981

[xxxiv] Comment by …Khushboo… in the thread Stop blaming/targeting Praphool fans. https://www.indiaforums.com/forum/topic/4084981

[xxxv] Opcit.

[xxxvi] Editorial, 'Maharana Pratap tussi great ho: is BJP more excited by the battles of the past than the present', *Times of India*, 24th May 2015

[xxxvii] *Times of India*, 24th May 2015

[xxxviii] Manimugdha S. Sharma, 'How Akbar went from great to not-so-great', *Times of India*, 24th May 2015

[xxxix] Opcit.

[xl] *Times of India*, 24th May 2015

Revision: January 31 2022

The Travelling Rāmāyana – Tamil & Telugu Sources of Michael Madhusudan Datta's *Meghnādbadh Kāvya* (1861)

Nandan Dasgupta

The poem

India – an ancient land of legends, tales and epics, often layered, sometimes paradoxical. Of these, arguably the best known is the Rāmāyana, the chronicle of the life and times of the north Indian prince and king Rāma. Unlike the Mahābhārata, which has fewer variations, India has numerous versions of the Rāmāyana. In some, Rāma is a flesh eater (*Vālmiki Rāmāyana*), in some a vegetarian (*Rāmcharitmānas*). In most versions, he kills Rāvana; in one, the deed is accomplished by Lakshmana; in yet another, Sitā slays a thousand-headed Rāvana (*Jagadrāmi-Rāmprasādi Rāmāyana*). Some mention the *Lakshmanrekhā*, some do not – in fact the *Vālmiki Rāmāyana* does not! In some, Rāma, Lakshmana and even Hanumāna have many wives (the Jain *Pauma-chāriya*); in some, Rāma and Sitā are siblings – in one of these, they marry (the Buddhist *Dasarath Jātaka*). In the 9th century Sanskrit Rāmāyana by Abhinanda, it is Hanumāna and not Rāma who prays to goddess Durgā for vanquishing Rāvana. (Raghavan 67) In others, Vibhishana tries to win over Kumbhakarna on the battlefield (*Kamba Rāmāyana*) and marries Rāvana's widow Mandodari (*Krittivāsi Rāmāyana*). In some versions, Sitā is Mandodari's daughter conceived by drinking the blood of Rishis (the 18th century Kashmiri Rāmāyana by Divakar Prakash Bhatt and an earlier Bengali Rāmāyana – the *Chandrāvati Rāmāyana*); in one, Sitā is conceived by Rāvana himself. Such narratives, often at divergence on many aspects, can be bunched as *Rāmkathās* (the legends of Rāma) and the authors (at times unknown) as *Rāmkathaks*. Some are *sampoorna*, that is, complete stories of Rāma's life and times, some are partial, some abridged. The *Meghnādbadh Kāvya* (Ballad of the Slaying of Meghnāda) by Michael Madhusudan Datta[1] (1824-1873) is one such version – an 1861 narrative of certain events on Lankā's seashore (much like the *Iliad*) spread over three days (but for the fourth canto, which is mostly a flashback), albeit as imagined by Datta.

Although a few scholars put certain Buddhist stories ahead of the Sanskrit *Vālmiki Rāmāyana* on the *Rāmkathā* timeline, most accept it as the first written version of the *sampoorna* Rāmāyana, believing it to have been scripted in the first millennium BC. Since then, it was, and continues to be, sung all over India as a travelling ballad. Transiting regions and languages over centuries, the story manifested a veritable forest of versions – few written, many oral. A school of thought believes that the first and last cantos in Vālmiki's version as extant were added by later authors. This prolific growth of the Rāmāyana, or 'meta-Rāmāyana', as Ramanujan calls it (Richman 22), led to significant changes, deviating remarkably from the 'original' story in a manner of speaking. Two such written variations are

the mainstream south Indian Rāmāyanas – the 11th/12th century Tamil *Kamba Rāmāyana* by Kamban (or Kambar) and the 14th century Telugu *Dwipada Rāmāyana* by Guna Budha Reddy, more popularly known as the *Ranganātha Rāmāyana*. The *Kamba Rāmāyana* introduced pre-marital romance and courtship of Rāma and Sitā. It also changed the Ahalyā story.[2] Then again, burdened by a curse, Kamban's Rāvan could not touch Sitā and lifted her together with the cottage/earth underneath for abducting her. Kamban also invented a Māyā-Janak on the lines of Vālmiki's Māyā-Sitā.

The *Meghnādbadh Kāvya* (*MBK*) is another such radical Rāmāyana, inventing the shocking tale of an unarmed Meghnāda's 'murder' by an unscrupulous Lakshmana. A blank verse poem of 14-character non-rhyming 8000 plus lines divided in nine cantos, it was composed in heavily Sanskritised Bengali shortly after the 1857 mutiny, perhaps the cause of speculation by some modern scholars on its having a nationalist and anti-colonial sub-text. (Sen 1979, 200; Radice lxxxiv; Murshid 2004, 83) It is now trite that Datta drew upon European classics and mythology while crafting the stories and characters of his Bengali works. And naturally, being a *Rāmkathā*, the *MBK* drew upon the *Vālmiki Rāmāyana* too, as well as the most popular Bengali Rāmāyana, the 15th century *Krittivāsi Rāmāyana*, which had already embellished/varied Vālmiki's version. In *Meghnād-Rāmāyani* (Dasgupta 292), where I named the *MBK* a "Nobo-Rāmāyan" (Neo Rāmāyana), and in an English article (Dasgupta, *Making* 46) the influence on the *MBK* of two subaltern Bengali Rāmāyanas, namely the 16th century *Chandrāvati Rāmāyana* (including Sitā's dream sequence, which is in the nature of a flashback) and the 18th century *Jagadrāmi-Rāmprasādi Rāmāyana* was examined. In this study, we look at the influence, again unacknowledged, on the *MBK* of two south Indian Rāmāyanas, the *Kamba Rāmāyana* and the *Ranganātha Rāmāyana*.

* * *

One of Datta's significant contributions to the *Rāmkathā* tradition is a disruptive story of the killing of Rāvana's most valiant and famous son Meghnāda by an ungallant Lakshmana in unfair combat. In all *Rāmkathās*, Meghnāda dies in tumultuous battle with Lakshmana in the Nikumbhilā grove[3], both warriors heavily armed and supported by their armies. Datta, however, visualised an unshielded, unarmed Meghnāda of noble descent (who, like the demigod Achilles, was invincible in fair combat) bleeding to death in a locked temple inside the fort-city of Lankā, desperately hurling utensils of worship at a fully armed and armoured Lakshmana, the exit door blocked by Rāvana's younger sibling Vibhishana. In popular Bengali imagination, Vibhishana treacherously led Lakshmana into the impregnable royal palace by a secret passage known only to the royal family. Notably, in the *MBK*, Vibhishana does not assault Meghnāda and there are no secret passages – a good example of the evolution wrought by recurring oral transmission of a text. In Datta's narrative, Lakshmana and Vibhishana walk freely through Lankā in full battledress to the stand-alone temple (not within the palace but elsewhere in the fortress-town), invisible to the Rākshasas by goddess Mahāmāyā's magic.

Another of Datta's innovations (inspired by European classics) in the fertile ground of *Rāmkathās* is the conspiracy of a few gods to treacherously slay their most formidable foe Meghnāda, as they had failed to defeat him in fair battle. This invention and the parallel of

the invincibility of Achilles, and Rāma's passage through the netherworld to meet his deceased father, as Aeneas did, were only a few of the reasons why Prof. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee called the *MBK* the "nearest equivalent to the *Aeneid* in modern Indian literature". (Chatterjee 20)

Datta created a few new characters in the *MBK*. The most important of them was Meghnāda's warrior wife Pramilā, firmly ensconced in the Bengali mindscape with her arrogant "Who says that I fear the vagabond Rāma?" (*ami ki dorai shokhi bhikhari raghobe?*) having been absorbed into the Bengali idiom repertoire. One of Datta's new characters less spoken of is the dreadful (yet ravishing) Daitya (Titan) woman Nrimundamālini, cavalry captain of princess Pramilā, crafted on the iconography of the goddess Kāli. Three other features also less remembered are 1) the gods coming down to earth to give battle to the Rākshasas in support of Rāma, 2) Rāma's journey to the netherworlds with a goddess[4] to meet his deceased father, and 3) Pramilā committing 'Sati' (self immolation on her deceased husband's pyre) in the last canto. There are some character adjustments too. In the *MBK*, instead of Meghnāda's wife being a *Nāgkanya* (as in the *Ranganātha Rāmāyana*, followed in the *Jagadrāmi Rāmāyana*), she is the Daityā (Titan) Kālnemi's daughter, and Krittivāsa's Rākshasa spy Shāron becomes Rāvana's minister. This kind of name or character transposition is common in *Rāmkathās*. For example, Vālmiki had not mentioned any Gandhamādana mountain – in his narrative, it was *Drona* or *Aushadhi* mountain, and Gandhamādana was the name of an ape. Krittivāsa named the mountain Gandhamādana.

The poet

Datta's two younger siblings died early, after which he moved to Calcutta from his village in about 1834 with mother Jāhnabi, his father having migrated there earlier to set up a successful law practice. Familiar with Farsi, Indian mythology and the epics, he was introduced to the English language and to European classics and mythology. A language prodigy with a phenomenal recall, and widely published as a poet in English, he became a Christian at 19 and consequently had to leave the Hindoo College (now Presidency University). He later joined the Bishop's College (then at Howrah) where he improved his Latin and Greek. Shortly before he was to graduate, his father stopped financial support. Unable to find employment, Datta moved to Madras (where he had friends from Bishop's College) for eight years (1848-55). He taught at schools, marrying one of his students, the Anglo-Indian Rebecca. He also wrote for and edited English newspapers. His significant works here were the poems *Captive Ladie* and *Riziā* (unfinished) and an essay/speech *The Anglo-Saxon and the Hindu.* Towards the end of his stay, he got romantically involved with Henrietta. In January 1856, he returned to Calcutta upon learning that his father had died in 1855. He and Rebecca (and his children by her) never contacted each other thereafter. Henrietta arrived in Calcutta after three years and was with him till her death. He could not marry her, not having ever been divorced from Rebecca. Datta died a pauper three days after Henrietta.

When Datta left for Madras, no one, least of all himself, could have imagined that he would one day find fame for his Bengali works, given the perceived advantages of writing in English in colonial Bengal of the late 1840s, as also his self-confessed "contempt for Bengali" (Murshid 2004, 118). But that was his destiny. When he returned from Madras, he found a sea change in the literary environment. Original Bengali plays were popular and bankable, so much so that he was commissioned to write a few. Finding recognition in elite circles with the very first of them, he did not need to look back, having got a "taste of blood" as he put it. (Murshid 2004, 110) He never wrote in English again, except for a translation of his own work.[5]

Before publishing the *MBK* in 1861, Datta wrote the plays *Sermistā*, *Padmāvati* and *Krishnakumari*, a four-canto poem *Tilottamāsambhav Kāvya* (his first blank verse work) and two farces *Ekei Ki Bole Shobhyotā* (Can This Be Called Civilization?) and *Buro Sāliker Ghāre Rõn* (often translated idiomatically as There is no Fool like an Old Fool, and by Alexander Riddiford as New Feathers on the Old Bird). He also published two collections of odes and epistles in verse, *Brajanganā Kāvya* (1861) and *Biranganā Kāvya* (1862). At the peak of unprecedented success in the Bengali literary world, Datta sold his house, leased out his *zamindāris* (all part of his patrimony) and departed for England in 1862 to study law and become a Barrister. Facing severe financial crisis at London, he reached out to Ishwar Chandra 'Vidyasagar' who arranged bailout loans, mostly on the security of Datta's properties. He shifted to Versailles for a couple of years because of poor flow of funds, delaying his being called to the Bar. Despite financial distress, he did not lose spirit. As in Madras, he acquired a reputation in Versailles as a scholar, learning French, Italian and German, conversing fluently in French. He composed 100 Bengali sonnets on a variety of subjects, publishing them in Calcutta as the *Chaturdashpadi Kabitābali*. The French interregnum could have been a preparatory period like Madras, but financial strain while in Europe and a failed law practice after returning to Calcutta led to alcoholism, ruining the possibility of another brilliant creative phase like the '60s. He wrote a Bengali prose version of the first part of the Iliad, calling it *Hector-badh* (Slaying of Hector) and a few months before his death, he dictated a commissioned play *Māyākānan*, where, as in the *MBK*, Destiny overrides human effort.

While at Madras, Datta learnt Sanskrit, Tamil and Telugu and brushed up on the popular Bengali versions of the two Indian epics, the *Krittivāsi Rāmāyana* and the *Kāshidāsi Mahābhārata*. We shall presently see that having learnt Tamil and Telugu, Datta made himself familiar with the *Kamba Rāmāyana* and the *Ranganātha Rāmāyana*. It can well be said that the seed of the *MBK* germinated at Madras. In his unique and ingenious *Rāmkathā*, Datta treated the Rākshasas sympathetically while making Rāma and Lakshmana look petty and unheroic. He built his poem on the justice concept of 'an eye for an eye'. Although the perspective and presentation was entirely his own, he was significantly influenced by the empathic treatment of the Rākshasas in the *Kamba Rāmāyana*. The glorious description of *Lankā* and the 'humanization' of Rāvana and his family in the *MBK* are heavily influenced by the *Kamba Rāmāyana*, which, though written with Rāma as an *avatāra*, still managed to maintain a balance by bringing out the glory of and pathos in the situation of the doomed yet

valiant Rākshasas. And from the *Ranganātha Rāmāyana* his major inspiration was creation of a new character, Meghnāda's wife Pramilā and her committing 'Sati'.

As it would be too prolix to refer to these two Rāmāyanas in detail, we restrict ourselves to some specific comparisons. First, a few from the *Kamba Rāmāyana*.

Influence of the *Kamba Rāmāyana*

1. In the *Kamba Rāmāyana*, upon hearing of her son Atikāya's death, queen Dānymāli berates her husband Rāvana for the loss, calling him a tyrant and blaming his lust for Sitā as the cause of the war and death of his brother and sons. (Sundaram 321) In the *MBK*, with striking similarity in tone and tenor, Birbāhu's mother Chitrāngadā (both creations of Krittivāsa) rebukes Rāvana for their son's death. She refutes his argument of Rāma being an aggressor saying that after all, Rāma, a petty human, had not come across the seas to usurp Lankā's throne but as a consequence of Rāvana's misdeeds and thus Rāvana alone was responsible for the destruction of the Rākshasa clan.

2. In the *Kamba Rāmāyana*, when Lakshman is felled by Meghnāda, Rāma laments saying he (Rāma) is a sinner, having caused the death of many, including his father Dasarath and father-figure Jatāyu and many heroes and now was responsible for Lakshmana's untimely passing away as well. (Sundaram 340) In the *MBK*, when Sitā hears of Meghnāda's death and of Pramilā's impending 'Sati', she laments that being an unlucky person she brought sorrow wherever she went and that among those who had died because of this were her father-in-law Dasarath and father-figure Jatāyu and many others; now young Pramilā's life was to be nipped in the bud.

3. In the *Kamba Rāmāyana*, dazzled by Rāvana's glorious palace while searching inside for Sitā, Hanumāna wryly soliloquizes that no matter how powerful and prosperous, every person was subject to the injunctions of Destiny. (Sundaram 217) In the *MBK*, when Lakshmana is similarly dazzled by the palace while walking past it *en route* to the Nikumbhilā temple for slaying Meghnāda, and tells Vibhishana that his elder brother Rāvana was undoubtedly the wealthiest person in the world, Vibhishana remarks that though true, yet, quite like the ocean's passing waves nothing was perennial, and personalities came and went.

4. In the *Kamba Rāmāyana*, when Lakshmana, struck down by Meghnāda's fatal Nāgpāsha is revived by Garuda, Hanumāna advises that the whole army should loudly rejoice and generally make a din so that the Rākshasas get discouraged by the celebratory commotion. At this, Rāvana and Meghnāda despair and blame each other before recovering and preparing for the following day's battle. (Sundaram 331) In the ninth canto of the *MBK*, Rāma's army uses the same strategy after Lakshmana is revived by the application of herbs of the Gandhamādana mountain. A completely disheartened Rāvana comments that the end was now inevitable. He then sends an emissary to Rāma to seek a week's cessation of hostilities for cremating Meghnāda with due honour.

5. In the *Kamba Rāmāyana*, there is a long description of Dasarath visiting Mithilā for Rāma's wedding, travelling with a multitude of the Ayodhya citizenry including his family and those of his warriors, courtiers and servants. This includes erotic descriptions (reminiscent of Vālmiki's eroticism) of women and scenes of flower plucking, love-making, wine drinking, bathing in lakes, etc. (Sundaram 32) There is a similar, albeit shorter, description of the citizens of Lankā as seen by Lakshmana and Vibhishana while walking down to the Nikumbhilā temple. Some erotic imagery is also used in the fifth canto (Preparation canto) and the eighth canto (Descent into the Netherworlds canto) of the *MBK*. In the latter, some specific description of men and women who are like Madana (the god of Love) and his wife Rati (Sri in the *Kamba Rāmāyana*) bear striking resemblance with narrations in the *Kamba Rāmāyana*.

6. Similarly, there are notable similarities in the two works in Rāma's lamentation (Sundaram 339, 346) upon Lakshmana being struck down.

Influence of the *Ranganātha Rāmāyana*

As observed earlier, Datta had drawn upon a lesser Bengali Rāmāyana – the 18th century *Jagadrāmi-Rāmprasādi Rāmāyana*, written by the father-son duo of Jagatrām and Rāmprasād of the Bankura district of Bengal. This Rāmāyana had in turn drawn upon some portions of the Telugu *Ranganātha Rāmāyana*, particularly the second half of the War Canto, which, and the subsequent cantos, were written by Rāmprasād after Jagatrām's death. A close reading of these two *Rāmkathās* alongwith the *MBK* shows that Datta was familiar with the *Ranganātha Rāmāyana*.

Before examining that, we look at an example of Rāmprasād's familiarity with Reddy's work. There is a description in the *Ranganātha Rāmāyana* where Rāvana displays himself with his retinue on the fort-palace's roof decked in the jewellery and expensive finery plundered by him in his military exploits. Vibhishana explains that this is a ploy to strike awe in the heart of Rāma's army. Thereupon, to demonstrate his dominance in battle, Rāma shoots off an arrow from the distant battlefield. The arrow divides into many, slicing off the headgear and ornaments of those on the palace roofs without hurting any of them. The same story appears in the *Jagadrāmi Rāmāyana* with the same comment by Vibhishana and the same display of prowess by Rāma, though with a few creative changes by Rāmprasād. For example, here Rāvana is enjoying a dance recital on his rooftop pleasure-garden with wife Mandodari where there is a panegyric composition comparing the couple with the moon, clouds, lightning, etc.

There is also at least one example of Rāmprasād's familiarity with Kamban's work. (This incident does not appear in the *Ranganātha Rāmāyana*.) In *Kamba Rāmāyana*, when Kumbhakarna enters the battlefield, Vibhishana approaches him and attempts to coax him over to the 'winning' side. Kumbhakarna approves of Vibhishana's move to the enemy camp. He says that in his case, however, glory was in death. He says that he cannot abandon his erring but benefactor elder brother, and leave the latter to die alone on the battlefield. He then

hugs Vibhishana with tearful eyes, urging him to leave before his (Kumbhakarna's) baser instincts came to the fore. Rāmprasād includes all of these features in his composition while repeating this sequence in his elaborate style.

Datta's most important take-away from the *Ranganātha Rāmāyana* is the character of Pramilā, wife of Meghnāda. In the *Ranganātha Rāmāyana* (adopted by Rāmprasād in the *Jagadrāmi Rāmāyana*) Meghnāda's wife is called Sulochanā. There is no mention of Meghnāda's wife in any earlier Rāmāyana. Both Sulochanās, though brave ladies, are not warriors. Datta departed from this and not only gave his warrior Pramilā a new name but also her own city-palace with a woman bodyguard-cum-cavalry. This city had no men. It is therefore more than likely that he modeled his Pramilā (which in Bengali also means woman) on her namesake in the Bengali Mahābhārata by Kāshirāma Dāsa.[6] In a minor passage of that work, Pramilā is the queen of a city of Amazon like warrior women. Yudhishtira's *Aswamedha Yagna* (fire sacrifice) horse is stopped by these women. Usually that was a challenge for battle. The horse is later released voluntarily as Pramilā is attracted to Arjuna, who promises to fulfil her desires if she pays obeisance at Yudhishtira's *Yagna* at Indraprastha.

A prime example of Datta's familiarity with Reddy's *Ranganātha Rāmāyana* is the sequence in this Rāmāyana leading to Sulochanā immolating herself on her husband's pyre. For this, we will first compare this sequence with its 'adoption'[7] by Rāmprasād. In the *Ranganātha Rāmāyana*, upon hearing of her husband's death, Sulochanā goes to her father-in-law and while asking him to bring Meghnada's corpse for the last rites seeks his permission to commit 'Sati'.[8] Rāvana grants permission but is skeptical that Rāma would agree to hand over his son's remains. Sulochanā decides to request Rāma herself. When she is approaching the invading army with her retinue, the monkeys are confused by her beauty and personality. They conclude that Rāvana has panicked after Meghnāda's death and is sending Sitā back. Sulochanā succeeds in getting Rāma's consent and recovers Meghnāda's body and severed head from the battlefield. The head speaks to her. She carries his mortal remains back to Lankā and then, in a glorious musical procession, takes it outside the city. She gifts her jewellery to her friends and immolates herself on her husband's pyre. Meghnāda and Sulochanā then depart on a celestial chariot for the abode of the gods. (Kamakshi 395)

In the *Jagadrāmi Rāmāyana*, Meghnāda's severed arms land in Sulochanā's chambers, which is a prearranged signal of his death in battle. She goes to Rāvana with the arms in a procession of musicians, friends and servants (all weeping inconsolably in grief) and asks him to bring her husband's head from Rāma so that she may commit 'Sati'. Rāvana asks her to wait a few days as he would himself join battle and kill the invading brothers. Sulochanā is skeptical of her father-in-law's ability to do that and decides to go herself to Rāma. In this story too the monkey army is dazzled and believes that Rāvana is returning Sitā. Meghnāda's severed head is brought to Rāma's camp on his orders and the head shouts 'Jai Shrirām'. Sulochanā carries the head back to Lankā. Then, in a magnificent procession, she goes to the seashore with the corpse and immolates herself on her husband's pyre which she lights herself. There is no celestial chariot here. (Bandyopadhyay 551)

In the *MBK*, Meghnāda dies within the city. Like Priam, Datta's Rāvana sends his minister Shāron to Rāma requesting a week's ceasefire. (Reddy's story – followed by Rāmprasād – too had shades of Priam seeking son Hector's corpse from Achilles; in these two stories there is no mention of a ceasefire.) Here Datta ostensibly makes Rāma appear noble with his acquiescence to the request, with a sarcastic twist on *Dharma* that is derogatory to Rāma, which we need not go into here. A substantial part of the last canto is devoted to describing the long funeral procession to the seashore in which all citizens, the army, Pramila's cavalry and the war animals participate. Pramilā gifts her jewellery to her friends and after saying a few words to them climbs the pyre. On Lord Shiva's (who is the patron god of Rāvana and his clan) command to fetch the couple to him, Agni (god of Fire) strikes the pyre in the form of a lightning bolt. As the funeral flames rise towards the sky, a fiery celestial chariot carries away Meghnāda and Pramilā to Shiva's abode.

The use of the celestial chariot sequence and the gifting of jewellery in the *MBK* (both absent in the *Jagadrāmi Rāmāyana*) shows Datta's familiarity with the *Ranganātha Rāmāyana*. The seashore locale Datta took from the *Jagadrāmi Rāmāyana*. Dinesh Chandra Sen had pointed out the debt owed by Datta to the *Jagadrāmi Rāmāyana* (Sen 2012, 152) but had not noticed the *Ranganātha Rāmāyana*.

In the *MBK*, Pramilā and Rāma do not ever come face to face. The nearest they come to each other is in the third canto when Pramilā is seeking passage through Rāma's army to enter Lankā and rejoin Meghnāda, and Ramā sees her from a distance. In the *Ranganātha* and *Jagadrāmi* Rāmāyanas, Sulochanā begs for her husband's corpse; in the *MBK*, Pramilā's proxy Nrimundamālini challenges Rāma to battle in the third canto whereupon he capitulates and grants Pramilā and her cohort safe passage into the fort of Lankā – a kind of reverse genderization of the Pramilā story of the *Kāshidāsi Mahābhārata.* The *MBK* is rather like the *Ranganātha* and *Jagadrāmi* Rāmāyanas in another way too – the purpose in all the cases is for Sulochanā/Pramilā to be reunited with Meghnāda, dead or alive!

The travelling Rāmāyana of India

It was not just Datta (and before him Rāmprasad) who was influenced by south Indian Rāmāyanas. We find from the 15th century Bengali *Srirāmpānchāli* (also popularly known as the *Krittivāsi Rāmāyana*) that the author was aware of stories of the *Kamba Rāmāyana* and *Ranganātha Rāmāyana*. One Dinabandhu Sen (a contemporary of Dinesh Chandra Sen) as cited by Brian Hatcher (Hatcher 125) observed how Krittivāsa would often incorporate stories heard by him "from the mouths of storytellers". Dinesh Chandra Sen too has shown by numerous examples how Krittivāsa drew from various Indian and foreign sources. (Sen 42) To show that Krittivāsa was familiar even with south Indian Rāmāyanas, I cite a story here not mentioned by Sen. This story is not in the *Vālmiki Rāmāyana* but is found in the *Kamba Rāmāyana* and *Ranganātha Rāmāyana*.

Vālmiki Rāmāyana tells of how Rāvana had mortally wounded Lakshmana after Meghnāda's death. The above-cited later authors (for Kamban, see Sundaram 301; for Reddy, see Kamakshi 330) say that this had happened once before Meghnāda's death as well. Each author says that on that occasion Rāvana had tried to snatch and seize Lakshmana's body but was prevented by Hanumāna. (Readers may be reminded of the humiliation of Hector's dead body by Achilles.) Thereafter, this story appears in the *Krittivāsi Rāmāyana* as well, followed by the *Jagadrāmi Rāmāyana*. Datta used it in the *MBK*. In his story, however, instead of Hanumāna, Shiva's wife Pārvati comes to the rescue. At her request, Shiva sends a messenger to dissuade Rāvana from this unworthy act. The messenger whispers in Rāvana's ear. Rāvana thinks it is his own thought and exits the battlefield.

It is also quite possible that Krittivāsa took the Lakshmanrekhā story from the *Ranganātha Rāmāyana*. In fact, the Lakshmanrekhā story may not be Reddy's creation; in his story Lakshmana with his bow scratches out not one but seven concentric circles on the ground around Sitā's cottage to protect her.

Tulsidās too drew upon the *Kamba Rāmāyana* in expanding upon the pre-marital romance of Rāma and Sitā in his 16th century *Rāmcharitmānas*. And like Kamban, Tulsidās drops the entire last canto of Sitā's banishment and death as appearing in the extant *Vālmiki Rāmāyana*.

Whether by play-acting by travelling artistes, stories told by traders or by reading, the south Indian Rāmāyanas travelled to both north and east India. And from the legend of Mandodari's pregnancy being caused by drinking the blood of Rishis appearing in the 17th century *Chandrāvati Rāmāyana* and an 18th century *Kashmiri Rāmāyana* one finds that *Rāmkathā* stories travelled in various directions.

Today, it is commonplace to take mythological characters and weave new stories around them. It is good to keep in mind that in the mid-19th century, to do this with the Rāmāyana, and that too in a manner that could be seen as derogatory to Rāma, was akin to blasphemy; in fact, Datta was accused of the same. However, most of his contemporary readers thought otherwise, and six editions were printed during his lifetime, leaving Datta quite pleased with the earnings. And yet, 150 years after the publication of the *MBK* he is, in his own words, like his idol Milton, a lion roaring alone in the forest, with a "glorious name but few readers". (Murshid, 2004 171) In the words of Rabindra Nāth Tagore – "It is true that Michael could not give intransience to his new creation (the blank verse). But as his legacy he left behind courage, he left behind encouragement for future writers. He proclaimed that talent's ever-innovative creativity invents novel pathways for the flowing river of literature." (free translation) (Ghosh 89)

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[1] He registered himself with Gray's Inn, London as Datta. Upon being called to the Bar, he wrote to Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar – "I am 'published' Barrister as Michael Madhusudan Datta Esquire. You might drop the vulgar form Dutt".

[2] In Kamban's story she turns to stone. In Vālmiki's work, she had been cursed with invisibility. Most *Rāmkathaks* adopted the stone story in preference to invisibility and Vālmiki's metaphor for banishment has been lost in the process.

[3] Some *Rāmkathās* refer to a yagna (fire-rite) under a banyan tree. Vālmiki and Krittivāsa refer to a Nikumbhilā grove outside the fort-city of Lanka, where Meghnada often performs a yagna/puja to render himself invincible for that day. Datta does not have a grove or a banyan tree. In *MBK*, the yagna is held in a temple inside the city. Goddess Chandi tells Lakshmana in the 5th canto – *"Jā choli nogor-mājhe, jothāye Rāboni, Nikumbhilā yagnāgāre, puje boishānore"* (Go forth into the city's heart, where Meghnāda worships the Fire God in the Nikumbhilā sacrificial temple).

[4] He does this by jumping into a tunnel (as does Aeneas in the *Aeneid*) with the goddess Mahamaya. Perhaps this incident of a tunnel with its passage to Hell got subsumed in the 'secret passage to the temple' story as narrated by Bengalis.

[5] The play *Sermista*. Lal (88) says it is the first bilingual play of India. The claim that he translated the Bengali play *Nil Durpan* by Dinabandhu Mitra into English is mired in controversy. See Radice for a discussion.

[6] The character of the aggressive warrior princess Pramilā in the *MBK* is in fact an amalgamation of many Indian and European characters that merits separate discussion.

[7] Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay labeled the MBK as plagiarism from European classics. (Chattopadhyay 2003, 160) Be that as it may, clearly he was not aware of the influence of the

various Indian Rāmāyanas. Ramprasad's adaptation of Reddy's story was in the tradition of *Rāmkathās* where later authors drew inspiration from the previous ones, thus providing continuity while expanding and embellishing the legend.

[8] It may be recalled that 'Sati' was originally seen as a defence for women of the vanquished Hindu side in a battle with Muslims. Is Rāma's invasion being compared with a Muslim one?

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Born in Calcutta in 1955 to parents of Barisal ancestry, Nandan Dasgupta schooled and graduated at New Delhi. Without formal education in his mother tongue, Dasgupta's enthusiasm introduced him to its literature and Bengal's history, though he became an Attorney-at-Law like his father. He started a bilingual little magazine *Dhvani* in 2007 and then another one *Hindol* in 2009 for which he did several editorials, articles and translations. His articles, poems and translations have been published in various journals. With a growing interest in, which became an abiding passion, he has the following publications on 19th century Bengali poet Michael Madhusudan Datta –

i) A book *Meghnad Ramayani*, Dey's Publishing, Kolkata, February 2019. An annotated Bengali prose iteration of the *Meghnadbadh Kavya*, it includes a broad outline of Datta's life, comments by critics and biographers, notes on European and Indian sources, etc.

ii) An article *Retelling an Epic through a Modern Ballad* in Economic & Political Weekly at Vol. LIV No 3, 2019.

iii) An article *The Making of Michael Madhusudan Datta's Meghnadhbadh Kavya (1861): Little Traditions and other Influences* in Summerhill at Vol. XXV, No. 1, Summer 2019.

iv) English translations from the works of Datta have been used in the book *Betrayed by Hope : A Play on the Life of Michael Madhusudan Dutt* by Namita Gokhale and Malashri Lal, Harper Collins, 2020.

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South Asian Regional Identity: Exploring Alternative Imaginations

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and
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Introduction

The project of a South Asian regional identity is a contestation of dualities.[1] In a sense, contrasting images of South Asia put forward one of the most intractable dichotomies of the world order – negotiating between territorial sovereign states along with the idea of regional cooperation and identity formation. The rise of the modern territorial states has witnessed the consolidation of physical boundaries where construction of hardened national borders has been the most fundamental tenet of state authority. The rise of nationalistic and populist political discourses amidst large-scale international migration has propelled states to further reinforce their territorial sovereignty premised on exclusive nationalist discourses. On the other hand, the gradual creation of a more economically, technologically and culturally interconnected and interdependent world seems to challenge the immutability of territorial sanctity and unwavering state authority. Moreover, with rise of a slew of emerging unprecedented challenges that require collective cooperation transcending across national boundaries further strengthened the calls for a limited state. Such evolving dynamics create room for multilateral institutions and negotiation of a regional identity amongst the various stakeholders of the region.

Modern South Asia typifies this dichotomy between the national and the regional as its regional identity is a juxtaposition of both these paradigms.[2] In one sense, South Asia is marked by a space of territorially sovereign states. These states thrive upon the tenets of hardened borders, territorial citizenship and exclusive nationalism. If defined by the geography of proximate set of states and people, South Asia can possibly be regarded as a region. However, regions are not only interpreted as dormant pieces of geography without active agents constructing *regionness* out of it. The actors can take various forms of states, institutions or individuals. A region acquires its regionness, or the quality or trait of qualifying as a region, through a set of norms and patterns build by the active agencies of the geographical space whereby a sense of identity develops, transcending the national identities. In short, a sense of belonging between the agencies and the region that is not merely geographical but also social which is based upon agreeable aspects of mutual behavior and a common agreement on its past, present or future. It remains difficult to classify South Asia as region if argued from this critical prism where the making of a region is not exogenously given or geographically defined but socially created and

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nurtured. South Asia defies any form of institutionalised and tangible political, economic and community convergences. [3]

However, there is a South Asia beyond the modern as well. Several traits of the region predate the advent of sovereign territoriality and citizenship. These tendencies are bound by imminent markers of identity which are strong and resilient enough to surpass political gates, if not entirely but intermittently. It does not necessarily go by the same nomenclature of a politically neutral 'South Asia', but it denotes the locale of the same space and set of people. This imagery of the South Asian region is comprised of historically diverse ethnic, linguistic and religious communities creating an "intersectionality of stratified, heterogenous, hierarchical and plural societies". [4] These communities have been bounded by strong ethnic ties premised upon a sense of collective identity. Although this sense of collective identity need not be equated with uniformity. Such communitarian existence remained characterised with deep rooted socio-economic hierarchies and ethnic prejudices. This collectivisation is rather of a shared interaction without being superimposed by political identities like citizenship and nationalistic binaries of otherisation. South Asia has been described as a 'garden of identities'[5] or a 'meta-state'[6] in this sense.

It is the contestation of these two imageries of South Asia that is at the heart of the making and unmaking of a South Asian regional identity. These two imageries are also reflective of the two ends of envisioning a global order. These orders are predicated on political borders determined and conditioned by the states on the one end and psychological borders nurtured by the people and communities on the other. The contestation is vivid in the case of South Asia which we intend to explore.

The rise of modern nation states in South Asia has been a result of arbitrarily drawn physical boundaries by the outgoing colonial rulers, many a times, in cahoots with the national political elite. As a result, the territorial borders of the new states have not symbiotically converged with the socio-cultural or physiological boundaries of the people of the South Asian region. This is primarily because the process of redrawing the territorial identities of newly created post-colonial states did not essentially coincide with the complex socio-cultural group identities in the region. Therefore, on one hand, the territorial states of South Asia have attempted to create hardened territorial bordersand a dominant, often monolithic and exclusive, discourse of national identity. On the other hand, the prolonged cross-border social, cultural, ethnic as well as economic ties and associations, geographical proximity and common regional challenges have incessantly manifested itself in various manifestations in all discourses of nation-building of the states in the region.

We make two broad arguments here in locating this duality in the conversation of a South Asian regional identity. First, it is difficult to argue that even before the advent of South Asian states, there was a comprehensive and complete imagination of a South Asian identity. The inherent diversities are too mosaic to comprehend such an identity. Despite elements like music,

architecture and cuisine that might create an impression of a South Asian culture and heritage[7], constructing an all-encompassing coherent identity amidst such diversity always runs the risk of including some and excluding many. Therefore, a plausible imagination of any South Asian identity can be on the fact that there cannot be any one particular South Asian identity.Even if there was a sense of collective past, South Asia as a term is not historical enough to evoke that sense of belonging. 'British India'is likely to evoke a sense of commonality for people across borders than the term'South Asia'. This is simply because the political neutrality that informs the birth of South Asia comes attached with the exclusivist states and identitiesdefined by the borders. The feasibility of South Asian regional identity, on the basis of historical interconnections, is not an institutional and complete project which has identifiable markers. But it is not absent entirely as well. It can be said to be a regional identity formed on the basis of interactions and interconnections which was not superimposed by any one hierarchical identity, like political citizenship. Simultaneously, it was an amalgamation of several horizontally placed markers – caste, class, religion, language, ethnicity and trade. Secondly, while statist imagination dominates South Asia creating a lack of regionness, there are several deflections to this statist modelthat keeps this contestation alive between the national and the tendencies of the regional. These deflections to the statist narrative are rooted in the very diversity of South Asia. This diversity might not have a rounded identity of its own, but it does not necessarily allow the statist imagination to be completely all-encompassing. It is these alternative imaginations that the state in South Asia has to accommodate and negotiate at various spatial and temporal dimensions.[8]

The paper records and analyses three sets of cases that highlight this dyad of the state – society exchange that neither provides nor denies a sense of South Asian regional identity. These three sets of cases each correspond to three kinds of challenges directed at the states in the region emanating from the diversified character of South Asia at varying intervals of time. First, we look at the singular case of a supra-state attempt in creating a regional organization – the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Second, we look to the episodic intra-state moments of autonomy and secessionist movements in various parts of South Asia that the states engage and negotiate within. Thirdly, we analyse the regular inter-state digressions from the national borders through migration and trade which the states deal along their borders. Finally, we conclude what are the possible trajectories of a South Asian regional identity against this backdrop.

Abortive attempt towards a 'Supra-State'

South Asia had a relatively slow start to institutionalised arrangements of regional cooperation than the other regions like Europe or Southeast Asia. Several factors contribute in explaining this delay – lack of strategic coherence or a common enemy, the burden of the Partition and the recurring nature of conflicts between the states, the India-Pakistan rivalry being at the centre of it. But what drove the South Asian states to look for a regional organisation in a region comprised of such ostensibly irreconcilable divergences? First, the proximity of states in South Asia has the potential for collective economic prosperity for the states through greater intra-regional trade that was seen a win-win situation. Secondly, while the interconnected nature of the region was favorable to trade, it did raise concerns for states as communities overlapped and political intrusions in an asymmetric region were a commonplace. Through regional cooperation

mechanism, states decided to put a rest to that by not discussing bilateral issues. As a result, SAARC became a reality because all of the states could see two aspects from such a regional arrangement – establishment of non-interference as a political principle which would lend them a sovereign consolidation and the potential economic gains out of proximity. Therefore, SAARC was a case of states attempting to insulate themselves politically and strengthen economically. However, as we elucidate, despite such a latent convergence between states, principles of non-intervention and economic interactions are untenable in South Asia as ground realities enforce divergent trajectories. The states could not make use of the proximity and erstwhile connections of the region and trade efficiently. Political considerations held the key for trade and in most cases, markets became caged. Simultaneously, non-interference, even though desirable, was too naive a policy in South Asia where states did not leave any opportunity to gain advantage over the other through intrusion. SAARC as a result did not reflect the character of South Asia in comprehending the complexities of the region. It was premised on the expectation that the states could apolitically converge on non-controversial issues in a deeply contested space.

The economic explanation behind SAARC is a potent argument. The salience of regions in international politics was gaining a momentum during the period in which SAARC emerged. Regions were seen in between the global and the national. The economic consolidation in regions were aided by the rise of protectionism in the developed economies, a growing balance-of-payments crisis in most of the South Asian states and a gradual global turn towards modernisation in trade. These enforced the South Asian states to find a solution at a regional level where advantages of proximity could reap benefits. Secondly, regional cooperation was made attached to the principles of non-interference and sovereign equality which also provided a sense of insulation for the states within the region. The mismatch between political and psychological borders in South Asia has always meant that nearly all states are invested in the other. South Asia is ripe with such episodes like the Pakistani involvement in Kashmir, the Indian entanglement with the Tamils in Sri Lanka, Rohingyas[9] in between Bangladesh and Myanmar and Lhotshampas stuck in crossfire between Nepal and Bhutan.[10] Therefore, non – intervention at a regional level would also solidify the positioning of sovereignty in the region and was a desirable conclusion for the states. Additionally, most South Asian states were also apprehensive of India gaining an advantage by combining asymmetry and intrusion. It is no wonder that the proposal was rooted by Bangladesh initially and supported by the relatively smaller states in South Asia. These states were concerned about their own space in an intrusive and India-dominated region. India covers most of the territorial and human possession in South Asia. It has a stronger armed forces and economic market compared to the rest. In cases of market and politics, there is an anxiety amidst the relatively smaller neighbours that India would gain in a bilateral negotiation owing to its stature in the region. Therefore, a regional cooperation would bring the bar at the same level. On the flipside, this was India's fear of issues being regionalised and losing out on the asymmetry that could be put to its advantage.[11]

While these were the incentives before the states, SAARC states could not create a culture of trade and ethical non-intervention. Occasionally, ethically driven but contentious humanitarian considerations did drive humanitarian interventions. Regular intrusions were politically determined to influence the domestic politics of the particular state. This politicisation of overlapping cultures has been trait in South Asia which has turned the principles of non-interference into a lip-service in most of the cases. Such interferences usually range between

softer versions of diplomatic symbolism to hardened features of cross-border insurgency and proxy-conflicts. In some cases, they also become lively issues of refugees and citizenship, strategically used by the states. As states are predicated upon fiercely exclusive nationalism, the 'neighbour' is an important character for all South Asian states where they end up interfering despite de jure claims. While the states kept the official narrative of non-interference, they continued the regularisation of intrusion. SAARC became a non-starter as the issues which were critical and most crucial to any substantial regional cooperation were chosen not to be discussed.The duplicity of maintaining a de jure regional stance and a de facto national political practice was a mismatch.When it comes to trade, South Asian states could not overcome the anxiety of reduced or compromised political borders. Trade does not make borders obsolete but they do require a certain reorientation of borders from closed ends to meeting zones. While South Asia is naturally a bounded space between mountains on the north and seas on the south, political borders have re-negotiated the geography that has been sacred to the states. Ruptured connectivity coupled with political control and social anxiety became the antidote to trade in South Asia.

Episodicmanagement of heterogeneity

Apart from threats of territorial fragmentation, the South Asian states have been wary of their diverse multi-ethnic demographic composition and cross-border socio-cultural linkages often disrupting the demographic sanctity of states. Cross-border loyalties and geographical proximity beyond the territorial boundaries has challenged the sanctity of state boundaries. Undocumented cross border flow of people from one country to another has been a constant process in the South Asian region marked by fluid borders. This has not only led the hardening of territorial borders but also gave rise to exclusive narratives of national identity and restricted citizenship laws to determine who is a citizen and who constitutes an 'outsider'. Islamic nationalism in Pakistan, linguistic and religious nationalism of majority Bengali population in Bangladesh and Sinhalese majority in Sri Lanka[12] and other projects of ethnic nationalism defined the dominance of Drukpa majority in Bhutan, Buddhist majority in Myanmar and Nepalese majority in Nepal have marked the making of the national identity in South Asia.[13] Though post-colonial India has constitutionally mandated a secular state, majoritarian Hindu nationalist project has gained political momentum with time.This aims to define similar homogenising ethno-nationalist narratives of national identity. Such projects of ethnic nationalism by the dominant majority population in all states have made attempts to create a homogenised definition of national identity and citizenship which many a times, excludes or marginalises the minority sections as seen in case of Hindu minorities in Bangladesh and Pakistan, Ahmadiyas in Pakistan[14], Lhotshampas in Bhutan[15], Rohingyas in Myanmar and Muslims and Christians in India.[16] Moreover, flow of undocumented immigrants and refugees by crossing the national territorial borders into other neighbouring countries have also made the states to harden their boundaries through exercises like tighter border fencing and patrolling, stringent citizenship laws. The political backlash in India's northeast due to the presence of Bangladeshi immigrants and the fate of the Rohingya refugees are cases in point that exhibits the insecurity of states caused due to cross-border flow of people. These factors have collectively contributed to the hardening of national identities and territorial boundaries of the South Asian states obfuscating concerted efforts towards regional imaginations.[17]

Despite such majoritarian projects, there are two limitations about superimposing national identities in South Asia. First, any project of homogenising national identity in a pluralistic space renders some markers to be important and some marginalised. Therefore, attempts of homogenisation are premised on hierarchical use of power which is not compatible with the diversity that is inherent in these states. For instance, the use of Urdu language in Pakistan in determining its national identity marginalised the Bengali-speaking population in its Eastern wing leading to the creation of Bangladesh. Similarly, equating the Sinhalese ethnicity with Sri Lankan nationalism led to the sidelining of the Tamil population in its north, ultimately catapulting into more than two decades of civil war. Such examples are plenty in South Asia where hierarchically determined attempts of constructing a national identity has evoked responses ranging from autonomy to secession. These sub-regional, in some cases cross regional, assertions challenge South Asian states episodically. However, these assertions are seldom organised and hardly ever in the concerted formulation at an entire South Asian regional level. As a result, the states sometimes punish and negotiate in the rest. While force remains one of the policy options, these deflections from the unitary statist fold have often encouraged more federalisation, creation of special autonomous zones, exceptions to constitutional provisions and political coalitions. Even when these assertions take the form of secessionism, they demand for a state and do not argue for a regional cohesion beyond the statist perimeter, as the case of Bangladesh serves to explain. Intensified efforts of nationalisation are not necessarily complete attempts on part of the state to structure its authority within. The diversity of the region puts before the states compelling fractures to engage and even accommodate. Secondly, while some assertions are political reactions, there are others which are innate to limits of authority in the region. The British control over the subcontinent was also comprised of certain limits. It was not a colonial hood that fell entirely on the region but was a patchwork of British suzerainty, princely states and buffer zones. These suggest that sovereignty, unlike what states command today, was shared, different and in many cases, limited. Governance and political control for these states as a result is not homogenous as they might claim or envision. In many cases, these zones and the people comprised of them are either lagging behind from the mainstream or they wish to remain in the realm of special provisions so that they can conserve their cultural possessions and economic security. For instance, the frontier province in Pakistan and the northeastern states in India[18], the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh comprise of considerable challenges with regard to accommodating the demographic diversity adding to its distant geographic nature. In sum, the presence of an insurmountable demographic diversity is a structural and political challenge for the South Asian states to create a straightjacketed narrative of homogeneity. These communities may be triggered by the process of otherisation or alienation which can accompany processes of governance.

Everyday management of fluid borders

Inherent linkages and people-to-people ties in South Asia are deep rooted as they go beyond the creation of political boundaries. There is no arguing the fact that political boundaries have come to define modern South Asia. However, it should be noted that they are unable to condition and structure every aspect of life in South Asia. There are symbiotic relationships that transcend political boundaries in the region. Two cases are distinctive in elaborating this case – undocumented migration[19] and informal trade.[20] These two aspects transgress political boundaries on a regular basis. They also function within their own networks despite the state and

not because of it. Communities across South Asia have migrated within the region for ages. Imagine the trade and migration routes of these communities as diverse set of lines on the South Asian map. These sprawling intersecting lines are then superimposed by political boundaries which cut them arbitrarily at various points.[21]This break is, however, a partial break as micro-histories of the region and the border areas would tell us that people tend to cross borders and they trade as informal economic interaction. Informal migration is a recurring feature of South Asia owing to overlap of ethnic, cultural and economic ties across boundaries. These kinds of migration can happen mostly due to the following drivers. First, political violence, or the fear of persecution might induce migration across the borders. As people share similar cultural and ethnic ties in several border zones of South Asia, they tend to migrate amongst their brethrens. Migration of Hindus into India from Pakistan and Bangladesh; Tamils from Sri Lanka are examples of such cases. While it can be challenging to prove that their lives are more secure after migration, they do become a subject of active politicisation of the stateless-refugee-citizenship debate. The state can deploy different strategies for each of the cases depending on the identity of the displaced population, political climate, local politics, electoral gains and tone of nationalism. Secondly, migration across borders happen due to economic factors. Economic migration happens in stealth across porous regions of South Asia marked by a large section of economically vulnerable population as they became easy cadre for cheap labour in the cities with their growing demands and increased industrialisation. The third factor in such cases of migration is climate. Climate migration, although difficult to identify, is a reality of South Asia. It is difficult to understand and emphasise as it can interlace with economic migration. Consider a case of a farmer in the Sunderban delta who has to migrate to the city as their crops are dying due to increased soil salinity or frequent eruptions of cyclone. In such cases, climate factors are difficult to isolate and they mostly act as threat multipliers. Environmental refugees is a broader term in that sense to indicate the displacement of people because of an imminent threat to the habit under which they live. The Chakmas and the Hajongs of the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh [22] remain as case in point who were resettled in the present-day Arunachal Pradesh in the 1960s owing to the construction of the Kaptai Dam along with the factor of communal prejudice.[23]Importantly, communities in parts of South Asia readily move across borders on a regular basis due to above mentioned factors because of softer and negotiable proximate borders in the region. As cross-border overlapping socio-cultural identities remain a reality, familial and community ties across them makes such informal and undocumented migration a continuous and ‘natural’ process. Despite the overriding fact of hard borders in South Asia, in parts, borders are soft and open. Consider the case of India and Nepal which shares an open border as the saying goes, roti-betikarishta (ties akin to family). There are several examples of border haats, enclaves and exclaves across the long border of India and Bangladesh.

These trends of informal migration run parallel to informal trade which operates despite the government and not because of it. Official trade has to run through the channels of bureaucratic formalisation and trade barriers which many erstwhile networks find complicated and time consuming. Informal networks pass these goods bypassing such paraphernalia using interconnections and un-institutionalised yet robust networks that sometimes even predate legalisation of trade in this part of the world.

The relative incapacity of the state to completely regulate these clandestine and undocumented cross-border movements leads to securitization of borders through increased surveillance techniques like border patrolling and fencing. States have often used legality in restricting such movements of people and goods across the border in terming these informal interactions as illegal. Indeed, there is evidence that porous border regions are criminalised leading several incidents of drug and human trafficking across the borders.[24]Such threats further give leeway to the states to securitise borders which provides them a regulatory control over people and goods. The collateral damage of this securitisation in South Asia is its human security.[25]However, despite the regulatory techniques of the states, undocumented migration and informal trade across borders has continued unabated in the region. States, in turn, have felt compelled to recognise the immutability of cross-border movements by creating semi-porous borders, facilitating conditional cross-border movements, introducing border *haats*, providing work permits with neighbouring countries in the region.[26] The continued sustenance of informal cross-border trade, despite states' security apparatus, suggests state complicity allowing that addresses the livelihood needs of the mammoth unorganized economic sector in the region.[27]

Ubiquity of statist narrative

The three patterns of deflection that challenges the indomitability of the territorial sanctity of state identity in the region reveals South Asian states' response to alternative imaginations of South Asia. At the heart of such response, lies the centrality of the idea of preserving or safeguarding state sovereignty and territorial sanctity that has compelled the states to either initiate multilateral institution formation or accommodate and negotiate with identities that transcends the national fold. The first instance of regional identity formation by the South Asian states in form of SAARC was driven by the nation-states in the region. However, the ineffectiveness of SAARC to become a robust regional forum has been attributed to the insecurity of the constituent states regarding their political sovereignty. Hence, if SAARC formation is considered as a one-time institutional attempt towards forging a regional identity beyond national territoriality, states'perceived threat to their national sovereignty due to possibility of political interference on certain long-standing bilateral issues in the region's multilateral forum, weakened the regional project all together. However, the other two patterns of deflection that has challenged the homogenous national identity claims and immutable territoriality of South Asian nation-states are found not be driven the nation-states but by other socio-economic-cultural dynamics of the region. As these processes emanated and persisted due to the structural conditionalities of the region which are largely beyond the control of the states, nation-states felt compelled respond to such deviations from the state narrative of homogeneity and border impermeability. States have been compelled to negotiate, accommodate and also regulate such deflections as these processes like multi-ethnic identity politics or cross-border movements, which cannot be completely curbed in the region, if left unaddressed, might seriously threaten state sovereignty. It is true for the case of both episodic as well as regular deflections discussed above. All modern nation-states in the region has bequeathed a diverse socio-cultural fabric and multi-ethnic demographic composition due to complex pluralistic over-lapping social identity dynamics of the region. States' attempts to create homogenous national identity on majoritarian terms have always created marginalised minority population who are discriminated against in the South Asian states. Such tactics of alienation or 'otherisation' of minority sections often resulted in demands for secessionism, insurgency and autonomy

movements seriously threatening the territorial sanctity and authority of the South Asian states. The insurgencies in parts of Northeast India, resentment against Hindi imposition in the Southern states in India, secessionist and autonomy demands of Sri Lankan Tamils are few examples amongst many others in the region. Though states have largely responded to such demands with coercive tactics, efforts of reconciliation, dialogue and federal power-sharing have also been adopted by the states in order to quell separatist tendencies and safeguard its territorial sanctity. Third, even the constant process of border transgressions through undocumented migration and informal trade in the region has been responded by the state with both securitised as well as some accommodative (though regulated) policy initiatives. This phenomena has the potential to disrupt state authority by violating territorial borders and bypassing state's formal and official mechanisms of documented cross-border movements and legalised modes of trade. States in South Asia have felt compelled to take note of such transgressions and negotiate with it. Though, proper coherent institutionalised mechanisms to negotiate such challenges are mostly absent, need for collective cooperation amongst the states in the region to regulate and monitor these processes, are acknowledged.

Conclusion

It can be substantially argued that the response of South Asian states to the challenges posed by the deflections caused to their territorial sovereignty and homogenous national identity formation is premised on how the states perceive those deflections. The emergence and preponderance of processes have compelled states to be accommodative only when such deflections further posed to threaten state authority. On one hand, the states deter growth of such transnational initiatives (like SAARC) as and when state finds it threatening its political sovereignty. As such multi-lateral initiatives are driven by states, they can abort or derail such transnational endeavours at will. On the other hand, when such deflections are insurmountable that stems from socio-economic context of the region, (like ethnic demands and undocumented migration) states have no choice but to adopt an accommodative approach to some extent. However, the security apparatus of the paranoid state system in South Asia also deploys instruments of coercion wherever possible, along with efforts of accommodation. Even if its true that institutional and social push towards challenging state authority exist in South Asia, such deflections are also dealt from the prism of state authority and its threat perceptions. South Asian civil society constitutes multiple strands of overlapping and cross-cutting socio-cultural commonality along with rich collective heritage which can constitute compelling narratives of South Asian identity outside the statist discourse. But, as the civil society space in the region has not consolidated itself adequately independent of state control and remains strongly influenced by state actors, alternative imaginations of the region, though present, will find it difficult to evolve. Especially, in a political scenario, where statist narrative of sovereignty remains disproportionately hegemonic.

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The Role of Dalit Women in the Land Acquisition struggle in Singur, West Bengal

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Introduction

The questions of land acquisition and peasant-farmer movements are crucial issues in politics in South Asia particularly since the 1940s. India witnessed a number of peasant struggles movements before and after independence like the Telengana Movement (1946-51), Tebhaga Movement (1946-50) and Naxalbari Movement (1967). The basis of these movements was class antagonism and class struggle though I movement I discuss here, the movement against land acquisition and women's role in it in Singur(2006-2011) does not belong to the same genre. The role of women, particularly that of dalit women in this movement has been poorly documented, which is why very few names can be identified in the records. It is my aim in this paper, to identify some of the women who participated in the movement and explore the significance of their role.

India is an agriculture-based country and according to the 2017-18 report published by Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), 70% of rural livelihood in India is dependent upon small, medium and large-scale farming. India offers 25% of the global production of crops, cereals, fruits etc. The agricultural economy is stratified into a number of sections- marginal, middle and big landholders and there exists a large number of landless peasants. Thus, questions of agricultural economy and peasantry plays a crucial role in the Indian socio-political scenario. There is no denying that even in colonial times, the peasantry has played an active and often radical role against state exploitation. Both in the pre and post-independence India, the peasants' economic condition has not improved, and therefore, revolts and restlessness persisted. However, the context is quite different in the contemporary period. In the name of development, often farmer is pressurized to leave their land which equally often results in movements against such eviction.

Socio-Political Background:

Before discussing the circumstances of the movement, it is important to have an idea of the social background of the Singur region. Covering an area of around 997.11 acres, Gopalnagar, Beraberi, Bajemelia, Khaserbheri and Singh Bheri were the five maujas (an administrative-territorial unit of land), where the multi-crop farmland was forcibly acquired by the then ruling government, under the British colonial Land Acquisition Act, 1894. Before the construction of Tata Nano Car Factory (TNCF), Singur was a multi-crop land and yielded at least three crops per year. District Statistical Handbook, 2004 has reported that in Singur, 10437 hectare area was recorded as agricultural land and population involved in farming was 35498. (cited by Sengupta and Mitra. 2007: 156-157).

West Bengal had been ruled by the Left Front from 1977 to 2011 and over the years, the Left Front was returned to power again and again with massive mandates from the electorate. Protracted Left Front rule ensured a process of routinized mobilization of the working class and peasants through

moderate doses of land reforms, decentralization and democratic governance while abolishing spontaneity and militancy of mass struggles and revolutionary movements. The legacy of the revolutionary (Naxalite) movement gradually faded and a period of relative calm began to prevail on the soil of West Bengal till 2006. Nobody perhaps could have imagined that the Left Front was winning its last election in West Bengal, when in May 2006 it got a landslide victory for the seventh time in a row. (Bhattacharyya. 2016: 156-157). Development through industrialization was their election agenda, as they thought industrialization was the only way to gain peoples' confidence.

Immediately, thereafter, in May 2006, the Left Front government decided to acquire 997.11 acres of land with a view to establishing a TNCF workshop in that area. At that time there was a huge amount of barren and fallow land available in the Hooghly district of West Bengal. The amount of barren and wasteland is 1,507.34 acres and fallow but arable land was 4,512.14 acres. Total available land was 6019.48 acres. (Das. 2013: 197). Not only that, the amount of barren, waste and fallow land that could be readily available in different districts of West Bengal for industry and other projects without any displacement was about 0.153 million acres (ibid: 196). The officials of Tata Motors, who were to set up the factory, were not shown other possible sites for the project, and the government insisted on handing over this fertile stretch of farmland in Singur. The state government in its Gazette notification (19-24 July, 2006) declared that the land was to be acquired under section 4 (1) of the Land Acquisition Act of 1894, (a British law with some changes made in 2013) by the government or its undertaking " 'at public expense for a public purpose' such as 'employment generation and socio- economic development of the area by setting up a Tata Small Car Project'." (cited by Bhattacharya 2016: 156- 157).

Debabrata Bandhopadhaya (former MP) observed that the then West Bengal Government "tried to make out a case by stating that the small car factory would generate employment and result in socio-economic development in the area". (Bandhopadhaya. 2008: 13). Many critics held that this was a baseless assertion because it failed to disclose employment opportunities. There was a suspicion that the farmers would be unable to satisfy the job needs and the outsiders would be appointed for those places. The farmers understandably felt that they would lose their livelihood. (ibid). On the contrary, some affluent landowners perceived this project of the TNCF workshop, as an important symbol of socio-economic progress that may improve Singur's condition and convert it to a mini-auto city. (Nielsen. 2009).

This acquisition of land affected peasant families of that area. Many small-scale farmers, landholders and agricultural workers lost their land and livelihood. (Sen. 2006: 3994). According to the local residents, the policies of the then Left Front Government were not satisfactory and convincing to them. Initially, the majority of the locals had supported the ruling parties, but soon the people lost their confidence in the government and Tata organization, mainly due to their lack of communication with the farmers who were directly or indirectly related to the land and who were unwilling to hand over the land to the government. The Government then used coercive measures to occupy the land for the factory, which incensed the local Singur community. A section of the farmers expressed their unwillingness to sell their land and refused to accept the cheques as the price of the land, in protest that the forced agricultural land acquisition by the Tata Motor was on agricultural land.

The Role of Dalit Women in the Movement

The word *'dalit'* means "oppressed" or "broken", also known as "Untouchables" are members of the lowest social group in the Hindu caste system. In India *'dalit'* is basically a caste defined in the constitution under article 341, listed as the Scheduled Castes. In 2008, the National Commission for Scheduled Caste stated that the term *'dalit'* is 'unconstitutional' and 'Scheduled Caste' was more appropriate but the word *'dalit'* is still commonly used. Women who are anyway a more deprived and exploited section in a patriarchal society and are denied equal opportunities and privileges as men especially in rural areas, in public as well as in family matters, face the painful consequences of eviction or displacement much more. For dalit women, caste and class discriminations are added to gender.

In the Singur agitation, it must be noted, that active participation of women was crucial and significant. On May 25, when Tata Motors officials visited Singur, they encountered the angry protesters, a large number of whom were women armed with broomsticks, shouting against the proposed factory (some of them were, Bandana Bag, Chhobi Bag, Shyamali Das, Archana Bag, Paramita Das and others), to indicate that the company was unwelcome in their neighbourhood. Mainly, the women of Gopalnagar, Beraberi and KGD (Kamarkundu, Gopalnagar, Daluigachha) *gram panchayat* areas of Singur played a prominent role in the movement. There were many landless families in and around Singur dependent on rearing cows and goats for their livelihood and they depended on the availability of grazing land. They were also emotionally attached to the land which they referred to as their 'mother.' The transformation of agricultural land into industrial estate would lead to the loss of many such land-dependent supplementary livelihoods. (Sen. 2006: 4088).

On December 2, 2006, the government took brutal action against farmers who were fighting for their survival on the very land that had witnessed the Tebhaga struggle. Hundreds of poor peasants including women were severely injured. About 50 villagers, including 18 women were arrested and condemned under section 307 (attempt to murder) of the Indian Penal Code. Among the arrested was a 75-year old woman and two girls in their early teens. Earlier, the police had *lathi-charged* about 7,000 villagers, including 2,500 women who were demonstrating peacefully at the block development office at Singur on the midnight of September 25. Hundreds of protesters including several women were severely injured, and 72 activists of Singur Krishi Jami Raksha Committee (SKJRC), including 27 women were arrested, as reported by the *Khonj Ekhon Parisad,* a non-governmental organization.

The active participation of dalit women emerged as one of the most important features of the people's movement in Singur. In a study, *Khonj Ekhon Porisod*, stated that "a fact-finding team has found that even when there have been cases where male members of the family have shown interest in handing over their land, the women have strongly opposed these moves. Women were seen defending their rights and giving evidence of police torture of September 25 before a panel that comprised Medha Patkar and others on a public hearing organized on October 27. Women also fasted for days in protest. In Kolepara where about 30 women are still on fast (at the time of writing in the third week of December), we talked to five who were above 60 years of age." (KEP. 2006:

5290). Tapasi Malik, 18-year-old daughter of a landless labourer was one such activist, attached with the movement from the very beginning and whom few outsiders knew till December 18, 2006. It must be said that the importance of the women in the activities of Singur movement was most forcefully brought to light when Tapasi Malik, a local teenage girl and movement activist, belonging to a lower caste (the number indicated in the figure below), was raped and burnt alive in December 2006, allegedly by party loyalist belonging to the then ruling parties, which was eager to see the Tata Motors project materialize swiftly and without any opposition. (Nielsen & Waldrop. 2014: 203).

Total female population in rural Singur	Total female population (Schedule Caste & Tribe) in rural Singur	Total female population in acquired areas in Singur	Total female population (Schedule Caste & Tribe) in acquired areas in Singur
110390	21574	12253	2773

(Source: Census Report of India, 2011)

It has been seen that from the very first day, *dalit* women have been in the forefront of the movement and they are seen to lead mass rallies. Many researchers like Kenneth Bo Nielsen, Dayabati Roy and others have also found the same. According to Dayabati Ray, "The Singur movement can be characterized by the substantial participation of marginal groups of these villages in terms of class, caste and gender. Along with the small landholding groups of peasants, like the small and marginal farmers, the bargadars and landless peasants in the surrounding villages of the earmarked area constituted an essential part of this movement. Since the initial days of this agitation, these marginal groups, who mainly belonged to SCs or OBCs, raised their voices and blocked the passages of the government officials to the earmarked area. But the conspicuous presence of the peasant women from the very beginning of the movement, and in the subsequent periods as well, turned the movement into a more dynamic incident." (Ray. 2014: 218).

Now the question is: why and how did *dalit* womenfolk come out in support of the Singur Movement? The womenfolk of Singur (mainly of Dobandi) performed many vital tasks in cultivation like transplanting the paddy-shoots and also help to thresh paddy. Dobandi is a backward area of Singur with mainly landless labourers belonging to the lower caste. Within this backward section women had an even more deprived existence and were denied right of livelihood or even decision making in the family. These women believed that displacement from their home would push them to a wretched state loss of home as well as crisis within the family. There was also the negative impact of forcible agricultural land acquisition on the life of the womenfolk of Singur. In the absence of other sources of income, many women agricultural labourers of Singur were forced to be involved in criminal activities or accept prostitution as a profession. They could not find any alternative means of livelihood, particularly those who worked as agricultural labour in bargadar owned land. So, when the

land was taken away from the owners, many of these wage-earning women lost their means of livelihood. Begging or prostitution remained their only option as conversations with Gargi Sengupta, an activist in the movement reveal. Drunkenness or gambling became an escape from this trauma for many men and wife-beating increased enormously. (Fernandes. 2007: 204) It is true that those who were willing to give up their land had been paid compensatory money. But the compensatory money was paid in most cases to the male family members and women had no decisive role here. Only in the case of the absence of male members of the family, the compensatory amount was paid to the female members.

It was found that due to loss of their livelihood a large number of women labourers were affected by the displacement-induced morbidity. It is quite natural that the nutrition, health and hygiene status of the women, which is lower than that of the males even under normal circumstances, were bound to proportionately go down in the event of an overall decrease in the health status of these womenfolk caused by livelihood displacement in Singur. Now these problems increased exponentially.

Every movement has positive and negative impacts. Singur movement too brought in a number of positive changes to the life of women including dalit women. They used to live in a patriarchal, social and cultural framework in which they were considered as the secondary members of the family. They had practically no right, they had no role in the decision-making process of family, they had no right on their body, mind and action. The movement provided them with more free space than in the past. Some of the beneficial changes were – firstly a realization among the women that education was very necessary and many of them took active step in this regard. Secondly, girls were previously considered to be a burden on their parents and were forced to marry at an early age; but presently this has changed. Thirdly, these women who had previously no role in the decision-making process of their family, now enjoyed more rights to express their views on different issues related to family affairs. Finally, after the movement, a number of women were found without veils in the public places. They are now more vocal than earlier and freely express their concerns in proper political language.

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