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BUDDHIST STUDIES IN RABINDRANATH'S VISVA BHARATI

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Abstract

Tagore's eclecticism and respect for Indic traditions and versions of civilization placed a great deal of importance to teachings of Budhha and tenets in Buddhism. It was, thus, natural, as early years in Visva Bharati witnessed a lot of focus being given to Buddhist studies. Though its importance somewhat declined in later years, recent efforts to revive interest in Indic traditions has witnessed a renewal of interest in reviving that tradition.

Keywords: Buddhism, Rabindranath Tagore, pan-Asianism, culture

Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore was born and brought up in an environment which was suffused with Upanishadic thought, His father, Devendranath Tagore was a great figure in the time of Bengal Renaissance and represented Rammohan's movement for monotheism, broke away from the Hindu social and sacerdotal laws and finally embraced *Brahmo dharmo* in 1843. Rabindranath also carried this legacy and all his writings reflect the deep impact of the Upanishads on his thought and personality. This background notwithstanding, Rabindranath Tagore was a great admirer of Buddhadeva and believed him to be the greatest of all the human beings among men of all times. It is said that only once in his life he felt like prostrating before an image and that was the image of Buddhadeva in Bodhgaya in 1914.

Deeply influenced as he was by Buddha's high moral sensitivity and infinite love, the themes of many of his creative writings too – the poems and dramas alike, are taken from the stories of various *avadanas.* Rising above a mere narration of the stories, he recreated these highlighting the best ideals of *karuna* and *maitri.* Of course, he explained Buddha's ideal in his own original way and even made an interpretation of Buddhist concept of *nirvana* in the Upanishadic concept of *Ananda*. He explained Buddha's ideals of *karuna* in terms of *ananda* of the Upanishads. There are several articles and addresses that explain his interpretation of Buddha's philosophy.[1]

With this deep influence of Buddha on him it was natural that Buddhist studies will be given a priority in the academic programmes in the institute that he founded with a vision. Researches

on Buddhist studies did receive a special place in the academic programmes and objectives of the Visva Bharati.

The foundation of Visva Bharati

Visva Bharati, as we know had started as a school in his father's *ashram* in Santiniketan in 1901. The *ashram* was actually started by Debendranath in 1863 to be converted into an *ashram* in 1888 by a Deed of Trust. Rabindranath obtained permission from his father to start a school there to implement his educational ideals and gradually developed it in to Visva Bharati. It is believed that he got his idea of Visva Bharati from the ancient Buddhist Viharas of Nalanda, Vikramsila and Taksasila. The methods and subjects of teachings in these universities were so universal that they even drew pupils from different countries. Thus these turned to be meeting places of various civilisations. The nature of these universities inspired Rabindranath to convert the Brahmacharya Ashram to Visva Bharati – a place which was deemed as a nest of all ideas and cultures of the universe.

The foundation stone of Visva Bharati was laid on 23rd December 1918. The ideals of Visva Bharati were elaborated in a talk in The Centre of Indian Culture delivered in Mysore in January 1919. In it as well as in a report of the scheme sent to Mrs. Seymour he explained how he visualised Visva Bharati in the model of Nalanda. "... it was merely a school up to this time- it is going to be a much bigger thing in the future. Bigger not in building, gymnasiums and playgrounds – but bigger as a centre of higher education concerning all the activities of our life, in fact a true university - not exactly in European sense – but more like what we had in ancient Nalanda, an educational colony which would be in direct touch with all the requirements of modern men. ... [2]

Visva Bharati was formally inaugurated in 1921.

The initiation of Buddhist studies with eminent scholars

The tradition of Buddhist studies had started long before the school became Visva Bharati. The thought that the Santiniketan school was meant to grow into something fundamentally broader was there from the very beginning of the institution's existence. The first foreign student to come to the Santiniketan school was as early as in 1902. He was Hori San from Japan sent by the philosopher Kazuko Okakura. Rabindranath was so delighted that he made a plan with his friend Jagadish Chandra Bose to initiate a project for Hori San to copy the `lost Buddhist texts from Sanskrit from the temples of China and Japan and to bring them to the Indian libraries.[3] The emphasis on Indian cultures brought with it an urge to explore a wider historical connection with the Far east. If Santiniketan was to become truly the guest house of India that he wished it to be, then it had to become broader in its learning and understanding of history. In his essay *East and West* (1908) he had argued that history of India is not the history of Aryans or non-Aryans, it is not the history of the Hindus, nor the history of Hindus and Muslims taken together. He compared the civilisation of the West with the exclusiveness of the civilisation of India nurtured on human relationships and co operations. [4] On this note began his preparations

for adding a centre for Indian cultures in Santiniketan in 1918. This was to be the centre for the coordinated study of the various cultural streams of India Vedic, Puranic, Buddhists, Jain, Islamic, Sikh, and Zororastrian through philosophy, literature, art and music.[5]

With time and expanding resources this branch of study actually developed in Santiniketan with the study of Chinese, Tibetan and Japanese cultures. The idea was taken further after he was awarded the Nobel prize in 1913. From then on, his travels in the West convinced him of the need for world-wide cooperation and he hoped that Santiniketan would become the fittest place for a meeting of the scholars of east and west. One area where they could devote themselves would be the field of Buddhist Philosophy. This was the genesis of Rabindranath's vision for Buddhist studies in Visva Bharati. Visva Bharati at this initial phase did not provide any conventional academic degree. The scholars who joined the institute came with high academic degrees from other institutes no doubt but here they devoted themselves to researches in the fields of humanities subjects and particularly in Indian history and culture. The focus on Buddhist Studies was derived from the urge to understand Indian culture and its connections with the other Asian countries and civilisations.

Buddshist studies started in Santiniketan even before Visva Bharati was formally inaugurated. After the summer of 1919 Sri Dharmadhar Rajguru Mahasthabir, a great scholar of Buddhist philosophy joined Visva Bharati. Viddhusekhara Sastri, basically a Sanskrit scholar and Indologist dedicated himself to the study of Pali. He had written *Pali Prakash* for teaching Pali language with the help of Sanskrit grammar in 1911[6]. In the printed advertisement of the first academic year 3 July 1919, it was announced that these two scholars would teach Pali. Rathindranath Tagore and Santosh Majumdar were the two students in the first batch.[7] It was desirable that that the students of this branch should have knowledge of Sanskrit literature and grammar. Kshitimohan Sen and Bhimrao Sastri would teach Sanskrit literature and grammar. Vidhusekhara Sashtri would also teach Sanskrit and Buddhist Philosophy and religion along with Dharmadhar Rajguru.[8] Visva Bharati started receiving scholars from different parts of the country and even from outside. Prof. Parasuram Lachmen Vaidya from the Wellington College of Sangli came to Visva Bharati for studying *Abhidharma.*[9]

The pursuit of Buddhist studies in Santiniketan has to be understood in this broader context.

The arrival of French Indologist Prof Sylvyan Levy and Madame Levy in Santiniketan in 1921 was an important landmark in the journey towards this goal.

After being awarded with the Nobel prize Rabindranath went round the world presenting the idea of Visva Bharati as a meeting place for scholars from the east and the west to share their learning. His idea received support from many from the European community including Romain Rolland. It was in this period that he came to meet the French Indologist Sylvian Levy of the Sorbonne and took the opportunity to invite him to Visva Bharati. *I told Prof. Levy of my idea of gathering the scholars of the world to my centre of learning at Visva Bharati with some diffidence. He was at that time invited to give lectures at Harvard University. Harvard was among the world's famous universities. But nobody knew of our Visva Bharati. Levy accepted my invitation to this unknown ashram with much respect./* [10]

Prof. Levi was the first to come as visiting professor in Visva Bharati and stayed in Santiniketan till August 1922. His visit was a memorable event for the institute. A versatile scholar of Oriental Studies, he, apart from giving regular lectures encouraged the students to learn Tibetan and Chinese. The idea of Cheena Bhavana took shape from this and initiated the scientific study of Buddhism. Scholars, both young and senior, assembled to learn Tibetan and Chinese as well as Pali, Prakrit and Apabhramsa from him to explore the hidden treasures of Indian culture in general and Buddhism in particular. Rabindranath himself along with Pandit Vidhusekhara Sastri became students in the Tibetan language classes of Prof Levy. This was the beginning of the teaching of Tibetan language in Santiniketan.

Even after his departure contacts continued between the two great minds, Rabindranath and Prof Levi. Later, he paid one more visit to Santiniketan to see the poet for a day on August 9, 1928 on his way back from Japan. Levi's departure in 1922 did not disrupt the teachings of Tibetan as Vidhusekhara Sashtri, in charge of the Uttar Vibhaga.[11] started teaching the subject. Many great scholars like Moriz Winternitz, C.F.Andrews, Ferdinand Benoit, Kshitimohan Sen, Dr. Mark Collins, Kapileswara Misra, Premsundar Bose, Saroj Kumar Das, A.Bachman, Vincent Lesne, Amarendranath Tarkatirtha taught different subjects like Sanskrit literature, Prakrit, Tibetan, Dharma Sastra, among many other humanities subjects and literature. [12]

Understanding Buddhism from Tibetan and Chinese sources

Researches on Indian Buddhism remains incomplete without an access to the Tibetan sources. Buddhism was introduced in Tibet in the 7th century under the initiative of the king Sron btsan Sgam po (620 -649) he sent his minister to India to learn to read and write the holy language of India. The minister learnt the Sanskrit language and the vast range of Buddhist literature. He also introduced the Tibetan script on the basis of the Brahmi script of Gupta period. The script is in use till today. The minister composed eight books and also wrote a book on Tibetan grammar as well as a discourse on Buddhism. This was the beginning of the translation of Buddhist scriptures into Tibetan language. Innumerable Sanskrit works, including the mystic songs and *dohas* of Saraha, Naropa, Marpa, Tilopa and many others were translated which in course of time are now lost in original language being available only in Tibetan language. In the 13th century, Tibetan translation of Indian works under the sections of *Sutra, Vinaya and Abhidharma* as well as other literary works of different types were organised and the complete form of K*anjur* and *Tanjur* took shape.

Both Tibet and India passed through many political upheavals but the cultural and literary interaction through translation continued between the two countries, In fact, there is no other country in the world that preserves the literary heritage of another country in such meticulous and organised manner. Works of Indian Buddhist logic, grammatical digests, commentaries as well as pieces of creative literature can be recollected and evaluated from Tibetan sources. Many original Sanskrit texts were lost and destroyed in India but these could be collected from Tibet. Pandit Rahul Sankrityana, Pandit A. L. Thakur have contributed immensely in this area. Pandit Rahul Sankrityana collected manuscripts and photographs of those from different places of Tibet.[13]

Thus the knowledge and understanding of Buddhism and the religious and cultural heritage of Buddhism in Asia as Rabindranath had visualised, remains incomplete without a holistic study of the Buddhist scriptures from various languages. The study initiated in Visva Bharati in the 1920s and Cheena Bhavana in the next decade provided the institutional platform to carry it on. The department of Tibetan language was established later in 1955.

Prof Levi, as we have mentioned above, took personal care for the promotion of research in the field of Buddhist studies particularly from a comparative perspective. He was not only concerned with the Pali and Sanskrit original works on Buddhism but also much more careful about the translated versions of the unavailable Sanskrit texts in Tibetan and Chinese. His discourses on the Indian culture with reference to Buddhism had great impact upon the Ashramites. A new trend of broad-based research developed in Visva Bharati to study Buddhism from different perspectives with the help of Tibetan, Chinese, and Japanese languages for the first time in any Indian institution.

After the departure of Prof. Levi Tibetan studies as a separate discipline was carried on by Mahamahopadhyaya Pandit Vidhusekhara Sastri. Pandit Vidhusekhara Bhattacharya Sastri remained in Santiniketan in two phases. Initially he was the Principal of Vidya Bhavana. He became the Prof and Head of Sanskrit Department of Calcutta University but joined Visva Bharati for the second time as honorary director of the academic and research studies of Cheena Bhavana when Prof Tan went to China on leave. He finally joined the institute from 1943 – 1945.

Giuseppe Tucci, the internationally known Tibetologist spent a year in Visva Bharati as early as 1925. He and Carlo Furmichi Cavour Professor of Sanskrit and Oriental Culture at the university of Rome had been sent to Visva Bharati following an agreement between Rabindranath and the Government of Italy signed a few months before. Mussolini had also donated many valuable books to Santiniketan. Formichi had translated *Buddhacharita* of Asvaghosa in Italian. He took classes on this book in Santiniketan. Tucci was already well versed in Chinese and Sanskrit. He initially came with the intention to settle down in Visva Bharati where he studied Buddhism, Tibetan and Bengali and gave lessons in Italian and Chinese. However, he had to leave Santiniketan shortly after as a result of the changed attitude of Tagore towards the Fascist regime of Italy and the discontinuation of Italian help to Visva Bharati. The brevity of his stay notwithstanding, the experience contributed to the development of his interest in the Himalayas to which he was exposed for the first time in 1926 when he accompanied Tagore to Assam and Darjeeling.[14] Long after, in 1961 Visva Bharati conferred its highest degree of Desikottama on him.

The poet's two visits to Ceylon in 1931 strengthened the relations between Santiniketan and Ceylon as well as the pursuit of Buddhist Studies. In December 1930 Chenfu, a Chinese monk came to Santiniketan on foot to study Persian, Sanskrit and Buddhist philosophy, He was followed a few days later, by 10 Buddhist students from Ceylon for studying Buddhist religion and philosophy. Dr. Anna Selig, a brilliant student from a German University came as Visiting Professor in 1930. Even though she basically came to learn Bengali, she also translated themes of Tripitak. A Mongolian Buddhist monk and a renowned scholar in Buddhism, Rev. Geshe-

Thubten came to Santiniketan in 1931 and studied for 8 months under the supervision of Vidhusekhara. An American scholar James Bisect Pratt whom the poet had met in 1930 came for a few months and delivered talks on Buddhism and Christianity. [15]

Some young scholars assembled to study Tibetan language and Buddhist texts under the supervision of Vidhusekhara Sastri and were engaged in researches in various aspects of Buddhist studies. The first publication of Visva Bharati - the *Mahayanavimsaka* of Nagarjuna was restored from the Chinese and Tibetan sources into Sanskrit along with an English translation by him. This was published in 1931 as Visva Bharati Studies I. The *Bhavanakrama* an important Buddhist work was also restored from Tibetan source by the Tibetan scholar Angi Wangdi.

In this way, Visva Bharati developed into a leading centre of Buddhist Studies. In this early phase the basic objective was to restore the lost Buddhist texts from the Tibetan sources, by comparing these with the Chinese and Sanskrit ones if necessary. This was a difficult task and the scholars were proficient in several languages. Finally, Dr. Prabodh Chandra Bagchi took over the responsibility.[16] He was a great Indologist with proficiency in several languages and Buddhist Studies in Visva Bharati progressed under his guidance and untiring scholarship. It was by his initiative that the Department of Indo Tibetan Studies was established in 1954 with financial help from the UGC.

Pursuit of Buddhist studies from Cheena Bhavana

The Cheena Bhavana was established in 1937 by the initiative of Prof Tan Yun Shan.[17] Hence forth it became the main platform (till the establishment of the Department of Indo Tibetan Studies) which all the Buddhist studies were carried on in Visva Bharati. That the study of Buddhist philosophy was one of the main objectives of the Cheena Bhavana was laid down in the General Rules of the Bhavana itself. These rules were adopted by the Visva Bharati Samsad on 19.9.1937 and in the Rules regarding Studies in Cheena Bhavana passed by the Cheena Bhavana Committee dated 30.9.1937 as well as described in the general prospects of Visva Bharati,[18]-

Article II of the rules stated -"The object of this department (Cheena Bhavana) shall be to establish and promote cultural exchange between China and India , for which purpose it will promote facilities for Chinese scholars to study Indian languages , literature, history, religion, philosophy, etc as well as for Indian scholars to study Chinese language, literature, religion, philosophy etc.... Buddhism being regarded as the nucleus of all such studies.' (vide VB Bulletin No. 24, dated April 1938).

In the rules regarding Studies, it was mentioned that Cheena Bhavana would not provide for any fixed courses of study prescribed for its students the arrangement for such course being entirely dependent upon and suited to the requirement of individual cases. The subject of study are as follows – Languages –Chinese, Tibetan, Sanskrit, and other Indian languages. Besides these, important European languages such as English, German, French etc, will be taught if necessary.

As for research the focus areas would be

1. Buddhism
2. Other religions (Chinese and Indian)
3. Philosophy, Chinese and Indian
4. History (Chinese and Indian
5. Literature (Chinese and Indian)
6. Cultural studies (Chines and Indian, ancient and modern

As for Publication the objectives would be the

1. Restoration of lost Sanskrit works from Chinese and Tibetan
2. Translations of Chinese, Tibetan, Sanskrit and Pali classics
3. Editing of Sanskrit, Chinese and other works etc.

> While describing the scope of work Prof. Tan wrote -These items and subjects provided us with a very vast sphere of work, scholarly, academic and cultural. Let us take, for example a single item, the restoration of lost Sanskrit works from Chinese translations. There are more than five thousand Chinese volumes (Chuan) in the Chinese Buddhist Tripitaka which were translated from Sanskrit and most of which are now either lost or undiscovered. When they were first translated from Sanskrit into Chinese it took about twelve hundred years, and the names of the chief translators attached to them amounted to more than two hundred, many of them being not only great scholars but sages both Indian and Chinese. .....Now we intend not only to restore the lost Sanskrit works but also to translate other important classical works from Sanskrit into Chinese and other Indian languages. And prior to these translations and restorations exacting comparative studies in both Chinese and Sanskrit and other Indian languages have to be made. So one can easily imagine how much time money and labour would be needed, not to speak of the personnel. [19]

The Cheena Bhavana it its initial years carried on the trend that had already been established in Visva Bharati - the trend of contacts with other institutes of oriental studies in India, particularly in Maharashtra and exchange of scholars not only from institutes within India but from other Buddhist countries of Asia as well. The Government of China also helped it with donations and book grants and Indian scholars were sent to China for higher studies. Prof Tan has given a detailed account of the academic activities carried on from Cheena Bhavana in these early years. In his account of the institute in course of the first twenty years, he has described all the research activities carried on by the various scholars, the distinguished visitors and also an account of the gradual expansion of the library thanks to the donations received from China.

One of the scholars who became associated with Cheena Bhavana was Dr Vasudev Gokhale – who remained in Santiniketan during 1937-38 as Professor of Sanskrit and Tibetan. His service was lent to the Institute by the Deccan Education Society for one year. After completion of the term he returned to Poone as Dean and Professor of Fergusson College. During his short stay he translated an important Chinese book into Sanskrit and English-*San Chiao Pin Hsin-Lun* by

Liu Mi, an important treatise on three important religions – Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism.

Pandit N. Aiyaswami Sastri first joined as Professor of Buddhist Studies in place of Dr. Gokhale. His service was also lent to the institute only for one year by the Sri Venkateswara Oriental Institute. But he rejoined as Research Fellow under the Chinese Government Cultural Fellowship 1945-48, then reappointed as Senior Lecturer in Sanskrit and Tibetan Buddhism and finally became Reader and Head of the Indo Tibetan studies. He was a veteran Sanskrit scholar of *Sankhya* philosophy and was conversant in Indian logic

Contribution of Aiyaswami Sastri in Sino Tibetan Studies are generally in the field of Buddhist philosophy with reference to the *sutra* text such as the *Salistamha Sutra* and *Bhabasankranti Sutra* with commentaries. He had access to Tibetan *Kannjur and Tanjur* literature.

The *Salistamaha Sutra* is one of the oldest Mahayana scriptures. The text of the commentary has probably been rendered into Tibetan from Chinese sources. There are some differences in the different versions of the Sutra. A Chinese translation was probably made in the third century and a commentary of the text written by Nagarjuna is available in Tibetan which was probably made in the 8th century. The original text of the Salistamaha Sutra is lost but he took great pains to restore the texts from the Tibetan sources

Alambanapariksa of Acharya Dinnaga is another important contribution of Aiyaswami Sastri in the field of Buddhist *Nyayas*. The text is one of the treatises composed by the so called 'father of medieval logic' among the Buddhists. The original text of the same *Sutra* had been lost and was later restored from the Tibetan and Chinese sources. The treatise *Alambanapariksa* has two commentaries, one by Dharmapala of Nalanda preserved in the Chinese version of I Tsing and the other by Vinitadeva available in the Tibetan version. The commentary by Dharmapala translated by I Tsing has 11 leaves. The text was completely rendered into English by Aiyaswami. The *Madhyamika* doctrines developed in two streams – *Prasangika and Swatantrika*. He endeavoured to understand both by restoring the lost texts of *Karatalaratnaascribed to Bhavaviveka* and *Madhyamakavatara* ascribed to Chandrakirti. The former text is not available in Tibetan and the latter is available only in Tibetan. He tried to examine both the aspects from different perspectives.

Some important articles by him are –

A lost commentary on the *Nyayamukha* (*Sino Indian Studies* vol II April 19436 part I), *Harivarman on Vaisaradiya(Sino Indian Studies* Vol I 1945 part 3), *Nagarjuna and Satkarvada of the Sankhyas* (Sino Indian Studies vol IV pt 2).[20]

Professor Sujit Kumar Mukhopadhyaya though a lecturer in Sanskrit and Bengali was an ardent scholar of Buddhist studies and remained attached to Cheena Bhavana. He carried on the restoration work which was innovated by Vidhusekhara Sastri in the 20s in Visva Bharati. He restored the *Trisvabhavanirdesa* of Vasubandhu into Sanskrit from Tibetan. The original Sanskrit text has been published along with its two Tibetan versions critically compared. The

text is annotated and translated into English (Visva Bharati 1939) Sujit Kumar had also worked on the *Avadana* literature

His work on the *Sardulakarnavadanam* from Tibetan sources opened a new line of Tibetan studies of the *Avadana* literature The book contains a Sanskrit text of the first century A.D. compared with four translations and a Tibetan translation in different editions edited critically with various readings of Sanskrit, Tibetan and Chinese. This *Avadana* is one of the oldest Sanskrit works discovered. It became so popular in the Buddhist world that it was translated almost literally into Chinese, and Tibetan more than once.

Sujit Kumar had also written some books in Bengali on Buddhist philosophy. His work, *Santidever Bodhicharyavatara* was translated into Chinese, Tibetan, Mongolian along with several European languages. It was annotated and edited with an introduction published by Visva Bharati in 1947.[21]

Prabodh Chandra Bagchi's contribution to the field of Buddhist Studies was outstanding. **A** great scholar with expertise in French, Chinese, Tibetan and different Indian languages, he also had knowledge of Apabhramsa and Prakrit. He visited Nepal and China for collection and researches on manuscripts. In 1944 he had started publishing the 3 monthly journal Sino Indian Studies and later became the Head of researches of Visva Bharati from where was published the *Visva Bharati Annals.* Many research works by him and other scholars of Visva Bharati were published in these journals.

His two very important works on Chinese Buddhism were *Le Canon Bouddhique in China* (2 volumes, Paris 1927, 1938) and *Deux Lexiques Sanskrit – Chinois* (2 volumes 1929, 1937)

He edited the *Caryagitikosa* in collaboration with Santi Bhikshu Sastri which was published by Visva Bharati in 1956. Among his works in the field of Tibetan studies, one of the most important is *A Comparative Study of the Caryagiti Songs* by the Siddhacharyas in Apabhramsa with their Tibetan renderings in the *Tanjur.* Earlier he had published his works on tantras in 1939.

Professor Bagchi made a geographic – historical study of the *Mahamayuri Tantra* in his article entitled *The Geographic Catalogue of the Yaksas in the Mahamayuri* (Sino Indian Studies vol III April 1947, parts I and III. Another of his articles *Chang So che li (Jneyaprakasa Sastra* (An *Abhidharma* work of Sakya Pandita of Tibet) was published in Sino Indian Studies parts 3 and 4. His monumental work is *India and Central Asia.* [22]

In his book *India and China* he attempted to survey the whole field of Sino Indian Cultural relations from 200 B.C. to A.D.1000 based on his studies carried on in India, Europe and China. Since Buddhism formed one basic element in these cultural relations the book is significant from the perspective of Buddhist Studies as well. The book considers the early contacts with routes to China via two overland routes, one across Central Asia and another through Tibet and South west China and via the sea route across the Indian Ocean. He describes the pious Indian and Buddhist monks who made their trips to China to propagate the Buddhist faith and also the Chinese pilgrims who visited India. The book also contains chapters on Buddhism in China,

literature in China, art and science in China and then goes on to discuss the synthesis of the two civilisations.

Professor Bagchi's writings on Sino Indian relations are significant not only for assembling a good deal of factual data on the various aspects of cultural interchange between the two regions but for generating an interest in the long history of cultural interaction between the two great civilisations of India and China which had remained little explored till then.

Dr. Bagchi remained the Director of Research Studies in Visva Bharati and many articles by him as well by other scholars were published in Visva Bharati Annals edited by him. Among the scholars who came to study in the Cheena Bhavana were [23]-

Dr. W Pachow –He initially joined as Research Scholar in Chinese language and literature and then went to Allahabad university as lecturer in Chinese and Head of Chinese Department. Afterwards he became Professor of Chinese Culture and Mahayana Buddhism in university of Ceylon.

Rev. Sumangala – He came from Ceylon- first as Research Scholar and then became the instructor of Pali in Visva Bharati

Mr. Shih Shu- Lu- He came for the first time in 1938-42 and then returned in 1948, first as Research Scholar and then as Assistant Lecturer in Chinese since 1951

Mr. Wangdi had come from Tibet 1938-41 as Teacher and translator of Tibetan.

Rev. Pannasiri came from Ceylon and spent 5 years in research. In July 1942 Rev. Fa fang joined Cheena Bhavana initially as a Research Fellow and later he taught there for two years before returning to China.

The Chinese library developed in a specialised library in course of time. It consists of 1000,000 volumes including the Sung edition (10^{th} century A.D.) and the reproduction of the Ching or the so-called Dragon edition (1936) of the Buddhist Tripitakas along with many separate volumes of Buddhist texts as well as a wide range of selected Chinese works of Classics, History, Philosophy, Literature etc. Ten sets of the Sanghai Edition of the Chinese Buddhist Tripitaka were presented to the library by the Chinese people. Professor Tan presented nine sets to different universities of India. This edition of the Tripitaka contains 1916 different books consisting of 8416 Fascicles of which most were translated from Sanskrit. The originals are now lost in India. It is said to have taken 1200 years to translate them into Chinese by 200 translators, all of them good scholars, under the Chinese Emperors. The books are bound into 414 volumes and packed with camphor boards into 40 bundles.[24]

There were some more scholars who had remained associated to the Cheena Bhavana to be deputed to China for further studies. Some came back to Cheena Bhavana to work in the Institute in various capacities and some joined other institutes. Another senior scholar of Cheena Bhavana dedicated to Buddhist Studies from classical Chinese sources had been Prof Biswadeb Mukherjee. Originally a student of Ancient Indian History and Culture in specialisation in religion in the University of Calcutta, he was encouraged to join Cheena

Bhavana by Sudhakar Chattarejee of the same department of Visva Bharati. He started his studies under the supervision of Prabodh Chandra Bagchi but after his demise carried it on from Germany under guidance of the renowned scholar Ernst Waldschmidt. He returned to Cheena Bhavana but finally left to join the University in Taiwan that offered him better scope of work. He has worked on different aspects of Buddhism and particularly on Vinaya. [25]

Till the opening of the Department of Indo Tibetan Studies in 1954, Cheena Bhavana provided the platform for Buddhist Studies and Tibetan scholars too remained attached to this. The disciplines of Chinese and Tibetan Studies became separated after the opening of the new department of Indo Tibetan Studies.

The Department of Indo Tibetan Studies

The objectives of the Department of Indo Tibetan Studies were many and were in tune with the educational visions of Rabindranath- the study of Buddhist philosophy and restoration of various texts from Tibetan sources.

Some of these were as follows –

1. To promote systematic study and investigation of Indo Tibetan cultural relation down the ages.
2. To arrange for Tibetan culture and in general and Tibetan Buddhism in particular
3. To restore the Sanskrit texts preserved in Tibetan translations
4. To make Tibetan texts available in translated version both in Indian and foreign languages
5. To train Tibetan scholars in the study of Sanskrit and Pali texts and Sanskrit scholars in the study of Tibetan texts
6. Publication of research monographs and imparting training in the Tibetan language are among the other objectives of the department.[26]

Some of the scholars who were previously attached with Cheena Bhavana shifted to the newly founded department. Dr Aiyaswami Sastri who was already well known in the world of Buddhist scholars shifted to this department.[27]

For a better understanding of the Tibetan texts and to remove ambiguities during the study of independent Tibetan commentaries some traditionally trained Tibetan lamas were invited to Santiniketan to work in collaboration with Indian scholars. Among them were C.R Lama and Lama Chimpa. Professor Suniti Kumar Pathak, an internationally known scholar of Buddhist Studies joined the department in 1954. He spent the long span of his professional life in Visva Bharati and even after his retirement continues to dedicate himself to academic pursuit in this direction. [28]

In this way Visva Bharati did make some original contributions to the field Buddhist studies Many internationally known scholars have at one point of time of their career have remained attached to this university, either to the Cheena Bhavana or to the department of Indo Tibetan

Studies. The contemporary volumes of *Visva Bharati Annals* published many restored or retranslated texts of Buddhist scriptures by these scholars.

P.V. Bapat, Prabhubhai Patel, Ven. Sonam Ngodub, Ven Geshe Thubten Rablag, K .Venkataraman, Dharmadhara Mahasthabira, Sten Konow, M. Winternitz, S.Kramrisch, V.V.Gokhale, Anagarika Gobinda, are some other scholars who have remained attached to Santiniketan in some capacity or other over the long years of the history of the institute.

Conclusion

The trend that had set in Visva Bharati suffered a setback after the demise of Rabindranath Tagore. The institute began to suffer from fund shortage from time of Rabindranath only. The problem took a severe turn after his death and finally the Government of India took it over and converted into a central university under the U.G.C. The Parliament of India by Act XXIX of 1951 declared Visva Bharati as an institution of national importance and provided for its functioning as a university, teaching and residential university. Jawaharlal Nehru, the Prime Minister of India became the first Acharya or Chancellor of the institute and Rathindranath Tagore was the first Vice Chancellor.

A change set in the academic programmes of both the Cheena Bhavana and Department of Indo Tibetan Studies which gradually shifted to more stereotyped graduate and post graduate courses. This had an adverse impact on the quality of researches in the Institute [29] The focus being more on contemporary languages and vocational approach, the trend of classical studies gradually dried up from both these departments. Professor Biswadev Mukhopadhyaya from the Cheena Bhavana, one could say, was the last scholar of classical Chinese Buddhism and Professor Biswanath Bannerjee of Sanskrit Department made some original contribution to the Kalachakra Studies of Tibetan Buddhism. But scholars like them became gradually fewer in Visva Bharati. [30]

Of course, this is not to say that Buddhist Studies has totally lost its appeal to the scholars as a whole. Pali was a part of the curriculum in the Sanskrit Department and faculty members of these departments as well as those of Philosophy and Comparative Religion still continue to work on various themes of Buddhism. But the collaborative works of classical nature, cutting across the language barriers – a trend that had been developed by the old Oriental scholars ceased to be the forte of Visva Bharati. The university and the departments have to run as per the UGC guidelines and tailor their academic programmes in accordance with the availability of funds.

The UGC provided for the setting up of the Centre for Buddhist Studies in 2005. Initially it remained under the Tibetan Department, the first Director being Professor Andrea Loseries, an ex-student of Visva Bharati and with vast experience and publications in Tibetan religion, history and culture. The objective of the Centre was the diffusion of Buddhist ideals and philosophy through weekly class lectures on Buddhism and lectures by special guest scholars. The first international conference was organised in 2007 on the theme of Buddhism and its Social Significance for the Asian World. The proceedings were published in the book with the same title by Buddhist World Press in collaboration with Centre for Buddhist Studies in 2009.

At the moment it has been placed under the supervision of the Sanskrit Department. Seminars are held from time to time but the shortage of resources often impedes its academic achievements.

The archive of Kala Bhavana preserves a collection of Thankas i.e. Tibetan scroll paintings, some of these being donated by Pratrima Tagore, the daughter in law of Rabindranath. It seems that the entire collection is from the Tsang province of Central Tibet of the lineage of the Panchen Lama whose seat is the monastery of Tashi Lhunpo at Shigaste. Only one from this collection of thirteen thanks, belongs to the *Ngor* tradition of the Sakya School. The collection was exhibited for the first time during the inaugural ceremony of the Conference of the Centre for Buddhist Studies held in 2007.[31]

The frescoes on various themes of Buddhas's life on the walls of Cheena Bhavana, paintings of Buddhist motifs on the walls of Santosalaya and Patha Bhavana , the *Tathagatas* on the walls of Kala Bhavana, the paintings of Ajanta and Bagh caves and *Jataka* stories on the walls of old Nandan Buildings, the studio of Professor Nandalal Bose and of course the concrete statue of Sujata made by famous sculptor Ramkinkar Baij in 1936 add to the aesthetics of Santiniketan Ashram.

These artistic treasures of Visva Bharati continue to remind one of the high respect that Rabindranath had for Buddha. On the one hand he encouraged classical studies in Buddhism and on the other hand paid homage to Buddha through these works of art by his team of eminent artists in Visva Bharati. [32]

Notes and References

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[2] Neogy, Ajit K. , *The Twin Dreams of Rabindranath Tagore : Santiniketan and Sriniketan :* National Book Trust, India, New Delhi, 2010, pp. 88 -89

[3] DasGupta, Uma, *Rabindranath Tagore : A Biography,* Oxford University Press, new delhi, 2004, p.29

[4] Ibid. p.30

[5] Ibid.

[6] Vidhusekhara Bhattacharya Sastri (1285 – 1364 bangabda) was a Sanskrit trained scholar from Benaras. He joined Santiniketan in 1311 as Sanskrit teacher. Later, he became the principal of Vidyabhavana i.e. the section for higher studies in Visva Bharati a post that he ultimately gave up to become the Asutosh Professor in Calcutta University. With Rabindranath's inspiration he learned English. For a comparative study of the Avesta he also studied Avesta. In order to pursue researches in Buddhist Studies he studied French, German, Tibetan and Chinese, He wrote *Bhotprakash,* a Tibetan reader to facilitate translations from Tibetan.

[7] Sarkar, Sadhan Chandra, "The Role of Visva Bharati for the Promotion of Buddhist Studies", in *Suvarna Jayanti Smaranika , Department of Indo Tibetan Studies,* Vidya Bhavana, Visva Bharati, 2003*, (*no page numbers)

[8] Neogi, Ajit K. op cit.p. 92

[9] Ibid. P.95

[10] Das Gupta, Uma , op cit. P.68

[11] Soon after inauguration of Visva Bharati, the Brahmacharyashram had been renamed Purva Vibhaga and the higher disciplines were grouped under Uttar Vibhaga. In 1926, the teaching departments were regrouped and renamed. The school became Patha Bhavana. Between it and the department of higher studies or Uttar Vibhaga was set up Siksha Bhavana which provided Diploma courses in languages and humanities as well as prepare students for B.A. examinations of the Calcutta University.
[12] Neogi, Ajit K. op cit. p.122
[13] Basu, Ratna, "The Historicity of Indo Tibetan Relations and Indo Tibetan Literature', in Karubaki Datta (ed) *Essays on Tibetan Cultural Heritage,* Serials Publications, New Delhi, 2008, pp. 69 - 76
[14] Neogi, Ajit K. op cit, p 138.
[15] Ibid. pp 184-85
[16] Prabodh Chandra Bagchi (1898- 1956), After acquiring graduate and Post graduate degrees in Sanskrit and Ancient Indian History and culture from Krishnanagar College and Calcutta University respectively he joined the Department of ancient Indian history and culture in Calcutta University. Sir Asutosh Mukkherjee sent him to Visva Bharati to work with Sylvyan levy whom he accompanied to Nepal as well in 1922 to collect and work on manuscripts from the Nepal Durbar Library. He was awarded the Doctorate degree from the University of Paris. he visited Nepal for the second time for further researches on manuscripts from Nepal and worked in the Calcutta University from 1930-44. He joined Visva Bharati Cheena Bhavana in 1944 and became the Head of Research Studies. Shifted the Department of Ancient Indian History of Culture in Visva Bharati and finally became the Vice Chancellor in 1954. He passed away on 19th January 1956.
17. Further information about his life and achievements are available from various sources. For example, in *Prof Tan Yun Shan and Cultural Relations between India and China, by Yunshan tan and V. G. Nair, Madras 1958,* Lee Tan, "Life Sketch of Tan Yun Shan" in www.ignca.nic.in/ks_ 40007.htm
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[19] Ibid pp 20-21
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[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Foot note 17 and Ganguly op cit.
[24] Nair, V.G. 'Professor Tan Yun Shan : The Man and his Mission' in Tan Chung (ed) *In the Footsteps of Zuanzang : Tan Yun Shan and India,* Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi, Published by Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi, 1993
[25] Personal discussion with Prof. Mukherjee in Santiniketan on 14.8.2017
[26]Dash Narendra K, 'Department of Indo Tibetan Studies , Visva Bharati – A Profile" in *Subarna Jayanti Smaranika*, op cit.
[27] Ghosh, Anandamayee in her article " Research Contribution on Indo Tibetan Studies in Visva Bharati 'in *Smaranika,* op cit, has given a detailed list of the restoration works of Sanskrit texts from Tibetan version done from Visva Bharati.
[28] A long list of his publications are given in volume I of his felicitation volume as mentioned in foot note 1 above.
[29] The Union Minister of Education in February 1974 formed a Committee under the chairmanship of Justice S.A. Masud of the Calcutta University to determine the lines on which Visva Bharati be developed and to recommend the guidelines for the amendment of the Visva Bharati Act. In its findings the committee pointed out that degree courses in Arts and Science subjects on the traditional patterns started in as a grudging concession to local clamour (p.23) It went on to make the following observation in p. 30 – "Before 1951 and before the conventional PG courses in Arts and Science subjects were introduced in Visva Bharati to provide facilities for advanced studies and research in several branches of the humanities. There is a reason to suspect that the quality of some of these studies suffered a diminution as a result of pouring them into the matrix of the conventional P.G. courses"-

[30] Both Prof. Suniti Kumar Pathak and Prof. Biswadeb Mukherjee, in course of personal discussion with the author pointed out the vast scope of work on Buddhist Studies from Tibetan and Chinese sources, in comparison with Sanskrit manuscripts as Rabindranath and other contemporeary scholars of Visva Bharati had originally envisioned. Interestingly, both explained the necessity of a knowledge about the cultural, religious and linguistic history of India, Central Asia and China as a prerequisite of such a holistic approach. Both regretted that now the focus being more on contemporary studies for vocational purpose, no such work is being undertaken in these two departments. Personal discussion with both the scholars on 14th and 16th August 2017.

[31] Loseries Andrea, 'Treasures of Buddhist Art at Visva Bharati-The Tibetan Thanka collection', in Andrea Loseries (ed) *Buddhism and its social significance for the Asian world,* Buddhidt World Press, Delhi, 2009., pp.97-104

[32] Mukherjee Kalpika, "Socio religious significance of Buddhist art in Santiniketan" in *buddhism and its social significance* ibid. pp. 89-96

HEMENDRA KUMAR ROY AND HIS ADVENTURIST SLEUTHS

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Abstract

Literature often reflects evolutionary patterns and flows in society. Crime fiction including detective stories or sleuth fiction by focusing on crime patterns often gives a picture of not only progress but the 'downsides' of modernization and evolutionary process. The Bengali detective fiction, with its rich heritage of over hundred and fifty years reflects this in many unique ways which remain unexplored. The present essay focusses on one of the early detective fiction authors Hemendra Kumar Ray and his versatile approach across several genres as an example of the Bengali crime fiction's historical heritage.

Keywords: Crime, fiction, Bengali, sleuth, detective, police

From the late nineteenth century the culture of reading 'story books' for pleasure beyond the boundaries of institutional education established a new indigenous recreational space, within the private domain of the home, for children and young adults in Bengal, beyond colonial surveillance. Such juvenile literatures, with their innovative approach of disseminating information through entertaining tropes and the medium of the vernacular language, had a profound impact on the minds of the target audience. The genre of Bengali detective fiction was brought within the paradigm of such juvenile literature (kishor sahitya) by Hemendra Kumar Roy (1888-1963) in the third decade of the twentieth century. It would not be an exaggeration to describe Hemendra Kumar Roy as the creator of Bengali mainstream detective fiction for young adults (his predecessors like Panchkari Dey had catered primarily to adults). Roy was a story-teller per excellence, who was western in his plots but all Bengali in his milieu – an author rooted in his own society but with fresh contemporary stories to tell.

It is significant that Hemendra Kumar, despite being an acclaimed and versatile mainstream writer, chose to venture into the domain of Bengali detective fiction – a not so 'respectable' genre in the eyes of the 'bhadralok' literati and remained it's dedicated practitioner for over four decades. Although inspired by the detective fiction of the West, especially that of Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie, Roy created his own unique brand of indigenous 'goyenda kahini' (detective story). According to litterateur Dr. Sukumar Sen,[1] Hemendra Kumar added a new dimension to the genre – firstly, by a successful application of scientific knowledge and inquiry as an integral part of the detective's thinking process; secondly, by incorporating the element of adventure in stories of detection; and thirdly, by inventing the novel concept of a detective-trio (Sen calls it 'trishul' or trinity) consisting of the detective, his confidante and a third person – a police officer in Roy's case. The writer, in fact, created two separate detective-trios, namely the Jayanta-Manik - Sundarbabu trio and the Hemanta-Robin-Satishbabu trio (The term 'babu' is a respectful address for educated Indian men). This was a conscious agenda on the part of the author to differentiate between the stories of pure scientific detection (featuring Hemanta-Robin-Satishbabu) and the adventurist-detective narratives (featuring Jayanta-Manik-Sundarbabu), where he also experimented with the occult and the paranormal within the format of the detective fiction. Asha Gangopadhyay, a noted researcher of Bengali children's literature, rightly observes that Hemendra Kumar played the dual role of H.G. Wells and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle for young readers and that in the annals of the contemporary Bengali juvenile adventure and detective

fiction, he was a pioneer.[2]

The element of 'adventure' creeps into several of the detective stories of Hemendra Kumar, especially the Jayanta-Manik narratives, turning them from stories of pure detection to adventurist-detective tales – a novelty in the history of the genre. These literatures extolled the enchanting geographies of one's own and distant countries, emphasized the ideas of modernity and the accomplishments of the youth in the nation-building process.[3] Coupling together tenets from adventure and travel stories, Roy's detective fiction upheld the cult of the courageous, resolute, assertive Bengali heroes and their daring feats, thereby emerging as heroic tales of human victory over adversities. According to John G. Cawelti, "The central fantasy of the adventure story is that of the hero – individual or group - overcoming obstacles and dangers and accomplishing some important and moral mission".[4] For Roy, the 'moral mission' was that of the 'character building' of the Bengali youth. Roy himself believed that the goal of the danger-ridden adventure and detective tales is to create firm, courageous and patriotic sons and daughters of the soil [5] who would court danger and achieve glory in heroism. Roy presents his detective heroes – Jayanta and Manik – as models in this 'character-building' enterprise. Their heroism and profoundly unusual life-experiences are used as an inspirational trope throughout the various novels of the series. According to John Lam Las, "The hero possesses a consistent capacity for action that surpasses the norm of man or woman … Both morally and physically, the hero is nevertheless of the human species, not superior to it, not beyond it." [6] Thus, the hero, despite being a common man, becomes invincible by virtue of his valour, wisdom and physical prowess. The protagonist of Roy's adventurist-detective stories – Jayanta – is by no means a 'super-hero' but "in excelling and exceeding himself … becomes a model of higher potential for his clan, his race, his nation …" [7] Thereby, he emerges as an aspirational character – a role-model worthy of emulation – while the narratives themselves become motivational literatures intended to counteract the prevailing submissive and domesticated (ghorkuno) image of the Bengalis. These narratives were based on the model of youth, masculinity and fitness. Not surprisingly, Roy's protagonists are all in the prime of their youth. Jayanta is around twenty-one-twenty-two years old while Maniklal's age is about nineteen or twenty.[8] In comparison, Roy's other detective-duo Hemanta and Robin are a little older. This is significantly indicative of the author's faith in the power of the youth to reclaim the lost glory of the Bengalis. Physically strong, fearless, young men of good character, with genuine respect for India's cultural and spiritual heritage, dedicating themselves to the service of the motherland, became the symbols of a vibrant

nation in Roy's narratives. This was quite in tune with the cult of 'masculinity' – a powerful tool with which the nationalist Hindu elites sought to overcome Macaulay's characterization of the Bengalis as 'feeble and effeminate', lacking 'courage, independence, veracity' - with a mind that was 'weak even to helplessness for purposes of manly resistance'.[9] Around the mid-nineteenth century, J. Munro, a Divisional Commissioner of Bengal, mentioned the absence in Bengalis "… of those manly and straight forward qualities which … are found in English men."[10] Susan Jeffords defines masculinity as 'a set of images, values, interests and activities held important to the successful achievement of male adulthood'.[11] This trope of 'masculinity' is a recurrent theme of Roy's detective narratives. He projects his detective-duo Jayanta and Manik as hyper-masculine figures - ''জয়ন্তর দেহ লম্বায় ছয় ফুট চার ইঞ্চি, তার বুকের ছাতি পঁয়তাল্লিশ ইঞ্চি চওড়ায় এবং তার ব্যায়ামপুষ্ট সুদীর্ঘ দেহকে দেখায় ঠিক দানবের দেহের মতো। মানিকের দেহ অতটা জাঁকালো দেখতে না হলেও যে-কোনো পালোয়ানেরই মতো বলবান।'' [12] (Jayanta with his 6 feet 4 inch tall well-exercised frame, with a 45 inch wide chest, looks like a monster. Manik too has the strength of a wrestler). Roy imposes this 'masculine' image on his villains (mostly Bengalis) as well, projecting them as virile and manly in their physical disposition.

Apart from the fictional representations of strong manly heroes, the Bengali Hindu elites strove to overcome their alleged degeneracy and lack of 'masculinity' by an active pursuit of physical culture. The physical culture movement, based on the dictum of 'Manliness is Godliness', became an adjunct of the cult of militant nationalism in colonial Bengal, symbolizing a new martial spirit and inculcating masculine attributes. This trend of physical culture was propagated by the 'akharas'[13](gymnasiums) and samitis of Bengal and became an important component of the anti-Partition and Swadeshi Movement (1905). With the focus on the indigenous as an integral part of Swadeshi ideology, traditional forms of sports, martial and defensive arts like sword, dagger and lathi-play (self-defense using bamboo sticks), kusti (wrestling), body-building, etc. were revisited and given a new political direction, with the goal of preparing the youth for the ordeals of the anti-colonial nationalist struggle. Joseph Alter observes, "The body is the nation and the nation is the body in a direct, one to one equation." [14] According to him, within the nationalist prism, physical culture involved recruiting the young to forge a community in service to the nation.[15] A similar idea is propagated by the contemporary indigenous newspapers and periodicals. The 'Bangali', Calcutta, dated 25th June, 1920 advocates " the formation of bands of youths in each

locality for learning gymnastics and the utilisation of these bands to defend their neighbourhoods."[16] Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (1838-94) wrote – "… ভারতবর্ষের আধুনিক দুর্গতির প্রধান কারণ বাহুবলের অভাব।"[17].(The primary reason of India's current plight is the dearth of muscle power). The Hindu Mela, an annual festival started in Calcutta in 1867, under the auspices of the Tagore family and Nabagopal Mitra, made public display of several Bengali traditional physical feats to highlight Bengal's heritage. Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), along with his associates Sister Nivedita (1867-1911) and Sarala Devi (1872-1945), played a pivotal role in popularizing the militant nationalist physical culture movement among the Bengali youth. Sarala Devi in particular, was the force behind the establishment of several 'akharas' (gymnasiums) throughout Bengal. One of the most famous physical culture societies of the time was the Anushilan Samiti, founded in Calcutta in March, 1902 by Satish Chandra Basu (with several branches all over the province). It upheld purity of mind, self-discipline and bodily strength and was based on the notion of 'anushilam' (culture) put forward in Bankim Chandra's 'Anandamath' (The Abbey of Bliss). This akhara-type movement was, however, banned by the colonial government because of its close affinity with revolutionary activities. It was revived during the second wave of the armed revolutionary movement in Bengal in the 1920s and 1930s when the militant, aggressive, mascular 'Bengali' body (largely a product of the physical culture movement) unleashed itself in an open combat with the colonial state through the daring exploits of Surya Sen, Jatin Mukherjee, Benoy-Badal-Dinesh, Khudiram Bose and countless other revolutionaries. In the uneven armed encounters of these revolutionaries with the mighty British Raj, the need for procuring arms was acutely felt. From a tool of self-defence, weapon had become a symbol of dominance and power, to fight the colonial rulers in their own language. But the Arms Act (1878) forbade the Indians to manufacture, sell or carry arms and weapons without a government license. It was the urgency for arms and ammunition that had culminated in the famous Chittagong Armoury Raid (18 April, 1930). Hemendra Kumar addressed the issue in his own unique way by bringing weapons within the reach of the common man, at least in fiction, through the liberal use of automatic revolvers, pistols, rifles, etc. in the confrontations between his protagonists and their adversaries. In Jayanta Manik's debut novel - 'Jayanter Kirti' (Jayanta's Achievement, 1937), Jayanta recognizes the primacy of arms, when, after having overpowered their captors by shooting at them, he tells Manik - " … রিভলবারের গুণ দেখো। আমাদের কাছে রিভলবার আছে জানলে শত্রু বোধ হয় এতটা বীরত্ব দেখাতে আসত না।"[18] (Look at the power of revolvers. Our enemies would not have

been so ambitious if they had known that we are carrying revolvers). It needs to be mentioned in this context that closely allied to physical culture was the construct of 'Brahmacharya' or celibacy, premised on sexual abstinence with the ultimate goal of achieving control of mind over bodily desires. In the akhara culture, dissociation from women was regarded as an essential prerequisite to male efficiency, especially for those dedicated to the service of the motherland. The underlying notion was that family ties and bonds, by acting as a powerful restraining force, prevent men from plunging headlong into the service of the nation. As Sudhir Kakar and Katharina Kakar argue, "If there is one 'ism' that governs Indian society and its institution, it is familism."[19] With the arrival of Swami Vivekananda, the image of the Hindu ascetic, renouncing family for service to mankind, became a rallying point around which young passions surged. Not surprisingly, Hemendra Kumar's delineation of his sleuths extends the tradition of physicality and celibacy promoted by the akharas and Anushilan Samitis. About detective Jyanta Roy writes ''রীতিমতো ডন-বৈঠক, কুস্তি, জিমনাস্টিক করে নিজের দেহখানিকে সে তৈরি করে তুলেছিল।'' [20] (He had built up his physique through regular exercise, wrestling and gymnastics). Regarding Manik, Roy remarks – ''নিয়মিত ব্যায়ামাদির দ্বারা ... তারও দেহ খুব বলিষ্ঠ।'' [21] (He too has a well worked-out powerful body). Similarly, in 'Andhakarer Bandhu' (The Friend of Darkness, 1942), Robin introduces himself and detective Hemanta thus – ''দেহচর্চার দিকে আমাদের দুজনেরই একান্ত ঝোঁক – কুস্তি, যুযুৎসু, 'বক্সিং' (সঙ্গে সঙ্গে লাঠি-তরোয়াল খেলা) কিছুই শিখতে বাকি রাখি নি ... আমরা দুজনেই বিবাহ করিনি ...''[22](Both of us are fitness freaks. We have mastered wrestling, jujutsu, boxing, lathi and sword play … Both of us are bachelors). The author presents both his detective-duos as 'swadheen' (independent) avowed 'brahmacharis' by choice. Having lost their parents at an early age, they had inherited a sizeable property and are unencumbered by family responsibilities or financial worries. What comes out from these character sketches is the typical image of the Bengali nationalists, nurturing their physical prowess and 'masculinity' through an attachment to the akharas and physical culture movement of the time. At the same time, their exposure to western literature, history and political thought through colonial education had led to the blossoming of their intellectual faculties. While Hemanta and Robin had studied at Presidency College and acquired University degrees, Jayanta and Manik had left College by responding to the call for boycott during the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920). Dr. Sumit Sarkar states that from January to March, 1921, the central emphasis of the Movement was on students leaving government – controlled schools and colleges.[23] Dr.

Sarkar has shown that till April, 1921 there was an exodus of 11, 157 out of 103, 107 students attending government or aided institutions in Bengal.[24] Hemendra Kumar's sleuths were evidently a part of this nationalist wave. They are not only patriotic but also conscious responsible citizens who repeatedly and selflessly endanger their own lives and safety to save the land and its people from all kinds of peril. Thus in 'Jayanter Punaragaman' (The Return of Jayanta), the detective proudly proclaims that he will willingly sacrifice his life in the battle field for the sake of his nation – ''নিজের দেশের জন্যে যুদ্ধে মরতে রাজি আছি...''।[25] While fulfilling the discursive demands that were considered as necessary requisites for accommodating oneself within the framework of colonial modernity (physical training, scientific mind, sports, etc.), Roy's sleuths even integrated within themselves the spirit of wanderlust or love for adventure, travelling to distant, unknown, even hostile terrain to solve mysteries. They embark on arduous enterprises, not for material rewards but for passion, just like the revolutionaries who were passionately driven by 'deshprem' (love for the country) to become martyrs at the altar of the motherland. In 'Sonar Anaras' (The Golden Pineapple) Jayanta states - -''... বিপদ নিয়েই তো আমাদের কারবার ... গুপ্ত বা ব্যক্ত কোন ধনের লোভেই আমরা কোনও কাজ করি না।''[26](We trade in danger... Pursuit of treasure – secret or overt – is not our goal). Similarly, in 'Mukh aar Mukhosh' (The Face and the Mask), Hemanta remarks – ''হেমন্ত চৌধুরী জীবনে পারিশ্রমিক বা পুরস্কারের লোভে কোনও কাজ করে নি ... আমি কাজ করি কাজের আনন্দেই।''[27] (Hemanta Chowdhury has never in his life worked for remuneration or reward... I work simply for the joy of it). The author thus seeks to present his sleuths as adherents of the Gita doctrine of 'nishkama karma' or desireless action, without any expectation whatsoever of personalized reward, that was deeply embedded in the philosophy of renunciation. The sleuths are thereby established as idealist, nationalist heroes who are driven by utopian notions of danger and death and whose vocation in life is selfless service to the nation and its people. To Indianise the common western themes of adventure-tales (pursuit of hidden treasures, discovery of virgin lands, tribes and settlements), these narratives are cast into a typical 'Bengali' mould, leaving out the acquisitive motives and focusing on the classical ascetic traditions of austerity.

Roy's sleuths are endowed with a middle class Bengali bhadralok morality. Unlike their predecessors, who dress in 'paka sahebi' (perfect western) attire, they are among the first to don the traditional Bengali 'dhuti[28] - punjabi' (kurta) attire, thus deviating from the erstwhile

imitative trends, to arrive at an essentially 'Bengali rendition of detectives, who take immense pride in their 'Bengali' identity. These sleuths are also situated within the overall Hindu body politic. Jayanta especially is very proud of his Hindu identity. His refusal to take beef (a religious taboo for the Hindus), his repeated proclamations of his Hindu bearing and his belief in the predominantly Hindu character of the national movement reinforce his 'Hindutva'. It needs to be remembered that in the contemporary socio-cultural scenario of Bengal, Hindu scriptures like the Bhagavad Gita as well as Hindu revivalist texts like Bankim Chandra's 'Anandamath' (1882) and Aurobinda Ghosh's 'Bhavani Mandir' (1904) served as the main guidelines for holistic development in the various akharas, clubs, samitis and ashramas. It is only to be expected that the patriotic Bengalis, imbued with the ideas of Hindu awakening, would welcome a hero like Jayanta who openly professes his allegiance to the Hindu ethos.

The strains of the 20th century Bengali nationalism are scattered throughout the novels of the Jayanta-Manik series. At the same time, however, the author establishes that there is no conflict between loving one's country and getting a taste of the 'world' outside 'home'. Thus, information pertaining to the outer world and its assembly of nations are craftily interwoven with the storylines in order to instill a spirit of inquiry and a global consciousness among the young readers. The stories disseminating historical and geographical knowledge about the Indian subcontinent, in particular, show a conscious agenda on the author's part to foster a sense of patriotic pride in and a sympathetic understanding of the country's cultural heritage and natural wealth. The protagonists remain unperturbed in the face of danger, to emerge triumphant by dint of their exemplary courage, physical prowess and command over self, thereby challenging the colonial stereotype of native 'effeminacy' and inefficacy through their nationalist orientation.

It can be reasonably argued that Hemendra Kumar's detective fictions offer an intricate web of theoretical renderings that deserves ‘serious’ attention. His predecessors, despite their desperate endeavours to project a façade of modernity (through references to telegraph, motor car, railways and the other so-called symbols of colonial modernity), had failed to introduce any major changes within the essentially conservative format of the detective narrative. Roy achieved that – he contemporized and diversified the genre by not only introducing and indigenizing the foreign disciplines of science, technology, geography and adventure but also making them the vehicle of a new spirit - that of a racial and national pride. Roy’s storytelling was characterized by a harmonious blend of instruction and

recreation. A refreshing newness in storylines and characterization coupled with a refined sense of humour and a lucid presentation and above all a distinct 'Bengali' flavour made Hemendra Kumar Roy's narratives popular among the lay and the elite readers, the young and the old alike.

End Notes

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NARRATING RESISTANCE: DOMESTICITY, LIVELIHOOD, AND FEMALE AGENCY IN 19TH AND 20TH CENTURY BENGALI WOMEN'S FICTION

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Abstract: This paper explores the intertwined constructs of domesticity and livelihood in the lives of Bengali women through a close reading of select novels by Ashapurna Devi, Bani Basu, and Suchitra Bhattacharya. Set across the 19th and 20th centuries, these texts serve not merely as literary works but as sociological documents that reflect, critique, and reimagine gendered realities. Drawing on feminist theories of labour, affect, and resistance, the paper interrogates how domestic space is often a site of regulation, emotional labour, and constrained agency. At the same time, it shows how livelihood—whether denied or claimed—becomes a field of negotiation and meaning-making for women. Through nuanced character portrayals, the novels challenge binaries such as public/private, victim/agent, and tradition/modernity. The narratives highlight intergenerational continuities and ruptures in female experience, articulating a feminist historiography rooted in everyday life. By integrating literary analysis with sociological theory, this study affirms the value of fiction as a legitimate epistemological source for gendered social inquiry. The paper concludes by arguing that literature enables a deeper, affectively charged understanding of women's lived negotiations within structures of caste, class, kinship, and patriarchy in Bengal's evolving modernity.

Keywords: Gender and Domesticity, Bengali Women's Fiction, Feminist Sociology, Livelihood and Labour

1. **Framing the Inquiry: Domesticity, Livelihood, and Literary Imagination:** The representation of Bengali womanhood across the 19th and 20th centuries is deeply embedded in the socio-historical matrices of colonialism, nationalism, and patriarchy, where the domestic sphere, often idealized as a haven of nurturing, is critically recast in women's fiction as a site of regulation, coercion, and emotional exhaustion. Simultaneously, the pursuit of livelihood—whether intellectual, artistic, or economic—emerges as a deeply gendered endeavour constrained by class, caste, and moral codes. Through a close reading of select works by Ashapurna Devi, Bani Basu, and Suchitra Bhattacharya, this paper examines how women writers have foregrounded these intersections not merely to narrate feminine experiences but to critique dominant ideologies and reimagine subjectivity itself. Drawing from Partha Chatterjee's (1993) theorization of the nationalist division between *ghar* (home) and *bahir* (outside), where women were tasked with upholding cultural authenticity within the private sphere, the paper explores how such spatial coding informed not just everyday life but also literary structures and characterizations. However, as Samita Sen (1999) argues in her study of working-class women in Bengal's jute industries, the ideology of domesticity was selectively applied, often excluding those whose labour was economically essential but socially stigmatized. Feminist economists such as Agarwal (1994), Benería (1979), and Hochschild (1989) have underscored that domestic labour, though economically foundational, remains unpaid and invisible, creating a false dichotomy between reproductive and productive labour. These concerns are dramatized in the novels through characters whose aspirations are crushed under the weight of invisible labour and familial obligation. The framework of patriarchal bargains, articulated by Kandiyoti (1988), and Kabeer's (1999) model of conditional agency help us understand how women maneuver within structures that are neither entirely oppressive nor fully emancipatory. In *Subarnalata* and *Hemanter Pakhi*, characters exhibit subtle forms of resistance—from educating daughters to continuing creative labour—while appearing to conform externally, echoing Mahmood's (2005) call to understand piety, modesty, and endurance as non-liberal forms of agency. Butler's (1990) notion of gender as performative is especially pertinent in examining how women in these texts are coerced into scripts of ideal womanhood that demand submission and sacrifice; their minor rebellions, silences, and refusals thus destabilize normative femininity. Loomba (1998) and Spivak (1988) remind us that the subaltern woman's voice is often mediated or erased, a fact that is evident in Bhattacharya's protagonists who are spoken over, silenced, or subjected to moral censorship. Writing fiction, therefore, becomes an act of reclamation—as Sunder Rajan (1993), Sangari and Vaid (1990), and Tharu and Lalita (1991) assert, women's narratives function as counter- histories, centering emotion, memory, and interiority as legitimate sources of knowledge. Characters such as Bandana in *Swet Pathorer Thala* and Apala in *Gandhorbi* subvert the trope of passive femininity, often occupying marginal spaces that, as hooks (1984) contends, offer unique epistemic vantage points.

Likewise, Mohanty (1988) critiques the universalizing tendencies of Western feminism, urging attention to culturally situated forms of agency, which the novels reflect through class-specific and caste-embedded negotiations of autonomy. The affective dimension of resistance, as argued by Abu-Lughod (1990), is central to these narratives, where emotion—shame, guilt, longing, resilience—operates not as distraction but as political vocabulary. The intergenerational sagas constructed by Ashapurna Devi, the moral ambivalences explored by Basu, and the contemporary dilemmas dramatized by Bhattacharya collectively offer a feminist cartography that resists binaries of oppression and empowerment, challenging the very categories through which women's lives are traditionally understood. Thus, the literary imagination here serves not only as narrative expression but also as theoretical intervention, foregrounding domesticity and livelihood as central to the sociological understanding of gendered life in Bengal.

2. Methodology: Fiction as Sociological Text: This research adopts a qualitative and interpretative methodology that treats literary fiction not as mere cultural production but as a sociologically rich text that archives women's lived realities. Drawing on feminist literary theory, the sociology of literature, and gender studies, this approach locates literature as a vital discursive space where marginal voices find ethical and epistemological representation. Bengali women's fiction offers unique access to subjective experience, emotional labour, domestic tension, and intergenerational struggle—dimensions often obscured in formal social histories. The following subsections detail the theoretical grounding, text selection, analytical strategy, and methodological limitations of this study. Theoretical Grounding: This study is guided by Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism, which views the novel as a polyphonic form where diverse ideological voices converge (Bakhtin, 1981). This makes fiction an inherently social form capable of representing heterogeneous realities. Lucien Goldmann (1975) similarly argues that literary texts reflect the "world vision" of specific social classes, thereby rendering literature a form of collective consciousness. For feminist scholars like Virginia Woolf, fiction is deeply entwined with life: "attached at all four corners," it reveals the emotional contours of everyday experience (Woolf, 1929). These perspectives validate the use of literature not only as a representation of lived experience but as an intervention into the way social norms are internalized and challenged. Feminist literary critics such as Spivak (1988), Rajan (1993), and Sangari & Vaid (1990) emphasize that women's writing constitutes a counter-canon—challenging the authority of androcentric narratives and recovering the domestic and emotional as legitimate sources of history and theory. Thus, this study interprets literary texts as situated, affectively charged, and historically grounded articulations of gendered life.

2.1. Literature as a Gendered Archive: This methodology considers fiction authored by women as a gendered archive—an alternative historiographical site where female subjectivities are preserved, reimagined, and politicized. As Sangari and Vaid (1990) argue, the everyday is not apolitical but encoded with ideological directives; women's writing, particularly when centered on domesticity, love, motherhood, and artistic desire, allows these ideologies to be revealed and critiqued. Fictional women like Subarnalata, Bandana, and Aditi are thus not passive narrative devices but historical figures whose struggles reflect real-life negotiations within patriarchal systems. These texts capture not only what happens but how it is felt—anger, exhaustion, guilt, joy, and ethical crisis—thereby highlighting affect as a mode of knowledge (Abu-Lughod, 1990). Through interior monologue, narrative tension, and domestic symbols, these texts record experiences that evade archival documentation or policy analysis.2.3 Text Selection Criteria: Seven novels form the core textual corpus: *Pratham Pratishruti* (1964), *Subarnalata* (1967), and *Bakul Katha* (1974) by Ashapurna Devi; *Swet Pathorer Thala* (1995) and *Gandhorbi* (1991) by Bani Basu; and *Dahan* (1996) and *Hemanter Pakhi* (2003) by Suchitra Bhattacharya. These novels span nearly a century of representation, capturing colonial reformism, nationalist anxiety, post-independence restructuring, and neoliberal dilemmas. The protagonists across these novels differ in age, class, and life stage—some are wives, widows, or mothers; others are teachers, writers, or caregivers. This diversity enables a comparative reading of how domesticity and livelihood are experienced and resisted across generations. These texts are selected due to their explicit engagement with gendered social roles and their literary ambition to critically interrogate the structures that govern women's lives (Sunder Rajan, 1993; Menon, 2012).

2.2. Analytical Strategy: The primary method is close textual reading, combined with thematic and discourse analysis. Key analytical categories include: domestic space (as a site of power and discipline), silence (as both compliance and resistance), livelihood (as constrained ambition), and agency (as negotiated and context-dependent).Feminist theoretical frameworks guide the interpretive lens: Hochschild's (1989) concept of emotional labour illuminates how women perform unpaid care within and beyond the household; Kandiyoti's (1988) notion of patriarchal bargains helps decode adaptive strategies; Kabeer's (1999) triadic model of empowerment—resources, agency, and achievements—helps map each protagonist's negotiation of identity. Butler's (1990) idea of performativity is particularly useful for analysing how women "do" gender within constraining socio-cultural grammars, especially when deviation is punished through ostracism or guilt. For instance, Aditi's literary ambition in *Hemanter Pakhi* is not interpreted as mere professional aspiration but as performative subversion, wherein her act of writing destabilizes the patriarchal expectation of sacrificial

motherhood. Similarly, Apala's muted artistry in *Gandhorbi* is analyzed through the lens of affective containment, suggesting how patriarchy manipulates liberal rhetoric to mask emotional control.

2.3. Limitations and Reflexivity: While literary texts offer unparalleled access to inner lives and moral imagination, they are fictional and shaped by narrative construction. The authors' positionalities—primarily upper-caste, educated, urban women—inform what is represented and what remains marginal. This study focuses on Hindu, middle-class, Bengali-speaking protagonists, a limitation that excludes intersectional experiences of Dalit, Muslim, tribal, or rural women. Furthermore, while fiction may illuminate psychological and ethical truths, it is not a substitute for ethnography or empirical fieldwork. This methodology is reflexive about its scope: its strength lies in interpreting culture, not quantifying experience. Yet, in doing so, it affirms that literature is not apolitical ornamentation but a serious discursive space for theorizing social life.

3. **Women Writing Women**: The act of women writing about women carries distinct political and epistemological implications, especially in contexts where women's experiences have historically been represented through patriarchal lenses. In the Indian literary tradition, female-authored fiction has often served as a counter-discursive space, one where women could articulate their emotional worlds, moral struggles, and socio-political negotiations without conforming to male-dominated narrative forms. Bengali women novelists such as Ashapurna Devi, Bani Basu, and Suchitra Bhattacharya do more than create female protagonists—they challenge the cultural expectations imposed on women, subvert traditional gender roles, and construct female subjectivity in dialogue with lived constraints. This section examines how these authors portray women not as static victims or idealized figures, but as dynamic, morally complex agents navigating an oppressive yet evolving world.

3.1 Female Authorship as Counter-History: As feminist literary critics such as Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (1993) and Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (1990) argue, women's writing in India often functions as a form of alternative historiography. Rather than reproducing nationalist or colonial narratives, women writers construct what Spivak (1988) calls a "counter-narrative" that centers subaltern voices, silences, and bodily experiences. In the novels under consideration, this counter-historical project is evident in the emphasis on female consciousness across generations. Ashapurna Devi's trilogy—*Pratham Pratishruti*,

Subarnalata, and *Bakul Katha*—charts the moral and emotional genealogies of Bengali womanhood, portraying how resistance is transmitted, adapted, or repressed over time. Each protagonist reflects a distinct moment in feminist evolution: Satyabati as a social reformer, Subarnalata as a silent rebel, and Bakul as an emotionally independent woman navigating the alienation of modernity. These character arcs resist the trope of the "new woman" as merely Westernized or liberated; instead, they embody local forms of feminist consciousness, deeply rooted in familial, cultural, and moral dilemmas.

3.2 Rejecting Idealization, Embracing Complexity: One of the most significant contributions of women authors is their rejection of idealized femininity. Unlike male-authored fiction that often frames women in binaries—virtuous versus fallen, mother versus seductress—female authors complicate this representation by embedding their characters in everyday struggles. Bani Basu's *Swet Pathorer Thala* is a compelling example, where Bandana, a young Brahmin widow, gradually resists the ritualistic purity expected of her. Her decision to remarry and seek employment is not portrayed as an act of defiance alone but also as a deeply ethical choice shaped by her hunger for self-worth and autonomy. As Butler (1990) suggests, gender is performative, but these authors show how performance is haunted by doubt, fatigue, and social risk. Similarly, Bhattacharya's *Dahan* presents Romita, a survivor of sexual assault, not as a passive victim but as a woman caught in the crossfire of family honour and feminist solidarity. Through Romita's moral confusion and silencing, the novel critiques the fragility of female alliances and the normalization of gendered violence in middle-class families (Loomba, 1998).

3.3 Centering Voice, Silence, and Interiority: Perhaps the most radical gesture these authors make is the centering of women's interiority—their thoughts, fears, hesitations, and unarticulated longings. While male-authored fiction often focuses on external events and actions, women writers emphasize the emotional and ethical texture of daily life. As Sangari and Vaid (1990) observe, the domestic sphere is not simply a private domain but a heavily politicized space where gender is performed and contested. Bhattacharya's *Hemanter Pakhi* foregrounds Aditi's internal conflict between being a mother-wife and a writer. Her brief literary fame is not framed as liberation but as disruption—one that elicits subtle retaliation from her family in the form of emotional withdrawal. This illustrates what Hochschild (1989) terms the "emotional double burden" women bear when they attempt to combine creative or professional ambitions with caregiving responsibilities. Even silence, in these texts, is rendered

meaningful. Subarnalata's refusal to confront her husband verbally is not read as submission but as moral resistance—a kind of strategic withdrawal that preserves her dignity and sanity. Drawing from Saba Mahmood's (2005) theory of non-liberal agency, these moments of silent endurance can be read not as passivity but as modes of ethical self-formation under constraint. In this way, these authors open up narrative spaces for complex, culturally situated articulations of agency.

4. Intersections of Constraint and Resistance: Reading Gender through Narrative Worlds The selected novels present a layered, introspective portrayal of Bengali women negotiating domesticity and livelihood in environments shaped by patriarchy, morality, and caste-class hierarchies. Rather than framing female protagonists as either victims or rebels, the texts render them as morally engaged actors navigating complex emotional and social terrains. The following discussion examines four key dimensions: the regulation of domestic space, the affective economy of gender, the negotiation of livelihood, and the intergenerational transmission of resistance.

4.1 Domesticity as Ideological Terrain: The domestic sphere in these narratives is far from apolitical. It is constructed as a site of moral surveillance, ritualistic discipline, and gendered conditioning. Chatterjee's (1993) theory of the home (*ghar*) as a sanctified repository of cultural authenticity is powerfully illustrated in *Subarnalata*, where the protagonist's life is governed by rules of purity, silence, and obedience. However, the home also becomes a space of small but significant resistance. Subarnalata's choice to educate her daughters without disrupting outward decorum reflects what Mahmood (2005) calls non-liberal agency-strategic, embodied acts that do not conform to conventional feminist paradigms of resistance. These women are not merely acted upon; they shape their world in moral and symbolic ways from within their confinements.

4.2 Emotional Labour and the Affective Economy: Arlie Hochschild's (1989) concept of emotional labour—the management of emotion to maintain social roles—is central to understanding the lives of Aditi, Bandana, and Romita. Aditi in *Hemanter Pakhi*, for instance, is not overtly punished for writing; rather, she experiences subtle alienation from her children and spouse, who label her ambition as selfish. The family becomes a site where affective labour is demanded in exchange for approval. Emotional costs are paid in silence, guilt, and self-cancellation. Similarly, Romita in *Dahan* is discouraged from seeking justice after being sexually assaulted, not because of direct prohibition, but through the coercive effect of familial

shame. Her trauma is reframed as a private matter that threatens the family's honour, reinforcing patriarchal norms through emotional manipulation (Loomba, 1998).

4.3 Livelihood as Negotiated Autonomy: Livelihood, in these texts, is rarely straightforward. Bandana's decision to teach in *Swet Pathorer Thala* is not framed as a professional milestone but as a transgression of widowhood's ritual demands. Her subsequent remarriage makes her an outcast in her community, even though it is ethically justifiable. Kandiyoti's (1988) model of "patriarchal bargains" illuminates these dilemmas: women may seek economic autonomy, but often at the cost of social belonging. Apala's suppressed musical talent in *Gandhorbi* shows how even liberal, progressive men enforce control by denying emotional and intellectual validation. Kabeer's (1999) framework of empowerment—emphasizing resources, agency, and achievements—helps analyse how these women assert autonomy in ways that are subtle, precarious, and context-dependent.

4.4 Intergenerational Resistance and Feminist Memory: A distinct feature of Ashapurna Devi's trilogy is the depiction of feminist evolution across generations. Satyabati's reformist zeal, Subarnalata's ethical defiance, and Bakul's emotional detachment from traditional roles reveal a feminist temporality that is cumulative and non-linear. These stories suggest that resistance is not always revolutionary; it can be inherited, fractured, and reimagined through memory and narrative. Hooks (1984) affirms that marginality is not only a site of pain but also of radical insight. The daughters in these novels inherit not only trauma but also templates of courage and the language to name their dissent.

5. Conclusion: This study has sought to investigate the nuanced entanglements of domesticity and livelihood in the lives of Bengali women as portrayed in the fiction of Ashapurna Devi, Bani Basu, and Suchitra Bhattacharya, treating their literary works as sociological texts that capture the emotional, moral, and structural contradictions embedded in gendered existence. Through close textual readings and engagement with feminist theories of affect, labour, and agency, the paper demonstrates that these narratives do not merely depict oppression, but actively interrogate the norms, rituals, and ideologies that shape women's roles in the home and public life. The protagonists—Satyabati, Subarnalata, Bakul, Bandana, Apala, Aditi, and Romita—do not represent a singular archetype of the "modern woman," but rather embody plural, context-specific articulations of femininity, each shaped by their positionality within caste, class, and kinship structures. Whether it is through silent resistance, moral courage,

artistic aspiration, or withdrawal, these women display forms of agency that challenge both patriarchal hegemony and liberal expectations of feminist defiance. The domestic space, rather than being a passive backdrop, is revealed as a battleground of ideological negotiation, emotional labour, and occasional triumph, while livelihood emerges as a deeply moral and symbolic act that involves more than economic autonomy—it implicates identity, relationality, and public perception. By foregrounding interiority, emotion, and ethical deliberation, these novels reclaim the subjective and experiential as valid sites of knowledge, echoing calls by scholars such as Mahmood (2005), Butler (1990), and Kabeer (1999) to rethink agency in culturally grounded, non-binary terms. The intergenerational framework offered by Ashapurna Devi's trilogy further contributes a feminist historiography that privileges memory, transmission, and slow evolution over rupture and radicalism. However, while this paper draws substantial insights from literary analysis, it also acknowledges its methodological and epistemological limitations. The chosen corpus, though rich and diverse, is largely representative of Hindu, upper-caste, middle-class, Bengali-speaking women from urban or semi-urban settings; as such, it cannot claim to represent the heterogeneity of gendered experiences in Bengal, especially those of Dalit, Muslim, tribal, or rural women whose voices remain underrepresented in canonical fiction. Additionally, the reliance on fiction, while invaluable for exploring emotional and symbolic dimensions of gender, carries the limitation of being mediated by narrative strategy, authorial intention, and aesthetic choices. Fiction does not reflect reality in a linear or empirical manner—it refracts it through metaphor, plot, and character, which requires careful interpretive framing. Moreover, the intersection of fiction and sociology demands a reflexive methodological stance, one that remains critically aware of the boundaries between representation and reality, imagination and experience. In light of these limitations, the scope of future research may include comparative analysis with autobiographical texts, oral narratives, or ethnographic accounts to build a more intersectional and inclusive understanding of women's domestic and professional lives. It may also extend beyond Bengal to examine how other regional literary traditions in India have explored similar themes through different cultural idioms. Ultimately, this paper affirms the enduring relevance of fiction as a powerful lens for understanding the lived complexity of gendered life, and for reimagining both history and possibility from the margins.

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THE *PATUAS* OF BENGAL: SOCIO-ECONOMIC VULNERABILIT IN A CULTURAL HABITAT.

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Abstract:-

The traditional folk painters of Bengal are known as *patuas.* This community suffers from acute identity-crisis with regard to their religion and social position. They are looked upon as a subaltern community, hence, they suffer from social alienation. They cannot stick to their traditional occupation of *pata painting* as it does not fetch them sufficient income to sustain their families. Their traditional heritage, *pata-art* and the *patuasangeet,* is becoming a dying profession. In this context, a study on the socio-economic identity of this community becomes imperative, to investigate into their economic distress and social vulnerability. In this paper, the identity-crisis suffered by this community has been highlighted. Proposals and suggestions have been put forward to relieve the *patuas* from acute poverty and a traumatic social condition so that they can revive *pata painting* – a heritage art of Bengal.

Keywords:- *Patuas,* Bengal, socio-economic vulnerability, heritage art, subaltern community, identity crisis.

Introduction:-

'Patua' is a term used to identify a community of traditional folk painters inhabiting parts of rural Bengal (including Bangladesh), Odisha, Jharkhand, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra and Rajasthan. Conventionally, they paint pictures on cloth, using organic colours and stone colours, hence, the canvas on which the painting is done is termed *'pata'*- a word that probably originates from the Sanskrit term, *'patta,'* meaning cloth[1]. The *patuas* of Bengal are characterised by remote antiquity and represent themselves as an exclusive unit of Indian social and cultural heritage. The *patuas* are known by various other names – *Patkar, Patidar, Maal, Gayen,* etc. These folk painters also fall in the category of performing artists as they are wandering bards who sing to their painted scrolls, narrating stories through their songs, sung in a monotonous tone like a *panchali.* The Bengal Region is an area where this quaint community of *patuas* and *pata painting* have been in vogue for centuries and have produced a chronicled history. Therefore, this group of folk painters deserves special attention from anthropologists, historians, sociologists, folklorists, art historians and cultural geographers. These indigenous folk artists of the Bengal Region are exceptionally talented, and are well-equipped with traditional knowledge of folk painting, its themes and techniques. However, it is a matter of concern that they suffer from social alienation and acute financial crisis in spite of their talent and virtues. They are regarded as a subaltern community involved in low-caste activities. Not only so, but they are also plagued with a feeling of insecurity with regard to their religious and cultural identity.

Objectives of the study:-

The main purpose of this work is to carry out an in-depth study into the present socio-cultural conditions of the *patua community* of Bengal and to evaluate their economic situation. This kind of evaluation involves an empirical study on the part of the researcher. The foremost issue to be addressed in this paper is the identity-crisis suffered by the *patua community,* especially with regard to the religion practised by them. In the process, the issue of frequent religious conversions by the *patuas* will be discussed. The other issues to be addressed in this paper include the origin of the *patuas,* their social and professional identity, lateral shifts in occupation and decline of the *patua song (patuasangeet)*. The researcher has felt that direct discussion with the *patuas* in the field would help to look into their problems they are facing

[1] Some have expressed the opinion that the origin of the term, *'pata'* is related to *'padam,'* a word used in Dravid language.

today and to relieve them of their socio-economic vulnerability. This would, in turn, reduce their feeling of insecurity and help to promote their heritage art and preserve their traditional knowledge. Therefore, this study attempts a thorough scrutiny of their present conditions from a social geographical perspective.

Methodology:-

The paper is purely based on qualitative techniques of research. The study is based on both secondary information and primary data. Secondary information has been collected from books and periodicals as well as different websites. Field work was done by the researcher to collect empirical data through individual and group interviews. The interviews were conducted with the help of a set of questionnaires. Participatory observation formed part of the field work. Finally, the data collected from primary and secondary information was compiled and analysed to understand the exact socio-economic conditions of the *patuas* and to find out the reasons for their social alienation and economic distress.

Major Findings and Discussion:-

Problems faced by the *patuas* of rural Bengal with reference to their religious identity:-

The above-mentioned group of folk painters of the Bengal Region has been working on folk art at the grassroots level for centuries not only as a profession, but also as a passion although they suffer from abject poverty and social alienation. Most of them live in remote, rural areas where it is difficult for them to even earn their bread to sustain themselves and their families. The *patuas* have lamented before the researcher that they are neither accepted by the Hindus nor by the Muslims. Considering the ever-existing conflict between the two religious groups, it is but quite natural that the *patuas* will be rejected by the followers of Islam as they draw pictures of Hindu gods and goddesses and sing in praise of them. Idiosyncracies among both the religious communities have led to their miserable plight. It is said that they had been cursed by the Brahmins for drawing untraditionally. Instead of following the ideals of *Devkul,* they followed folk ideals (Chandra, 2014). Hence, they became unacceptable to the staunch Hindu community, who made them outcastes. The Brahmins looked upon them as *'mlechha'* (untouchables). The Brahmins considered themselves to be much superior to the *Nabasakha* group[2] (nine craftsmen-guilds) who were involved in manual labour. These Brahmins cursed

[2] The *Nabashakha* group refers to the nine sons of *Viswakarma.* The group comprises the *Chitrakaras, Malakaras Tantubayas, Kumbhakaras, Karmakaras, Kangsakaras, Sankhakaras, Sutradharas* and *Swarnakaras.*

the *Nabasakha* group, saying that they would, for generations, remain impure and work as menials. But later on, all the manual labourers could purify themselves except the *Chitrakaras,* the youngest of the lot. There is yet another myth which says that *Lord Shiva* had cursed them that they would forever follow the lifestyle dictated by Islam while taking up a Hindu profession (Bhattacharya, 1973). The story goes that one day, a *chitrakara* was painting a portrait of *Lord Shiva*. *Lord Shiva* came in disguise to see if His picture had been completed by the *patua.* As the *patua* picked up his painting brush to give the final touches, he started cleaning his teeth with a green stick. This made the Lord furious. According to this mythical tale, *Lord Shiva* rebuked the man for painting his picture with a polluted brush and cursed him. In this way, the *patuas* were made social outcastes by the Hindu community (Bhowmik, 2004). Today, ostracised by both the communities, they practise Islamic rituals while maintaining Hindu names. Their main pilgrimage centres are Puri, Varanasi and Kalighat. They rever Hindu gods and goddesses, but bury their dead. The *Moulabi*[3] is called for the purpose. The bier is carried only by people of the *patua community,* but other members of the Muslim community often join the funeral procession. The *patuas* recite the *Namaz*, but are barred from entering mosques. Most of the *patua women* use vermillion and conch-shell bangles, but marry only Muslims. They have reported to the researcher that in spite of adopting Islam, the true Muslims do not marry them, they have to marry within their own *Chitrakara community.* Thus, the *patuas* form an endogamous community. The date of the wedding ceremony is decided according to the *Panjika.* At the wedding ceremony, prayers are offered by the *Moulabi* (Santra, 2011) according to the Islamic scriptures. However, according to Hindu customs, various rituals are performed (Bhattacharya, 1973). After the wedding, the couple goes to the temple to seek the blessings of Hindu gods and goddesses. *Chitrakara* families used to be organised into marriage circles, which led to the formation of sub-regional schools of *pata painting,* each with its own, distinctive style. At present, only two such schools survive - the Tamluk – Kalighat – Tribeni Samajik School and the Birbhum – Kandi – Katwa Samajik School.

The *patuas* are highly influenced by Hindu customs in the ceremony of *Annaprasan* (rice feeding ceremony). However, during the ceremony, the baby is fed *sinni* collected from the mosque by the eldest member of the family. Following the Hindus, the *patuas* celebrate *Jamaisashthi.* At the same time, the *patuas* of West Medinipur observe *Ramzan* and *Id-uz-zoha* – Muslim festivals. The *Chitrakaras* of Bengal consider *Doljatra, Shivaratri, Charak* and

[3] A Muslim priest.

Makar Sankranti to be their main festivals (Singh and Bandopadhyay, 2008). '....practising Patuas are considered to be somewhere in between the religions. They depict Hindu gods on their scrolls, portraying their glory, sing about Hindu myths, and their patrons are exclusively Hindus. On the other hand, they practise their rites of passage according to the Islamic rules.....' (Hauser: 2002). Thus, their religion is a peculiar co-mixture of the two faiths – Hinduism and Islam.

Again, a *patua* is usually known by two names – one Muslim and one Hindu. On enquiring about this, Seramuddin Chitrakara, son of Ranjit Chitrakara of Naya Village, West Medinipur said, "We are the followers of Islam for generations. My father has two names – Bahar and Ranjit. But he did not like this idea, so he selected only one name for me."

Origin of the *patuas:-*

The origin of the *patuas* is a highly debated issue. The *patuas* themselves claim that they are the children of *Viswakarma,* the celestial architect. In the *Brahmavaivarta Purana*[4]*,* they are said to be descended from *Viswakarma* and *Ghritachi,* an *Apsara* woman, the spouse of *Viswakarma* (Choudhury, 2004)). *Viswakarma* was worshipped by the Dravidians and appears to have been less popular in the Vedic society. The Aryans were not adept in art and craft. Just as *Viswakarma* was less known in the Vedic society, so also, the *patuas* have not been mentioned much in the *Vedas.* This leads to the idea that the *patuas* have never formed an integral part of the Aryan society. The Aryans were not idolators. They always tried to suppress the cultural and aesthetic heritage of the indigenous folks (the Dravidians). In fact, *Viswakarma* was not held in high respect by the Aryan gods. He was called upon by the gods to perform some business as though He was their paid employee (Chakraborty, 1973). All the descendants of *Viswakarma* were enemies of the Vedic God, *Indra. Viswakarma* is only revered by the artisans of the lower castes. This confirms the non-Aryan origin of the *patuas* even more. The *patuas* have always been recognised as people belonging to the Austric stock or the *Asura* family, that is, the family of demons (Dey, 2008).

In the Bengal Region, *Shiva, Durga* and *Kali* are some of the iconic mythical figures that have inspired a strong *patua culture.* All of them were originally tribal deities and were incorporated into mainstream Hinduism much later. This is perhaps an indication of the fact that the *patuas*

[4] The *Brahmavaivarta Purana* was written in the thirteenth century A.D. It was written in Sanskrit. It is one of the *Maha-Puranas.*

have a tribal origin. Benoy Ghose, after examining the *Santhal patas* and the *Chakshudan patas,*[5] came to the conclusion that the *patuas* of the western part of West Bengal were of tribal descent (Manna, 2012). *Pata painting* was and still is largely associated with the aboriginals. The *patuas* living near tribal villages have adopted a number of tribal mythological materials. These have been fused with their tribal philosophy to get the subject matter of *tribal patas.* The tribal tradition of the *pata painters* entered into the different caste groups through the process of detribalisation. The districts of Birbhum, Bankura, Purulia and West Medinipur are still inhabited by tribals. In fact, primitive tribal culture indigenous to the *Mundas, Hos, Juangs, Bhumij* and *Santhals* of the Chotanagpur Plateau has given rise to the birth of *patua culture,* with all its myths. These tribal *patuas* have a sound knowledge of tribal myths and legends. Within the *patua community,* this kind of traditional knowledge has been passed on orally from one generation to another through the medium of songs known as *patuasangeet.* Traditional knowledge of tribal myths inspired the *tribal patuas* (mainly *Santhals)* to draw *patachitras* depicting the birth of their first ancestors, *Pilchu Haram* and *Pilchu Burhi,* their seven sons and seven daughters and how these seven brothers were married to their sisters. The *Santhal patas* were and still are found in the Santhal Parganas, Manbhum[6] and Medinipur regions, in Nolla in Dumka, Bharatpur near the Susunia Hills of Bankura, Binpur in Medinipur, Kalipahari, Salberia in North West Bankura and Jhalda, Barabazar, Manbazar, Jaipur, Raghunathbari in the Purulia district. Some *patuas* themselves claim to be of tribal origin. This is because they found that the *patuas* who belonged to the *Santhal, Bhumij* and *Kheria* classes were in a better position in society. The tribal origin of the latter can be traced in their scrolls identified as *Marrang Buru, Baghut Bonga, Dharmaraj, Sristitatta* and *Chakshudan patas.* After Hinduisation, the tribal section of the *patuas* changed their themes of *pata* drawing. They began to draw on the semi-divine stories connected with Vaishnavism and Shaivism in order to meet their economic needs and raise their social status and popularity. Gradually, they became more and more sanskritised by the addition of a wide range of myths and legends from the diversified

[5] The *Jadu Patuas* draw *Chaksudan patas*. Whenever they come to know of a death in a *Santhal* family in the neighbourhood, they draw a picture of the dead person, but do not insert the iris in the eyes. Then they rush to the neighbouring village and show the picture to the bereaved family, explaining that the dead person is suffering in the other world because he does not have the iris. They also say that they are willing to insert the iris in the eyes of the dead one to relieve him of his sufferings if they are paid a lumpsome. The bereaved relatives of the dead person agree to the proposal of these *jadu patuas.* The *jadu patuas* then insert the iris so that the dead one regains his vision. Therefore, it is believed that these *patuas* can create magic. Hence, they are called *jadu patuas,* the word, *'jadu'* meaning magic.

[6] The undulated plateau region of Purulia in the western part of West Bengal along with the Dhanbad district of present Jharkhand is called Manbhum. This geographical unit forms part of the Chotanagpur Plateau.

Hindu religious texts. However, the researcher has observed that in recent years, the demand for *tribal patas* has increased so that the *patuas* are reverting to their original tribal myths.

Some scholars are of the opinion that the *patuas* were a clan belonging to the nomadic group that practised animism[7] (Sengupta, 1973). Many of their beliefs and practices are akin to animism. Some *patas* clearly depict totemic[8] beliefs. The *Jadu patuas,* sometimes known as the *Duari patuas,* may be regarded as a tribal offshoot of the *patua community* (Sarkar, 1994). These *Jadu patuas* are very different from the common *patuas* and no direct relation has been found between the two groups. The *Jadu patuas* are supposed to know magic and hence, the name. They draw peculiar figures in which the upper part of the body is much larger than the lower part and in the dress and costumes of these figures, there is a distinct, tribal style. Benoy Bhattacharya (1973) has contended that in the northern part of Birbhum, the *patuas* are addressed as *'Paharimal,'* which indicates that in the remote past, the *patuas* belonged to the tribal groups. The *patas* drawn by the tribals are known as *adivasi patas.*

Again, Dr. Ashutosh Bhattacharya (Manna, 2012) has observed that some *patuas* have taken up the occupation of snake charmers. In fact, the title, *'Maal,'* also used by the *patuas,* is associated with snake charming. Snake charming is essentially a hereditary occupation; it is not a profession that can be newly adopted. Hence, these *patuas* must have been snake charmers by origin and therefore, they should be classed as non-Aryans. Risley (Manna, 2012) is of the opinion that in the western plateau of West Bengal, there still exist snake charmers known by the name, *Maal,* who are offshoots of the *patua community.* He has contended that the main purpose of these snake charmers was to highlight the virtues of *Devi Manasa* by drawing pictures of the Goddess. So perhaps, originally these snake charmers painted *Manasa patas.* Later, they took up *pata painting* as a profession and began to draw on other subjects as well.

Islamisation of the *patuas*:-

Perhaps the *patuas* originally belonged to the Hindu society and were converted into Islam much later - a fact that has been supported by many historians. The reasons behind this kind of conversion have also been debated upon. Sri Lakshmi K. Pal (Bhattacharya, 1972) is of the

[7] A belief system that a soul or spirit exists in all living beings like humans, animals and in all physical things like mountains, rivers, etc.
[8] A system in which human beings in a small group have a mystical relationship with a spiritual being centred in an animal or a plant.

opinion that the *patuas* use some dyes to colour their drawings; there were certain things in the dye that were untouchable by the Hindus. It is for this reason that they were made outcastes by the Hindu community. Some say that the *patuas* were regarded as untouchables by the Hindu society, so they resorted to taking up Islam. "We have been drawing *patas* for seven generations. My father, grandfather, great grandfather – all have been *Muslim patuas* for ages. My ancestors became Muslims during the time of Nawab Siraj-ud-Daulah, when there were Hindu-Muslim riots. Since then, we have remained Muslims. I have no intention to be converted into Hinduism" said Shahjahan Chitrakara of Naya, West Medinipur.[9] Some scholars are of the opinion that during the period of the Turk- Afghans, social and political exploitation by the Brahmanical society forced them to take up Islam. Still others have said that in the fourteenth century, Firoz Shah Tughlaq imposed *jiziya*[10] on all the non-Muslims. So in course of time, the *patuas* became Muslims in order to avoid paying this repressive tax. This idea has been supported by Samadish Patua of Purandarpur, Birbhum. Whatever may have been the reason, it is found that during the reign of the Muslims the *patuas* were used as propagators of Islam. At this time, a number of *Gazir patas*[11] were painted by them. *Patas* showing *Mohammad Mangala* and some other *patas* describing the miracles of Muslim *Pirs* were also drawn by them. Perhaps, the *patuas* thought that such Islamisation would provide them security as they could get support from the patronage of the Muslim rulers. Much later, when Muslim rule declined, this patronage waned and the *patuas* tried to enter into the Hindu fold once again.

The *patuas* have traditional inter-community linkages with neighbouring Hindu castes. Tarapada Santra (2011) expresses the opinion that the ancestors of the *patuas* of Prashastha Village, Howrah District, were originally Hindus who were often taken by the *Nawabs* to the harems to draw portraits of the *begums.* This alienated the *patuas* from the caste Hindus. On the other hand, due to their closeness with the Muslim families, these *patuas* developed the practice of circumcision of their male issues and of reciting the *Namaz* five times a day. The female members of these families, however, went on worshipping Hindu deities and were not required to make any such compromises.

[9] Interview taken by the researcher in the field, 2022.
[10] A tax imposed by the Muslim rulers on their Hindu subjects. Akbar was a benevolent Mughal emperor who abolished this tax.
[11] *Gazir Patas* are *patas* that depict the heroic deeds of Ismail Gazi. They were very popular in Bangladesh at one time. Primary survey by the researcher has shown that the rural *patuas* of West Medinipur have been drawing *Gazir Patas* lately.

Back to the Hindu fold: -

On asking a *patua* about his idea of drawing portraits of Hindu deities, he replied, "It is not a choice after all. We have faced many problems for drawing Hindu gods and goddesses. The fanatic Muslims have tried to stop us. In fact, many of us have been isolated for drawing the portraits of Hindu deities. But we have to do this for our livelihood."

During the rise of the Muslim League, the *patuas* of Prashastha Village were asked to adopt Islam permanently and to give up all Hindu practices. They did not agree to this suggestion. During the Hindu-Muslim riots, all the villages around Prashastha were occupied by Hindus and the *patuas* could no longer practise rituals related to Islam. At this time of danger, the *patuas'* former position as Muslims going to Hindu families to earn their income, became very unsafe. It became crucial that they identified themselves with one of the two religious communities and for all pragmatic reasons, it was safer to join the majority. This made them turn to Hinduism. Eventually, large-scale conversions were undertaken by the *Swamijis* of the *Bharat Sevasram Sangha, Arya Samaj* and *Hindu Mahasabha,* who performed the so-called 'purification' rites *(suddhi, yajna and dharma sabha).* Sri Shyamapada Mukherjee, Sri Indubhusan Das and some others were instrumental in these conversions. The motivation behind these conversions was to re-convert apostates and strengthen the Hindu majority. Another aim was to persuade the low-status and Muslim communities to identify themselves with the Hindus in the nationalist movement (Hauser, 2002). Ultimately the *patuas* were converted to full-fledged Hindus everywhere except in the Narajol, Daspur and Tamluk areas of Medinipur.

Frequent conversions:-

Whatever the reason, it is a true fact that the *patuas* have always been regarded as a subaltern community with a degraded social position. To save themselves from religious persecution, they had to resort to conversions time and again. Whenever any particular religion would come to the forefront, this socially marginalised community would adopt that religion. Scholars such as Sankar Sengupta are of the opinion that the *patuas* originally came into contact with the Buddhists, then they went from the Buddhist fold to the Islamic fold and again they adopted Hinduism. Therefore, many religious ideas of the Buddhists are still found among the *patuas.* In their rites, rituals and customs and also in their behavioural patterns, they seem to be people with a cosmopolitan religious bent (Sengupta, 1973). Thus, in a Hindu-dominated society, they took up Hinduism, when Buddhism gained prominence they declared themselves to be

Buddhists and again they adopted Islam when it became necessary to save themselves from the rigours of the Brahmanical society. These conversions did not affect their lifestyle and had no influence upon their work or income. In fact, that is why they could afford to change their religious identity, irrespective of doctrinal differences, as suited to their social and economic advantages from time to time (Chakraborty, 1973). It is perhaps because of these frequent conversions that their religious identity has remained all the more obscure. At the same time, their economic condition deteriorated day by day and link with the Hindu community through their traditional occupation weakened.

Dilemma regarding the social and professional identity of the *patuas*: Lateral shifts in occupation:-

It is said that in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, during the domination of the *Senas*, the *Sutradharas, Swarnakaras* and *Chitrakaras* were made social outcastes by Vallal Sen who was a staunch propagator of Brahminism. Later, the *Swarnakaras* and *Sutradhars* could return to the Hindu fold, but the *Chitrakaras* remained impure (Rahman, 2006). With the advent of the *Senas,* the Buddhist ideals of the *Palas* lost importance. Vallal Sen, who was a strong supporter of the Brahmins and very conservative, imposed caste restrictions rigorously. In a Hindu society ever dominated by Brahmins it was but quite natural that the other three castes would be looked down upon. The drawing of human figures went against the ideals of the Brahmanical religious traditions. Hence, the Brahmins vehemently protested against this activity of the *patuas.* But these folk artists did not bow down to that protest. This led to an everlasting conflict between the two groups. In the circumstances, the *Swarnakaras* and *Sutradharas* took up Hindu customs but the *Chitrakaras* remained in the twilight zone, being neither Hindus nor Muslims in the true sense of the term. It is interesting to note that today, the *patuas* of Bengal are often found to exist in the conflicted red zones such as West Medinipur, East Medinipur, Birbhum and Purulia. They live in a deplorable condition in the midst of floods, inaccessible roads and violence that are typical of these areas. Moreover, the *rural patuas* of Bengal remain in a secluded condition although they form part and parcel of the villages where they dwell. Their peculiar lifestyle acts as a barrier in free mixing with the other castes and communities of the village.

Actually, although most of the *patuas* of Bengal today use the surname, 'Chitrakara,' the *patuas* were not *Chitrakaras* by profession in the beginning (Mc'Coutchin and Bhowmik, 1999). The

term, 'Chitrakara' was applied to the artisans of Ganjam, Odisha. In the Census of 1901, these artisans (the *patuas)* have been identified as a sub-caste of the *Mucho.* The *Muchos* were a class of *Odia* painters. As the *patuas* were suffering from an acute crisis with regard to their social and religious identity, they were anxious to enjoy a high position in the society. The *Chitrakaras* were artists who were identified as *'shilpi'* and were respected for their exceptional talent in painting. So the *patuas* were eager to identify themselves with the *Chitrakara community.* When they saw that their occupation was similar and that they could identify their taxonomic position with that of the *Chitrakaras,* they got themselves named *'Chitrakara'* in an epiphytical way. However, the staunch Hindu society did not accept this move. The *Chitrakaras* were alienated by the Brahmins on the ground that they did not care to maintain the rigidity of the religious scriptures in their drawings (Sarkar, 1994). Rather, they synthesised the events to suit the mentality of the common people so that their *pata paintings* could become popular and could be sold easily. This resulted in a cultural fight between the two groups. Since there was no distinction between the *Chitrakaras* and the *patuas* now, the entire *Chitrakara community* was declared corrupt. In fact, in the caste-based society of India, all the nine sons of *Viswakarma* have been classed as *Sudras* (Dey, 2008). Today, the *Chitrakaras* are looked upon as a subaltern community, practising a faith that is neither Hindu, nor Muslim, nor tribal. They occupy an 'intermediate position between the low-grade traditional artisan caste and the Muslim groups of similar social status' (Singh and Bandopadhyay, 2008), oscillating midway between Mohammedanism and Hinduism.

The *patuas* also suffer from lack of professional identity. *Pata painting* was their original occupation, which they had begun as a profession from around tenth – eleventh century A.D. (Mitra Bajpai, 2015). The popularity of *patas* at that time can be estimated from various folk songs and folklore of rural Bengal that existed in the yesteryears. The *Kalighat patuas* were paid handsome prices for their paintings in the mid-nineteenth century. With the passage of time, the demand for their paintings declined owing to lack of patronage, the advent of lithographs and oleographs and other reasons. The *Kalighat patuas* got very much discouraged and depressed. To sustain themselves and their families, they took up other occupations, some of which were not even allied to their artistic inclinations. In rural Bengal, the common occupation of showing scrolls accompanied by *patuasangeet* went into obscurity with the advent of the bioscope and the television. The situation was aggravated by the abolition of the *Zamindari System* whereby the patron-client relationship waned. As feudalism was destroyed, 'the entire socio-economic content of all obligations connecting the direct producers, artisans

and peasants with their overlords was shattered..... A large stratum of rural artisans was ruined automatically.' (Datta, 1993). Now the *patuas* could no longer rely upon *pata painting* to sustain themselves. They had to look towards other jobs to supplement their income and quite naturally, they opted for taking up new occupations allied with artistry as they were artisans by origin. In the circumstances, the *patuas* of rural Bengal turned idol-makers in large numbers and many of them migrated to the nearby towns and cities, especially Calcutta (Kolkata). A large section of the *rural patuas* of Bengal left their homes in the villages and came to settle in Kalighat, Kolkata.[12]

Kaushik Bhattacharya finds a link between the *patuas* and the *Sutradharas* and has said that they were stone carvers in origin. Hence, their transformation from the *Chitrakara* to the *Karigara.* (Bhattacharya, 2008).

Since the latter half of the twentieth century, the *rural patuas* of Bengal have shown a marked lateral shift in occupation. Their occupational pattern today does not have a firm base. They may be categorised as non-ritualistic painters, that is, painters of the second category. A survey has revealed that about 2500 *patuas* exist today in the Bolpur, Suri, Nanoor, Sainthia, Mayureshwar, Rampurhat, Nalhati and Muraroi Blocks of Birbhum. But actual *pata painters* in these areas are only about 20 in number. Most of the others have resorted to idol-making or masonry. The picture is similar in East and West Medinipur districts. Habichak of East Medinipur was once famous as a *patua village,* but primary survey reveals that only about 12% of the entire population here consists of *pata painters.* West Medinipur shows greater instances of occupational shifts among *male patuas;* as the women have to stay back within their homes to look after the household, it is they who paint *patas,* the men often supplement the income by pulling rickshaws or trolley-vans or by working as masons or landless agricultural labourers. Moreover, it is the *male patuas* who carry the *patas* painted by the *women patuas* of West Medinipur to the nearby towns and cities and demonstrate them before the city dwellers.[13]

As an outcome of the change in the attitude of the *patuas* and drastic lateral shifts in their occupation, the artisan community of Naya Village, West Medinipur, came to be divided into six classes – *Basantaris, Satkuris, Atparas, Choupalkatas, Katakattas* and *Bejos* (Barapanda, 1999). While the *Atparas* and *Satkuris* make clay dolls, the *Choupalkatas* make hurricane-

[12] Perhaps, this kind of immigration gave rise to the Kalighat School of Painting, a hybrid style, which came to be known as urban folk painting.
[13] Primary survey.

lanterns and the *Katakattas* work as blacksmiths. Working in the field as wage earners, doing repairing work and treating animals also form part of the livelihood of these rural *patuas*. In the absence of a stable economic status, the *patuas* of rural Bengal are obliged to take up any kind of job they can lay their hands upon. In the process, they have developed roving tendencies.

The *Kalighat patuas* are especially keen to be recognised as Hindus. Since many of them have taken up idol-making, they have been using the title, 'Pal' – a title traditionally used by *Kumbhakaras.* This is 'an effort to disown a background of dubious nature' (Siddiqui, 1982). As an instance, the case of Srishchandra Chitrakara (Srish Pal)[14] may be cited. 'This is because they live in a Hindu-dominated area and are engaged in making idols of *Durga, Kali, Saraswati* and other Hindu gods and goddesses, *shola-work* and garland making……..On the other hand, in an Islamised village, the profession is mainly masonry, besides making the *tajia* and singing *jari songs'* (Chandra, 2017). A careful analysis reveals that among all the areas of West Bengal, Kalighat Patuapara is in a much more advantageous situation regarding transport and infrastructure as well as the clientele of the *patuas* because it lies within the heart of the city of Kolkata. But it is a matter of irony that this region presents the worst picture with regard to the creation of *patas*. *Pata painting* is totally in a moribund state in Kalighat Patuapara. This is owing to the poor work culture prevailing in West Bengal, institutional apathy and red tapism being the foremost among the detrimental factors. Primary survey has shown that in Kalighat Patuapara, there exists a conflict between the urge of the *patuas* to practise and showcase their works of art and the obligation to take up other occupations to sustain themselves and their families. Most of them have taken up idol-making and clay modelling with which they have no sentimental connection. The termination of *pata painting* is a marked departure from their life-philosophy.

It has also been found from primary survey that the *Kalighat patuas* are especially anxious to be looked upon as true Hindus as they live in a Hindu dominated area. This is adversely affecting their creative work and almost all of them have abandoned *pata painting.* Therefore, it will be wise to declare themselves as a special class of Hindus in the forthcoming census.

It was observed by the researcher that the *Medinipur patuas* are earning a decent income by copying the *Kalighat patachitras.* They have reported that the art connoisseurs are willing to pay much more for the replicas of the *Kalighat patas* drawn by them than for their indigenous

[14] Srishchandra Chitrakara was a famous idol-maker who used to make *Durga images* for Forward Club in the Kalighat area of South Kolkata.

rural patas. This is perhaps due to the fact that *Kalighat patas* have now become rare and are looked upon as items of collection. On the other hand, the *Kalighat patuas* are becoming marginal workers as they have resorted to idol-making, which is a seasonal occupation. So it was suggested to them by the researcher that they revert to their ancestral occupation of *pata* painting, at least during the lean season. But surprisingly, they are not willing to accept this idea.[15] Actually, the *Kalighat patuas* are apprehensive as to whether the *patas* drawn by them painstakingly would fetch them the correct prices. A hesitant attitude prevails among them with regard to the revival of their traditional art. Thus, it is necessary to boost up their morale and to provide them assurance regarding patronage and sale.

Decline of the *patuasangeet:-*

Today, the *pata paintings* are frequently purchased by art connoisseurs. In the last few decades, the scrolls have become objects of collection both for the upper middle class, keen to represent themselves as intellectuals by displaying Bengali culture and for the foreigners. But originally, these scrolls were not meant for sale. The *patuas* painted the scrolls for their own use, as they wandered from village to village singing the *patuasangeet* and seeking an audience. As the *pata paintings* now are meant to be used as wall decorations in the homes of the elite, urban class, the functional value of these paintings has been lost. The *patachitras* are sold by the *patuas* to their customers, who do not value the *patuasangeet,* but pay for the paintings only. Naturally, the *patua* gives less effort to the performing art and skips many rhymes. In the process, the *patua song* is fading away and the *rural patua* of Bengal is being converted from a wandering bard to a seller of visual art, displaying his scrolls as exhibits and selling them for high prices. Whereas originally, the *pata genre* consisted of three, distinct elements - visual art, narrative and music, the performative art has now got transformed into a mere descriptive art. Thus, the occupation of the *patuas* has changed from a verbal art to a purely visual tradition.

Not only so, the traditional *scroll pata* today suffers from deterioration. The length of the scroll has diminished, the panels of a particular story are not clear, the traditional colour combinations are absent and vegetable dyes are no longer used. On the whole, the scroll painting and the *pata heritage* have been highly commodified.

[15] Interview with the *patuas* of Kalighat in Kalighat Patuapara, 2022.

Conclusion:-

It must be emphasised that the *patuas* are children of the soil, working at the grassroots level. Painting *patas* and demonstrating them with the help of the *patuasangeet* is a passion for them. Moreover, they form a highly talented community of folk painters. In ancient India, they enjoyed a high position in the society. But this community today suffers from socio-economic as well as socio-cultural vulnerability. Considered as a subaltern community and alienated from the society at large, the *patuas* of Bengal today exist as a group neither bound by any religion nor by any social identity. They remain within their own caste and are bound by the passion for their traditional occupation of *pata painting.* The *patuas* of Bengal can best be described as itinerant folk painters and ballad singers who carry their narrative scrolls around and narrate mythological and secular stories with their own, characteristic tunes.

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INTERGENERATIONAL CULTURAL AND MEMORY TRANSMISSION AMONG BANGLADESHI MIGRANT WOMEN IN WEST BENGAL

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"I am a Birangona, but I am not a victim. I am a warrior. My body may have been violated, but my soul is free. My story is not one of shame, but of the strength of a nation's heart."

- NILIMA IBRAHIM

(*Ami Birangona Bolchhi)*

Abstract

This study, "Intergenerational Cultural and Memory Transmission among Bangladeshi Migrant Women in West Bengal," examines the pivotal but often overlooked role of women in preserving cultural identity and collective memory following the partition of Bengal and subsequent migrations. It analyses how different waves of migration—from the 1947 Partition to the 1971 Liberation War created distinct socio-cultural environments for East Bengali women in West Bengal. The article argues that women, by acting as the primary custodians of the home, were central to the transmission of heritage through daily practices. It explores specific mediums of transmission, including ways of food, oral traditions, and linguistic preservation, demonstrating how these practices are not merely nostalgic but are active forms of resistance and identity negotiation. Drawing on concepts from memory studies, such as inherited and entangled memory, the article illuminates how the trauma and displacement of the first generation are carried forward, shaping the identity of the next. This study employed a mixed research methodology, drawing upon both numerical data and descriptive information to provide a holistic view of the subject. The research highlights a significant gap in historical narratives by focusing on women's experiences and concludes that their contributions have been crucial for the survival of a distinct cultural legacy in a new land.

Keywords: Migration, Cultural Transmission, Memory, Bangladeshi Women, West Bengal

The Shattered Horizon

The kitchen hums with the familiar symphony of a Bengali home: the sharp sizzle of mustard seeds in hot oil, the rhythmic *thump-thump* of spices being ground on a stone mortar, and the low, melodic murmur of a grandmother's voice. Her hands, wrinkled with the wisdom of decades, guide her granddaughter's young fingers as they form small, round fritters from a paste of bottle gourd leaves and mustard seeds. "This is *Lau Pata Bata*," she says, her voice a soft, steady link to a history that is not visible on any map. "Every dish we cooked had a meaning. Every meal was a story," Goya. (2025, June 26). This act, seemingly simple, is a powerful ritual of intergenerational transmission, an art of survival passed down not in books or lectures, but in the intimate, lived language of food.

This study dives into the profound and often unacknowledged role of Bangladeshi migrant women as the custodians of cultural and mnemonic heritage in West Bengal. Their story is one of enduring resilience, creativity, and the relentless negotiation of identity across generations. It is a narrative forged in the crucible of two historical ruptures: the traumatic Partition of Bengal in 1947 and the brutal Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971. These events shattered borders and dislocated millions, but they also initiated a deeply human process of cultural survival and reinvention, with women at its heart. Through an exploration of their lived experiences, the report seeks to understand not just what was lost but how a vibrant, new identity was painstakingly woven into the cultural fabric of West Bengal.

Great Crossing: A History of Dislocation

The migration from what was then East Bengal to West Bengal was not a singular event but a complex, decades-long saga shaped by political instability, religious persecution, and a yearning for a familiar cultural space. The nature and scale of these movements shifted significantly over time, creating distinct waves of settlement and assimilation.

Unfolding Partition (1947): A Gradual Displacement

The Partition of Bengal in 1947, which divided the province into a Hindu-majority West Bengal and a Muslim-majority East Bengal (later East Pakistan), set the stage for the first wave of displacement. Unlike the rapid and violent population exchange in Punjab, the migration in Bengal was a "gradually slower" process that unfolded over three decades. In the immediate aftermath, an estimated 2.04 million Bengali Hindus left East Bengal for the newly formed Indian state of West Bengal (Kamal, Nahid 2009).

This initial exodus was followed by a protracted flow of migrants spurred by successive communal flare-ups, such as the 1950 Barisal and Noakhali riots and the 1964 East Pakistan riots, which drove hundreds of thousands more across the border (Chakravartty, Gargi 2007).

The socio-economic profile of these early migrants was often shaped by their access to resources and networks. The first to leave were typically the "wealthy, educated urban upper and middle classes," including rural gentry and businessmen who had family connections and

social capital in West Bengal. Their ability to migrate was often a direct result of their privileged status. However, the migration continued across all classes, with poorer Hindus, including Dalits, later facing significant challenges due to their immovable property, such as land (Story of Five families). This prolonged migration process, unlike the more abrupt population exchange in the West, allowed for a more organic, if still fraught, process of integration into the host society. The presence of segregated refugee colonies and a distinct "Bangal" identity emerged from this era, a testament to the community's resilience and struggle for recognition (sahapedia n.d).

1971 Liberation War: A Tidal Wave of Refugees

The second major rupture occurred in 1971 with the Bangladesh Liberation War. This conflict, marked by "systematic mass killings, rapes, lootings and arson" against ethnic Bengalis, triggered a massive exodus of refugees into India. In the early months of the war, an estimated

ten million people, predominantly Bengali Hindus, sought refuge in India, representing the single largest displacement of refugees in the latter half of the 20th century (UNHCR, 2000). While the majority returned after Bangladesh's independence, an estimated 1.5 million stayed behind, further swelling the migrant population in West Bengal.

This influx had a profound demographic and social impact, with the largest concentration of refugees settling in the districts of 24-Parganas, Nadia, Bankura, and Kolkata (Wikipedia contributors, 2024). The sheer volume of people strained the rehabilitation infrastructure, leading to the establishment of numerous refugee colonies that became new homes for the displaced (sahapedia n.d). The community's identity, forged in the crucible of war and displacement, was now marked by a collective memory of trauma and loss.

Contemporary Flow: Economic and Environmental Drivers

Migration from Bangladesh to West Bengal continues to the present day, but the underlying drivers have shifted from primarily politico-religious to economic and environmental factors (Bawa, 2025).

Push factors in Bangladesh include a high population density, economic insecurity, lack of industrialisation, and a sharp "deterioration in the land-man ratio" due to rapid population growth, urbanisation, and environmental challenges like flooding and river erosion (Mannan, 2024). The lure of better economic prospects and a higher standard of living in West Bengal acts as a strong pull factor (Mandal et al., 2025).

A significant aspect of this ongoing migration is the "homo-ethnic climate" of West Bengal, characterised by shared linguistic and cultural ties with Bangladesh (Datta, 2015). This familiarity, along with a porous border and improved transportation links, makes West Bengal the most preferred destination for migrants, as it allows them to feel a sense of belonging with the "Bangalees" of the host state (Das & Ansary, 2017).

However, the shared identity is not without its fissures. While the initial waves of migration were overwhelmingly Hindu, recent decades have seen a larger proportion of Muslim migrants, introducing a new layer of complexity to the "homo-ethnic climate" and the political discourse surrounding citizenship and belonging in the host country (Alam & Das, 2025).

Keepers of the Hearth: Women as Cultural Anchors

In the narrative of migration, women's experiences are often overlooked, yet they are the primary agents of cultural survival. The journey of displacement is a "gendered process" that presents unique vulnerabilities and challenges for women, but it also necessitates their role as cultural conservators and innovators (Migration Data Portal, 2021; UN Women, 2020).

Gendered Journey: More than Just "Refugees"

Migration impacts women and men differently, often placing women in a position of heightened vulnerability to mistreatment and discrimination. For many Bangladeshi women, the move to West Bengal meant leaving behind the social norms and patriarchal structures of their homeland, which often confined them to the home and limited their freedom of movement and economic autonomy (Migration Data Portal, 2021). This dislocation presented a dual challenge: the trauma of being uprooted from a familiar place and the pressure of adapting to a new environment where their traditional support systems were weakened. However, the migration also created a space for new opportunities. Women who were divorced, deserted, or widowed were often forced to break out of social restrictions and seek work outside the home, becoming the principal caregivers and providers for their families (UN Women, 2020).

The evidence from the research presents women as active agents in this process. They migrate in pursuit of better work or educational opportunities and bring with them valuable "social and cultural capital" that enriches both their families and the host society. They are not merely passive carriers of culture but "cultural conservators" who feel a sense of pride in sustaining the heritage of their home country. This transformation from victim to active agent is a powerful testament to their resilience (Subramaniam & Carolan, 2021).

Psychological Burden: An Inherited Identity Crisis

The journey of displacement extends beyond the physical crossing of a border; it embeds a "psychological dilemma" and an enduring "identity crisis" within the migrant community. First-generation women, like Nazneen in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane,* grapple with the emotional shock of being alienated and having to cope with a "transnational status". Their struggle is a constant "psychic battle" between the traditional values of the "old world" and the new, often liberalised culture of the host society (Rahman et al., 2022).

This struggle for belonging is not confined to the first generation; it is passed down, becoming an "inherited" experience for their descendants (Hornabrook et al., 2025). The second and third generations face a profound sense of being "in-between people," caught in a negotiation between the culture of their parents and the culture of the West Bengal society they were born

into. While a literal "genetic memory" has been largely disproven, the concept serves as a powerful metaphor for the inherited, deep-seated emotional baggage of displacement, where the experiences of a parent can "markedly influence both structure and function in the nervous system of subsequent generations". This continuous process of "boundary work" defines their lives, as they selectively integrate new egalitarian ideals while preserving their family's core values (Dias, Brian; Ressler, Kerry, 2014).

The cultural transmission that occurs within these communities is fundamentally a creative act, a dynamic dialogue between past and present. When a child learns a tradition from her grandmother, she is not just receiving a static piece of the past; she is inheriting an emotional and symbolic history that she will, in turn, interpret and adapt. This process explains why the memories of the 1947 and 1971 migrations are often "entangled," blurring historical lines and creating a fluid narrative of trauma and resilience (Porobić et al., 2025).

Silent Scars: Intergenerational Trauma and Mental Anguish

Beyond the negotiation of cultural norms, a deeper, often unacknowledged struggle lies in the transmission of trauma. Intergenerational trauma is a phenomenon through which the emotional and psychological wounds of one generation are passed down to the next, often without a single word being spoken. This is not a genetic process but is woven into daily interactions, expectations, and the silent weight of past struggles (Afreen Dhamani, 2025).

For South Asian immigrant families, this can manifest as parenting styles based on fear, a mindset of scarcity even when financially stable, and emotional suppression. The memories of displacement, violence, and the loss of familiar places can turn once-known spaces into "fearsome places" that carry the memory of horrific violence (Sholder, 2012).

A study on Syrian refugees found epigenetic signatures of stress passed through generations, providing a scientific basis for this phenomenon. This psychological burden is a key part of the migrant experience. Women, in particular, may carry the wounds of violence and displacement that they often had few words to describe. A first-generation migrant's struggle for belonging, as seen in the psychological dilemma of having a "transnational status," can create a constant "psychic battle" for subsequent generations caught between their parents' values and the new culture. This unhealed trauma can be traced in literary accounts and memoirs, which often fill the silent gaps in official histories (Sholder, 2012).

Agents of Change: Socio-economic and Political Roles of Women

While a significant portion of the migrant narrative focuses on women as the keepers of the domestic sphere, their role was profoundly transformative, expanding from the private to the public realm. The uprooting forced many women to leave the security of their "inner quarters" (*andarmahal*) and seek livelihoods to supplement their family income, despite facing "taunts and ostracisation for being a 'colony girl'" (Vedapranaa Purkayasta, 2024).

Many women became the sole earners of their families. Their jobs spanned various sectors: they worked as teachers, nurses, office staff, actresses, and labourers in mills and factories, such as Bengal Lamp. Educated, middle-class women, in particular, found employment as teachers and headmistresses, often in the very schools established to serve the large migrant population. Organisations like the Nari Seva Sangha provided vocational training, empowering women with skills to enter the workforce.

This economic independence paved the way for their social and political emancipation. As they fought for basic amenities in the newly formed squatter colonies, they became political workers, aligning with leftist parties to fight for their rights. Their political advocacy centred on crucial issues such as government jobs, grants for marriages, and the passing of a bill giving equal rights to Hindu women. This shift in their roles transformed the social reality of West Bengal and inspired other women to move into the public sphere. The women of East Bengal were not just passive victims of circumstances; they were active agents of change, triumphing over trauma and reshaping the socio-political landscape (Vedapranaa Purkayasta, 2024).

Architecture of Survival: Refugee Colonies and Social Life

The migrant journey did not end upon arrival; it continued in the creation of new homes in West Bengal's refugee colonies. These settlements, often established through a process of 'jabardakhal' (squatting), became physical manifestations of the migrants' resilience. The very names of these colonies—such as Gandhi Colony and Netaji Nagar—were a mode of remembering and an act of homage to the freedom movement, legitimising the new settlements in the eyes of the government and placing the refugees within the nationalist narrative (sahapedia n.d).

These colonies had a distinct social and physical structure. They often featured primary schools, public libraries, clubs, and ritualistic places like *Harisabha* (platforms for religious congregations). While the schools and libraries have seen a decline in relevance as residents have moved to English-medium schools and the areas have become more urbanised, the clubs and adjacent fields continue to host festivals like Durga Puja, serving as enduring centres of community life (sahapedia n.d).

Lived Stories: Case Studies and Personal Narratives

Personal narratives and memoirs provide an intimate portrait of the migration experience "from below," filling the gaps in official records and giving voice to the individuals who lived through these historic events. These stories often highlight aspects of the trauma and resilience that go beyond official accounts of violence and displacement (Sriwastav, 2020).

- **The Story of Reena Biswas:** Reena, a refugee from East Pakistan, had few memories of life before migration, so her narrative focused on what she witnessed after settling in West Bengal. Her childhood was marked by the harsh reality of life in a "Permanent Liability Camp," a type of settlement designed to shelter abandoned women and their

children. She recalled watching older women, often widows clad in white, working silently on sewing machines, turning out blankets for the market. Her mother taught her to sew, a skill that would later prove invaluable. For Reena, the camp was more than a shelter; it was a community of women who had "no one to take care of them," and her childhood was a patient education in survival and self-reliance (*Sumallya Mukhopadhyay: Refugees from East Pak*, n.d.).

- **The Memoir of Begum Mushtari Shafi:** Begum Mushtari Shafi, a social activist, fled East Pakistan in 1971. In her memoir, she writes that she did not understand or know politics, yet she felt that "things were not quite right". While in a refugee camp in Agartala, she felt compelled to stay busy and began distributing work. Her narrative is a testament to the fact that women were not simply victims but actively sought to support their families and communities in the face of immense upheaval. Her memoirs, along with others, create an "alternative history" characterised by the doubts, silences, and resilience of women who survived the tumultuous period (Sriwastav, 2020).

Living Legacy: Channels of Transmission

The preservation of cultural identity in a new land is an intricate process, unfolding through a series of rituals and practices that serve as conduits of memory and heritage. For Bangladeshi migrant women, these channels of transmission—language, food, and storytelling—are far more than mere customs; they are acts of resistance and survival.

Language of Nostalgia: A Bridge and a Barrier

For the first generation of migrants, Bangla is more than a language; it is a profound marker of identity forged through struggle. The 1952 Bengali Language Movement, a pivotal event that led to the recognition of Bangla as a state language and eventually to the liberation of Bangladesh, imbued the tongue with a deep sense of national and ethnic pride. For those who migrated to West Bengal, their mother tongue became a "vital conduit for transmitting cultural memory and familial intimacy" (*Bengali Language Movement*, 2020). It serves as a private, shared code that distinguishes them from internal migrants and non-Bengalis, creating a sense of a shared "homo-ethnic climate" (Ngomdir, 2022).

However, this linguistic bridge becomes a barrier for subsequent generations. As second-generation migrants attend school and engage with peers, English often becomes the dominant language, leading to a linguistic gap and a potential "emotional disconnect" within the family. The children's inability to express themselves fully in their parents' language can create a sense of alienation, even as they may possess a deep appreciation for the history behind the language their elders fought for (Yeemmin, 2025). This phenomenon underscores a crucial aspect of cultural transmission: it is not a perfect, one-to-one transfer. The younger generation's identity is a hybrid, a blend of their inherited language and the culturally dominant tongues of their new environment.

Grammar of Food: Survival, Art, and Rebellion

If language is the voice of the homeland, food is its heartbeat. Intergenerational food culture is a "living, breathing knowledge" that transmits not just recipes, but a society's "shared beliefs, practices, and habits". It serves as a powerful form of "preservation pedagogy," an education in valuing food and connecting to one's ancestors (Sustainability Directory, 2025).

Nowhere is this more evident than in the case of Bengali "widow cuisine." In traditional Hindu Bengali society, widows were subjected to severe dietary restrictions, forbidden from using "heating" foods like onions and garlic and from eating most proteins. Within these stark confines, these women turned "limitation into innovation" and "austerity into art," creating dishes of "extraordinary flavour and depth" with everyday staples like lentils and mustard oil. This culinary practice is a powerful narrative of survival, silent resistance, and unacknowledged brilliance (Goya, 2025, June 26). When a migrant woman teaches her daughter or granddaughter a widow's recipe, she is not just passing on a meal; she is transmitting a story of resilience and creativity in the face of systemic injustice. The dishes become a tangible link to a collective past and a symbol of their ability to thrive despite adversity.

Folk Traditions and Domestic Rituals

Beyond food and language, a rich tapestry of folk traditions and domestic rituals serves as a conduit for cultural memory. For Hindu women, these include the performance of *brata* (vows) and *vratakath* (ritual stories). These practices, led by women without a priest, are deeply rooted in the fulfilment of personal goals and the well-being of the family, and often highlight feminine qualities of caring and perseverance. The stories, passed down through generations, often feature cautionary tales and moral lessons, like the story of a trader's wife who learned to respect Ma Sashthi after her children were taken away. These traditions often carry symbolic meaning, with rituals tied to agricultural productivity, wealth, and the birth of male children (Chakraborty, 2024).

Meanwhile, the wider Bengali culture is rich with festivals that serve to reinforce community and identity. For Hindu Bengalis, Durga Puja is a significant festival, and for Muslims, Eid al-Adha and Eid al-Fitr involve visiting neighbours and exchanging food and sweets. Pohela Boishakh, the Bengali New Year, is a secular celebration observed by all, featuring fairs, music, and parades. These festivals, along with distinct forms of folk music like Baul, Bhatiali, and Jhumur, act as carriers of traditional wisdom and a form of oral history. They depict everyday life and provide a space for social commentary and community bonding (*Folk & Tribal Cultural Centre (FTCC)*, 2025).

Attire also plays a role in cultural expression and adaptation. While the sari and *dhoti* are traditional for Hindus, women in urban areas have increasingly adopted the *selwar kamiz* or even the *abaya*, covering their hair with a hijab or *orna*. This demonstrates a fluid, evolving identity that blends tradition with new cultural and religious expressions.

Role of Oral History in Preserving Memory

The use of oral history as a research method is crucial to understanding the nuanced, multifaceted experiences of migrant women. Unlike official historical records, which often focus on large-scale political events, oral narratives offer an intimate and subjective perspective on the human cost of Partition. These accounts highlight the resilience and agency of women who navigated displacement and loss, demonstrating that their voices have been largely absent from mainstream historical narratives (Bhattacharjee, 2025).

Oral history projects, like the Bangla Stories website, aim to bring these accounts to a wider audience, teaching future generations about the history of migration.

Space Between: Identity, Assimilation, and the Tri-lemma

The journey of Bangladeshi migrants to West Bengal is a constant negotiation of identity in a new social and political landscape. This process is complex, unfolding at the intersection of nationality, language, and caste.

The Tri-lemma of Identity Negotiation

The core of this identity struggle is what has been described as a "tri-lemma". First, the migrants must grapple with their status as refugees, a label that often questions their belonging and citizenship in India (*Migrant Identity at the Intersection of Postcolonialism and Modernity – Journal of Migration Affairs, a Bi-Annual Journal*, 2020b).

Second, they must navigate their identity as "Bengali in the land of Odia" (in the case of those who settled outside West Bengal) or as a new kind of Bengali within West Bengal, where they are distinguished as a separate community. Finally, they must maintain their original "Bengaliness," a connection to their culture of origin, in a world that pressures them to assimilate. This struggle is a complex, multi-layered process, and the identity markers are not as simple as they may seem (Ray & Mohanty, 2024).

Caste, Class, and the Struggle for Status

Beyond the political and cultural labels, deep-seated caste and class dynamics shape the migrant experience. The initial waves of migration included a significant proportion of the educated, upper-class *bhadralok* community, who brought with them valuable social and cultural capital. However, the research also reveals a process of "Sanskritisation" among lower-caste migrants. This involved a strategic camouflaging of their identity, such as changing their surnames to more "sophisticated surnames" to gain social recognition in their new environment. This profound act of self-negotiation is a form of "creole nationalism," a deliberate and strategic performance of identity designed to navigate the new social hierarchy. It demonstrates that cultural identity is not a fixed inheritance but a fluid, strategic construct shaped by the pressures of assimilation and the desire for social mobility.

For example, a study of migrants to Odisha found instances where individuals from the Pandu Khyatriya caste, which is a Scheduled Caste in West Bengal, changed their surnames to sound more like those of higher-caste Bengalis, such as "Mukherjee," to gain social status. This act of changing names during the registration process for settlement highlights the profound negotiation migrants undertake with their caste identity (Ray & Mohanty, 2024).

Women's Autonomy and Decision-Making

The act of migration also created a space for women to redefine their roles and autonomy. A comparative study between women in West Bengal and Bangladesh shows distinct differences in their levels of freedom and decision-making power, especially concerning household matters and spatial mobility.

Women's Status: Direct Measures (Das & Chattopadhyay, 2012).

Indicator	West Bengal (Hindu)	West Bengal (Muslim)	Bangladesh (Bordering State, Hindu)	Bangladesh (Bordering State, Muslim)	Bangladesh (Rest, Hindu)	Bangladesh (Rest, Muslim)
Decision on spending money	Alone: 7.5%	Alone: 6.8%	Alone: 7.4%	Alone: 10.8%	Alone: 6.7%	Alone: 9.0%
	Jointly: 10.3%	Jointly: 9.4%	Jointly: 13.4%	Jointly: 10.8%	Jointly: 10.3%	Jointly: 5.7%
Health care decision	Alone: 32.2%	Alone: 33.3%	Alone: 14.0%	Alone: 18.6%	Alone: 18.0%	Alone: 22.6%
	Jointly: 27.9%	Jointly: 24.4%	Jointly: 28.8%	Jointly: 26.1%	Jointly: 30.0%	Jointly: 27.0%
Final say on large household purchases	Alone: 9.7%	Alone: 7.8%	Alone: 5.2%	Alone: 9.4%	Alone: 9.0%	Alone: 13.7%
	Jointly: 29.7%	Jointly: 24.1%	Jointly: 47.1%	Jointly: 47.4%	Jointly: 45.6%	Jointly: 43.3%
Permitted to go to market	Yes: 79.8%	Yes: 85.7%	Yes: 19.0%	Yes: 16.4%	Yes: 19.4%	Yes: 14.3%
Permitted to go to the health centre	Yes: 84.8%	Yes: 90.3%	Yes: 29.5%	Yes: 23.6%	Yes: 29.1%	Yes: 24.7%

The table reveals that women in West Bengal, particularly both Hindu and Muslim women, have a higher degree of spatial mobility and autonomy regarding health care and market access compared to their counterparts in Bangladesh. This reflects a regional difference in cultural norms and highlights how the act of migration to West Bengal may have offered some women a path to greater independence and freedom of movement (Das & Chattopadhyay, 2012).

Host-Guest Dynamic: "Bangals" and "Ghatis"

The relationship between the migrant community ("Bangals") and the native West Bengalis ("Ghatis") has been fraught with both sympathy and antagonism. While many locals offered voluntary relief and support to their "less-fortunate brethren," the massive influx also created a sense of competition for resources and a feeling of being burdened by the new arrivals (Ghosh, 2013). This friction has been further exacerbated by the political weaponisation of citizenship and border issues, leading to new forms of societal tension (Al Jazeera English, 2025).

A fascinating counterpoint to the migrants' struggle to preserve their culture is the parallel "cultural crisis" faced by the host population. Research on rural West Bengal shows that the native communities are also experiencing a deterioration of their heritage due to the "place-making of popular culture" and a shift away from traditional livelihoods. This shared experience of cultural erosion, though from different causes, highlights a deeper societal struggle in West Bengal. The migrant community's inventive cultural transmission is, in some ways, a mirror to the host community's own efforts to preserve its heritage in the face of modernisation (Chatterjee & Dwivedi, 2023).

Analysis of the Study

This report posits that despite the Partition's political and geographical divides, Bengal's shared socio-cultural heritage has empowered women as key agents of cultural transmission. Research indicates that a common "homo-ethnic climate" and traditions foster a hybrid identity, allowing women to balance autonomy with inherited customs. Comparative data on women's autonomy in West Bengal and Bangladesh support the notion of cultural continuity. Furthermore, the report addresses gaps in existing scholarship regarding migration and memory, which often overlook personal experiences in favour of official narratives. By highlighting women's "lived experiences" through oral histories, the report shifts the focus from a simplistic account of Partition trauma to one that emphasises their agency and resilience. It also explores the psychological burdens of "inherited" trauma, underexplored for Bangladeshi women in West Bengal. In doing so, it provides a more nuanced understanding of Partition's lasting legacy.

Tapestry of Resilience and Reinvention: Conclusion

The story of Bangladeshi migrant women in West Bengal is a powerful testament to the enduring human spirit in the face of profound dislocation. Far from being passive victims of history, these women have emerged as the primary custodians of their cultural and mnemonic heritage. Their journey reveals that the transmission of culture across generations is not a static, passive process but a dynamic, creative act of survival and reinvention.

The analysis of their migration history, from the gradual post-Partition influx to the tidal wave of 1971, demonstrates how the nature of displacement shaped their settlement patterns and their subsequent struggles with identity. The deeper examination of their lived experiences, particularly their unique psychological burdens, reveals a process of inherited identity

negotiation that continues to define the lives of their descendants. Through the potent channels of language, food, and oral history, these women have transformed acts of survival into rituals of cultural preservation, using the familiar comforts of the kitchen and the emotional power of storytelling to connect a homeland in memory with a new home built in reality. The example of "widow cuisine" stands as a particularly poignant symbol of this process, illustrating how creativity can flourish even within the most restrictive confines. Ultimately, the identity of these communities is not a simple inheritance but a negotiated and hybridised self. The strategic changing of names and the blending of languages are not acts of submission but profound expressions of agency, designed to navigate a complex social landscape. This process has resulted in a new, resilient identity that is both rooted in the past and dynamically engaged with the present. The enduring legacy of Bangladeshi women in West Bengal is not just the preservation of a culture but the courageous and continuous act of its reinvention, forging a vibrant tapestry that is a testament to their extraordinary strength and ingenuity.

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