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**Displaced Nation(s): Reading ‘The State of Exception’ In Debesh Ray’s
*Teesta Parer Brittanto (Story of The Banks of River Teesta)***

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Abstract: The advance of capitalist modernity in India and the widespread circulation and dissemination of colonial knowledge led to the formation of nationalist identity, curiously modelled upon the discourse of nation-state. In all this derivative formulation of nation state, what is lost is the voice of those people, whose concerns are never taken care of by the elites of the society and who continue to suffer in the dark labyrinth of history. In this context, this paper would like to reexamine the lost history of the ‘Burmans’ vis a vis Debesh Ray’s novel *Teesta Parer Breettato* (1988). This novel has become the very point of departure which seeks to reestablish the pristine interconnection between man and river and the marginal community which is unfortunately thrown into the oblivious pages of history. Analyzing Agamben’s idea of ‘bare life’, this article will try to understand the context and situation of the subjects of modern democracies.

Key Words: Development, Displacement, Subaltern, Historiography.

From ancient times, river has ceaselessly worked for the construction of civilizations. Our ancient civilizations had flourished and prospered under the benevolence of rivers. With the advent of capitalist colonialist modernity into India, this traditional riverine culture had undergone enormous changes. As the focus gradually shifted towards the colonial metropolis, these rural riverine cultures had lost the due importance. The economic incursion in the name of modernity into the traditional structure of community life rendered them displaced and dislocated. But the existing historiography falls short of adequately explaining the weak response of this river based community to the nationalist movement in Bengal. This article



will try to explore the mental world of the people and examine the experience, perceptions of the community residing on the banks of several rivers. Their silence in the mainstream colonial and neocolonial sociological discourse marks the very enigma of nation building which the modern nation-state fails to encapsulate. The river novels provide that platform to witness this contest between the mighty power of nation and its dispossessed children. The agonies of dislocation on part of the community and the large scale exploitation of the nature on the other hand constitute the 'gap' within the monolithic narrative of national progress. This multifarious form of subalterneity is the nodal point from which this paper would try to analyze the flip side of the dominant modes of history writing in the context of Bengal.

The rivers of Bengal are important geographical territories that shape the social, political and economic organization along with the psychological responses, custom and religious belief of its people. Not surprisingly, therefore, this river centric environment has found prominent mentions not only in the musical genres, local sayings and folklores but also in the rich oeuvre of Bengali literature. The river novels in recent days have become the constant subject of introspection. But what is not adequately probed is the deep connection between the rivers and its various communities and their response vis a vis the stories of development, displacement and the global circulation of capital in the neocolonial age. Therefore, following the trajectories, already laid out by the figures like Manik Bandyopadhyay, Tarashankar Bandopadhyay, Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay, I would like to take up Debesh Ray's *Teesta Parer Brittanto* (1988) to look at this continuity of river based expressions and simultaneously its changed courses during the post independence years.

Before delving into the details of the text, it is germane to situate my reading of the novel along the lines of developing subaltern contexts. Therefore, I would take a brief theoretical detour to understand the complexities of subaltern representation in the novel. Partha Chatterjee in his *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A derivative Discourse* (1993) discusses the mimetic nature of anti colonial nationalism and tries to find out the fault line of its journey. For Chatterjee, 'the fault line emerges at the very moment of its



conception, in its desire to counter the colonial claim that the non western world was fundamentally incapable of self rule in the challenging condition of the modern world' (Gandhi 119). Insofar, as Indian nationalism prepared to embark on the project of indigenous self-modernization, it announced its suicidal compromise with the colonial order. As a consequence, nationalist idioms succumbed to European etymology. Leela Gandhi suggests, 'nationalist production merely consists of particular utterances whose meanings are fixed by the lexical and grammatical system provided by the theoretical framework of post-Enlightenment rational thought' (Gandhi 120). As it comes up that the idea of Indian nationalism is a product of Eurocentric discourse, thereby open to the critical interrogation. This derivative discourse of nationalism first of all creates a fissure between the people-who-comprise-the-nation and the state-which-represents-the-nation, which the postcolonial nation struggles to bridge. This split between the preaching and the practice invites several problems to the construction of a homogeneous national identity.

Dipesh Chakraborty in his book *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (2000) shows 'how Europe works as a silent referent in historical knowledge' (Gandhi 119). 'The dominance of Europe as the subject of all histories is a part of a much more profound theoretical condition under which historical knowledge is produced in the third world' (Chakraborty 42). The historical creation of modern state and its subsidiary knowledge is the result of a transition narrative which is unfortunately incomplete. It is the study of this historic failure of the nation to come to its own, a failure due to the 'inadequacy of the bourgeoisie as well as of the working class to lead it into a decisive victory over colonialism'. He alerts us to the fact "The idea is to write into the history of modernity the ambivalences, contradictions, the use of force, and the tragedies and ironies that attend it" (Chakraborty 43). Chakraborty is in favour of situating the course of Subaltern histories in this deep chasm that still exists in the very digesis of modern nation. This inherent lacks or absences mark the texture of a vision of India which awaits its completion. Ray's novel belongs to this 'gap' which is critical of the schizophrenic nation state and its elite representatives.



Teesta Parer Brittanta (1988), part of Ray's trilogy, focuses on the relations between river, community and nation. The Rajbangshi community, on which this novel is written, describes the importance of Teesta in their life. Teesta is not the Ganges and the Rajbangshis are not also the elites of the nation. Therefore it has played with these two levels of dispossessions. Central to the story, is the narratives of pain and memories of dislocation, as the state of West Bengal undertakes the project of developments. As the colonial metropolis/ the new city is built on the ruins of villages, consequently this river novel turns out to be the best avenue for examining the unequal distribution of justice, wealth during the fag-end of colonial era and it also adumbrates dismal future of a newly independent nation. My contention is that this celebration of nature and the community is never a romantic engagement with the outside world, as exemplified by Tagore in his *Chinnapatra*, but fraught with the politics of the authors of the novels. The authorial direction and intervention makes these novels complex as it defies the logic of straightforward subaltern recuperation. This is always mediated and coloured by the novelist's own subjective engagement with the work of art. Ray's personal experience of being an immigrant from Bangladesh and the plight of settlement has also influenced him to pen down this novel. His personal engagement with the river Teesta often finds mention in his later writings too. He openly advocates Teesta has become the backbone of his identity and intellectual wings. Therefore it is of no surprise that the novel would bear the imprint of his concern for the river as well as for the residing community.

As far as the growth of the plot is concerned, Ray displays the pungent cultural insularity/fragmentation in *Teesta Parer Brittanta* through the use of the character of Suhas who arrives on the banks of Teesta as a settlement officer for Operation Barga, initiated by the contemporary Left Front Govt. in West Bengal. Earlier, he was also a part of the Naxalbari movement; he had also his share of belief in the utopic potential of the movement. Now he works as a bureaucrat, a government official. He is deputed here to oversee the land reform. Suhas experiences a strong disconnect with the ideal and the process when he understands the impending dislocation of the people living in the bank. His experience is



quite similar to that of Gora when he undertakes a journey across the countryside to feel the actual living condition of the people. He immediately discovers the widening gap between his imagination of India and the pragmatic reality of its people. Suhas, here is also appalled to see the poor living conditions of the Rajbangshi community. The latrines are dirty and filled with jungle. The frailty of the revolution and the destitution of the people give him an understanding of the pathetic pathogenic reality. As a former Naxalite leader he had ideas and a specific discourse, however, now he is surprised to look at this reality. He does not know how to change this reality. 'Just ten years ago what he thought, heard and saw about tribal, land, struggle happened to him, however, he didn't feel excited' (Roy).

A further example would help us to understand the growing disenchantment in Suhas as he feels the gnawing gap between the pedagogic and the performative reality of the nation. In the market Suhas meets a man called Nauchar Alam. Alam is very famous/ infamous there as the Govt. lost maximum land-cases against him. Suhas thinks him to be of huge shape however; he turns out a tiny one. This is how his daily experiences continue to shape the conceptual paradigms about the formulation of a new nation in the times of neo colonial set up. His experience and the expectations from the new state are further emboldened when he suddenly meets Bagharu in the middle of the crowd. Bagharu, a Koch- Rajbangshi, is symptomatic of the community, which fails to be mainstreamed, which still resides on the fringe of the state. Mised, deceived and finally uprooted from their traditional base on the pretext of creating a dam, this community bears the brunt of the mindless development project thereby constantly slipping from the codified semantics of the nation. Their entry into this is always postponed and deferred. This 'differance-deferral of colonial modernity' is responsible for the half-baked integration process. I will come back to the Rajbangshi identity formation and to the character Bagharu later to understand the impact of sovereign violence on the 'bare life'.

'Suhas' confrontation with Gayanath and the adivasis brought him a new realization about his Nation.' (Roy) When he faced Gayanath and his people in the remote forest he found he was alone and frightened. However, with lot of uncertainties he looks at their faces



and remembers his past life before ten or twelve years. It seems to him a fairy tale now. 'The struggle and then revolution of the farmers and laborers in the background of village politics loomed large again and again in the activities of Radhaballav and Hrishikesh, Albish and Biren Babu' (Roy). Suhas witnesses all these struggles, the lectures, the ironic struggle for unity and most dangerously the infighting between different tribal groups. At last after several incidents only Suhas stood alone in the field. He was astonished to see this changed reality about the Nation. His dream is shattered like the tribals of the bank are displaced. The revolution fails as the project of integration too surrenders to the roller coaster of development. The nation thus fragments into several displaced nations. Bagharu Burman leaves the river and the river silently witnesses the result of propagandist developments. Teesta becomes thus a metaphor in history.

Sudipta Kaviraj in his essay 'The Imaginary Institution of India' has talked about two forms of national identity- 'gesellschaft' and 'gemeinschaft'(167-209). 'Gesellschaft' denotes the organized institutions like state, whereas 'Gemeinschaft' refers to the community which is plural and boasts of the multiplicity, the praxis. As the eponymous hero in Tagore's *Gora* (1910) embarks on a search for the real 'Bharatbarsha' to have a sense of 'everyday', bypassing the myopic 'historical' of the nation, likewise Suhas' search for the actual Burman lives is tantamount to a search for the community-the 'gemeinschaft'. The gap between the imagined and the perceived makes him realize that he is a misfit into the society- the alienated traditional intellectual in Gramscian sense. The gerrymandering of the boundary between state and the community is a desired practice on the part of the nationalist leaders. But the failure to do so amounts to a cultural crime. His coming to terms with Bagharu provides him a vision which is wanted to see through the falsity of development- the development which costs the lives of the natives as well as is responsible for the destitution of nature. Therefore the inauguration of the barrage has refused to be the saga of development, but becomes the agonized narratives of displacements. Sajal Nag in his scholarly article "*Nationhood and Displacement in Indian Subcontinent*" (2001) argues that nation building is always a narcissistic project and it harps on creating a core self, excluding



the minorities in all sense of the term. “The journey of nations begins with the construction of self, the basic criteria for which is a preconceived homogeneity. But achieving such homogeneity proves elusive and the search becomes an exercise in peeling an onion, which involves the shedding of people who do not fit the constructed identity or who question the accepted framework”(Nag 4753). Analyzing the set up of Narmada dam and others like Teesta in the name of development, he goes on to argue how this politics of development carries the supplementary connotations of displacement in modern India. Riding on the stories of modernity, this, in a way, believes in the construction of a core identity, excluding the misfits. Bagharu Burman is the cultural other, therefore, he has to be sidelined. Thus, the novel becomes a stringent critique of the atrocious state power and its play of selective forgetting.

Ray’s novel helps to foreground the incompatible temporality that exists between the ‘historical’ and the ‘primitive’ of Indian society. Following Simmel’s argument in *Philosophy of Money* (2004) I would like to show that money becomes the only mode of interaction between these two antagonistic temporalities which is involved in ‘*representing the non-present*’ (Banerjee 18). Prathama Banerjee suggests that, ‘Historical’ is culturally superior, ‘Primitive’ is the alien other. One is duly incorporated into the mainstream and the other is sadly left to lurch on the border of society. The circulation and discursive formulation of ‘historical’ marks the formation of a composite national identity at the expense of marginalizing the primitive temporal reality. This continues to influence the newly independent nations like India. Therefore the significant bridge between the two realities can only be the idea of modern development as it tries to come to the terms with the troubled non-present. In expressing the outcast and the neglected, it categorically subsumes the heterodoxy of primitive voices. The primitives either surrender to the oppressive forces of the historical or get displaced by it. As in Tarashankar’s *The Tale of a River Bend*, the economic incursion with the advent of railways unsettles the traditional base of Kahar life, this novel also witnesses the same upheaval and resultant displacement as the Leftist Govt. of West Bengal decides to create a dam on the river. It forces Burman and his female-counterpart, Madari, to



relocate: “Bagharu and Madari are leaving the banks of the Teesta and Apalchand. The same reason, which would deforest the *Sal* trees, is likely to evict Burman and Madari. Deer, elephants, birds, and snakes, which used to roam all around the Teesta-based woods, would move away, and so would Burman's body. His battered physique would not survive the new Teesta-banks, the new forests...!”(Roy). As the novel finally ends with the hopeless surrender of the ‘primitives’ to the forces of capitalist intersection, it records the overpowering presence of the capital in their lives. The dismal failure of casteist mobilization under the yoke of colonial-capital is the failure of creating a composite national identity that this novel hints at.

Working on Aristotle’s distinction between ‘mere life’ (zoe) and ‘good life’ (bios), Giorgio Agamben in his book *Homo Sacer* (1998) explicates the genealogy of ‘bare life’ from ancient regime. Banished from political significance and exposed to murderous violence, ‘bare life’ is the cumulative result of the sovereign decision on the state of exception and the target of sovereign violence. Damaged, tortured, violated body of bare life is not only the biological ‘Zoe’ but also the mutilated trace of the unfulfilled, destroyed political ‘Bios’. Evoking Theodor Adorno, one could surmise that ‘bare life’, not only the referent but also the effect of sovereign violence, is a form of damaged life. This has greater influence on the functioning of modern democracies. ‘Bare life’ is always already ambivalently positioned in the politics as being included only in the form of exclusion and being exposed to the tortuous violence. With the gradual transformation of sovereignty into biopower, the bare life results into the state of exception as it changes into disjunctive inclusion within the modern life. For Agamben, this inclusion of bare life within the bodies of each citizen becomes catastrophically apparent with the reversal of the democratic state into totalitarian states. In the novel, Bagharu becomes the symbol of ‘bare life’, a life which is swayed by the whims of the political developments. Bagharu’s body becomes the space where the contest between the state and the people is enacted. Suman Mukhopadhyay, commenting on Bagharu writes:

"Bagharu knows, knows in his bones: 'Everything is Gayanath's, that Teesta there is Gayanath's, those lands there are Gayanath's, this Bagharu here is Gayanath's'. Gayanath - the



lord and master of Bagharu - had once ordered Bagharu to tie trees to his body and let himself to be carried away by the waves of flooded Teesta. [...]One of them, an expert boatman of the region, was Kadakhowa. He was like a mirror image, a look-alike of Bagharu himself. Though the two came very near each other, no exchange took place between them at least that was what the rest thought. Does this mean that the Bagharus are incapable of entering into dialogue with other Bagharus? Are they really so alienated, so lonely? At the very beginning, while wading through a river with the local M.L.A. on his shoulders, Bagharu had requested the elected representative to give him a human name. Towards the end, ten years after the talk with the M.L.A., Bagharu is left with just a monosyllabic utterance, a word that he employs as a fixed reply to all questions: No. No, he is not anything, he is not Rajbanshi, he is not English, he is not of any party, and he has no festoons or flags.

Bagharu is negation personified. And this 'negative essence' ceaselessly intervenes, interrupts steady flows, and makes messy all *a-priori* designs. The society and the state keep him outside of history and for the same reason he remains irrepressible, he 're-turns' again and again to point towards the unrealised potentials of history, towards open- ends" (Mukhopadhyay).

Bagharu is exploited, tortured, misled and ultimately wiped out from the pages of history. Misled by politicians, he joins a procession from Maynaguri towards Jalpesh, without knowing that he is lending support to the eviction of thousands of people like himself. He is an eternal transient without any describable definite identity. He is like others, forced to give away their identity and rights. As he gets uprooted, along with him is also displaced the age old customs and rituals of the Rajbangshis, residing on the banks of Teesta. In the 'state of exception' the rights of man is taken away and this depravity is naturalized by the sovereign power of the state. During the building of the dam, a supposedly time of crisis, Bagharu along with other Rajbangshis are forced to move away to facilitate the smooth functioning of the dam. Unwilled, they are to face the state brutality and exposed to the violence of the state. That is why Bagharu's removal is a stark reminder of the 'bare life', wrecked by 'thanato-



political state of power', necessitated by the 'state of exception'. Therefore, this in a way becomes the epic story of the perpetually disadvantageous Koch- Rajbangshis.

Written in the fag-end of twentieth century, this novel projects the cultural alienation and the plight of the Rajbagshi community in Bengal and the concomitant withdrawal from the pages of official history. It warns us against the falsity of developments, which does not care for its own subjects. During the 'state of exception', the citizen is turned into the 'bare life', becoming the subject to the violence of the state and the resultant panorama of suffering engulf the marginals. The more this gap is widened, the more it runs the risk of obliterating its own self. *Teesta Parer Brittanto* thus turns out to be the testimony of a promise, which loses its track in the complex meandering of time.

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