A regional novelist need not necessarily be an inhabitant of the place of which he writes, but he must have a keen interest in and detailed information of it and above all a sharp power of observation. A good regional fiction cannot, certainly, be written with the help of official dates and second hand information or a cursory glance of a tourist. But where the writer himself is a resident of the place of the novel, it is natural for him to possess an inherent affinity and attachment with the local people and surroundings, and it is convenient for him to have a knowledge of local specialities. At the same time it is also not unlikely that too much familiarity with the place may breed negligence and indifference about it.

In case of Tarasankar, we can know from his autobiographies that he had a soft corner in his heart for his district and had vast acquaintance with it through social works. In addition, he entertained a strong intention of depicting it in his literary creation. Hence we find the importance of a particular locality in many of his writings. "And Tarasankar Banerjee is happiest in his regional stories and novels. He knows quite well the man and the nature of the part of the country he belongs to (Birbhum District in West Bengal)". 1.

At this point it is essential to know the topography of Radh, the oft-mentioned name in Tarasankar's writings.

But it is difficult to mark out the exact situation of the old political divisions of Bengal of different times. So is the trouble with defining the old Radh.

Dr. Sukumar Sen has described the location of Radh in the following lines :-

"After the establishment of Capital in the northern Gangetic plain during the Pal dynasty in the eighth and ninth century, the left side of the river was named as Barendrabhumi or Barendri for its nature's abundance. In contrast, the right side was then, known as Radhghumi or Radh.**** In Sanskrit Radh means beauty and wealth. **** Most possibly, some part of the northern side of the Ganga was also in Radh, which, again, extended in the south up to the old bed of the Damodar known as Baka Balluka (Behula). It is this Radh that has been applauded by Vrndavandas in his Caitanyabhagavat. (Dhanya Radhdesh - glory of Radh)". 2.

With reference to old literature, Binoy Ghosh has concluded in his book Paschim Banga Samkriti :-

"After analysing different descriptions we find that present Hoogly district has

has been marked as the centre of old Sumbha or Radh which extended from Midnapur to Birbhum. The Radh was situated in between the hilly tracts and dense forests of Chota-Nagpur and Santal Pargana on one side and the fertile green plains of Bengal on the other. 3.

Lastly, for having a more clear idea of the specific area of Radh we can, probably, accept the following view.

"The complete Western side of the Bhagirathi - from the northern part of Murshidabad where the river has taken a turn to the south upto Howrah district was once known as Radh." The writer concludes after Minhaj a historian of twelfth century that, "It appears that during the reign of Lakshman Sen the area of the present districts of Birbhum, Burdwan, Bankura, Santal Pargana and Hoogly was named as Radh". 4.

The typical feature of Radh are the following :-

(a) The Soil is very hard, gritty and reddish brown, mixed with limestone and iron oxide. (b) Though there are large tanks and rivers with strong currents still the land is not marshy like that of East Bengal or Gangetic deltas (c) Major portions are highlands. As a result floods, if occur, submerge the land only for a short time.

These specialities of Radh covers the whole area from Birbhum to the hills of Chota-Nagpur. For this even to the Geologists this vast area is known as Radh. *

As discussed earlier, the background of a regional literature should be a rural or sub-urban locality with some peculiarities of its own, and a regional writer draws different aspects of that region in a good number of his writings.

That particular favourite place of Tarasankar is the district of Birbhum, where he took his birth and enjoyed his childhood and early youth.

From his own writings we came to know that he travelled extensively throughout his district on different occasions connected with political and social service or with a mind to know and see the villages, fairs, temples and holy places.

The entire region of Radh and its past and present life, not only the district of Birbhum or its condition during

3. Binoy Ghose - P.69 P.B.S.

* Ref. ibid.
his days, made him inquisitive with a fond eagerness to write on local subjects.

That is why his readers come across the name Radh and the description of its unique features in his novels and other writings.

In his presidential address at Banga Sahitya Sammelan (in 1374 B.E.) held at Suri, the headquarters of Birbhum District, Tarasankar gave a short description of the special features of Birbhum. We should read it in this connection in order to note his acquaintance with the place.

"It is true that, the food, habit, dress, culture, religion and customs of the people do not, and can not, change following the exact border-line of each district. Still, the district of Birbhum has got some specialities of its own distinguishing it from the neighbouring districts. And those are conspicuous. Here Bengal's black, soft and fertile soil has changed in this district bordering present Bihar, as if setting aside all her opulence Annapurna (the goddess of food), has sat for meditation in the saffron garb of a Bhairavi (a nun). The undulating saffron fields have, as if, merged into the blue of the horizon, with unknown flowers and thorns here and there, tall palm trees high in the sky like the withered hands of the Bhairavi.

"With the change of time the district of Birbhum has undergone great geographical transformations, but these natural features remain more or less unchanged. Here the rivers are very narrow, as if they are the flow of tears of the hard ground. Here we miss the beauty of forest, at least the land is devoid of the pleasant green of the foliage. Here the soil is hard but when properly cultivated and attended to yields sufficient crops. Here cattle's look thinner than those of other places."

"If you view with a look of sympathy and inquisitiveness Birbhum will present a quite different picture to you - a Birbhum full of holy sanctuaries from the bank of Ajoy in the south up to Nabhati in the north. Just take glimpses of Jaydev-kenduli, Bhandari Ban, Banka Ray, Birchandrapur, Bakreswar, MangalDhi, Ekakra, Labhpur, Saithia, Patharapadi, Nabhati, Nanur, Kamkali Tarapith ending with modern Santiniketan. Then a different picture of Birbhum will be evident to you. Cast your eyes for back over the dilapidated palace of Rajnagar, Sherina Bibi's grave at Hetampur or the ruins of Raja Ramjiban's monumental structures, and look at the pre-historical Birbhum full of monasteries and shrines of the devotees." 5.

Tarasankar has thus viewed Birbhum and Radh with the same sympathetic look of which he mentioned in his speech quoted above.

5. Samibarer Cithi - Vaisakh, 1374
The setting of a story or a novel does not mean only the immediate visible background where the events occur but comprises of time or the historical period, climate, nature and even the people in the scene. Bearing in his mind the importance of background Tarasanker in his regional novels has taken care in presenting the setting in descriptive passages.

Tarasanker's idea about the importance of background in a fiction is well-expressed in the following sentences in the preface to his novel "Raikamal", added in its second edition.

"I now feel the necessity of adding some descriptions of the area between Kendubilwa and Navadwip - a part of Radh - The seat of vaisnav culture. An idol does not appear attractive without a scene behind it. So, also, the characters in a novel can not be impressive in absence of a proper background of time and place. The readers too find it difficult to follow the incidents and characters!.

The writer Tarasanker knows that, -

" It is not a correct assumption that, the consciousness of human mind manifests itself in different moods and attitudes in different places and countries due to the impact of society or education only. But this diversity is also to be attributed to the land, nature, climate and many other influences. The nature of the people of Radh moulded by its soil and climate is quite different from that of the people of East Bengal - the green, soft land teeming with rivers." 6.

In his"Hansuli Banker Upakatha" Tarasanker has pointed out the distinction between the nature of Radh and East Bengal.

"The very old proverb - who resides on the bank of a river is under constant anxiety - though it is true, still the saying is not applicable in case of this entire region (of Radh) That applies to other parts of Bengal." 7. In these areas innumerable streams, rivulets, canals and bogs make the fields soft moistened and fertile and the villages look pleasantly verdant with creepers and tall palms, and there the most used conveyance is the boat.


"But the district containing "Hansuli Bank" is quite different. It's a place of hard soil. Here people is to struggle more with the soil than with any river. The rivers dry up under scorching sum of the summer and only sands remain in the river beds while on one side only knee-deep water flows somehow. She moves slowly like a little girl with a pale face and thin health who has lost her mother. At that time the soil gets the hardness of stone, grasses dry up and the earth becomes as heated as a piece of iron taken out of the fire. Even the ponds and wells dry up and their beds crack and then these lean rivers provide the people with water." 8. Not boat but cart is the main transportation in Radh area.

In the novel "Kalantar" Santoshbabu says to Kishorekhan on a summer day - "O my goodness I they say that Bengal is the most coveted place with its coolness of flowing rivers, with its pleasing southern breezes and also with the easy and motherly touch of the green lands fertilized by the streams. But, kisor, I was ignorant of any such area inside our Bengal. It seems that a piece of the desert of Rajasthan has been dug up by the ploughshare of Lord Balaram and transferred here." 9.

In the following typical extract, the topography and nature of Birbhum has almost turned lively and sensible. "There is no sign of green anywhere. The brown soil of the scorched fields right up to the horizon looks still deeper red. As if a Rakhsasi (demoness) has spread out its long tongue to allay her thirst." 10.

The novels named below are based on different areas of Radh and the writer has attempted to bring out the characters on a localised background: -
Tarasenkar's achievements as a regional novelist can be assessed only through a close study of these novels.

Apart from these, Radh occupies a part, through references and short descriptions in Saptapadi, Jangalga, Aroga Niketan. The rural setting and characters of Caitali Ghurni have very much resemblance with Radh but the background is not named.

Here, with a view to ascertain the position and importance of Radh in his novels we shall examine how closely the background is knit in the texture of the novels through the plots, characters etc.

But local influence doesn't end with physical surroundings only. Here we must take consideration also of the milieu which will be dealt with in details in Chapter Four.

10. P.64. Dhatrdebata.
In the southern part of Birbhum the two rivulets Bakreswar and Kopai have joined and formed the river Kue which flows through Murasidabad and mixes with the Mayurakshi*. Laghata - a port on this Kue, with its surroundings are in the main setting of the novel 'Dhattrdevata'.

The story of this novel has developed in three stages.

In the first stage, we see the activities of young Sibnath, a son of a zamindar of Birbhum; his voluntary services to the village society and his marriage with the daughter of a rich coalmine owner.

The second part of the story starts with Sibnath's going to Calcutta for study where two of his friends bring him in contact with a revolutionary patriot who understands the futility of bloodshed has abandoned the path. Sibnath comes back to his home to see his ailing mother who subsequently dies. Sibnath now falls into financial hardship and it becomes extremely difficult for him to retain the estate by paying the arrear revenues. Gouri, his wife, being a daughter of a rich man is not very willing to share their hardship and shows lack of sympathy to her husband in his difficulties. This brings forth a misunderstanding between the two families.

In the third part of the plot Sibnath donates his property to a hermit and himself establishes an Asram by the side of Mayurakshi where he settles down to organise rural upliftment and thus serve the people. But within a short time he responds to the call of Gandhiji's Non-Co-operation Movement and is sent to jail.

If we read the novel side by side with Tarasankar's autobiographies we can realise, and the writer himself has mentioned, that the story is based on his own life.*

Young Sibnath's social work during scarcity and epidemics or a fire, that were common in those areas, crisis of agriculture due to draughts, Sibnath's helplessness to collect revenue from poor and starving farmers, Ramji Sadhu with his strong influence on Sibnath in that area of Sakti cult, the presence of the Mahajans at Bolpur nearby and the forwarding of a loan to Ramratanbabu and Sibnath's plan for agriculture-farming and village-development at Bilwagram on the bank of Mayurakshi - no doubt these are all local elements in this novel. 'Pisima' represents a typical zamindar of Birbhum with her vanity, courage and firmness resembling the soil of Radh. The dreadful

* Ref: P.27.A.S.J.(I)
surroundings of the cremation ground on the night of Rakshakali puja reflects the dismal and cruel picture of the nature of Birbhum which arouses in Sibnath a strange feeling of love for his motherland. We can notice the projection of this wrathful nature in the description of the famine.

Of course, Sibnath's stay in Calcutta, his political consciousness and his joining the Non-Co-operation Movement are by no means regional events. But Sibnath is fully occupied by the nature and common people of Birbhum and their problems.

"The far-flung and diffused background hinder the compactness of regional temperament in literature". 11. And we must admit it in the case of "Dhatridevata".

The novel 'Kalindi' starts with the following lines -

"The river Brambhami flows by the side of the village Rayhat. Its local name is Kalindi. On the other side of the river a bed of sand has been formed by the river. * Presently 'Kali' has eroded a part of Rayhat and flows by it."

And now the disputes that arise when numerous heirs of the Ray Zemindars of the place, a few Mahajans and some ryots claim the ownership of the new land, along with the complications and consequences of their strife are narrated in this novel.

This river 'Kalindi' plays an important part in this novel. The Santals consider the river to be alive. Their belief is that, 'Kalindi' is 'the sister of no other god than Yama'. ** She erodes the land on one side while deposits on the other.

This newly formed 'car' of 'Kalindi' welcomes and accepts the modern industrialism and the capitalism of the businessmen while ousting feudalism torturing and declining as a result of its internal conflicts of interests. And the story shows the process of this change.

A sand-bank of a shallow river of Radh has caused so much toils and miseries to so many persons resulting in several deaths, deportation of Mahindra for committing a murder, eviction of the Santals from their lands and once-dreaded Zamindar Indra Ray's defeat and leaving his own village for Varanasi.

The novelist has ascertained the importance of the newly sprung up land in the following words of Sunita:

* To avoid circumlocution we, hereafter, use the word 'Car' to mean land thrown up by a river.
** Ref. Ch. 3. Kalindi.
"The cursed land! The seed of bloody revolution is hidden somewhere in its heart! One is killed and several are injured in the riot! Stream of blood has flown down the grass of the land!" 12.

Srikumar Bandopadhyay has remarked -
"In fact this novel has two main characters - one is Rameswar, a human being, the other is the inanimate nature in the form of oar of Kalindi." 13.

We must admit the regional character of this novel but with certain exceptions. In this context we can remember a critic's comment on Egdon Heath's role in Thomas Hardy's novel 'Return of the Native'.

"This story could not run its course anywhere other than amid the solitudes of Egdon. Egdon influences all the human characters, moving them to love or to hate, to dispair or to the philosophic mind." 14.

This conclusion cannot be drawn about the car of Kalindi in the novel 'Kalindi'. This car in 'Kalindi' plays the same role as the car in 'Car Kasem' and Car Ismail in 'Upanibes'.

This novel contains the geographical feature of an area of Birbhum, local problems regarding land and cultivation, as also a picture of the Santals who with their simplicity, sound physique and pastoral living remain a part of the nature. Though nature is an inseparable part of the novel, the writer has not shown the overall impact of it on the mental conditions of the characters. The car has evoked Ahindra's ideas of Communism which he has earlier imbibed from his readings.

For these reasons it may be said after Srikumar Bandopadhyay that -
'The car of Kalindi has touched its neighbouring human lives from a distance without influencing their souls'. 15.

In 'Sandipan Pathshala' we see how difficult it was even in the second and third decade of this century to spread literacy among the village population of Birbhum comprising

13. P.552. B.S.U.D.
* 'Car Kasem' and 'Upanibes' are two fictions by Amarendra Ghosh & Narayan Gangopadhyay respectively.
15. P.553. B.S.U.D.
mainly of Sadgop farmers and labourers, Kaibartas (fishermen), Sahas (goldsmith and dealers in country liquor) not to separate of those of still lower standing. It is a story of a Sadgop Primary-school teacher of the village Ratnahata who by his own effort established the Sandipan Pathsala with a view to educate the poor and backward people. But on the one hand want of sufficient students and on the other inconveniences caused by the so-called influential gentlemen of the locality put him in much trouble.

Though Ratnahata was a developing village new ideals and style of living had little place there. For this while Sitaram was encouraged and helped only by Bhirababu and Ranima he received resistance and opposition from others like Manilal-babu and Sibsankar.

In this novel the social environment plays a more dominant part than the geographical and natural surroundings of Radh. The problems which Sitaram faced was mostly due to the outlook of the people there who didn't feel the necessity of education. The situation would have been different in any town where, at least, Sitaram would not have been insulted simply for being a farmer's son.

But the financial and other problems of a Primary-school teacher like Sitaram, as narrated in the novel, was more or less similar everywhere in Bengal at that time. The writer has given some stress to Sitaram's patriotism and infatuation towards the lady teacher of the local girls' school which don't have any close connection with the background.

Though the regional factors have not entirely moulded the principal characters and main plot of 'Sandipan Pathsala', still we should take consideration of this novel along with Tarasankar's other novels having more regional characteristics, as it reflects certain social aspects of this particular region.

* Tarasankar out of his ignorance and after a few instances in his village, described the Mahisyas (an enlightened sub-caste of Kaibartas) as poor, illiterate, rustic cultivators. This caused much displeasure among the Mahisyas when Sandipan Pathsala was filmed, and as a result Tarasankar was manhandled by them. /Ref. Anunda Basar Patrika. April 3 & 10, 1949/ Tarasankar confessed his inadvertence and apologised. (Ref. PP. 179-80. A.S.J. (II).
In the twin novels 'Padacinha' and 'Kalantar' we get details of the natural transition in the rural life of Labhpur with its surroundings during the period from 1905 to a few years after our independence.

Arnold Bennet has named fictitiously the five pottery-towns to the north of Staffordshire beside the river Trent which served the background of his novels - "A Man From The North", "Anna Of The Five Towns" and some stories. Tarasankar, too, in his present novels have used a fictitious name in place of Labhpur, retaining the names of other villages mentioned. As a result we can recognize the actual locality as the readers of Arnold Bennet can. When we read Tarasankar's these two novels in consultation with his some other writings, including autobiographical, we find his 'Nabagram' is in fact Labhpur coloured with his imagination for the sake of art.*

The main theme of 'Padacinha' is the conflict between Swamababu of a Zamindar family and Gopicandra, a rich and rising coal-miner ending in the former's defeat and humiliation. In this connection comes the past and present picture of the local society.

In this stream of the story the writer narrates the social-activities of Gopicandra as the foundation of a School, a Charitable dispensary, a Theatre, a Library etc. with the help of Kisor, Daktar and others which made astir the Zamindar-influenced village society of Labhpur steeped in superstition, luxury and lethargy.

As Radhakanta of 'Pacacinha' puts in -
"With the change of all-powerful Time the Mahapitha of Nabagram, enlightened as a result of penances of many devotees through ages, have recently been enveloped in the darkness of ignorance." 16.

But Radhakanta is pleased to witness 'with the mysterious play of time', the new progress and prosperity of Nabagram under the initiative of Gopicandra.

In 'Kalantar' Gourikanta, a writer, comes to his own village Nabagram after a long time, on the First of Vaisakh after national independence, and is overwhelmed with a mixed feeling of pain and pleasure for the all-round changes in his village. The story develops centering Gourikanta with his

* e.g. The geographical situations and other features of MastaLi (Mahistali), Goga (Gogram), Mahagram (Mahugram), Debipur, Nabagram (Labhpur) and such other villages in and around Labhpur Block are described with accuracy.

reminiscences and new experiences in which the various changes in the life of Nabagram is the main theme.

Though in these novels we find cursory references of the physical aspects of Radh the nature does not influence the principal characters to any notable degree. But the rural population of Radh, the local pitha of Attahas, the religious and other places of importance, local social and religious festivals, customs, the legends and myths in combination, certainly, produce a graphic picture of a vast area centering Labhpur.

The novels 'Raikamal', 'Radha' and 'Svarga Martya' are written on the background of Vaisnav culture and its holy places like Nanur, Kenduli.

In 'Raikamal' the author has described the Vaisnav atmosphere and traditional practices of the vainsava of Radh and has intermixed the surroundings with the plot and the particular tone of the novel. According to the novelist, 'the Haludmani bird that elsewhere in Bengal calls out - Ghraster Khoka Hok (may the houseowner be blessed with a son) here changes its words and chatters - Krsna Kotha Go (where is Lord Krsna) ?'. 17.

The fragrance of innumerable uncared-for holy basil and host of Kadam flowers are complementary to this environment of vaisnav-life. The picture of the akhdas of Radh has been drawn with a touch of local colour.

It appears that the heavenly love of Radha is reflected in the manners and behaviour of Kamal who is nurtured in this vaisnav surroundings. The famous fair of the Bauls at Kenduli, where Kamal and Ranjan meet, is also important in the story. Again, Rasikdas is one of those numerous Bauls who roam about on the red-soils of Radh. It is quite usual for the Sahajiyas of this area to espouse more than once. Here no one is surprised at the attachment of the middle-aged Boul Rasikdas towards young woman Kamal. Such young girls accompanying aged male devotees are common sight around here.

In this story Kamal and Rasikdas get married and sweeping away all his restraints the aged Baul surrenders to his physical urge. But in no time he is full of remorse and leaves his home for wandering life of a Baul. After some days Rasikdas returns and they together pass their days in religious prayers and practices in their akhda. But Rasikdas finally leaves the company of Kamal. After two years, on her way to the temple of Jaydev, Kamal unexpectedly

meets Ranjan and they get married by garlanding each other with the flower-wreath given by the prist of the temple. But being deprived of the love of Ranjan the vaisnavi, Kamal, lastly, leaves everything behind and aimlessly moves along the bank of Ajoy.

The following is a very common picture of the sahajiya vaisnavis roving the near the holy places in Radh.

'The vaisnavi sings in village-markets. The facetious among the listeners put her different questions. The woman slightly draws her veil aside with a charming smile. The jocund listeners remark - vaisnavi's smile is as charming as her songs. The woman smilingly replies - Your honour! this much is the only asset of a vaisnavi." 18.

The commercial area of Birbhum on the bank of Ajay from Illumbazar to Janubazar with Jaydev Kenduli at a distance of six or seven miles and opposite to Kenduli the fort of Syamrupa and the places adjacent to Ichai Ghosh's temple in Burdwan district constitute the background of the novel 'Radha'.

The story extends over the period from 1726-'27 to four months after the battle of Plassey (1757).

Several important political incidents of Birbhum, Burdwan, Bankura and Murshidabad with setting of the region are penetrated into the flow of this fiction. Well-known places of Birbhum like Supur, Ananda-cad's Nababrindaban, fair at Kadamkhandi, Hetampur are connected with the story.

Krsnadasi and Mohini, her daughter, of Illumbazar - two vaisnav women of Nyada-Nedi sect and the Sanyasi who newly arrives there and establishes an Asram close to the Syamrupa's Fort are the three principal characters of this novel. Krsnadasi and Mohini, both are moved at the sight of the handsome sanyasi and they desire to offer themselves to him, of course, in the name of vaisnav custom. On the other hand, the Sanyasi is disgusted with the Parakiya cult of the sahajiya vaisnavs of Bengal because, in course of time it has degenerated and it ruins the society as a whole. For this, he has excluded Radha in his new vaisnavism and accepts only Krsna, the killer of Kamsa. Thus to him both Mohini and Krsnadasi are unholy.

So the mahanta of the monastery of Kenduli has intimated Madhabananda that, this part of Radh is influenced by Vaisnavism preached by Jaydev, the vaisnav poet. 'Placing goddess Radha's feet with reverence on his head Jaydev has popularised the cult of Parakiya here, and so it is not a befitting place for your ideals.' 19. 'This area is flooded with the spirit of Git-Govinda', and so people will not tolerate your concept of vaisnavism without

Radha and conflicts will be inevitable.' 20.

In this connection Madhabananda compares Kenduli with Braja and the other side of Ajoy with Mathura while the river Ajoy flowing between them as the Yamuna. He says -

'Remember, the killing of Kansa at Mathura follows the juvenile sports of Krana at Brajadham.' 21.

This proclamation of Vaisnavism without Radh by Madhabananda at a place predominated by the sahajiyas vaisnavas has brought the invariable adverse reaction and resistance. The enraged people have frustrated his arrangements for distribution of drinking water to the thirsty passersby in summer. Again the villagers become friendly to Madhabananda and his followers after they rescue and protect the local people when the Maharashtrian dacoits, in the disguise of monks, attack some visitors at Kenduli's fair and then swim across the Ajoy.

The gers parakiya practice upheld by the preceptors of Kenduli, combination of Tantra and Vaisnavism introduced by Anandacaud-Swami of Supur, the false propaganda of mastery in witchcraft by Krsnadas and her father-in-law Premdas - these reacted on Madhabananda's mind in some way. So also Hatem Khan's hostile attitude towards other religions, self-offerings of Krsnadas and Mohini, enmity of Radharaman Das Sarkar and his son Akuru - rich businessmen of Illumbazar and such other incidents distributed Madhabananda's religious practices repeatedly. At one time he, along with others, had to go away from the soil of Radh.

Most of the characters in 'Radha' are influenced by the environment. Kayo Bairagi, like a pet dog in Krsnadas's Akhda seems to be a part of the nature of the locality. He used to hunt the fairs, villages and akhdas just to have some food and did not leave this deserted area during the inroads of the Marhattas.

With a few examples we can see how the nature of Radh with its forests and even mean creatures have exerted influence on the feelings of Madhabananda, a prominent character of the novel.

When Madhabananda came to know from Kayo about the insanity of Krsnadas who had left her home, he thought - "The water in Ajoy is very shallow now, but there are abysses in it with crocodiles in them."

"He could see in his imagination the entire society, as if embodied in Krsnadas, being deviated from the religion of love, is bewildered in transgression like an intoxicated man." He shuddered at that picture. "They, too, will meet similar unnatural end by falling in the abysses of life." 22.

21. ibid.
Madhabananda wrote a letter to Fauzdar Hafez Kha requesting him to save Mohini from the clutches of Akura. One evening after a shower, anxious Madhabananda cast his glance over the nature around. He could not concentrate his mind for a meditation, as his mind rushed towards Ilumbasgar. He was charmed with the beauty of nature. Ajoy was before him and Kendubilwa on its other bank. The verses of Git Govinda came to his mind.

Like a part of this nature Mohini also has upset Madhabananda. Lastly, Mohini’s unreserved offering of herself to the services of Madhabananda gave rise to his emotion which, like a strong current of Ajoy, was about to sweep away the sanyasi’s long-observed restraints.

So, we can conclude in the words of Srikumar Bandopadhyay that in the novel 'Radha' -

"The wild nature of Radh is mingled with the thoughts and perceptions of the characters. The vivid descriptions of this wild nature scattered throughout the story is quite consistent with the introspections of this devotee desirous of salvation. Here, the living nature has firmly embraced the inner-self of men." 23.

Again, the vaisnav environment of northern Radh provides the background of the fiction 'Swarga Marta'. The story spreads out over the village of Subalpur and its surroundings, with the Akhda of Brajadasi as its centre. The story contains the life of the local Bagdis and Sadgops influenced by vaisnav-rites, the establishment of an akhda and practices of vaisnavism by Narottandas Babaji, a new comer to this place. Then we find Dulal, an illegitimate child of Narottandas by a woman whom he gave a shelter in his akhda. Dulal grows into a desperate young man and leads a life of a non-vaisnav. He becomes a bus-conductor and often visits distant towns and prefers an adventurous town-life.

"This particular area on the bank of Mayurakshi is equally famous with the sacred places of the vaisnavs as is the valley of Ajoy". 24.

Brajadasi, as a vaisnav woman brought up at this place, has inherited the real qualities of a vaisnav with her sacrifice, affection, devotion to religious rites and modest disposition. Whereas Narottandas, who is an outsider here, fails to absorb the vaisnav culture and tenet though he outwardly embraces this religion. He remains a lustful hypocrite.

23. P.587. B.S.U.D.
The story is intermixed with the local vaisnav practices, the life of the Bagdis, the mental imbalance of the Tantrik worshippers, and many other problems arising out of local geographical conditions. To name a few of them - the abysses of the Mayurakshi with its tributaries Dauki and Bauki, infested with crocodiles prevent people from taking their bath in them. The shrubs and jungles here are often haunted by tigers, so people are extremely cautious to go to those places. Here people are accustomed to dwell along with venomous snakes.

In respect of "Ganadebata" and "Pamagram" a critic has affirmed - These are 'accounts of life in Radh' during the time 1922 to 1933 and 'the common life of Birbhum is the background'.

Kankana, Kusumpur, Mahugram, Sibkalipur and Dekhuria - these five villages of Birbhum are in the setting of these twin novels. Most of the villages mentioned in these novels are really situated in Birbhum but their actual locations are different. There is a field named Amarkundar-Math touching the border of these five villages. The Mayurakshi flows on the south, east and west of this field. After the First World War the cultivators of Sibkalipur, to which the major portion of this field belongs, have sold it out to the babus of Kankana. Now they cultivate others' lands while some produce cereals on the land called Cholakudi or Cholakunda on the river-bank. The area near the railway junction on the other side of the river, is developing into a township where businessmen have settled and farmers can sell their crops against cash-money.

The village-artisans have lost their market as mill-made products are available at the junction market at comparatively cheaper rate. The blacksmith, the barber and the carpenter throng there for a better and steady earning. Complication arises in the story when they refuse to abide by the order of the village-panchayat which is presently dominated by unscrupulous people like Srihari Ghosh.

Then, in course of events we can see the panorama of the five villages. The Mahajans at junction, the coalmine-owners of Kankana and their effort to usurp the powers of the Zamindars, the helplessness of the cultivators, Srihari's struggle with the village society in his attempts to come to importance, the rugged red soil of Birbhum, the Mayurakshi with its floods - all these contribute to develop the story.

We get vivid picture of a particular area from the descriptions of the local physical and agricultural conditions, the periodic floods of Mayurakshi, the dreadful sounds of the mid-might - drummings by the dacoits and incidents of day-to-day life of the Bauris, Bayens, Sadgops, Santals and others.

We also find in the novel numerous cultural practices and customs, various festivities and the importances of certain places.

In those days most of the industries in other areas of Bengal such as the jute mills and various factories at Howrah, Hoogly and 24-Parganas were owned by foreign Companies. The presence of a few Bengal coalmine-owners at Burdwan and Birbhum and their frequent conflicts with the zamindars, as seen in these novels, is a local factor. Thus these two novels present the way of living of the people of a particular area with a clear picture of the local social, political and economic conditions.

Tarasankar, in the course of a talk with a modern writer drew a similarity between the hard and rough soil of Radh and its people.

"The people of my district are outwardly rough and rude but softness at a tender touch. Their soft feelings are not manifest apparently." 26.

Nayaratna of "Ganadebata" is a striking exple of such a personality with a pleasant affable wit but of rigid and unconciliatory principles. Daulat Seikh and Phyalaram Choudhury are as heartless and crooked as the incongenial nature of northern Radh.

Considering the importance of the local social elements Arun Kumar Mukhopadhyay correctly concludes -

'No doubt Debu Ghosh appears the protagonist of these two novels but in reality the changing village society is the hero.' 27.

'Ganadebata' and 'Panca-Gram' are surely significant examples of regional novels as these contain characters subtly and deeply influenced by the nature, society, culture, religion and customs of a particular area. All these create a compact and complete appeal of life pattern of the then Radh.

'Kabi' is the story of a village-poet of Birbhum named Nitai who is a Dom by caste. He lives at the village Attahas, the Mahapith of Devi Camunda. Here opera and kabi-songs are performed on the occasion of the festival of this goddess on the fullmoon day in the month of Magh. Besides this, here, in the villages of Radh, Jhumur and kabi-songs are very popular and are often presented before roadside-gatherings, mostly of the lower class Hindus like -Bauris,

Bayena, Doas and others. The audience is entertained with vulgar songs with appropriate gestures and movements of Jhumur.

The soil of the place is pale yellow which is very hard except in rainy season. Raja, the pointsman of the local railway station with his incorrect Hindi is very friendly to all but often flogs his wife at home. One day, per chance, Nitai and Raja becomes acquainted with each other and Raja takes Nitai to his railway quarter. They become close friends in no time and Nitai's poetic skill is much appreciated by Raja. Nitai is introduced to Thakurjhi, the sister-in-law of Raja and in a short time an infatuation develops in them.

The nature around Attahas with its lourry appearance influences the poetic mind of Nitai to give up his loathsome family occupation of theft and devotes himself in composing lyrics. Raja's friendliness and praises, Thakurjhi's admira­tions and attachment enhance Nitai's self-confidence, sense of prestige and even his poetic talent.

The environment of the village inspires Nitai who takes Kabi-song, a stream of local folk-culture as the aim of his life. The deity of the place occupies much importance in his mind. The sight of Thakurjhi dressed in all-white with a brass-pitcher on her head moving along the railway line resembling a Kasa-flower and the Krama-cuda flowers near the railway station appeal to his poetic mind as much as the travelling opera parties of Radh.

By chance Nitai comes in touch with a Jhumur Party where Basanta, a dancing-girl at first taunts him but soon, being impressed by his simplicity and humane behaviour and his power of composition, hail him as her 'Cuckoo of the spring'. Fortunately, Nitai gets a chance to join the party.

Basan is a woman of low taste commonly seen in a Jhumur party of Radh area. Vulgarity is in her nature and prostitution is a part of her occupation. In the Jhumur party, to please and attract the audience 'Nitai', through Basan's indulgence, giving up his fine taste turns to composing obscene and detestable songs. The story narrates their love, mutual influences, Nitai's experiences in the Jhumur party, Basan's premature death in a disease common to a woman of her profession, Nitai's sorrow and his search for peace.

The village Attahas with its nature and habitants, the village-culture of Radh area with different amusements
like kabi-seng, Jhumur dance, Kheud, Tarja are indispensable background of the novel. The characters are a part of this culture. Their living, love and problems are linked with this folk-culture and its environment brings them close to one another.

Nitai, the hero of the novel is one of the innumerable kabi-seng of Radh. The localities of Attahas, Kandra, Alipur, Katwa, Agradvip are the places of his professional activities. he feels uneasy outside this region, even at the holy place of Varanasi.

It seems, the yearnings and errors, the love and flirtation, attachment and indifference, allurement and apathy of the character are, practically, centred at a point.

Kabi is a novel with the fragrance of the soil of a particular region of Bengal and the people closely attached to the rivers, fields and woodlands of the area. *

The geographical background of 'Hasuli Baker Upakatha' which is described at the starting of the novel can be clearly located in the map of Birbhum.

"The well known bend of the river Kopai near the middle of its course is popularly known as Hasuli Bak, because, the bend is very sharp and looks like a Hasuli (a kind of necklace)". 28.

"The village Basbadi encompassed by the river at Hasuli Bak and is dotted with bamboo-cluips in the block named Jangal, comprises of an area of Eighty acres." 29.

'Hasuli Baker Upakatha' is the story of this Basbadi.

The life of the kahars has a close relation with the darkness under the bamboos, the supernatural dreads, the uneven surface and ruthless climate of Radh, the erratic flood of Kopai and such other local factors.

Bidyoday Library, Calcutta-9.
29. ibid.
The mysteries and adversities of nature with its sporadic calamities forms the basis of the myths and proverbs of the kahars and this nature, also mould their beliefs and surprises, a constant consciousness of a semi-spiritual atmosphere and the peculiar ideas of their life.

The darkness of the bamboo-clusters keep the minds of the kahars, so to say, covered with ignorance and prejudices, whereas the hissing of large snakes, the hooting of owls and the cries of geckos and other animals around a fear of ghosts in them. The darkness of Basbadi, the moonlight over the jungles, the strong currents of Kopai goes to fill in the minds of the kahars with spontaneous and wild feelings of jealousy, anger, cruelty and unrestrained sensuality.

And in practical life they meet their financial needs in their hard days by selling the bamboos of Basbadi.

Nature is as indifferent to the weals and woes of life as in the flow of time. The shepherd Gabriel in Hardy’s 'Far From The Madding Crowd' is happy as he can fully adjust himself to the process of this impartial and unaffected nature while Eustacia suffers as she can not. In 'Hasuli Baker Upakatha', surrendering themselves to the hostile nature of Birbhum the kahars impose divinity on many things like - silk-cotton tree, Cobra, wood-apple tree etc. It may be said that, their Kartabaha and Kalrudra symbolise the adversities of nature around them.

In fact, the small area of Hasuli Bak is not only the background of this novel but has virtually become a character in it. The abyss of Kopai, flood, draught, bamboos, wood-apple tree, silk-cotton tree, snakes, bear, the sky, cloud, lightening and such other natural elements and phenomena deeply influence the life of the kahars. Things like towns and town-people, machines and workshops, trains and aeroplanes, create a sense of awe and repulsion in the kahars. Karali has developed some reasoning and liberal views only coming in touch of the railway workshop at Gandanpur and its environment. 'Karali appears to be a foreigner among the kahars. Though he is of same origin his manners are much changed, even the language he now speaks has undergone great change.' 30.

'The workshop at Gandanpur is like a foreign place to the kahars and Karali to them is like a man who has just returned from England.' 31.

31. P.266. H.B.U.K.
So, we conclude with these words of Srikumar Bandopadhyay:

'The principal character of this novel is not any person, but the natural surroundings of Hasuli Bak, the spiritual atmosphere and a compact community encircled by both of them.' 32.

Tarasankar in several places in his writings has mentioned of snakes as a nuisance in his district. We also find snake-episodes in 'Dharrdebata', 'Kalindi', 'Sandipan Pathshala', 'Hasuli Baker Upakatha' and a few short stories e.g. 'Nari O Nagini' Snakes pester in Radh and its adjoining areas probably because they find a good shelter in the jungles and highlands which do not submerge in monsoon. So, this area is the haunting ground of the professional snake-catchers. The are found moving over her in a very large number in fields and meadows.'Nagini Kanyar Kahini' details their typical mode of living.

At the starting of the novel the author has given an elaborate and vivid description of the background. Satali village, the age-old abode of the snake-charmers is bordered by the Ganga on the East and the lake Hijal on the West. Snakes live in abundance in the water of Hijal, in nearby fields and even on the trees. During winter snakes are not seen off and on but varieties of birds flock here and among them Gaganbheri frightens the stranger with its peculiar hoot.

Bisbedes, a class of snake-catchers live in Satali village by the side of Hijal. They are very little concerned with outside people except when they seasonally go out for a display and sale of snakes and thereby earn their livelihood.

Sirbede is the chief leader of this Bisbede Group and can punish them for any indiscipline. Nagini Kanya, Kanya, who have certain specific signs, often becomes the source of many conflicts and complications among them.'Nagini Kanyar Kahini' unfolds the problems and intrigues centering Mahadeb and Gangaram, two successive Sirbedes and Nagini Kanyas Sabala and Pingala.

In Radh, Hijal is the common name of marshy lands. But this Hijal is a well-known and big lake in Murshidabad District near the Ganga. The writer has confessed his lack of first hand knowledge of this lake and so has described

32. P.565.B.S.U.D.
it with a touch of his imagination. As a result the background that comes up before us with an admixture of legends, myths and scenario trifles the actual geographical situation of the place.

The life of the Bedes, full of superstitions and dangers, and with their elemental passions, simplicity and ferocity perfectly reflects and matches with the nature around. In the words of Pramatha Nath Bisi -

"The lake Hijal is not mere a natural scene, but a living character - a background of the entire plot turned into a personality. Possibly of greater importance it symbolises the Fate itself." 33.

Lastly, we can remember the proper analysis by Srikumar Bandopadhyay in his following remarks:

"The whole story is in tune with the thrilling and mysterious setting composed of the thick bushes of catkins and water reeds, the dense forests beside Hijal lake with its wild beasts, snakes and vipers and the usual significant movements of the birds and animals." 34.

The story of the fiction "Tamas Tapasya" goes like this.

Panu, a young boy, with his experience of oppression on his family members by the police in his fear escapes from police care and is, per chance picked up, indisposed and unconscious by a group of nomads.

There, in the border of Birbhum adjacent to Santal Pargana, in the company of these nomads he lives for a long time and as a result, imbibes many of the habits and behaviours of these people. Later while travelling in a town of Birbhum by the side of the river Mayurakshi, accidentally he meets his sister and stays with her family. He usually brings firewood from the forest on the river and do such other jobs. But one day he unexpectedly receives a rebuff from his sister for the rudeness of his nature and in his grief leaves them.

Panu, then afraid of men, begin his life at a sandbank of Mayurakshi, but soon leaves it under oppression of

* Ref:


34. P.579. B.S.U.D.
the local landlord, and takes shelter in an island of the river. Even there he is ultimately cheated by Ghosebaba, a milkman as well as his father-in-law.

Nomad Panu finally settles at an wasteland near the river Bakresvar. With his own labour and hardship he turns his area of the land into, so to say, an Oasis in a desert with hard red and gritty land all around.

There also, the local zamindar, tempted with this piece of the improved land picks up a pretext to punish Panu who again and again helplessly bears the miseries.

Thus, with repeated blows of his misfortunes Panu turns into an intolerant and heartless ruffian.

Thereafter, Panu develops a soft and affectionate feeling for a young calf wounded by him. Again, with the death of one of his wives a great change of his heart becomes apparent and it takes a spiritual colour as he becomes attached to Namo Narayan Gosai, a sanyasi of the locality.

So, 'Tamas Tapasya' is a story of a man, away from normal social life, who gradually becomes wild and heartless in an adverse environment and then through many ups and downs at last transcends to a peaceful and tranquil world of devotion.

The nomads commonly found in these areas occupy an important place in the story.

So, also, we find here the hard and rough soil of Birbhum including its rivers Kopai, Bakresvar, and Mayurakshi with their sand-banks where Panu, the nomad, takes shelter again and again.

The hat of Bhubanpur is a very old one. There are many Bhubanpurs in this region. There is Ganga-Bhubanpur on the bank of the Ganga, Bipra-Bhubanpur is a few miles away in the west and Choto-Bhubanpur is still further in the West.

But the village where the hat is held is known simply as Bhubanpur. Here the god is Bhubaneswar Anadilinga and the place is named Bhubanpur after him. Outsiders call it Sib-Bhubanpur, but people of this place call it Bhubanpur - the good old Bhubanpur. God Taraknath dominates over Tarakasvar, Deoghar is the dominion of Baidyanath and Bhubanpur is of Bhubaneswar.
Bhuban-Dighi, a large lake, is situated near the hat and the swamp of Mayurakshi is at a distance of three miles.

This hat of Bhubanpur with its surroundings is the background of the fiction 'Bhubanpurer Hat'. The temple of Bhubaneswar is at the centre of the hat. Proverb goes - this hat is the great seat of goddess Gandheswari.

Earlier the place was a barren land of red soil mixed with gravels and was the area of the club-men. The story includes the legend of the origin of Bhubanpur and its divinity, the faith of the people who come here, the priest-class of this temple, their connection with the market, their endowed property and dispute arising out of it, the life of the local Gandhabaniks and the Vaisnavs.

This hat is connected with the main characters - their conflicts and struggles and their way of living. People come over here to take medicine for many incurable diseases, to settle marriage, to win love or to fulfill some secret desire. The expenses of the temple and earnings of the priests come from the tax collected from the sellers. This is the place for perverted girls like Cunaria to earn their livelihood.

Various characters and their varied activities have not only given a colourful touch to the look of the hat but have also become a part of it.

Though in present times the presence of electricity, Cinema, political parties have brought some urban trends here, still people come here with their age-old religious faiths. Here a housewife can move about all alone to the fairs and the holy places of the Vaisnavs and often a young man abruptly turns to a devotee Baul with saffron clothes by renouncing a domestic life.

It can, therefore, be rightly said that, this Bhubanpurer Hat is the real protagonist of this novel.

"Aranya-Banhi" is based on the well-known Santal Revolt of 1854 in Santal Pargana, Birbhum and adjacent areas of Radh.

"The place concerned is a vast area comprising of the entire Santal Pargana and Deoghar - from Bhagalpur upto Tinpahar and Rajmahal (to the west of the Ganga) in the north and the then district of Birbhum spreading upto the north bank of Mayurakshi in the south." 35.

The entire land in the south of Rajmahal was then in the district of Murshidabad. And the wild area of Santal Pargana and Deoghar was in Birbhum district. 36.

Tarasankar presents in his "Aranya Banhi" a chapter of the history of Old Birbhum in the shape of a fiction. It describes the local Santal life, their economic distress and oppressions by the Dikus (Hindu businessmen), the appearance of some Englishmen in Burdwan, Birbhum area in connection with the construction of Railways and roads, conversions of the Santals into Christianity, establishment of Indigo and Silk houses (Kuthi) and humiliation of the Santals at the hands of the foreigners. In their helplessness the Santals worship their Ma Bonga (goddess) at their Jahar Sarna (place of god) with prayers for gaining strength to fight out the enemies and remove their hardships. And lastly they revolt under the leadership of Subhobabu, Sidhu and Kanu.

The rustic people of the forests of Birbhum and Santal Pargana with their natural, primitive simplicity are as determined and inflexible as the nature of the place. But the writer shows how, being deceived and exploited repeatedly, the Santals gather the courage to protest and say - 'This country is ours'. In their distress they were naturally attracted by the Sakt cult of Birbhum and received their impetus for revolt from Bengalee Saktas like Tribhuban Bhattacharya and his daughter 'Bhairabi'. Ultimately they react with a revolution. But inspite of their valour their want of experience causes them great miseries. The blank-fire from the British soldiers make them think that goddess Durga mysteriously turns the enemy - bullets into water and keep them unhurt. Fearlessly they face the British guns down the plain of Sangrampur leaving their advantageous position on the hill-top of Pialpur. Thus they met their herculean ends.

The story of this tribe of a well-defined land with their agricultural life, their own problems and their efforts to remove them make 'Aranya Banhi' a perfect regional novel. The hills and forests of Santal Pargana and Birbhum, the distribution of the special 'call on Sal leaves' ** to their own people by the Santal men riding on ponies or bi-cycles over the sun-burnt fields, their thronging at the temple of goddess Kali in the depth of the jungles, the Bhairabi with her assurances make the readers feel a condensed sense of regionality in the story with a deep compassion for the poor Santals.

** The secret symbol for a mass-revolution adopted then by the Santals.
The novel 'Capa Dangar Bau' is developed mainly on the domestic love and intricacies of an agricultural family of Radh. Still the background of the agricultural land of Radh with its rivers Mayurakshi and Bakreswar peep through the story. It seems that, a whimsical and bucolic character like Mahatap is perfectly befitting with this land where he gets hard soil to labour with and various folk festivals and entertainments like Gajan, Id-Puja, Sam, Alkap etc. to take part in or only enjoy.

While reviewing the novels of Thomas Hardy, George Sampson says :-
"The most impressive character in his novels is not a person, but a place, Egdon Heath, timeless, immemorial, and unmindful of the human life that flutters briefly upon its ancient bosom."37.

Similarly, considering collectively the novels of Tarasankar discussed here-in, possibly we can conclude, of course in a lighter emphasis, that the land of Radh with all its features, is also a character in them.

Now we proceed to the Fourth Chapter to study the characteristics of the local life as depicted in Tarasankar's novels.