CHAPTER IV
The Novels of Gunamay Manna: Peasants’ Unrest and
Peasants’ Struggle

Gunamay Manna appeared in the realm of the Bengali novel in the second half of the 20th century. The author was born in the Adagoda Village of the Ghatal block of west Midnapur in 1925. He entered the literary world of Bengal as a writer of stories. The short-story *Abijnan* ¹ was published in the magazine *Parichay* in 1948. Two years later in 1950, his first novel, *Lakhindar Digar* ² saw the face of publication. After this, his pen flowed in an incessant stream.

Except two or three, most of his novels are based on the lives of workers or peasants. Hence it is said about him:

Referring to his own literary urge, the writer has remarked:

At the time the writer entered the world of literature, major events like the World War, famine, communal riots and above all partition of the country had already occurred, resulting in different thematic and stylistic experimentations in literature. Side by side with the peasant-life, the workers of jute-mills and men belonging to different occupations also began to find place in literature. As a result of the earnest endeavours of Pragati Lekhak O Shilpi Sangha, Gananatya Sangha etc., the true pictures of the lives of the poor, socially exploited classes to find reflection in literature.

Referring to his own literary urge, the writer has remarked:
The suspense with which he stepped into and made advances in the path of literature, bore its fruit in the novel *Lakhindar Digar*. In this chapter we have focussed on the writer’s two novels namely *Lakhindar Digar* and *Shalbani*.

II

In the novel, *Lakhindar Digar*, Gunamay Manna has drawn a true picture of peasants’ revolt which had a great impact on the village-life of an unknown village of Midnapur district. Though the Midnapur, village Amdhere is the main setting of the novel, other adjoining villages such as Shyaoda, Shyamgang, Shiyasha, Jhankra, Dhangachhia, Kechkapur, Keshpur with their men and surroundings have played important roles in the plot of the novel. The farmers and labourers of this region are habituated with the exploitative reigns and the feudal customs and practices imposed upon them by the two zamindars of two areas. Gunamay Manna has also described these villages and rustic places in the novel. The sub-division town Ghatal is only 12 miles east of Kechkapur village. The two men, Phani Babu and Shyamchandra Babu of Jhankra village works as mohrars in the town court of Ghatal. These two look after all the cases and legal suits filed by people of this area. So, they are always treated highly with care and fear. Towards the end of the novel, by way of describing the 26th January celebrations, the writer has given a description of Jhankra village also. It is noteworthy that the author has consciously tried to focus on the class-characters of these villages. About Jhankra village, he writes:

It is quite clear from this description that these villages have grown under an agriculture-
based economy. It is clear enough that though this areas are slightly influenced by the urban civilization, they are entirely free from the impact of urban economy. A critic has made the following remark in this connection:

At the very outset of the novel, Gunamay has referred to the time in which the novel is set—

The sentence with the mention of specific date and year point to histories and several social transitional shifts. Though the British have gone away, they have left behind the class of zamindars. The Permanent Settlement has a disastrous message to their life. Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay has thrown light on the plight of the farmers caused by the Permanent Settlement which came into force in 1793 in his *Bangadesher Krishak*:

Not only that, the village and village-life are on the way to destruction as well. As a result of the Settlement, the new zamindar-class that came up became money-mongering contractors in reality. Besides, the exploitations of the middle-classes such as the money-lenders and jotdars were more dreadful. A number of peasants revolts took place against this exploitation. The mention made of time at the very beginning of the novel is actually meant for making the readers aware of the time. After many struggles, after the British have left the country, even after the new ruling class have assumed power in independent India, the peasants and farmers are still the victims of a merciless feudal and state-sponsored exploitation—all these clearly indicate that no socio-economic change has come about so far in their life. The very first sentence of the novel carries this truth.
The writer has not mentioned the time only, he has given a description of agriculture even before the story begins and by way of this he has shed light on the main theme of the novel — the resistance by the exploited peasants and farmers. He has described thus:

This description makes clear the real plight of the farmers under the background of time. In other words, the farmers will have to wait till the fields are ready for sowing the seeds of struggle. They will have to tackle the inobedient lands with iron hands; they will have to advance breaking the stumbling blocks; they will also have to keep the cattle under strict control. The farmers will have to change their strategy according to necessity by ‘•••••••••••••••••••••••••••’ etc. The farmers will be required to advance forward with carefulness, courage, strength and perseverance. Through the above description, the writer has not only referred to cultivating the land by means of the plough—behind the description is hidden a far-off hint of political movements. Through this description of ploughing of the land, the author has introduced the central character of the novel Lakhindar Digar to the readers. In the novel, it is through this character that the writer has thrown light on the development of the class-awareness of a specific class by way of individual awareness.

Lakhindar Digar is a middle-aged farmer of 51 of Amdhere village belonging to the society of a lower caste. As he is advanced in years, the people of the adjoining villages obey him. Lakhindar is not uneducated; but his education is only upto ‘••••••••••’ etc. In his family life, he is an affectionate father and loyal husband. Though he is quite aware of the defects, sins, meanness of men, he is not at all disdainful to them. He
is equally affectionate to everyone of the village. The sound of the paddy freshens him. The busy hours of a farmer, his fascination for the land fill his mind with an urge live. In the begining of the novel, it become quite evident from the discussions of the farmers amid their hectic days that even in the minds and thoughts of the farmers, the waves of the ongoing change have broken upon. In a gloomy winter morning, from the discussion of Lakhindar, Ram, Akhil and Paran, we come to know that Shayamchandra who used to learn mathematics in his childhood from Akhil has now become a Babu (so-called gentleman) but Akhil, his teacher, has remained a poor farmer. Even when Phani tells Ram:

Then, though extremely angered, they cannot give a befitting reply. The farmers of these villages do not want to join any political party. In the village, there are two absconding leaders of the peasants’ movement named—Satish Mandal and Govinda Mitra. Satish’s endeavours in favour of the farmers give birth to faith and courage in their minds; it also makes them respectful to him, but they cannot yet take him into confidence. The memory of the failure of the Tebhaga Movement is the reason behind this. It is because of their doubt and scepticism for the peasant leaders that these deprived, exploited farmers cannot become members of the Krishak Sabha and thus set out to fight for the establishment of their rights. They think that educated men or leaders like Satish indeed form farmers’organisations and instigate the illiterate, easy-going farmers of the villages for the achievement of their rights but then flee away themselves. The failure of the Tebhaga Movement together with the selfishness and double-dealing of the political parties is responsible for the doubts and suspicion in their minds. They know:
In this connection, it may be mentioned that in the prolonged Tebhaga struggle from 1946-1950 numerous families of the farmers of Bengal who took part were destroyed. Still then, they did not cease to fight against the zamindars and money-lenders and above all, the British colonial rule. This movement was carried on even after India became independent in 1947. The new rulers of the country who took charge after the British had left also played a disgusting role in this respect. In the incidents of massacres that took place in Kakdweep, Lalganj etc., the true picture of Congress politics of the country was exposed in its true form. But even then, the exploited, downtrodden farmers went on fighting against their oppressors without any pause.

This explains why in the novel Lakhindar Digar written on 1950s, we observe an anti-Congress attitude form the very beginning. Govinda, the peasant leader says:

Today’s farmers are not only aware of political parties, time and society, they are aware of their situation as well. This self-realisation makes Mahendra utter thus:

They understand that in this world no work can be said to be smaller or greater in dignity. They also understand that if the farmers do not work, the so-called gentle-folk of the town will have nothing to eat. But among the farmers here, only Lakhindar is an exception so far as his thoughts and awareness are concerned. The world of his thoughts and ideas are based on the ideology of the Geeta, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and other mythological literatures. He is conscious of the fact that with the change of time, the rigidity of the village society has become loose and that the economic change has made the farmers rush to the city giving up his own occupation. This changed social atmosphere saddens his mind. Frustrated, he says:
In the novel, we find that the farmers have the experience of the past struggles and at the same time, they have the experience of the present scenario and the exploitation in the hands of the zamindars. The farmers have an irresistible attraction towards the agricultural land, at the same time, there is a lack of faith in agriculture noticeable in them. Lakhindar understands the change that has come over man. This is quite evident in the fact that whistling sounds and film-songs have outweighed the old & traditional *Ramayana* songs. He thinks:

Lakhindar does not fail to realize that the youngmen of the society have undergone a change of values in the post-war period. Not only an attraction for film-songs, Lakhindar does not even fail to take notice of the tendency of the youngmen towards addiction to intoxicants. He finds that the farmers of the village are little attentive to their lands. He believes that the household which is devoid of rice in its store is also devoid of all grace and happiness. He looks at the paddy as *Mother Lakshmi*. In his eyes, the farmers are all devotees of the Mother goddess whose chief purpose is to serve Her. Hence, in his view, it is a sin on the part of a farmer to be indifferent to the land. For this reason, while advising Mahendra, the *bargadar* of his neighbourhood, regarding cultivation of potato, he says:

The thoughts associated with the land and cultivation occurs in the mind of Lakhindar,
the hero of the novel, time and again. He cannot tolerate neglect of the land which provides food to the farmers. He does not believe that everyone in the world is a cheat or fraud. He deeply believes in the essential goodness of man. The ideology and values inherent in the *Puranas* (Hindu mythology) are not behind his faith alone, the ideology of Krishnamohan Bhattacharya, the village priest, is also behind it. He respects the priest from the bottom of his heart. When the police carries on a search in the village for the absconding peasant worker Govinda and brutally tortures the wife of the poor-farmer Ram Digar, Lakhindar becomes dumbfounded at this. He suffers inwardly as a result of a helpless wrath. Sudhir, Lakhindar’s son, thinks otherwise instead of protest. According to him, one should stop thinking of others; on the contrary one should think of his own interests. Lakhindar becomes upset at the self-centredness and degradation of humanity in the next generation. He feels utterly helpless. Sudhir lives in a world opposite to his. Though he cannot protest, an endless, insoluble query gets voice in him: 

9 In his effort to answer the question, Krishnamohan tries to convince him saying that man does not get belittled if he exerts himself or if he strikes back—it is man’s greed which belittles him. In the changed social milieu, the farmers have developed a craving for money. Though the British have left, they have left behind poisonous sugar-mills and cloth-mills where the farmers work and in this way they have become mechanised. Greed for money, hankering after cosmetics have made selfish of them. In this connection, it may be mentioned that Rabindranath Tagore, in discussing his play, *Raktakarabi*, wrote:

But this is also true that the farmers began to move to the towns in those days not because of their greed only. Krishnamohan, who grew landless as a result of feudal oppression and suppression, foreshook his own land and own occupation in order to
survive only. On one side, there was the decaying feudalism and on the other, the on-
coming capitalism — the farmers became confused finding themselves in between
these two extremes and so these foolish farmers resorted to the means of earning money
in exchange of their cheap labour; their sole motive was to live in this world somehow.
The farmers of the day could not even understand that in the shape of neo-capitalism, it
was like a mythological water animal and that:

However, Lakhindar could not make out clearly the complex philosophy of the priest,
Krishnamohan. In this context, a critic has remarked that

In the novel, again and again, we
observe such strategic defence of this state-terrorism in the interpretations offered by
Krishnamohan. For the time being, even Lakhindar too takes the greed of the farmers
to be the root-cause of their disaster. Lakhindar has noticed that the farmers of the
village were selling out their lands merely for making merriment and for temporary
entertainments:

Disregarding the land which is all to a farmer frustrates Lakhindar. If Hari Choudhury,
the agent and revenue-collector, takes anybody’s land for once, it is utterly impossible
that he would ever let it go out of his hands. The farmers have all been witness to this,
still they have little love for their own lands. This pains Lakhindar. In the character of
Lakhindar, from the very beginning we have noticed his scrupulousness in matters relating
to politics and social laws. He trusts Krishnamohan firmly, but he cannot either distrust
Govinda Mitra, the leader of the Land Labour Movement. In reality, the ever-scrupulous
Lakhindar cannot firmly adhere to any of his beliefs. When Akhil, referring to the peasant-
leader Satish, says that these leaders only want to instigate the farmers, Lakhindar
replies:

93
Again while advising his neighbour Mahendra as regards potato-cultivation, we hear Lakhindar say:

Lakhindar himself feels that there is little consistency in what he says. He tries to come out of this state of confusion. He is not at ease for the contradiction in his thoughts. He always suffers from indecision. For this, a critic has spoken of him:

The agitation concerning Manu Digar’s land works as an outlet for him to come out of this contradictions in thought and consciousness. The confused, disorderly thoughts of his mind find order and harmony when he begins to lead the farmers. Lakhindar stands out in protest boldly against the atrocities and exploitation of the zamindars.

The character of the zamindars have remained the same even in independent India. The zamindars like Anutosh Singha of the novel, small zamindar of Dhangachhia, Ajay Ray and the maternal uncle of his wife Hari Choudhury are evidence to this. The writer has deftly drawn their anti-farmer pictures. The zaminder Anutosh Singha is not directly referred to in the novel. But his absent presence is felt everywhere. But the small zamindar Ajay Ray plays a far more important role. It is through Ajay Ray that we also come to know of Anutosh Singha. Anutosh can turn cruel in cold blood. It is he who has brought the peace proposal regarding procurement. He has also arranged a number of meetings. Anutosh has accepted the government policy because he only knows profit. He knows very well how to grab other’s lands and make it khas.
small zamindar Ajay Ray too has a great greed for land. He also wants to occupy others’ lands at any cost. Referring to his land-hunger, his wife Sabitri remarks:

In this connection, we may have a look at the far-sighted remark made by Rabindranath Tagore. Rabindranath in his article *Raiyater Katha* (1926) said:

The novel under consideration supports Rabindranath’s view. The way the small zamindar Ajay Ray grabs others’ lands bears witness to this. Ajay Ray is also not on good terms with the big zamindar of Shirsha on account of matters concerning land-grabbing. But Ajay Ray once was in love with village-life and decided to stay in the countryside. He was inclined from the very beginning to exercise his dominance in the village. He knows that once the illiterate farmers become aware of their rights, his desires will remain unfulfilled. Hence he cannot tolerate Govinda, a far-related husband of his wife’s sister. He wants to intelligently use the peasants’ revolt organized in the fields of Manu Digar. He wishes to incite the subjects against the zamindar of Shirsha through the priest, Krishnamohan and in this way he tries to occupy Monu’s lands. It is clear enough here that even after India’s independence, the hateful party-strife is still very much present among zamindars. On the other hand, the novelist has also thrown light on the fact that the victimized, oppressed and exploited farmers are gradually being aware of their situation and rights. The journey which Lakhindar undertakes from among the strifes relating to land ultimately gets another dimension in the novel. It is his fascination for the
land and also the pleasure for serving humanity that inspired Lakhindar, the subaltern farmer, to go forward to lead the peasants in their struggle for rights. The Krishak Sabha emboldens him all the more in this respect. It was this Krishak Sabha, an organization formed by the Communists, played a huge role in those days making the farmers conscious of their rights; the organization sowed the seeds of revolution in the minds of the farmers. In the novel also, we just come across the reality of this aspect of the rural society. The Communist peasant leaders like Govinda and Satish tried to rouse and unite Lakhindar and other farmers in their struggle against the land-lords and other land-holders. On the day of reaping the harvest in Manu Digar’s land, the farmers of the village in general, get involved in a direct clash—the reason being who to own the corn. In this, Lakhindar plays a pivotal role. He declares:

Lakhindar was much influenced by the ideals of the priest Krishnamohan, still his taking up the leadership of the peasants does not seem unnatural. It is also noteworthy in this connection that the farmers and peasants of this area took an active part in the Tebhaga and Land-Labour Movement. But the political leaders did not get directly involved in this phase. But we hear Lakhindar saying that if necessary, the suggestions of the political leaders will be sought. The farmers not only reap the paddy, they cope with the club-men of the zamindars as well. The farmers who have long been exploited by the zamindars have fought for the possession of the land and corn. The problems of the farmers have not been solved even after independence. But with the change of time, the farmers have become aware of their rights. That is why the farmers like Lakhindar are not afraid of anything. In this connection, the fearless declaration made by Lakhindar is mention worthy:

Lakhindar get hurt in a direct clash, with time, his thoughts and awareness undergo a strange transition. Analyzing the attitude of Lakhindar at this phase, a critic has remarked:
Lakhindar, bed ridden as a result of injuries given by zamindar’s club-men, waits eagerly to hear the sweet sound of paddy. — though this primary victory brings peace to his mind, he has to pluck up courage and strength in order to stand firmly against the zamindars. This strength he derives from the Left-wing literature, manifesto etc. supplied to him by Satish and also through the secret organizations. The farmers like Lakhindar, who were heavily influenced by the priests like Krishnamohan, overcome this weakness and in this way, an individual turns into a social man. The individualism find an way out to merge into collectivism. In this context, it may be mentioned here that people like Krishnamohan have always worked as strategic tools in the hands of the zamindars. Initially, Krishnamohan tries in his own way to work for the uplift of the farmers. At one time, he incited the farmers against the zamindar of Shirsha who used to make them work without pay. Again, the same Krishnamohan did not support the peasant-unrest regarding the reaping of the paddy in Manu Digar’s fields. In fact, he has a duplicity in his nature. Despite being a well-wisher of the farmers, he supported the zamindars in regard to farmers’ rights. Again when the zamindar Ajay Ray tells him to instigate the subjects against the zamindar of Shirsha, making a shrewd use of their unrest, Krishnamohan’s determined voice is heard:

Yet, it was this Krishnamohan again who suggested the farmers that they should not pay any heed to what the zamindar of Shirsha says and should hear, instead, what the zamindar Ajay Ray says and that they should not get involved in riots. In the true sense of the term, to Krishnamohan, the peasant movement means rioting only. He is a man
who favours compromise. So his ideal is only a strategy to let the domination and
exploitation of the zamindars continue as usual. But farmers like Lakhindar cannot
recognise the true nature of Krishnamohan disguised behind the mask of traditional
values. Even the people like Krishnamohan themselves are not aware of it. A critic has
thus rightly said:

In the novel, the peasant-leaders Govinda and Satish are pitted against Krishnamohan.
As the story progresses, we find that farmers like Lakhindar, Ram, Ratan and Paran
etc. are slowly leaving the camp of Krishnamohan and entering that of Govinda and
Satish. Lakhindar has realized that it is possible to resist injustice only if there is unity
and integrity among farmers. The Krishak Samity also call for a united struggle against
the zamindars, land-holders and the government. Lakhindar, with this new awareness,
refuses the proposal of compromise sent by the zamindar of Shirsha. After this,
Lakhindar’s political studies begin literally. He knows that this struggle for man’s self-
respect and prestige is not confined to the boudaries of his village ; it is in progress
everywhere. He learns the meanings of the new words—‘ेपिः’, ‘ेसा’ etc. A
new awareness is born in him. Earlier, Lakhindar would feel pity for men in distress; this
was out of his common sense of good and evil and taste. But the study of various books
make him think in terms of society. In the novel, the writer has captured Lakhindar’s
thought-process in the following way:
When his new awareness is facing a transformation, the farmers begin to oppose the government as regards Procurement. The orders to sell rice at a fixed price gives rise to unrest among them. The incidents like the fraud in weighing rice by the government representative, entering the granary with shoes, trampling the rice etc. add fuel to the fire. In such odd situations, the leftist volunteer Satish and peasant-leader Govinda shows their sympathy. Another Tebhaga Movement begins. The village is overflooded with the poster ‘‘=. = = = = = = =’’ To the farmers, rice has always remained the very ‘‘= ’’ so, the farmers get involved in a fight to finish for this fuel of their lives. On the other hand, the nexus between the zamindars and the police make peasant-life unbearable. It is noteworthy here that owing to the oppressive policy of the government, the farmers begin to voice their protest and announce that ‘‘= = = = = = ’’ This time, the struggle is not against the zamindars, money-lenders or the British power; the struggle is now against the state-machinery of the independent state. Lakhindar’s son, Sudhir also joins the struggle. He announces in a courageous voice : ‘‘= = = = = ’’ This breaking of the law on the part of the farmers leads to huge arrests. The land-lords Ramu Paul and Hari Chakrabarty send the lists of the names of the rebel farmers to the police. Sudhir gets arrested, Lakhindar is ordered to keep under home-arrest. The exploiters like Ajay Ray, Hari Choudhury do not put an end to their activities. Ajay Ray sets up a police camp in his court. Not only that, he even engages Malati, the widow of the village, to entertain the policemen. The people like Ajay, Anutosh and Hari Choudhury use the state-machinery of power for their own self-interests. They do not at all think of the interests of the farmers. In the story, next we find that a resolution has been adopted by the Krishak Sabha to bring out a procession. This procession is resounded with the slogan ‘‘= = = = = ’’ A number of deaths occur in direct confrontation with the police. The hand-bombs and bows and arrows of
the farmers cannot cope with the fire-arms of the police. The whole village gets terrified. The farmers knows no sleep. The writer describes this fear-ridden villagers in the following way:

Many escape into the jungles fearing arrests. The bullocks, ducks, cocks and hens — the belongings of the farmers begin to die for want of food. The farmers are at a loss to find a way out of this owing to the oppressive policy of the government. The writers tells us:

So they are compelled to come back to their villages. The writer has informed that such distress did not occur to all the regions. In some villages, the women fell upon the armed policemen with kitchen-knife, axe, wipers etc. and compelled them to retreat. The people of Bengal will witness to this war-like image of its women-folk before. The women-folk have placed a significant role in the first phase of the Tebhaga Movement launched against the atrocities of the zamindars, jotdars (land-holders) and the British rulers. In every village, the women-folk formed ‘••••••••’ etc. Referring to the upsurge of this women force, a critic has remarked:

The writer, in this connection, has not forgotten to refer to the new image of the women. But in the long run, the Tebhaga Movement ended up in failure. The reason behind its failure was the arrests of innumerable rebel farmers. After this, the farmers fell victims to
a farcical judiciary trying their cases. Those who were set free on bail were asked to report to the court in the Ghatal town in every fifteen days. This meant the loss of a day’s work, travelling expenses, expenses for food, the fees to be paid to the lawyers; they get confused but they prefer the company of their families & villages to this.’

The home-imprisoned Lakhindar also was ordered to report to the police station once in a week. Sudhir on the other hand, escapes befooling the police and joins Govinda’s group. In this way, Lakhindar’s political awareness gets a new dimension by way of his progeny. Lakhindar realizes that the notice to report to the police station is nothing but a bondage. He is all set to seek a way out of this.

Lakhindar has never been able to put forward his own thoughts before Krishnamohan Thakur. But as regards the peace-meeting proposed ny Krishnamohan, he gives firm expression to thoughtful mind:

Not only Lakhindar, the timid-natured Ram or the headstrong Sudhir also undergo a transformation of character. It was under Lakhindar’s influence that Ram, who was most loyal to him, joined the Krishak Samity. He derived all the strength to overcome the adversities of life from his Lakhindadada. But despite all this, Lakhindar was not happy because the fields in and around the village were empty. The farmers were not much interested in agriculture. Being agonised, he tells Ram:

Two or three months pass by in this way. In the rainy season, the farmers again sow
paddy in their fields or get busy in preparing their lands. After this, the paddy plants attain their growth in autumn and in the dewy season when the ears of the paddy plants slowly shoot out, they are filled with joy and a sense of fullness. This familiar cycle of life stirs him again. When he finds someone in the field reaping the corn or someone binding the corn in sheaves, he gets energised to catch glimpses of such worldly activities. When Ratan says that he could not leave the village even when everyone else in the village did so and that being the son of a farmer he could not sit idle in the corn-reaping season, Lakhindar’s feels a rare tranquility in the very core of his heart. Lakhindar gets back his lost stamina and courage as he looks at the farmers rhythmically treading the zigzag pathways of the village with sheaves of paddy on their heads. The heaps and heaps of pain in his inner mind, innumerable words yet untold come out:

The Krishak Sabha decides to observe the 26th January. Their reason behind this was:

Lakhindar realizes that this too is a form of revolution. Towards the close of the novel, we thus find that Lakhindar is not disturbed to hear that Sudhir has gone in for training to continue their struggle. On the contrary, he compared this with Judhisthira sending Arjuna for training in the use of arms. Lakhindar heartily shares Govinda’s dream of freedom. He is fully prepared now for the crusade against the war unjustly thrust upon them by the Duryadhana. He has realized that unless they think of one another, there would be no progress and without progress, life has no meaning and joy. It was this collective consciousness that inspired him to disobey the laws of the state. He tells Govinda:

In this way, from an ordinary farmer, Lakhindar turns a peasant leader. In reality, the
age old exploitation of zamindars like Anutosh Singha and Ajay Ray, the physical torture and other atrocities meted out to the farmers by the rent-collectors and agents like Hari Choudhury, made them furious, in addition to this was the persecution of the state — all these fiery experiences led to the birth of a new, purified soul in Lakhindar.

This new leader Lakhindar was first consecrated in the meeting organized by Krishak Samiti to mark the occasion of 26th January. In the meeting, in front of more than a hundred farmers hailing from the villages such as Shyaoda, Shyamganj, Dhangachhia, Shirsha, Keckkapur, Amanpur, Keshpur and Amdhere, Lakhindar though a little embarrassed, gives vent to his ideas fearlessly:

The society of farmers was overwhelmed by his speech; the peasant-leaders were also stupefied. Lakhindar’s voice rang with the spell of love:

The farmers were all spell-bound at the words of Lakhindar, a leader born among them. For this reason, Nakul’s mother weeps embracing her son in her bosom and Radhu Dolui catches hold of her uncle’s hand tightly, the little puffed-rice that she kept in the folds of her garment falls off without her notice. By way of this non-political speech delivered by Lakhindar, Govinda speaks of the necessity to destroy the evil or sin. A critic has remarked: ‘

Though the farmers get embarrassed at hearing Govinda’s words it is true that the desired joy of Lakhindar and freedom seem synonymous to them. But for
breaking the order of his internment, orders are issued for his arrest. But Lakhindar is not afraid of anything this time—neither police atrocities nor even death. He knows Next morning, he is arrested. The state-machinery also recognizes the leadership of a struggling man belonging to the lower class society. With this also ends the story part of the novel.

It is hinted at the novel that with Lakhindar’s arrest, the revolt will not come to an end. In fact, Gunamay Manna has tried to focus on the truth that those who have been blessed with the joy of freedom will go on fighting for making that joy an everlasting one. The departure of one Lakhindar will be followed by another. In the novel, the writer has quite consciously developed Lakhindar as a peasant-leader. The writer has written elsewhere:

Noteworthy that Lakhindar has fought this ‘• • • •••‘ He has awakened the selves or souls of others. It is certain that seedlings will sprout from the seeds he has sown. This explains why Lakhindar has tried to hand over the heavy responsibility of his work to future progeny. Even the political workers like Govinda and Satish felt the need of a man like Lakhindar in every household of Bengal. That is why the story continues even after Lakhindar’s arrest. The journey undertaken by Lakhindar become complete on the day of 26th January. He has experienced complete joy only after reconciling the individual household to the collective society and by identifying the farmer with the fields: ‘• • • •••‘ So, his arrest does not mean his defeat; it is, in reality, a victory for him. A critic has rightly said:
In this way, Gunamay Manna has kindled the flame of materializing the dream of freedom of the marginalized farmers and here is the real place occupied by *Lakhindar Digar* in the history of Bengali novel.

III

The agrarian novelist Gunamay Manna has spoken of those peasants in his novel *Lakhindar Digar* to whom existence appears to be meaningless sans land and agriculture and who rose against the fangs of injustice and oppression and that very flow of tradition continued in his another novel titled *Shalbani*. In that novel the reference to the period of the story remained unmentioned. But it does not seem to be difficult for the readers to understand. The novelist wanted to arrest the billowy period in his story that swept over West Bengal in the ’70s. The rebellious movement of Naxalbari started in 1967, which spread through ’70s. The peasants belonging to the vast rural areas of the district of Midnapur of West Bengal and stretching over an extensive areas of Debra, Gopi-Ballabhpur, Keshpur right from Shalbani, the movement burst with violent struggle in response to the call of Naxalbari peasant struggle. Gunamay Manna wrote the novel *Lakhindar Digar* on the perspective of the Tebhaga Movement of ’40s. Right from that very moment, he let the fight of the land-labourers, especially those belonging to the class of Santhals, fishermen, *Bagdi* etc. of Midnapur against the exploitations by the feudal authorities bloom in words and that tradition through the delineation of the nature of Naxalbari Movement of the seventh decade descended to its present stage. But it is a fact that there is no direct description of the Naxal Movement nor there seems to be an effort of revolutionizing the fact. He just picking up a chunk out of it, showed its right influence over the human society.

*Shalbani* was published in book-from in November, 1978, and its period of composition is quite significant. Observing the politically boiling atmosphere of the ’70s, he carried forward the task of his writing with rapt attention and as a result of that his
unique literary achievement in the form of *Shalbani* was published in the 80s. He divided the novel in three parts: *Taranga*, *Ghurni* and *Prabaha*. The first part deals with the murder of mahajan Ganapati Singh, the second part narrates the killing of Mohan Dule alias Amalesh Chattopadhyay, and in the final part, the birth of protagonist Shamli’s child brings down the curtain on the progress of the story.

The novel has a vast background. There is no iota of doubt that this detailed presentation was necessary to reveal the undisclosed truth of the Naxal Movement. The name of the village which happens to be the focal point of the story of the novel *Shalbani* spreading over its two hundred sixty pages and sixty four chapters is Chandsol. It stands very nearest to the town of Shalbani. The road of the said village has got merged into Bankura-Kharagpur pucca road. The story revolves around the villages namely Golabari, Rampur, Chandani, Monglabandi which adjoin the village Chandsol. The people of the classes like Santhal, Bagdi, Dule etc. live in this village. They are very poor. Both the girls and married women of this locality work in the rice-mill of tenure-holder-cum-mahajan and zamindar Ganapati Singh. Some of them are share-croppers while others work as daily wage-earners. A few of them have two-four bighas of land of their own. Naturally the larger part of the land of the village are in the possession of Singh Babus. But all the land-labourers of the village cannot be accommodated there. The writer informs:

The status of power that Ganapati Singh enjoyed earlier informed at the very outset of the novel is on the decline. Nearly every soul was the victim of the oppressions unleashed by tenure-holder Ganapati, Abhay, manager of his Annapurna Rice Mill and revenue-collector Tarak. It is in this Chandsol, where Amalesh Chatterjee, a famed student of Presidency College, Kolkata goes into hiding under the pseudonym of Mohan Dule. Amalesh, an active worker of Naxal Movement, mixing here with the villagers wholeheartedly, becomes one of their near and dear ones. Introducing himself as the son of Gajan Dule’s sister-in-law, he shouldered the responsibility of looking after the four
bighas of land of Gajan Dule. An enterprising dynamism is marked amongst the young
bloods of the village right after his arrival in the village. The proof of the emergence of
anti-feudalism waves in the village lies in the advice of revenue-collector to Ganapati of
purchasing the stolen rifles in connection with dacoity occurred in the village Manglabandi.
But Ganapati paid no heed to him. On the other hand, the movements and attitudes of
Mohan Dule help to form a tinge of doubt in the mind of the protagonist of the novel
Shamli. She was able to realize that Mohan lacked skill in the methods of agriculture
and his demeanour did not match that of the villagers. The scenario of the village
underwent a change with the murder of tenure-holder Ganapati Singh.

Ganapati was the powerful tenure-holder of this area. He had the required
courage and power to encounter all the unfavourable circumstances. He maintained his
ownership over an extensive area of land, he ran a rice-mill, as well as a pond where
fish were abundant. He knew it well that poverty-stricken people of this locality were
dependent on his kindness. We come to know from Duli’s mother, how many Santhal
girls and married women had fallen prey to heterosexual traps of Ganapati and his
assistants:

54

Gunamay Manna through short descriptions had given a tangible shape of the conflicts
between the peasants-labourers and tenure-holders-mahajans of the village. The murder
of Ganapati marked the culmination of the conflict. The murderers declared that Ganapati
was not their personal enemy but of the society itself:

55

The murderers of Ganapati were undoubtedly Naxalists and which proved to be right
at the time of the death of Mohan. After the murder of Ganapati, many other land-
owners of the village fled away. A reign of terror overcast the whole village. The waves
of information regarding various political activities of the peasants and the killings of the
class-enemy reached and touched the public life of Chandsol from the encircling villages.
Gunamay revealed the picture of this sizzling situation through the conversations of
some characters. For example, Duli’s mother told Shamli:

In fact, the surging waves of Naxal Movement that spread out all over Bengal had its
prime objective of vanguarding the interests of the peasants. One critic provided a
good number of facts relating the Naxal Movement in his essay which seem to be very
essential in reading the novel with close attention. He wrote:

Therefore, if we study the novel on the basis of the above said facts, we can easily
reach the background that worked behind Amalesh, a successful student from Presidency,
of transforming himself into Mohan Dule as well as the clue associated with the murder
of Ganapati. Following the shut down of the rice-mill after the death of Ganapati, many
people of the village were thrown out of employment. At that time the peasants again
started their cultivation works at the initiative of a Sadrjope farmer called Mathur Kouri.
Meanwhile, Tarak made an abortive attempt to rape Shamli in the jungle of Brahman
Bhuin and ultimately committed suicide. The said suicide committed by Tarak worsened
the situation of the village. Afterwards, as a result of the efforts of Mathur both Mohan and Shamli one day, entered into a wed-lock. But their dream of starting their married life in a cave of jungle crossing *Adhai Kroshi Math* (a field measure of distance equal to about 5 miles) was soon shattered owing to military attacks. Mohan was shot to death by captain Narendra Sinha and Shamli was raped by soldiers. Even after that, the wheel of life in Chandsol did not come to a standstill. Mathur took the responsibility of keeping the movement going. A police camp was set up in the residential campus of Ganapati. Another farmer was killed while harvesting due to clash between the landlords and the peasants. The atrocities by police broke throughout the village. The peasants-turned-fighters no longer remained a passive onlooker. Two police personnels were also dead pierced by their arrows. Mathur fled away but he was ultimately killed by the police with the assistance of the zamindar’s obedient fisherman Naran, and even after that Bona, Pachai and many other peasants kept the wheel of revolt rolling. A struggler of the later age was born to the womb of Shamli and in this way the peasants’ movement continued unceasingly.

Gunamay Manna did not mention the name of any political party in his novel *Shalbani*, but through some hints, inklings and dialogues, he identified the agitated period of the ’70s. We get the indication of the exploited peasants and labourers being well organized first of all in the novel through the cultivation of land by Mohan Dule alias Amalesh Chatterjee. The novelist has described:

As the plough-share of Mohan shoves up the dry plot of land and makes it gradually fertile, so also Mohan seems to have brought a new lease of energetic flow in the prosaic life of this locality. Bona Tudu, Pachai and the likes were able to discover a fresh rhythm of life. They also took every preparation secretly to put an end to the
exploited life of their own. Moreover, secret trainings on how to shoot an arrow, operate a rifle were, too, going on. Their mode of discourses appeared to have been a pointer to that preparation:

As the above discussion proves, on one hand, their agricultural experience, so, on the other hand, it also hints at some other truth. In fact, the novelist showed that the simple but illiterate peasantry enduring and suffering the endless blows of exploitations by Ganapati, Abhay and Tarak, were able to have a solid knowledge of the functionings of the state-machinery. They unhesitatingly could take part in the political activities of Mohan Dule. The novelist Gunamay wanted to display the power of resistance by the peasants in this novel too, like that of Lakhindar Digar and naturally his descriptions were painted with a brush of revolution. The death of Ganapati led to the coming of police in the village. The atmosphere of the village became dreadfully suffocating. Everyone seemed to be frightened and terrorised. Nobody believed anybody; and clouds of doubts were formed in everybody's mind. On the other hand, the celebrations of all sorts of festivals of the poor Santhals had been stopped due to financial paucity. Mathur Kouri stood by these starved; simple and honest people. As Mathur had courage, so also he had a sense of pride and self-esteem as a descendent of the Rajputs. It was on the strength of his advice that the peasants of the village again firmly made up their minds to fight for their survival. Mathur happened to be a worthy fighter of the Naxalist Amalesh. Since he was endowed with the strength for making sacrifice and also organizing ability, he was able to ignite them with enthusiasm for the cultivation of the fallow lands. He encouraged Ratan Digar to plough two bighas of land of the
Mandals. The novelist made us hear the past glorious history of the peasants belonging to this area through the mouth of Mathur Kouri. Actually the history of the district of Midnapur is in real sense the history of peasants-revolt. A critic wrote:

The peasantry being oppressed by the tenure-holders and zamindars ultimately in an organized form stood against this machinery of exploitation. The Communist Party consolidated and cemented the movements of the land-labourers and the poor landless peasants. Gunamay Manna has marked off this historical correlation with the peasants movement in the novel. It is Mathur Kouri who built this ramp of connection:

Hence it is most natural that the peasants of this locality would erect a wall of resistance against the canker of injustices, and in this regard the man who extended his helping hand to them was none other than Mohan alias Amalesh Chatterjee. Mohan wholeheartedly became one of the dearest souls of the Santhals. So, as it seemed to be no matter of trouble for him to detach the small clod of earth from the plough, so in developing a normal relationship with Shamli did not prove to be difficult for him. Leaving aside his passion for a carrer, Amalesh Chatterjee converted himself into a cultivator. It has already been pointed out that the novelist did no where in the novel mention this movement launched by Mohan as the Naxal Movement. The chief objective of the novelist was to depict how the revolutionary peasants movement was shaping and snowballing the dreams in the minds of the poor populace of the village. The novelist had already given the hint at the onset of the novel that Mohan actually did not belong to this village. His
weakness and ungrammatical approach to agricultural works did not escape the watchful
eyes of Shamli and she even could realize that it was Mohan and his allies who killed
Ganapati. The real identity of Mohan was revealed before his death through the words
of captain Narendra Sinha addressed to Mohan during police-encounter:

It has already gone down in history that Sushital Ray Choudhury, President and Secretary
of CPI(ML) State Committee within six months of the first Party Congress (15-16
May, 1970) of the CPI (ML) registered his protest in the Deshabrati against the breaking
of Statues by the young boys. It has its mention in the comment of a critic:

He exercised restraint regarding the action of the students to
wreck the statues of renowned people. In his view although
the breaking of statues of Gandhi and Congress leaders could
be accepted, it was not proper to damage those of personalities
like Rammohan, Vidyasagar, Subhas Basu or Rabindranath.
Because all of them were the intelectuals of New Democratic
Revolution of earlier India.  

At that time, leader such as Kanu Sanyal and the like were in favour of breaking statues.
The passing of a remark by captain Narendra Sinha in the novel throws light on this
course of history more distinctly. There is no other clearcut fact regarding the Naxalists
in the novel except this very direct mention of the Naxalists. Hence the death of fearless
Mohan by captain Narendra’s bullet and the rape of Shamli from the angle of the
gravity of that specific time became an instance of unvarnished truth. A critic said in this
regard:
Mathur shouldered the responsibility of the movement after the demise of Mohan. Bona and Pachai and others under his leadership and enterprising jack-up started tilling the plots of land of the tenure-holders. It is worthy to be mentioned here that the novelist described serially the course of agricultural activities in the land of Mohan from the sowing of paddy-seeds to shifting of paddy to granary after harvesting. As there have been dexterous descriptions of different agricultural systems like harrowing the uneven land, making the earth muddy, setting up a ridge of earth around agricultural land to protect from rain water, sowing of tender paddy-seedlings, uprooting the weeds in the novel, like wise we get the information of the want of seeds, want of seedlings and the agricultural problems of many peasants from the mouth of a peasant:

The descriptive style of Gunamay Manna itself proves how experienced he was in the pros and cons of the agricultural works. After the death of Mohan the peasants started reaping paddy-crop from his paddy-fields stretching as far as the horizon and the widow Shamli too, took part in reaping that paddy-crop. Mathur makes others dream of ploughing of all the virgin lands on cooperative basis by the peasants followed by lifting of produce to granary after harvesting. Then there started the festival of harvesting. The land-labourers from different villages scattered in all directions start flocking for harvesting. The great course of activities relating to reaping of paddy-crop seemed to be to Mathur a festival like *Rajsoo Jajno*:

A realistic picture pertaining to the harvesting of paddy-crops by the peasants as well as confirming their rights on the produce has been distinctly revealed in the novel. In fact, this was the uniquely prime objective of the Naxal Movement. The peasants under a strong dose of gusto received their respective share after harvesting. The description that flowed from the pen of Gunamay Manna is fit to be mentioned here. He jotted
The above quoted descriptive lines symbolically represent the stance, resistance and revengeful frame of mind of the peasants and correspondingly the words like (ant); (deathbed) etc. are notable indeed. The death of, metaphorically speaking, paddy plant-like tenure-holders is sure and certain in the hands of ant-like food-foraging peasants loaded with combativeness. It is the very paddy plant-like mahajan-class who so long snatching the of the peasants got nourished and developed. The novelist Gunamoy Manna here manifested the full length picture of the consciousness, sense of rights and the fighting spirit of the peasants. But it is a clear fact that the zamindars-tenure-holders-mahajans and the state-machinery did never value the dreams of the peasants. That’s why we see in the novel that the state with all its might tried to stampade the peasants. When the peasants started reaping the paddy, the servilely obedient ruffians of the son of Ganapati and the police force jointly came to take possession of the crops. This led to a conflict between the peasants and police personnel, resulting in the death of a peasant. Naran, who worked as spy for the police set up, and communicated the message regarding the oneness of the peasants and their secret trainings to the zamindars, was caught in the watchful eyes of Pachai for his act of treachery. The peasant-fighters like Pachai, Bona, Sate and many others were out of temper after the death of Mohan. They also were ready to shed their blood on that very surface of the earth which bore the blood-stains of Mohan. So when Bona said the high decibel chorus of voices of all the peasants such as superseding that of Bona attained much more depth and pervasion. They were now like their forefather Bharab Tudu in a fashion of devil-
may-care for the protection of their rights on paddy and land, and that’s why they gave a fiting reply against the oppressions by the police. The fighting peasants killed a couple of police personnels under the envelop of nocturnal darkness. On the one hand, the fight carried forward by the inspired peasants to establish their stamp of rights and on the other hand, a reign of terror unleased by the police and military combinedly. These twin pictures have been skillfully delineated in the novel. Then occured the death of Mathur in a police-encounter owing to a web of conspiracy knitted by Naran. The story could have been over with the death of Mohan, but even after that the novelist kept the natural course of life going. So the of the peasants revolt that kissed the atmosphere all over the country, and the of conflicts with police and killings did not calm down, but their the train of identical happenings are still on the run. And, in this way, the title of the parts met with success in the novel. Neither the flow of life nor the dynamic course of a story do ever stop. The revolt may be over, but dreams of Giribala, Shamli, Kamini, Bona, Pachai and Sate are deathless indeed. The novelist indicated symbolically the existence of never-to-be-ended revolt through the birth of (son of Mohan) to the womb of Shamli. A critic said in this connection:

Many critics in course of their critical analysis of the novel Shalbani have raised questions over the characters of Mohan and Balai, the killing of Ganapati, as well as the suicide committed by Tarak. They hold the view that there is no such remarkable picture in the novel pertaining to the canker of oppressions and exploitations unleased by either Ganapati or Tarak. Therefore, was there essentially any genuine ground of killing them? Or, they are also of the opinion that the impersonation of Amalesh for Mohan has not even scored a point of credibility. It is indeed a fact that there is no great instance of the exploitations done by Ganapati and Tarak in the novel. But it cannot be denied that the bandwagon represented by Ganapati and Tarak kept the practice of exploitations in
the villages of Bengal alive, and the said fact though not displayed extensively, yet Gunamay Manna presented the fact in a indicative way. It is noteworthy that after the formation of CPI(ML), Charu Mazumdar in an article entitled *Chhatra O Yubakder Kachhe Partyr Ahaban*, published in *Deshabrati* Remarked:

In response to this call many bright students from Presidency College went into hiding in the villages and simultaneously organized and motivated the peasantry. Gunamay also suggested this one in the novel. Nevertheless, the novelist did never cite the reference of Naxal Movement. As a matter of fact, he portrayed a flawless picture of the flow of life of rural Bengal. The Naxal Movement did not attract more spotlight than the village Chandsol. The novelist again and again in the novel referred to land and crops. This land and paddy seem to be the vital breath of their life and the peasants of Bengal had to struggle very hard for sustaining that vital breath of life:

The above quoted lines are suggestive of a new phase of struggle and this reveals the struggle for existence of the peasants. That the perpetual gush of life remains unhindered even after the deaths of Mohan and Mathur has been a glittering focal point in the novel.
References and Notes:

1. Ist. Pub., Parichay, Mar. 1948
2. Ist. Pub., 1357 B.S.
6. Gunamay Manna: Lakhindar Digar, p. 198
7. Tapodhir Bhattacharya: Upayaser Samay, p. 103
8. Gunamay Manna: Lakhindar Digar, p. 1
10. Gunamay Manna: Lakhindar Digar, p. 1
11. Ibid., p. 3
12. Ibid., p. 89
14. Gunamay Manna: Lakhindar Digar, p. 91
15. Ibid., p. 46
16. Ibid., p. 4
17. Ibid., p. 29
18. Ibid., p. 47
19. Ibid., p. 36
20. Rabindranath Tagore: Raktarakabi, p. 117
21. Ibid., p. 43
22. Debasish Bhattacharya: Bish Shatakaer Bangla Kathasahitye Nimnabargiya Chetana, p. 214
23. Gunamay Manna: *Lakhindar Digar*, p.86
24. Ibid, p.5
25. Ibid, p.47
27. Gunamay Manna: *Lakhindar Digar*, p.66
29. Gunamay Manna: *Lakhindar Digar*, p.53
30. Ibid, p.55
32. Gunamay Manna: *Lakhindar Digar*, p.56
33. Ibid, p.71
34. Tapodhir Bhattacharya: *Upanyaser Samay*, p.95
35. Gunamay Manna: *Lakhindar Digar*, p.105
36. Ibid, p.118
37. Ibid, p.132
38. Ibid, p.135
40. Gunamay Manna: *Lakhindar Digar*, p.160
41. Ibid, p.169
42. Ibid, p.192
43. Ibid, p.193
44. Ibid, p.195
45. Ibid, p.194
46. Ibid, p.199
47. Ibid, p.200
48. Tapodhir Bhattacharya: *Upanyaser Samay*, p.106
52. Ruma Bandyopadhyay: *Swadhinata Uttar Bangla Upanyase Nimnabarger Abasthan*, p.142
53. Gunamay Manna: *Shalbani*, p.38
54. Ibid, p.49
55. Ibid, p.52
56. Ibid, p.79
57. Fatik Chand Ghosh: *Naxal Andolan O Bangla Kathasahitya*, p.187
58. Gunamay Manna: *Shalbani*, p.21
59. Ibid, p.33
61. Gunamay Manna: *Shalbani*, p.61
62. Ibid, p.164
64. Shukdev Chattopadhyay: *Sater Dashaker Ek Mahat Upanyas*, Composed in *Ubudash, Bishesh Sharad Sankhya*, p.200
65. Ibid, p.136
66. Ibid, p.203-204
67. Ibid, p.202
68. Ibid, p.190
69. Ibid, p.190
70. Shukdev Chattopadhyay: *Sater Dashaker Ek Mahat Upanyas*, Composed in *Ubudash, Bishesh Sharad Sankhya*, p.203-204

119
71. (a) Fatik Chand Ghosh: *Naxal Andolan O Bangla Katha Sahitya*, p. 189
(b) Nirmal Ghosh: *Naxalbadi Andolan O Bangla Sahitya*, p. 146


73. Amiya Kumar Samanta: *Left extremist Movement in West Bengal*, p. 152

74. Gunamay Manna: *Shalbani*, p. 241