CHAPTER III

Peasant-life in Mahitosh Biswas’s Novels: Pictures of Turbulence and Calm

In the history of Bengali novel, though the novelist Mahitosh Biswas has not attracted much critical attention, the number of novels to his credits is not scanty. An immaculate reflection of rural Bengal can be found in the novels of Mahitosh Biswas. It may be said, the agrarian life of rural Bengal is the actual fountain-head of all his potentiality and effectuality in terms of creations. It was his birth-connection that opened the door of opportunity for him to observe rural Bengal very closely, and that is why we meet with the traces of his deep nearness with the lives of the peasants in his novels. We will try to present a plenary introduction in the chapter in question regarding the lives of the peasants contained in the two novels of Mahitosh Biswas, namely *Mati Ek Maya Jane*¹ and *Paye Paye Path*.²

II

A specific region called Kathukhalir Beel belonging to the district of Jessore, East Bengal (now Bangladesh) serves as the main backscreen of his novel *Mati Ek Maya Jane*. The stories of smiles and tears of the peasants living in this Beel-centric villages of Kalkapur, Benakhal, Bakshi, Hatinara, Malichak, Goonokhal, Dohati found the very fabric of this novel. No calendar was maintained from writer’s end in narrating the story of the novel. From this point of view, the novel may be categorized as nutral in terms of periodicity. The writer wrote at the very outset of the novel in course of his introduction to the peasants of this region that they had the ability to work very hard day in and day out. They grow crops at the cost of their pleasure. The writer narrated in this way:

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So the peasants have to work robustly. Now and then they are thrown into danger due to Nature’s eccentricities. Sometimes fructiferous paddy fields get ravaged by flood, again sometimes they cannot sow seeds owing to barrenness of the season. Yet again sometimes Nature smiles upon them. This Beel, as if, seems to be the living effigy of the vagaries of Nature.

Balaram is the central character of the novel. The story develops revolving round his life. He is a well-to-do farmer. Their own plots of land produce so much crops that they are to hire the kishan (farmer) for harvest. Immediately after the second marriage of Sanatan, Balaram’s father, the father-son relationship has turned bitter to such an extent, that Balaram feels comfortable being out under the open sky rather than inside the four walls of his house. Balaram loves Padmakali, daughter of greedy Bhajahari, right from his childhood. But the village chief Nilmani, a womenizer by nature wants to marry Padma by alluring Bhajahari that he would give five bighas of land. If Bhajahari gives his consent to the proposal, Balaram’s dream of a happy conjugal life with Padma will be shattered. Not only to speak of Balaram alone, in fact, the bossing of headmen in this way has splintered the dreams of the peasants in colonial India. The middlemen in the apron of headman, usurer, steward etc. who came into existence owing to force of the Permanent Settlement of Lord Cornawallis, virtually, created the waves of utter ruin that swept over the lives of the farmers of Bengal. The headmen Nilmani of the novel Mati Ek Maya Jane has maintained the qualities of the class concerned. Nilmani is a big gatidar (tenure – holder ). The author has let us know about Nilmani:

that’s why, Balaram has failed to enjoy unbiased justice even convening an assembly of arbitrators against Nilmani. The hostilities between Balaram and Nilmani have not surfaced over the matter of Padma only, rather it had already been there in frame right from the lifetime of Balaram’s father. Nilmani was never practically able to match Sanatan
in terms of physical strength, but he encroached upon much of Sanatan’s land by shrewed means. Balaram’s father Sanatan did have neither courage nor ability to protest against Nilmani. Therefore, these led to an increased discontentment in the mind of Balaram against Nilmani. So, when Nilmani wanted to marry Padma, Balaram turned furious. He could do nothing except helpless vaunting. All of his piled up anger, agonies got eased only with the touch of five paddy plants. He wanted to elope with Padma to the town taking advantage of the darkness of the night deserting the village. He dreamt of earning handsomely working in the factories and workshops of town. In this context, we may mention that these mills and factories of the town had struck a great blow to the rural social infrastructure of colonial India. The farmers and labourers of the village being oppressed by the feudal authority, were bound to go to town in search of their livelihood. We have already discussed the sequences of these changes in course of studying and analysing Ganadevata of Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay. One critic wrote regarding that trend of changes of the rural society:

It is true that Balaram’s plan of eloping with Padma to town and his dreams as narrated in the novel of living a happy life there with her and his love for Padma was not superior to that for his village-land-crops-paddy. So, even giving his word to Padma, he could not desert the village for the sake of his love for the land. As compared to the land which nurtures them like mother, the land which is their companion in their weal and woe, the love of Padma seems to be meaningless. The novelist described Balaram, bewitched with the charm of the land, in this way:
Balaram realized on the eve of his departure from the village that he loved Kathukhalir Beel more than Padma. So, the plan of elopement of Balaram with Padma was not materialized. Hence Padma married Nilmani out of anger and anguish. Balaram went to maternal uncle’s house. He, of course, came back in the farming season once again. The cultivation again started.

Mahitosh Biswas in the novel in question narrated different cultivations of different seasons in a perfect manner. Most of the farmers of this region have their own plots of land. But some farmers cultivate on a mutual settlement of shares. *Aman* (Winter rice), *Aush* (Autumn rice) and Jute are mostly cultivated in this region. As the author mentioned the different kinds of paddy, so he did mention too, the names of different weeds that grow in the paddy-fields. The names of *Dighe, Machhranga, Kaladhalai, Bhojankalpa, Malbhog* etc. belonging to *Aman* group, and while *Ratol, Manik Muri, Boyale, Kalebarai, Boupagla* etc. of *Aush* category have their mention in the novel. Besides this, the following description carries the stamps of the novelist’s close experiences relating to the specific seasons for paddy cultivation:

The above mentioned description has made it crystal clear how closely the novelist observed the rural agrarian life. The cultivation of Jute is also carried on side by side with that of paddy in the novel. Because the cultivators knew that the cultivation of Jute was much more lucrative. The farmer cautiously uprooted the weeds, such as *Shyama Ghas, Gayal, Kalmi, Arali, Dhyala, Hilancha* etc. so as to help with utmost care,
sympathy, compassion and grow crops in the field. It is, indeed remarkable to note here, the novelist delineated the paddy here wandered about dancing like a teen aged girl. The tender girl of Jaishthya becomes adolescent in the month of Shravan and after that she attains her youth immediately with the elapse of two months. The author wrote in course of his description of this phenomenal female entity:

This very female entity of the paddy plant had been unmasked through the train of thoughts of Balaram throughout the novel. One critic rightly commented that in this novel—

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We find in the novel that after the marriage of Padma, Balaram gradually devoted himself to cultivation. In the month of Kartik, Balaram and other peasants get busily involved in the cultivation of Katen fasal that is rabi crop like Khesari (variety of Pigeon-pea), Motor (Pea), til and tishi (linseed). The farmers working hard in sun, water and rain grew their crops, but the high-ups of the society by means of their money-power and the help of an administrative machinery unlawfully possessed that crops. The peasantry once did stand in protest against the feudal exploitation. The farmers with a view to protecting their rights plunged into the surging waves of movement against the exploiting class. In the present novel too, the problem originated centering the harvests. When the headman Nilmani, in cooperation of his companions wanted to reap the crops of Balaram’s field, Balaram protested violently. First there was an exchange of bandy words, then there began a heavy fight. The two accomplices named Mahadev and Anta, responsible for all the misdeed of Nilmani, were stained with blood by the hits of the stick of Balaram. The paddy plants were coloured with blood. Nilmani took to his heels, and for revenge he wanted to file a suit of land-encroachment against Balaram. But that intention of Nilmani was not translated into reality. The nayeb (steward)
Nilmani was mentally broken down. He knew that Balaram was as bold and spirited as his father; but his own son was feeble and timid. Towards the last part of his life, Nilmani had to undergo an all out defeat at the hands of Sanatan. As a matter of fact, the middlemen like the headman Nilmani were a curse to the poverty-stricken peasantry of the rural society. There exists a huge catalogue of misdeeds by Nilmani in the novel. The writer at the very outset let us know that Nilmani was a barrator. History is witness to this that in colonial India the middlemen who emerged under the assistance of the British government had a chunk of them full of shrewd and litigious persons. They used to solve any problem concerned with the farmers and labourers of the village. They were in deed unequalled in deceiving the poor and foolish villagers. A historian wrote about this class of people:

the above quoted comment is exclusively applicable in case of the headman Nilmani. The writer has set the story at a time when the influence and power of Nilmani were almost like a setting sun. He had to accept his defeat to Balaram. The novel contains the description of the conflict between Nilmani and Balaram over the matter of reaping paddy; even the matter of Nilmani’s fleshly desire is referred to. But it has to be mentioned that neither the conflict between the headman and the peasants nor the personal
life-traits of the headman is given importance in the novel. The easy defeat of the class of village chiefs, that the writer showed, was not practically very natural in the rural society in those days. In reality, the novelist did not like to emphasize the complexities of relationship existing among the zamindar-nayeb-village chief and the farmers. It is indeed remarkable to note that there is no mention of zamindar in the novel. However, a relevant excerpts from the letter of a certain literary critic addressed to Mahitosh Biswas may be cited here:

The critics comment is quite justified, as because we find in the novel, it was Balaram who once abandoned Padma for being unable to belittle his magnetic relationship with the land and now with the passing of time an illicit relationship with Padma was again built up for a brief spell of time when she came back to the village after turning a widow prematurely. Although, due to commands of the natural course of life, Balaram by that time had already married Subasi, daughter of Sukhlal, an aged farmer and Balaram became a father of a child. His illicit relationship resulted in Padma’s pregnancy and subsequently she committed suicide in order to save herself and Balaram as well from ill will. The novelist completely gave up the possibility of creating the vortex of complexities in the novel on the strength of all these series of incidents. Balaram’s repentance and mortification were nothing but quite short-lived. The world of Balaram’s thoughts revolved around only agriculture and land, as a result of that no problem had a lasting effect on his life. The sole intent of the novelist was to explore this primitive and inartificial relationship between land and farmer.

In general, besides personal ordinary problems, many a multiplex problem did shatter the lives of the farmers. We have found in the novel that nayeb, headman or zamindar did not practically exert any oppression, rather all the responsibilities of exercising oppression, as if, had been shouldered by Nature herself. In fact the agrarian
life of Bengal always depends on Nature. The Nature is not only a benevolent force, but a malignant one too. The rural life residing on the bank of river has a warp and woof of intimacy, adverseness, love and fight with this double-pronged character of Nature. The peasants fight against Nature with extra-ordinary determination, close concentration and challenge. So these people are mentally; temperamentally and in activities different from the people isolated from land. As on one hand, these farmers and labourers are being harassed by the big guns of the society at every walk of life, so on the other hand, they has to face disaster and ruin when Nature turns hostile to them. Though at time, the peasants like Balaram voiced their protest against the oppression of the feudal authority, but they always felt helpless before the terrible onflaughts of Nature. The rude-merciless-fearful character of Nature has been revealed in the novel *Mati Ek Maya Jane*. In the novel we notice that, the village Bakshi with the beel of Kathukhali at the centre was overtopped by water due to unceasing rainfall during the last part of the month of *Shravan*. The half-matured paddy plants of fields got destroyed. The Nature’s fury snatched away the bread of the farmers. The author described this time of severe adversities of the farmers flawlessly:

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This is the permanent problem of the peasants, dependent on Nature. As the smiles of Nature bestow them with bumper harvests, so her malignant manner invites ruin for their life. This nature-depending picture of life of the farmers has a permanent place of its own in literature. Mukunda Chakrabarty wrote in his *Chandimangal* in course of his description about Nature’s oppression upon the denizens of Kalinga:

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The picture of the cry of distress of the farmers created by the loss of marvellous paddy due to flood is found in the play *Maluya* belonging to *Maimansingha Gitika*. In this way Nature for ever remains involved with the weal and woe of the farmer’s life. The novel *Mati Ek Maya Jane* tells us that how the wretched villagers including Balaram of Kathukhalir Beel lost all of their hopes and aspirations on account of incessant rain. Some of them stored reaping both green and yellow crops. But it did not solve the problem of scarcity of food. Once Balaram’s granary also suffered shortage of crops. They were not able to eat their fill because

The farmers of Kathukhalir Beel did not even lose their strength of mind during the dreadful days of famine. *Shapla, Dhap, Shaluk* that floated on the vast sheet of water of the Beel provided food to these indigent farmers’ families for their survival, but that provision too, one day became non available. When water level goes down in the month of *Ashwin*, the *Shapla* and *Dhap* are no longer found and then *Ghenchu* grass remains as the only resource. The farmers in this way try heart and soul for their survival fighting with Nature. Then at one time the level of water falls. The farmers cultivate some rabi crops, yet the scarcity of paddy is not met up. The writer has given an accurate description of this disaster:

The farmers of Kathukhalir Beel, turn earth-cutting labour in order to survive. Thus, the lively-patterns of the farmers get a new-arrangement. Balaram also joined the earth-cutting group. Balaram, who once pooh-poohed the love of Padmakali for the sake of
the smell of the earth drenched with rain, now moves to a far-flung place saying goodbye to his land and crops for a different kind of living means. Bangshi, Madhai, Nibaran and Balaram turned over a new leaf in an unknown place and in an unfamiliar environment.

By the way, we have seen in *Ganadevata* and *Panchagram* of Tarashankar, the illiterate people of the village being bulldozed by feudalism and capitalism had to be the millwagers of urban areas. In the novel *Mati Ek Maya Jane* too there exists a feudalistic pattern of society. The farmers described in this novel were forced to land-labourers abandoning their own occupation. But here neither feudalism nor capitalism made them open a new chapter of their life. The only element happened to be instrumental in bringing about a change in their life was the merciless behaviour of Nature. These people, closely attached to land, became victims of another kind of exploitation as labourers. The earth-cutting contractor made them do earth-cutting works at the rate of rupees one and a half as daily wages including eating expenses. The wage was low, and was utterly disproportionate to the volume of loose earth. They had to cut earth according to contractual agreement. Balaram and his other colleagues felt that this work did not provide much profit to them, yet they went on working under compulsion without any question. The memories relating to Kathukhalir Beel lacerated every nook and corner of their heart. Out of genuine love, the Kathukhalir Beel seems to be beckoning to these land-attached people. On the other hand, Cholera broke out in the village in such topsy-turvy condition. This Cholera, known as *Olabibi* as per convention of the village, brings disaster to every household. The entire village turns to be a graveyard. The atmosphere of the village Bakshi gets filled up with the sense of fear, anxiety and heart-piercing wailings. Balaram’s little son Naran also died of Cholera. Hearing this, everybody came back helter-skelter abandoning the earth-cutting works. Balaram was dumbfounded at the news of his son’s death. Despite having experienced the ups and downs of life, their strength of mind never exhibited any down slide trend. The pangs of bereavement vanishes with the elapse of time, and they again devote themselves to cultivation with a renewed push of enthusiasm.

It is remarkable to note, the writer showed in the novel the change of livelihood
of farmers, created the corle of deaths due to epidemiical attack, but no problem in
the life of the farmers was allowed to exist for a long time. Of course, he had a scope to
do so. As a matter of fact, the wrter explored only the magnetic pull of love of the
farmers, replete with problems, towards their land. So, we find, towards the very end
of the story, that Balaram suppresing the feeling of bereavement at the loss of his son,
engaged himself again in the cultivation works. The wrter let us know that the fields of
Kathukhali were again full of crops. Balaram realized that neither Naran nor Padma
had gone to extinction in the ocean of eternity. They are alive in the large tract of grass-
land of this village. The optimist wrter did not wind up his story with the pessimistic
stroke of his pen. He showed the wheels of weal and woe of the farmers, enclosed by
the thrills of matured paddy and love for land ; kept rolling in this manner. The lives of
Balaram and others moved ahead in the six different forms of the six Indian seasons that

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The picture of life of farmers that we get in the novel Paye Paye Path is quite
different from that of Mati Ek Maya Jane. The subject-matter of the novel Paye Paye
Path is the bloody peasant-revolt. As a matter of fact, numberless agrarian revolts
took place from the last part of the eighteenth century right up to the nineteenth century.
The factor that led to all such revolts was exploitations. Besides the exploitation by the
zamindars, that of the money-lenders and the governments machinery, the country-
wide famine also pushed the peasants of Bengal to a utter hapless condition. The
coercions in the forms of successive hike of revenues by the zamindars, the imposition
of Abwab brought about untold miseries in the life of the peasants. Nevertheless, they
swallowed everything without protest. The peasants of that period did not think of
launching a struggle in a well organised way. The first session (March 27-28, 1937) of
Bangiya Pradeshik Krishak Sammelon, under the leadership of Communist revolutionary
was held against a background of all these sorts of exploitations. In this session, the
Pradeshik Krishak Sabha was found. These Communist revolutionaries resolved to declare an anti-feudal peasant-revolt. The Krishak Sabha called for the Tebhaga Movement in the month of September, 1946.

Mahitosh Biswas used this Tebhaga Movement as the central theme of his novel *Paye Paye Path*. The Tebhaga Movement was the last but a massive peasant movement in the undivided Bengal. At that time, this movement spread out near about to eleven districts in which Narrail region of the district of Jessore happened to be one of the leading fronts. We also find a remote village called Beelbhasan and villages adjacent to it used as the background of the novel *Paye Paye Path*. It was skilfully portrayed in the novel how the protesting awareness assumed from amongst the illiterate land-attached people being victims of exploitation, deception and fatigued with disappointment. So, the novel *Paye Paye Path* has come to survive not only as novel, but turned into a historically evidential document:

The writer, at the very outset of the novel has given a nice picture of the village Beelbhasan:

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The chief source of livelihood of the people of Beelbhasan was cultivation. All the joys and pains, festivities and ceremonies that deluged their life emanated from cultivation and crops. Each of them was very poor. The number of *bhagchashi* (share-cropper), field-labourer and *burgachashi* (share-cropper) was very high in this region and while the number of well-to-do farmers was quite negligible. There poor peasants somehow managed their living, paying the revenues of the zamindar. Some of them maintained their families being engaged as field labourers, again some of them cultivated on the condition of leasing a plot of land, but with all these things, they were not able to pull on well. We come to know from the statement of influential Kailash that the *burga* farmers
of this region themselves bore the expenses of ploughs and bulls and paddy-seeds, but they did not get the full share of the crops. Half of the share was taken away by the tenure-holder. As a result of that their burden of debts went on increasing. Seizing this opportunity, the tenure-holders and money-lenders kept them as bondmen. In fact, that was the very familiar picture of rural Bengal of that time. In this regard we may cite here a comment from critic’s pen:

This band of cultivators, field-labourers or peasant never got the light of education. It is narrated in the novel that they could manage their daily way of life if they learnt counting up to twenty. They knew that schooling brought no benefit for them, as because even if the nayeb of the zamindar kept wrong account, they had to accept it. The writer portrayed the wordy picture of this exploitation in his novel:

They did have neither guts nor capability to protest against the exploitation. They knew if they protested or if they did not clear the revenues, the zamindar’s men would take them to the cutchery of the zamindar in a very cruel and indecent manner. Not only to speak of farmers of Beelbhasan, the picture of life of the farmers of the entire East and West Bengals were identical. As a matter of fact, the agri-social structure in colonial India was completely changed with the introduction of Permanent Settlement. This Settlement gave birth to a new class of middlemen who purchasing new zamindari estates in rural Bengal, themselves turned zamindars. This particular class threw the
rural Bengal into the webs of exploitations. Besides this, there existed certain layers in
the agri-centric social structure such as, solvent farmers or middle class farmers, poor
farmers, share croppers and field-labourers. It is needless to say, this classification
came into existence on the basis of economic disparity. The economic discrimination
among different classes of farmers led to unrest and anger among the exploited farmers.
In addition to that, the economic recession that was sweeping all over the world during
the second and third decades of the twentieth century also endangered the lives of the
farmers. At that time the decrease in the prices of the Jute and other agricultural
commodities added more damage to the life of the farmers. It became practically
impossible for the farmers to pay back the debts of the money-lenders and the tenure-
holders. Many a money-lender were unable to give loans to the farmers in such a dull-
market-condition. Side by side with it, communal riots too, raised its crest. As a result
of the mindless exploitation of the feudal-lords and also by financial crunch the farmer
got reduced to share-croppers and daily wagers. The ownership of the land gradually
went into the hands of the tenure-holders and zamindars. The farmers who in such
deplorable plight were living from hand to mouth ultimately adopted path of registering
their protest. The Krishak Sabha integrating them on a common platform infused the
spirit of courage and inspiration into their heart.

The social structure of the novel *Paye Paye Path* is like the pattern depicted
above. The poor farmers of Beelbhasan worked and worked from dawn to dusk and
survived on the condition of being exploited. The writer wrote about the stereotyped
go of life of the farmers of this locality:

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The scheduled caste Hindus lived over a stretch of five-six square miles in the low-lying
area of the Beel belonging to the village Beelbhasan, and over a vast area to the west,
there lived both the Hindu and Muslim farmers. The zamindars of this area lived in the
urban sectors of Afra, Basunde and Jessore etc. The zamindars had relation with the
city of collecting revenues. They did not keep any link with the land, crops and farmers of the village. The poet Nazrul Islam observing this picture of rural
Bengal composed:

Though the zamindars did not live in the village, but their vacant places were occupied
by the money-lenders and tenure-holders. The novel projected five powerful tenure-
holders — Ananta Biswas of Bankpur, Bhajan Das of Bankhari, Pulin Ray of Mallihat
and Badan Mandal of Beelatit. Leasing the land from the zamindars, they used to exercise
their rule and exploitation. They compelled the poor farmers to cultivate on a settlement
of shares, as it brought more profit for them. They had to provide nothing, so to say,
ploughs, bulls, seeds, paddy, but they enjoyed fifty percent of the share easily. It is to be
noted here that besides the tenure-holders, some helpless widows also got their plots
of land cultivated on the agreement of shares. Apart from that, the ownership of some
land belonged to the upper caste middle class intellectuals, who never liked kicking up
a row. They divided the shares of whatever was produced on the very field. The farmers
of Beelbhasan cultivated Aman, Aush and Bodo among different kinds of paddy and
Khesari and Goonji til etc. belonging rabi crops. Besides this, the area was fit for Jute
cultivation too, as because it was very profitable. The experience of cultivation of the
writer is equally present in the novels Mati Ek Maya Jane and Paye Paye Path. For
example, the writer let us know that two types of Jute, called Babupat (Babu Jute) and
Kalchit (Kalchit Jute) were cultivated in Beelbhasan. Babupat was much more
profitable, because its fibres are very good – long and snow white.

The picture of the mode of living of Beelbhasan and its adjoining villages got
changed when Satyaprasad, son of Baikuntha Mukherjee, a local zamindar, arrived in
Beelbhasan. Satyaprasad is a Communist. He came here as a volunteer of the Party. It
is mentioned earlier that the Communist Party founded an all Indian organisation called
Krishak Sabha in 1936 opposing the in-expressible oppression upon the farmers by
the zamindar, tenure-holders and money-lenders etc. with the sole planning of economic uplift of the oppressed peasantry. In the same year The Pradeshik Krishak Sabha was also formed. Meanwhile, when the Second World War began, the British imperialism through the promulgation of an ordinance created obstruction of holding and forming meetings-organisations and movements. At that time the Communist Party was banned. Despite that, it was declared in a healthy party manifesto in 1939 in favour of protecting the interests of the farmers, it would not be enough to make the farmers conscious. In the novel we find that Satyaprasad came to Beelbhasan with that mission of the Party. Satyaprasad, as narrated in the novel, vehemently opposed the zamindari rules and regulations and the exploitations of the farmers by the zamindars. He, himself being a son of a zamindar, had a clear knowledge of the oppression committed upon the farmers by the zamindars. He believed that if something was to be done for the poor, illiterate farmers of the country, one had to occupy a place in the chamber of their heart as their own. Moreover, sharing the smiles and tears of the farmers, an awareness had to be created among the farmers. The history speaks with evidence that during the second and third decades of the twentieth century a plethora of city-dwelling educated young boys visited the villages and organised them. A critic wrote:

The long-standing culture and flow of thoughts and ideas of the illiterate and chicken-hearted farmers naturally received a dashing blow, while Satyaprasad, son of a powerful zamindar like Baikuntha Mukherjee, visited the village. It seemed to be as amazing as the landing of an aeroplane in the village during war time. The lodging arrangement of Satyaprasad was made in the house of a solvent farmer called Kailash. During his stay there, he realized that there was a gulf of difference between the harangues for eradicating their sorrows and sufferings living in Kolkata and the eradication of the same being a part of their tears sharing with them. He, in true sense, became aware of the life, livelihood,
the exploited life of farmers of Bengal after his visit to the village. As a matter of fact, the farmers of Bengal in literal sense, belonged to the lowest rung of the poverty line. The agrarian society got crippled with a dark chapter of life emanated from socio-economic oppression, absence of the light of education and mental mal-nourishment. The farmers of Beelbhasan too, portraited in the novel were accustomed to such living of life. So, the sudden arrival of Satyaprasad in the village made them surprised and suspicious. The coming of Satyaprasad and his love for the farmers appeared to be a mere momentary sybaritic mode to the school master Jatin. But Satyaprasad by means of his companionship and sympathy became everybody’s favourite ‘Satyada’ within a short spell of time.

Satyaprasad used to write his diary every night. It was right from his arrival in the village; he observed the poverty, wants, illiteracy and superstitions of farmers and for which he imprecated the Permanent Settlement introduced by the British ruling authority. It did not seem to be difficult for him to understand that the Permanent Settlement practically paved the way to evict the farmers from their land. It is true, sometimes the diary kept some unnecessary narratives, but through this diary the writer portrayed the condition of the farmers of Bengal prevalent at that time:

Though the simple and easy-going farmers of the village accepted Satyaprasad heart and soul, but the shadow of doubt did never disappear from the mind of Jatin. Satyaprasad, in order to remove his doubts, made Jatin understand how his initiation in Marxism helped him to stand by the side of the farmers. Satyaprasad noticed that, as the farmers had strength and courage, so had piled up anger against the exploitations, but they were lacking only in organizational consciousness and ability in offering leadership.
That's why he first baptized all the farmers in the *mantra* (incantation) of unity and integrity. Meanwhile, following the orders of the nayeb of their zamindari, the dangerous footmen Raghu Singh, pinioning the hands of five-six innocent farmers of the village took them away for the offence of not clearing the revenues. Satyaprasad vehemently protested against such oppression and informed that farmers would pay the revenues as soon as the crops were harvested, but they would not pay any kind of *Abwab*. The tenants since the day embraced Satyaprasad more closely as their own. It is noticable that, we find no more instance of oppression of the zamindar Baikuntha Mukherjee except this one in the novel. It ought to be mentioned here that the Tebhaga Movement was directed not so much against the zamindars as it was against the tenure-holders. No significant role of Baikuntha Mukherjee was portrayed in the novel. Though Satyaprasad counted back the reminiscences of his mother, but he never revolted against his father. While the farmers, with their accumulated anger against the tenure-holders appeared before him, Satyaprasad advised them to register their protest against such injustice because he knew that the farmers had no other way to survive except fighting against the tenure-holders collectively. A leading Communist named Abani Lahiri of the Tebhaga Movement wrote in his memoirs about the concerted action of the farmers:

The Krishak Sabha arranged meetings in every village to unite the farmers. While the suppressed farmers got united, Bangiya Pradeshik Krishak Sabha called for Tebhaga. In this connection it may be mentioned that a memorandum was submitted on behalf of the Krishak Sabha in the month of November, 1938 to the Land Revenue Commission (Floud Commission) and a demand was raised before the commission to abolish the *burga* system. The commission recommended of giving one-third of the produce to the *bargadar*. But then it was not possible to put Tebhaga on track. Later, a resolution was adopted for a movement in demand of Tebhaga in the state conference of the Krishak Sabha held at Panjiya, Jessore in 1940. We find in the novel that Satyaprasad
wrote about this historic resolution in his diary at length. After the resolution of Tebhaga adopted by the Krishak Sabha, a movement was in full bloom all over Bengal in demand of one-third of the produce. Even the farmers of Beelbhasan did not remain mum. While the month of *Agrahayan* witnessed the paddy-fields being full of crops, and the sheaves of paddies were expected to be lifted to the threshing floor, the farmers of Beelbhasan at this ripe opportunity took a resolution of not giving half of the share of their hard-earned produce to the tenure-holders. The unruffled rural life abruptly was rocked with high waves of agitations. The farmers so long tolerated all sorts of injustices and oppressions with tight lips. Besides the half percent of the produce, the remaining share enjoyed by the farmers themselves also went to the store-house of the tenure-holders in the names of *(fee to landlord’s seat of business)*, *(towards divine profession)*, *(money present on festivals)*, *(for the studies of children)*, *(entertaining with fish)*, *(weighman’s charge)* etc. So, now they were ready to give fitting reply to the zamindars for their sufferings and pains. Like other villages of Bengal, leaders from outside started pouring into Beelbhasan also. The villagers were stimulated hearing the speech of the young comrade Nikhil Ray. Night school and schools by Communist Party were set up in every village. Both the married and unmarried women in legions from the adjoining villages of Beelbhasan came out on the streets from behind the screens of their houses at the enterprising call of a Communist leader like Sucheta Basu. The women brigade was formed under the leadership of Phuli Shingi, a courageous and weighty wife of a farmer. Side by side in a natural course went on the farming activities such as harvesting, arranging *(treading out corn)*. The news of public awakening of Beelbhasan did not remain hushed up. The news of the development of the situation reached to tenure-holders like Pulin Ray through their sleuths. As tenure-holder Pulin Ray was a hard nut to crack, the impression of shrewdness was very much there on his face. The writer analyzed the characters of these tenure-holders:
Near about one hundred farmers cultivated the land of Pulin Ray on the condition of burga. The blue-eyed gunman of Pulin kept aside paddy secretly from the share of the farmers used to swallow all these injustices as because this very Pulin Ray lent them seeds of paddy or money at the time of crisis. But the condition of his giving out loan was that the recovery should be one and a half time more than the principal amount. These tenure-holders and money-lenders were virtually the sustainers and bearers of the economic structure of the rural Bengal. These farmer-tenants had to depend upon them throughout the year. They lent the farmers paddy-seed and also money to pay the revenues of the zamindars. Whenever these unfortunate farmers and labourers were in need of money to maintain their livelihood, the very class of people provided them loans. All the villagers were to rely upon their kindness. The farmers working from dawn to dusk ignoring rain and storms produced bumper crops with borrowed seeds of paddy, but after reaping the crops, they were unable to lift them to their granary. Almost everything flowed into the custody of the tenure-holders and money-lenders. This creamy layer realized their yearlong debt. Paying the interest according to Deri system, nothing remained for the farmers to call their own. Ramesh Chandra Dutta wrote in his The Peasantry of Bengal:

The ill-fated farmers of Bengal tolerated everything without any protest and this is what we get an identical picture in the novel. The farmers said nothing despite their having a shortage in the quantity of paddy. But it was for the first time under a changed situation the farmers protested. The young peasants like Jaladhar rumbled out: 

The tenure-
holding class became careful at this sudden change of the farmers. They realized that
the very awakening of the farmers was nothing but a prelude to a revolt. The tenure-
holders with the help of the supporters of the Muslim League of the village created a
communal riot to split the unity between the Hindus and the Muslims. It is to be mentioned
in this regard that the Muslim League Government was somewhat in two mind at the time
of the start of the Tebhaga Movement. Most of the Muslim tenure-holders and the
League itself were assured in the atmosphere of communal riot that the Muslim *burga*
farmers would not go to have Tebhaga by force. But observing the unity of the farmers
of both the communities, the confounded League Government started propagating
contradictory opinions to break the friendly bond between Hindu & Muslim. A critic
wrote in this regard:

The distorted propagation by the self-centered Muslim League proved to be abortive.
We find in the novel under discussion, the joint venture of the tenure-holders and the
League failed to splinter the unity and integrity among the farmers. As a result of that,
the tenure-holders were bound to knock the door of the police. There is always a
hobnobbing between the administration and the class of exploiters. The administrative
machinery has always been used as a tool by the land-holder. The history bears witness
that:

The agitated farmers could not be prevented from their struggle by intimidation on the
part of the police administration. Noticing the desperate attitude of the farmers, the
tenure-holders were also afraid of entering the village singly. The movement could not
be put into bracket at the expense of anything. As a matter of fact, this awakening of the farmers of Bengal was possible due to direct back-up of the Communist Party. This struggle of the farmers was for their survival and for which they were ready to sacrifice the last drop of their blood. Everyone right from school-going children took part in this movement. In this regard a notable character was Gagan Dhang. A vagrant renunciate, always queerly clad and often singing mystic song from village to village, Gagan having realized the awefulness of the movement in advance opened a forge in the village and there he made secretly all the necessary weapons for the farmers. Satyaprasad, right from the beginning was against the armed-struggle. He only sought an inner awakening of the farmers. The farmers failed to get at this kind of emotionalism of Satyaprasad, rather they were only after ‘an eye for an eye’. Gagan Dhang told Satyaprasad:

It happened so in reality. While the tenure-holder Ananta asked burga farmer Shreepati not to cultivate his land, the piled up anger of the farmers took the shape of an unrest. It was decided that Tebhaga for the first time would be in force in the land of Ananta. Thus started the bloody chapter of the Tebhaga Movement. The complete atmosphere was filled up with numerous catchy slogan, such as ‘(one who holds the shaft of a plough, owns the land), ‘(heeded be the demand of Tebhaga). It is true that one of the farmers was injured in a clash with the club-men of the tenure-holders, but at last the farmers got the better of them. Krishak Sabha was formed in the village and which resolved of shifting the paddy after reaping in the month of Agrahayan to the kholen of the share -croppers. As a result of that the administration became more prompt and alert. Both men and women suffered oppression to the last degree. The history writer of Tebhaga let us know:

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The spree of murdering farmers continued. Meanwhile the farmers after reaping kept the shares of the tenure-holders into Dharmagola. The writer incidentally drew our attention to the humane side of the mentality of the illiterate farmers. We see, that though the farmers refrained from giving the shares of the tenure-holders, but they reached the shares of the paddy of the helpless widows in time. They did never deprive anybody of his or her rightful share. While the oppression by the police took a violent form, many of the farmers took shelter in the forest. Satyaprasad was arrested. This diminished much of the strength and force of the Tebhaga Movement of Beelbhasan. At that particular time, Beelbhasan went under the territorial jurisdiction of Pakistan due to partition of the country. The leaders of the Krishak Sabha thought that the government of free India would honour the demand of Tebhaga, but in reality the table was placed upside down. On the other hand, the League Government of East Pakistan (Now Bangladesh) ran the bulldozer of untold oppressions upon the farmers. No married and unmarried women, was spared off. The compiler of the history of Krishak Sabha wrote regarding this barbarous policy of repression:

The role of the women in this Tebhaga Movement was very remarkable. Both the girls and married women of the entire undivided Bengal paraded unprecedented organizational dexterity in winning over their demands, resoluteness against the posse of police personnels, vanguarding their own dignity, helping the leaders of Krishak Sabha to go into hiding in the village. The factor that worked behind this awakening of
women was the history of exploitations and deceptions of ages. These women were tortured not only by the feudal-lords, but also constantly by their own husbands. Then the women joined the *Atmaraksha Samity* for their liberation from social and domestic violence. We get a substantial support of such social history from the comment of a critic:

The writer highlighted that very picture of protest of the women in the novel. As they prevented the police with groom, *boti, dao* so they similarly saved the comrade Jatin from police by means of their presence of mind. By the by, we may take a look at the excerpt from the memoir of a comrade of Tebhaga Movement:

We see in the novel that in the same way comrade Nikhil was sent away from the village in the guise of a married woman by Sourabhi, an important character in the women brigade. This very description bears the impression of the practical experience of the writer regarding the Tebhaga Movement. At that time many women were victimized by the brutishness of police. Sourabhi too was raped and at last turned mad. On the other hand, Krishak Sabha at the extreme stage of Tebhaga gave a call for *Dalal-Halal* (finishing the brokers, middlemen or agent). Pulin Ray was brutally killed by extremist farmer Jaladhar. As a result of that the forge of Gagan Dhang was thrown about at sixes and sevens by the police and tortured him inhumanly. The writer gave the description of that cruelty:
Once in this way the village Beelbhasan was shattered. Jaladhar was sentenced to lifetime imprisonment. Furthermore, the lives of Phuli Shingi, Jaladhar, Champa, Sourabhi were darkened. The writer by means of his delicate style of presentation brought the actual picture of the shattered Beelbhasan to limelight in this way:

The farmers movement of Beelbhasan and its adjoining village came to a standstill. Different historians expressed multifarious views regarding the unfruitfulness of the Tebhaga Movement. The Communist worker Nikhil Ray, a character in the novel said about the dearth of right leadership in the Communist Party. According to him, the iron was not hit when it was hot, and sometimes the following up of wrong paths led to this disaster. It is not the butt of our discussion why the Tebhaga Movement withered away meaninglessly; and even the writer himself did not tax his brain about this, but he did not end the story in a state of despair. He drew the curtain of his novel welcoming that new road that would be brought into existence being trodden by the upcoming generations waiting to be born in the womb of new age as well as lending his approval to the farmer’s movement.

IV

Analyzing the novels of Mahitosh Biswas, namely *Mati Ek Maya Jane* and *Paye Paye Path* it is found that their subject-matters are quite heterogeneous. Two different portraits of the lives of farmers had been displayed in these two different novels. The backgrounds of both the novels are the remote rural areas of the district of
Jessore (now in Bangladesh). The novelist himself by means of birth connection was intimately familiar with the rural areas of Jessore. Hence he was quite aware of the festivals, popular customs and usages, belief and disbelief, culture relating to the lives of the farmers of Jessore. So the cultural profiles pertaining to the lives of the farmers delineated in these two novels are identical. We have forwarded an extensive narration about the cultural identification of the lives of the farmers in the Chapter VII. The novel Mati Ek Maya Jane is a narrative of the dispirited life of the farmers. A flawless portrait about the rural life of Kathukhali and its encircling areas has been drawn in the novel. The success and failure of the farmers of Kathukhalir Beel depended upon the crops. The crops and plots of land were to the protagonist Balaram like a fascinating woman which he could not by-pass. So, the love for his sweetheart Padma appeared to be furnished before the charm of land. A flavour of the earth drenched with rain abounds in the novel. Hence, a critic through a personal letter intimated the writer:

A tangible picture of how the people attached to land stood again on their sole with their bounceback ability facing economic, social and natural disaster has been obvious in the novel Mati Ek Maya Jane. It is, indeed, remarkable to note here that the novelist did not horripilate the lives of the poor farmers by any problem in the novel. He has only given an easy expression to their love towards their lands and paddy-fields. The characters created by the author bears multifariousness. Every character created by him though sprang up out of rural atmosphere, yet bears a tinge of eternal humanism. The portrait of rural life had been so much objectivistic, as it was not painted with the artfulness of the urban intellectuals. We may quote here what was written then about the novel in the
As has already been pointed out, there lies a big difference between the two novels in respect of subject-matter. The novelist has given a concrete shape of the bloody Tebhaga Movement in his novel *Paye Paye Path*. Tebhaga was the last but a great farmer’s movement in the undivided Bengal. The writer presented skilfully in his novel, the stories of commitment, organization, resistance and success and failure of the struggle of the farmers of Beelbhasan and its adjoining villages. Satyaprasad in the central character of the novel. He was the son of a zamindar, but the writer has made us to see Nature, man, human relationship, festivals, merriment, sorrows and all through the eyes of Satyaprasad. The character with all hesitations and conflicts has become a real human being of flesh and blood. The writer has delineated the ins and outs of the Tebhaga Movement very consciously in this novel and in this respect the diary of Satyaprasad has played an important role. Satyaprasad has kept all the facts and figures of the Tebhaga Movement in his own diary. So, at times it seemed to have been imposed upon the readers forcefully. For that matters, most probably a critic said:

Even accepting the comment of the critic to some extent, we may say that the novel is not weighed down with facts. The references relating to the habit of Satyaprasad’s writing diary have come up in the initial stages of the novel. The necessity of keeping the records in the diary came to a close since the exposition of the dreadfulness of the movement with the development of the story. The writer has very deftly portrayed the tales of the movement of the farmers. The role of the women of rural Bengal in the
Tebhaga Movement has not been too, skipped over in the novel. It may be said that the women of Beelbhasan under the efforts of Satyaprasad rushed to the movement in a greater number. The name of Phuli Shingi deserves a special mention here. It was her leadership which inspired the married women and girls of Beelbhasan to harass and trouble the police force. Though the picture of the failure of Tebhaga Movement has been factually projected, the writer has not put a fullstop there. The story ends with the touches of mobility of man coming down over the ages. The writer virtually wants to show that the stories like that of the village of Beelbhasan never ends. So, we see at the end of the novel that the influential Kailash has found the trace of a new path in the vicinity of the village Bankpur, which runs to the village Bilatite in a zigzag way. The path was formed as it was frequently trodden by man. Looking at this very path, there peeped the thought in Kailash’s mind that such is the logic of creating a new path and the old path goes out of existence from the roadmap of human mobility. Though the movement launched by the farmers of Beelbhasan shedding their blood came to a close, the clanging of the movement still floats in air. A day will come when a new movement like phoenix rises rejuvenated from this debris. So, in the story of Beelbhasan there is no drop of curtain, no joviality of victory or pangs of defeat ; the only thing that keeps going is this—man on move and on move only age after age, lending approval to endless struggle. A critic has said:  

We too, are of the same opinion with the critic. At last, it can be safely said that Mahitosh Biswas in the backdrop of Tebhaga Movement, has presented to the reading public a successful and exquite agrarian novel.
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