The Primary Attribute of the Novels Passing the Test of Time and Space

The root of the word 'Sāhitya' is probably 'Sahit' signifying what is associated to 'hita', that is welfare or goodness. It is therefore surmised, that the social reformers wanted to spread the lesson or message of the welfare of the society through the medium of literature. In those past days, however, stress was laid on individualism or individual consciousness; importance was laid rather on community. This leads to the conclusion that the goal of literature was the development of the community. But as civilization marched ahead through the century, man accepted with increasing force, the concept of his own individuality. The notion of individuality of man got reflected in literature, and thus man freed himself from the notion that literature is only an agent of materializing social welfare. From then onwards more started to lay greater emphasis on literature as the medium of expression of artistic sensibility of man or aestheticism. So ecclesiastical and otherworldly notion about literature yielded place to the acceptance of man and his social life as the subject matter of literary efforts. The best expression of the new notion about literature is discernible in the novels of the modern time.

As man is the chief object of the novel, so various facts and attributes of human life is focused in this literary genre. Though the novels written in different countries and languages, different communities and classes of peoples are dealt with, it cannot be denied that despite the differences of space and time, there are some common attributes of the peoples of all times and climes. From the scientific point of view human beings form a species and they live collective and social life, which points to the fact that in the face of differences among different communities, there is always a felt oneness and a unity. This oneness and unity are the bases on which rests the notion of 'unity in diversity' we would try to bring to light some of the features or attributes which express this oneness of the vast human community.

It is a fact that in the river centric Bengali and Assamese novels there are differences in regards to time, place, and characters, but the other undeniable fact is that all these novels have in their core human beings and their community lives. It is possible, therefore, to discern in them this unique 'oneness'.

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First of all we have to refer to the peculiar religious and folk beliefs of each community. We have already discussed in the foregoing pages that the novels under steady are built on the bases of the regional community lives. It is only natural that in them all there are references to the folk and religious beliefs and practices of the peoples inhabiting the regions. Almost all the communities of peoples dealt with in these novels follow their own traditional religious beliefs and senses. In Tarasankar's ‘Hānsulibānker Upakathā’ there are some details of some folk festivals of the ‘Kāhār’ society, through which some folk features of Radh Bengal have been fore grounded distinctively. We find in the ‘Bhānjo’ festival of the ‘Kāhārs’ the practice of calling names other side by side the other rites and practices. But in these calling of names there is no association of cursing, rather there is association of ‘Rāng’ or love. In the festival of ‘Nabānna’ (harvesting) the distinctive folk features of the ‘Kāhārs’ have been brought to the fore with greater gusto.

Thus in Bibhutibhushan’s Bengali novel ‘Ichāmati’ find, on the one hand, references to such commonly accepted and followed celebrations of Durgapuja, Kali Puja, Piligrimage, Birthday, Annapraśan (initiation of the baby to rice-taking) etc and on the other, references to the purely local festival of ‘Terer Pāluni’. This festival is observed by the women of Pāanchpota village on the banks of the river Ichamati on the thirteenth day of the month of Bhādra. The women of the village organize picnic under the old Kadam and Jeuli trees. Cooking is not done there, foodstuffs are brought from home according to financial ability, and then eaten there on banana leaves. Women from rich families share the same food from these coming from poor families. The tenor of female life of a particular region is brought to light through this. The novelist has, almost like a bard, described the rural life in this way.

In ‘Titās Ekti Nadir Nām’ again, we find the celebration of another festival or ‘Brata’ in which only wenches participate. This may be regarded as their very local folk festival. This festival is really ‘Māghmandaler Brata’ which is celebrated by unmarried girls for their marriage. We have discussed this festival in detail in the preceding chapter. Here we would hold only this-the ‘Mālos’ of the banks of the Titas are distinctly presented to the readers by means of the description of this folk festival. This festival distinguishes almost entirely the regional feature of the region. There are references to Ganga puja, ‘Ambubachi’ in the novel ‘Ganga’ of Samaresh Basu. At the time of Ganga puja the boatmen do not pay money as subscriptions, but fishes.
The money collected from the sole of these fishes is used for the Puja. This is purely their own practice which distinguishes their folk features.

In river-centric Assamese novel ‘Kapilipariār Sādhhu’ too space has been given for various social rites and practices. There are references in this novel to the ‘Bhāwna’ and the ‘Srāddha’ rites of the Assamese society. Rupai’s grandfather jumps into the Kapili for searching him and falls ill. The villagers consider him possessed by ghosts and bring an enchanter to drive the ghosts away. Again, when Dhirsingh dies his son Rupai observe period of mourning for eleven days. Here, there are references to ‘Dashā’ and ‘Srāddha’.

‘Surujmukhir Swapna’ is a novel built centering the life and society of the Muslims. This is the reason why in this novel there are not many references to festivals other than the observance of Namaz and fasting during the Roza month. Of courses there are references to two feasts. The peculiarly own folk life of the region has been drawn through such things as making ‘Pithās’ during the feasts.

In the novel ‘Matsyagandhā’, folk belief and folk culture, particularly in the matters of driving away ghosts and application of medicine for abortion have been brought to light 4. Again, the distinctiveness of this society is brought to the notice when the celebration of Bihu of the ‘Kaivarta’ (Fisherman) community is referred to. In the same way in ‘Matsyakanyā’ of Lakshminandan Bora there are references to the rural folk-medicine Pemada, an important character in the novel, side by side the profession of fish- selling, also earn money by treating the people with folk medicine. Other than this, boating, catching fish and selling them in the market, feasts etc. reveal the heart of the rural society. Mentions made and description given of the feasts, rites and practice, which foreground the folk culture and folk belief, also make it clear that the social status of the peoples of the rural community is distinctly different from the urban middle and upper classes and their senses of values. This difference accounts for the fact that the rites and practices of these rural folks are outside of the urban sophistications. The undeniable fact is that the centre of the beliefs and practices is man. The currents of folk beliefs and folk cultures flow on and on with the vast human community at the centre. This is the point in which the aforementioned ‘oneness’ is revealed. The differences of time and space do not separate these peoples from each other- rather unify them in a single community of men.
From the vintage point of economic status we find that the people in these river-centric novels live under the poverty line. Some of them are agricultural labourers, same fishermen, some are engaged even in inferior professions.

The society which is shown in Tarasankar’s ‘Hānsulibānker Upakathā’ are for generations palanquin bearers. Side by side they do the works of the agricultural labourers. The ‘Kāhārs’ do not find jobs all the year round; seasonal unemployment is a great problem to them. As cultivators they have to work in the lands of others, particularly of the rich landlords. Some of them work as gang men in the railways, but their number is negligible. There economic condition is quite bad. Want of money turns Param into a thief and Kaloshashi a maid servant. This pinpointedly shows that their economic condition is really bad. It may be said that these people have nothing to lose but their chains.

The people who are spoken of in the society portrayed in Bibhutibhusan’s ‘Ichāmati’ also do not belong to an economically comfortable class. Although a few rich families inhabit the village, the majority of the village folks are economically unsound. The causes of their poverty are the oppressions meted out to them by the Europeans engaged in indigo cultivation and the lack of employment opportunities Bibhutibhusan has given expression to this as he dealt with the ‘Chandimandap’. For earning money by fair means or by foul these people, as it is noted in the novel, bank upon such diverse activities as robbery, with superstitions and practicing ‘Kabirāji’ etc. One character named Nalu Paul in the novel ‘Ichāmati’ has been beautifully used by the novelist to show the economic condition and hope- how he started as a poor retail seller of goods and, by dint of hard labour rose to the status of a land owner (Jamindār).2

In ‘Titās Ekti Nadir Nām’ the society the ‘Mālos’ has been mainly dealt with. The references to catching fish, procuring boats and sails, making arrangements for catching fish from distant sources reveal the poverty of the people and their economically marginalized standing. Weaving of nets by women, casting the net for catching fish by men, doing the works of boatmen in the boats owned by others have been referred to quite a few times in the novel. The delicate economic condition of these people is revealed through the fact that they take money from the money-lenders on interest, even by pawning their goods. The novelist refers to the pouring of rain water through the roof of the cottage of Ananta’s mother which is a pointer to her precarious economic condition. To bring to the fore the economic condition of the
‘Mālos’, he refers to the peasantry living in Shukdebpur on the banks of the distant Meghna who at once catch fish and cultivate land to have both the ends meet Subul and Kishore set said for distant regions to bring financial relief to the family which resulted in the putting an end to Kishore’s life. Subal failed to bear the burden of poverty, joined Kalobaran’s boat to cast the net to catch fish and soon died a premature death. It requires no effort to understand the lack of economic self sufficiency of the society of the ‘Mālos’.

In the novel ‘Gangā’ we find the some kind of tale of the economic insufficiency of the fishermen community. These fishermen pawn whatever they have to the moneylenders and with the money they get, go to the Ganga to catch fish. They are so engulfed in poverty that they cannot manage to catch fish themselves and sell the catch according to their own wishes, for they are indebted not only to the moneylenders, but also to the agents and other businessmen. And so we find Bilas going to the agent Damini to sell his catch of fish. In ‘Gangā’ novelist Samaresh Basu tells us how poverty of the fishermen reaches the highest point when he refers ‘Tota’ of Shravan and famine in Chaitra. In that period the economic condition of the fishermen becomes so bad that they leave their hearth and home and lie down in a sacrificial posture on the banks of the Ganga or join the band of hermits of ‘Gājan’. At times, in order to get little financial relief, they in fatches venture into the sea with the ‘Sāider’ to catch fish at the great risk of their lives. Many of them die; but they take the same risk for earning money, for they have no other alternative. We may support the critic as he says that these fishermen are—

"নামেনাত্ত স্বাধীন মৎস্যজীবী, আসলে এরা মহাবস আর পাইকারদের দাদা খাওয়া শর্করা।"³

The society which is described in the Assamese novel ‘Kapilipariār Sādhu’ is also submerged in poverty. In the novel the society of peasants has been given the greatest importance. The reference to the traditional method of ploughing in the narrative of Dhirsingh’s father Mansingh points to this fact. There are also references to the method of casting the net for catching fish in this novel. The ‘Behāri’ fishermen dealt with in the novel belong to an economically depressed community. We find that they eat rice only once in a day— at night. During daytime they take farley meal (‘Chātuya’). In the novel agriculture is also referred to in the narrative of the immigration of the Muslims of Mymansingha region. That these people were not economical marginalized is proved by the fact that they used silk neckerchiefs and
roamed about on horseback. The original inhabitants were, however, victims of poverty which was caused by the oppression method out to them by the social superiors. We hear Tilak Goswami say that he does not initiate the poor people the disciples as they would deprive themselves of food to send money to the master.

The people who are spoken of in the “best novel” of Syed Abdul Malik ‘Surujmukhir Swapna’ are not economically very sound, but are not on the whole, dependent upon other. Almost all of them are associated to agricultural activities. Some of them earn their livelihood by working in their own land, some work in other people’s land. They work very hard—men and women alike have the ability to do various works. They never grudge embracing the life of hard toil, precisely because they have the sense of self respect. The signifier of this fact is the tale of the mother of Gulach. He changed his economic condition by working hard on the fallow land on the banks of the river Dhansiri. Most of the villagers rear domestic animal or grow vegetables and by these means earn their livelihood. The poor villagers, especially the women, do various works in any festival in the houses of the financially well-off people. It is understood quite easily, however, that the rich of the village coerce the economically weaker people. In the novel there is found another economic class, who do business by roaming from place to place by boats. They sail boats in the bosom of Dhansiri with their Merchandise and sell such items as potato, mustard seeds and seeds of other vegetable to the villagers. In the village Dalim, almost every house has a loom by which the women of the house weave cloth. They put on the cloths and sell the surplus.

The society described in Homen Bargohain’s ‘Matsyagandhā’ is a ‘Kaivarta’ fishermen society. Here too the people are victims to poverty, though there are a few wealthy families. By the opening of the narrative it comes out from the discussion between two passersby that the people of this community do not know how to cook with oil. In the whole village there is only the smell of raw and burnt fish. The people belonging to the socially low class are often humiliated by the so-called high class for which, however, their economic weakness is mainly responsible. When Menaka’s mother, being economically depressed, goes to the house of an upper class wealthy gentleman to get some paddy seed, she and Menaka have to bear abuses because the shadow of the child Menaka has fallen on the dried paddy seeds. The society which is dealt with here has fishing as their main profession though some of them are engaged in cultivation. They procure food for at least two months by cultivating fallow or
other people’s land. The means of communication being very bad, they cannot get the legitimate price by selling fishes in distant places. Most of the fish get rotten because these cannot be sent to the towns. So poverty is the permanent companion of the fishermen of the region. For earning money they often have recourse to the profession of exorcists and charmers. We find Menaka in that role; it is easily understood that this has occurred because of their precarious financial condition.

The main plot in Lakshminandan Bora’s ‘Matsyakanyā’ is based on the fishermen community whose constant malady is poverty. This comes out from the description of the house of Pemada and Gunada. From the narrator we come to know that during the World war a new class of agents was created and this phenomenon hit hard the income of the fishermen. Under the given circumstances Gunada and Pemada were constrained to starve. The situation compelled the fishermen to give up their profession of selling fish and accept exorcism or any other means to earn their livelihood, when Gunada failed to earn anything for the family; she debunked herself by becoming a maid servant. In the novel there are references to the government office-assistant who are, on the whole, financially solvent. Again, there are references to the oppression of the poor by the corrupt government officers. When the health officer fails to get fish from Pemada without any payment, he lodged a false complaint against her and sent her to the judicial custody. The novelist has given same space to the tale of oppression meted out to the economically depressed class.

Thus we find that the society described in the river based novels which are our target of discussion, is the society of the economically and socially marginalized people. There seems to be no end to their struggle for existence – fare existence with two square meals a day. These communities of people are never economically self-independent, rather in most cases, they have to depend upon the other, the ‘haves’, class, for money. These suppressed and oppressed peoples are united in ‘oneness’—from economic point of view, their names occur in the same list.

We may notice another similarity among the river based novels discussed here. This similarity is discerned in the creation of the female characters. There are female characters like Pakhi, Basan, Kalosashi, Suchand, and Gopalibala in ‘Hānsulibānker Upakathā’ of Tarasankar. All these women flow with their distinctness and individuality; each has her distinct personality. These women are never faded or paled by the presence of the male characters; rather they establish themselves by virtue of their respective sense of dignity. We may refer to Pakhi as an
example, who goes away with Karali leaving behind her husband Nayan, suffering from asthma, and when Karali brought another woman, Subasi, to his house, she preferred suicide with a desire to preserve the honour of her love. This is a signifier of the distinctiveness of her sense of feminine dignity.

We would refer to two female characters in 'Ichāmati' to show the novelist's art of female characterization one of them is Tīlu or Tīlottama and the other Nistarini. In the portrayal of Tīlu, the novelist has revealed the stage when a woman reaches the position of a life-partner advancing through the stages of a mere house wife or a beloved. Bhabani's wife Tīlottama has been portrayed as the representation of her husband's spiritual teachings, as the participant or sharer of his thoughts, as his beloved disciple. This puts the seal of success on the novelist's art of characterization. The great creator Bibhutibhusan has drawn the image of the eternal mothers through the creation of Tīlottama. Here Tīlu has been portrayed as the combined form of a goddess and a human female being. Bhabani has discovered in Tīlu two appealing forms the mother of the family and the universal mother.

In the character of Nistarini, Bibhutibhusan was portrayed a rebellious woman standing against the conventional social practices and attitudes. Nistarini is a married woman, yet she is unlawfully in love with a young man of the village. Her adventurous feats for the satisfaction of her desires must be considered revolutionary, given the time to which she belongs. Through her, Bibhutibhusan seems to bring the point home that in the changed circumstances of the modern times, there inevitably comes the dawn of new attitudes opposed to old, conventional social ideas, values, and notions about religion. So Bhabani believes that women like Nistarini are the new women of the future.

In Samaresh Basu's novel 'Gangā' too we find such an exceptional woman, Himi. In the narrative the novelist at times identified Himi with the river, for in her character is discerned the primitiveness of the river. She always waits for, as does the river, the rainy season. The season appears in the life of Himi in the form the love of Bilas. The image of her independent self is seen in the constant flow of her love. She does not put chains in the feet of Bilas because of this uninterrupted flow. As the sailor crosses the river and advances towards the sea, so Bilas crosses the bounds of Himi's love and marches ahead towards sea. We find Himi restlessly searching for her soul's mate, never ceasing her search. Though her love finds fulfillment in Bilas, she does not desire to enchain him to herself. This attitude has portrayed her as an
exceptional woman with a distinct personality of her own. She is not a submissive product of the patriarchal society, rather a rebel unboundable by the social and ethical mores of the conventional society.

We feel the presence of independent selves of at least two women in 'Titas Ekti Nadir Nam'. They are Basanti and Udaytara. Basanti is present in all the four parts of the novel and she is perhaps the most active character in it. The narrative opens with the description of the Maghmandal Brata observed by her. Kishore desires to hand over to Subal the 'Chouari' of Basanti which creates a great impression on her mind and from this point perhaps her love for Kishore flows.

The famous critic Achintya Biswas holds that Basnati’s distinctness is discernible in her hospitality and friendliness towards Ananta’s mother. She even quarrels with her mother when she extends hospitality to Ananta’s mother. The novelist, Advaita himself has observed that there is rebel in the character of Basanti. She is constrained to accept Subal’s death in ‘জিঙ্কলের সমুদ্র’, but there lay in her heart an ingrained anger which found no outlet. The expression of this anger is seen perhaps in her revolt against the Yatra Party. But by this time the cultural degeneration of the Malo society has set in. The Malos, at the hints of Basanati, throttle a young man of Telipara to death, put the corpse in a boat and set it in the river. That is the beginning of the conflict between the Malos and the upper class people. In this conflict Basanti gave the leadership to the Malos. Her quarrel with Udaytara for Ananta probably expresses the conflict between two childless women for the ownership of an offspring.

One significant feature of the character of Udaytara is the expressed existence of the rural folk life in her. The narrator, it seems, wanted to bring to the fore the fact through the portrayal of Udaytara that folk belief or folk culture of the rural folk of Bengal has been flowing through women from time immemorial. From this vintage point Udaytara has become a representative character.

In the Assamese novel 'Kapilipariar Sadhu' of Nabakanta Barua, Sonpahi occupies an important place as an exceptional female character. In the novel, Rupai and the course of his life occupies the centre stage, but still Sonpahi, who is portrayed within a small canvas, easily creates a deep impression in the mind of the reader. The novelist has used the river Kapili as a metaphor for woman. But Sonpahi is presented as the opposite of the Kapili. As opposed to the flow and dynamism of the Kapili, Sonaphi is drawn as the image of stasis. She, it appears, wants to bind Rupai by her
love; wants to confine the free life of Rupai within a limited space. Naturally there
develops an invisible conflict between Sonpahi and the Kapili. The mindset of Rupai
is, as if, built by the free movement of the Kapili. He becomes oblivious of the Kapili
only for the while he remains in the vicinity of Sonpahi in the bank of ‘Gosain
Pukhuri; Sonpahi separates him from the Kapili. Ultimate Sonpahi suffers defeat in
her conflict with the Kapili and embraces the path of self slaughter. Thus the character
of Sonpahi has been established metaphorically through her conflict with and
opposition to the character of the Kapili.

In ‘Surujmukhir Swapna’ there is at least two powerfully drawn female
characters Kapahi and Tara. Kapahi is a young woman deserted by her husband.
Kapahi was given in marriage at the tender of twelve with a young man named Nahar.
Tara is Nahar’s daughter by his first wife. But Kapahi could not live long with Nahar,
because there develops an illicit relationship between her and a trader, who had come
by boat, called Basir as a result of which Nahar deserts her and leaves the place.
Kapahi then starts living in the village with Tara. When she is acquainted with
Gulach, she entrops this man; she first attracts Gulach by showing Tara and then,
finding an opportunity, married him herself. But her moral weakness asserts itself
again she re-establishes her relationship with Basir for which she is beaten and driven
away by Gulach. It is worth noticing that Kapahi even in her married state flouted
social ethics and developed relationship with other men. From that angle of view, she
establishes herself as a mentally independent woman who cares little for conventional
ethical values. 6

Tara is presented as a woman who is completely different from Kapahi in
nature. She loves Gulach right from the beginning but she controls her emotions and
preserves her sense of self- respect even when Gulach and Kapahi get married. She
kept watch on the sorrows and happiness of Gulach without betraying her emotions.
Her love for Gulach is so instance that she fled away from the place of wedding, her
marriage with the son of old Saffiat beyond her knowledge. Later on when Kapahi
deserted her home, Tara got married to Gulach and they lived a happy domestic life.
Tara’s unchangeable love and her loyalty to Gulach establish her distinct personality.

Menaka is the central character in the novel ‘Matsyagandhā’. She is portrayed
as a very active and forceful character. The central theme of the novel is revenge
taken by the people of the lower classes against the social superiors. Menaka is the
person who takes revenge. When the younger sister of her husband, Kamala, became
pregnant because of her illicit relationship with an high born Ahom young man called Maniram, Menaka saved the fetus in Kamala’s womb even though she had the knowledge of the medicine for abortion. She made Maniram marry Kamala. As Matsyagandhā (Satyabati) of the Mahābhārata was married to a ‘Kshatrya’ King, so her a ‘Kaivarta’ (fishermen community) girl is married to Maniram who belongs to high social class the blue blood. This is the revenge taken by the socially marginalized class against the superior class for the centuries of oppression meted out to the former by the latter. This revenge came through the hands of Menaka whose attitude imparted firmness and solidity to her character.

The plot in the novel ‘Matsyakanyā’ revolves round the female character Pemada. In the novel is narrated the hazards and adversities through which Pemada had to move in her struggle for life. Her mindset has been created by her idealistic love for Gopen Das in the early part of her life, and she tried to clutch to that ideal all her life. With a view to preserving her ideal of love she did not allow any alluring proposal to approach her and patiently bore the harshness of fare existence. She wanted to bring up her child in accordance with her ideal. In the circumlocutory ways of life she came in contact with another ideal man, Surath Mahaldar, and fell in love with him. For keeping her ideal she did not low down to the government officer; she did not sacrifice self respect though she was raped twice by police personnel. This sort of unbending idealism has given her a moral strength of a different type and established her as a forceful and vital woman.

After a study of these different novels we logically reach the conclusion that these works, though written in different times and climes and with widely different characters, are bound together by one main thread or tune the revelation of human relationships under the backdrop of the greater and universal human life,. And thus-by conquering the differences of time and circumstances, and geographical remoteness, they became the representations of a universal ‘Oneness’ they reach a level beyond time and space.
References:

3. Debasish Bhattacharya—Bish Satak Bāngla Kathāśāhitye Nimnabargiya Chetana, (P—246)
4. Gobinda Prasad Sarma—Upanyās Āru Asamiyā Upanyās, (P—320)
5. Achintya Biswas —Prasanga Advaitā: Mallabarman O Titās Ekti Nadir Nām, (P-161)
6. Abdul Malik—Asamiyā Upanyāsat Musalmān Janajibanar Chitra, (P-136)