Chapter - IV

Dialectics of Ideology and Its Reformation in Bengal Social Structure

(Analysis of Select Plays by Utpal Dutt, Mahasweta Devi and Manoj Mitra)
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Multiculturalism, religious plurality, heterogeneous ethnicity, diversity in faith, and harmony in heterogeneity are some of the guiding ethos of the society of India. Being a state in Indian union, West Bengal possesses the same sorts of plural society and social structure as they are found in India. The social structures based on caste system, religions and socio-economic forces that exist in whole India are present in Bengal too. In colonial era, the social strata of Bengal were zamindar, talukdar, tehsildar, chepattanidar etc. and they ruled the masses in a hierarchical order. On the other hand, based on caste system there are different divisions that existed in the society of Bengal such as Brahmin, Kshatryia, Vaishya, Shudra, Harijan etc. The social set up is hierarchised and defined in Bengal with some customs and norms to rank the people from various societal strata on the basis of certain criteria such as income, occupation, education, hereditary status etc. The existing hierarchical social orders of Bengal are rulers and ruled, elite class and lower class, landlords and landless people, upper caste and lower caste, rich and poor and so on. Although the society of Bengal is composed of different race, ethnicity, caste, creed and religion, there is a unity in diversity. Yet, society is composite with overall ethos which make it distinct and special. The society, where members from different caste, religion, and race share equal facility, would be called a perfect society. But in reality, it would be very difficult to find out the perfect or ideal society. In the societies of Bengal, there are discrimination, oppression, suppression, marginalization on the basis of caste, race, religion and social stratum. Dominant class of a society always strives to impose their ideology on the lower class. In terms of education, economy, religion and culture, the oppressed classes believe that the order of inequality in society is ‘natural’ or ‘preordained’, and do not realize that they are oppressed.

The structure of thought or representation that helps to naturalize economic inequality and oppression is called ideology. Ideology is the speeches, writings, beliefs, and opinions- cultural practices- which state the ‘naturalness’ and necessity of economic
practices. “Althusser defines ideology as a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence. The imaginary consciousness helps us to make sense of the world but also masks or represses our real relationship to it” (Selden 97-98). Hence, ideology is an appliance of power because it helps prop up the dominant classes by naturalizing an exploitative relationship and convincing the working classes that this is how things exist. Ideology stops the recognition of oppression by the oppressed. Therefore, it is a blind, a veil that prevents the oppressed from proper understanding. And that is why Karl Marx appropriately termed it as false consciousness.

The domination and reinforcement of power relations is termed ‘hegemony’, a term popularized by the Italian theorist Antonio Gramci in twentieth century. Hegemony is analogous to ideology, but its area is greater than it. It incorporates ideologies because, as we see, hegemony works most successfully when the dominated accept their domination. Hegemony is the domination of particular sections of society by the powerful classes that is executed not necessarily through threats of violation or the law but by winning their consent to be governed and dominated. Hegemony, like ideology, works less through coercion than through consent.

The working people themselves give their consent to the bourgeoisie and adopt bourgeois values and beliefs. As sustainers of the economic base, the dominant class enjoys the prestige of the masses and controls the ideology- a term often used synonymously with hegemony- that shapes individual consciousness. This shaping of people’s ideologies is, according to Antonio Gramci, a kind of deception whereby the majority of people forget about or abandon their own interests and desires and accept the dominant values and beliefs as their own.

(Bressler 198)

Whereas, Louis Althusser argues that prevailing ideology or dominant hegemony constructs the mind-set of people through a procedure called interpellation or ‘hailing the subject’. The worldview of the people is cautiously crafted through a complex series of massage sent through the essentials of the superstructure, including the arts. The dominant class uses this ‘Ideological State Apparatus’ rather than political or military repression.
Ideological State Apparatus, is a term used by Louis Althusser to describe how ideologies are produced and disseminated in a culture. In discussing how any culture gets its people to behave according to its laws, Althusser posits two kinds of State Apparatuses or mechanisms i.e. Repressive State Apparatus and Social Mechanism. (Klages 45)

The dominant class and the lower class exist in the societies of Bengal as well and the dominant class uses the ideological state apparatuses to dominate or govern the marginal class. As there was oppression, marginalization, superstition and discrimination in the societies of Bengal, Bengal has a long and glorious history of social reformation and the reformers. West Bengal is fortunate enough to have some great social reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Swami Vivekananda, Sivanath Sastri, Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Sri Sri Harichand Thakur, Umesh Chandra Dutta and many more. The Bengali Renaissance or the social reformation movement of Bengal was a social, cultural and intellectual movement in the state of West Bengal during the tenure of British colonial rule which marked from the early nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. There have been many stalwarts who led this Bengali Renaissance or reformation of Bengal but it began with Raja Rammohan Roy (1772-1833) and marked its end with Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). There was a blend of social reformers, colossal literary figures, scholars, patriotic orators, religious reformers, journalists, artists in the nineteenth century West Bengal and they all amalgamated and shaped the spectrum of Bengali Renaissance. The Bengali Renaissance is the sign post of transition of Bengali civilization from medieval era to the modern age.

It is widely acknowledged that literature is the reflection of society as it delicately encapsulates the different aspects of society. Through the depiction of diverse societal aspects literature strives to reform the social evils, perverted norms and distorted traditions which prevail in the society. Matthew Arnold rightly said that “Literature is a criticism of life” (qtd in Nagarajan 100). Writers of different ages and different parts of the world always endeavor to facsimile the society in their respective literary works to rectify the prevailing follies and disorders of the society. Likewise, from the primordial stage of Bengali civilization, the playwrights of Bengali dramatic literature dexterously bring up the distinct societal aspects in their dramatic works to reform the
society. The playwrights of Bengal massively contributed to the movement of Bengali social reformation or Renaissance through their active support and producing social dramatic literature and its performance. The dramatists of Bengali theatre such as Ramnarain Tarkaratna (1822-1886), Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824-1873), Dinabandhu Mitra (1829-1873), Girish Chandra Ghosh (1844-1912), Dwijendra Lal Roy (1863-1913), Kshirode Prasad Vidyabinode (1863-1927) and Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) through their dramatic writing greatly influenced and supported the Bengali Renaissance. The plays like *Kulinkulasarbaswa*, *Kangsabadh*, *Ekei Ki Bole Sabhyata?*, *Jamai Barik*, *Balidan*, *Parapaare*, *Visarjan* etc. are the remarkable examples of the active support of Bengali dramatists in the social reformation movement of Bengal. Even many of the stalwarts of Bengali Renaissance like Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Swami Vivekananda, and Ramakrishna Paramahansa were present in various performances of these plays in theatre to watch the play and spread the social massages amongst the masses. Thus, the playwrights of Bengali theatre greatly influenced and made the mass intellectual social movement of Bengal successful in nineteenth and twentieth century Bengal.

After the Renaissance period there are many dramatists who are producing and performing plays for more progress and advancement of the society of Bengal. Amongst the most prominent figures are Bidhayak Bhattacharya, Bijon Bhattacharya, Utpal Dutt, Badal Sircar, Mohit Chattopadhyaya, Mahasweta Devi and Manoj Mitra etc. But, the plays of three versatile playwrights namely Utpal Dutt, Mahasweta Devi and Manoj Mitra capture a complete spectrum of society of Bengal incorporating all its aspects. They have strived to project the social disorder and follies in their plays and also through the performances of the plays they try to rectify the disorder.

Now, I would take up the major plays of these three well established playwrights for analyzing them critically and exploring the social reformative zeal of the playwrights. It will also bring out the nuances of the texts and highlight the issues they have dealt with in their works. My study will be dissecting the primary sources minutely, solidified by the secondary sources. The texts will be analyzed from various theoretical approaches such as cultural studies, humanistic approach and other contemporary literary theories.
Utpal Dutt once talked about the social utility of theatre and he asserted that:

A theatre that merely entertains and avoids any reference to real social or political problems will never be able to subject the audience to stress and such an audience will not affiliate. Such a theatre denies the very reason why theatre was created. (Dutt 85-86)

The major plays of Utpal Dutt are representative of his concomitant society of Bengal and his plays minutely portray the societal milieu of Bengal. Dutt longed to see revolution to bring all the section of society on the same ground of humanity, justice and equality. He wished to create a society in which the dimension of hatred, violence and conflict between different social forces come to an end. His major works dramatize the voice of the suppressed, the marginalized and constructs a resistance against the disastrous social powers and social forces.

Playwright Utpal Dutt himself translated his three plays namely Hunting the Sun, The Great Rebellion and Nightmare City and he maintained the original dramatic sense of these plays in his translations. For the most part it is colloquial, characterized chiefly by a conscientious simplicity of diction and sentence structure. The effect is of crispness, cleaness, clarity and a scrupulous care. The dialogue is equally striking, for Dutt had an ear for the accents and mannerisms of human speech and that is why he was able to bring a character quickly to life. In The Hunting the Sun and The Great Rebellion, Utpal Dutt uses a language that rises out of the sense of the age and place. The language of the play The Hunting the Sun and The Great Rebellion attempts to give a sense of the lived world of the pre-Mughal period and the colonial era respectively. The lucidity and vividness of the language of Nightmare City try to provide a sense of the lived era of 1970s Kolkata. In order to keep the colloquial sense of the age, the playwright retains many Bengali words in his performative utterance in all the three plays. Hence, his plays are rich in colloquialisms and original swear words. However, the translation tries its best to retain the original and pure dramatic sense of the plays.
Hunting the Sun (Surya Shikar) (1971) is one of his revolutionary plays. Utpal Dutt’s play Hunting the Sun (Surya Shikar) is set in Ayodhya during the reign of emperor Samudragupta. The play is centered on the regimen of Samudragupta and it displays the internal kaleidoscopic view of the kingdom and its policies to retain authority. Through the play Hunting the Sun, the playwright deftly depicts the social ambience of society of the day. The ‘plague’ of caste system, which paralyzes the social fabric of the society, is adroitly portrayed in the play. Through the character sketch of Indrani in the play Utpal Dutt shows the vitiating consequences of caste hierarchy. As Indrani is a shudra (Untouchable) in caste, she cannot touch or read the religious scriptures, but she dares to read scriptures. Indrani possesses the religious knowledge and she challenges the so called religious experts with the reference of scriptures. To sustain their predominance over the common masses, the so called religious preachers become hypocrite and strive hard to defame her.

VIRUPAKSHA. And she is not to blame if she, a shudra woman, studies the Vedas?
HAYAGREEVA. What are you up to now?
VIRUPAKSHA. This woman is a shudra, and yet reads the Vedas- she reads books! (snatching her books.) Look. Yajnabalkya. Narada.
Shudras may not read. Her tongue must be cut out. That is the imperial edict.
HAYAGREEVA. Why then do you read?
INDRANI. Ahahare twang shudram tawaiwa saha gabheerastu. The Vedas themselves defend a shudra’s right to read the Vedas. (Dutt 47)

The entire Bengali society as well as Indian society is divided on the basis of caste system. These caste hierarchies are founded by repudiating individual’s identity and value and they spread the poison of discrimination and inequalities in the society. The great Indian social reformer B. R. Ambedkar shows the contaminating and flagitious effects of caste hierarchy and he excoriates the so called casteism. According to Ambedkar, the idea of society should be based on the equality and justice. He opines that caste system is the root of undemocratic norms and it weakens the social fabric of the society. Ambedkar said:
Caste has killed public spirit. Caste has destroyed the sense of public charity. Caste has made public opinion impossible. A Hindu’s public in his caste. His responsibility is only to his caste. His loyalty is restricted only to his caste. Virtue has become caste-ridden and morality has become caste bound. There is no sympathy to the deserving. There is no charity to the needy. (qtd in Wagh 4)

In the play *Hunting the Sun*, playwright Utpal Dutt repeatedly draws the attention of the audience to this specific aspect of caste hierarchy. Utpal Dutt with his skilled artistic caliber represents the character of Indrani as a symbol for reformation in the play. Hayagreeva, the general of emperor Samudragupta was a very immoral and egocentric man but after encounter with Indrani in due course he became a very honest and sincere man. When Hayagreeva was purchasing a slave Gohil, Indrani requested him to free the man. But, he denied and responded why he would free a low caste shudra slave. Subsequently, Indrani asked Hayagreeva to prove his caste and made him realize his fanatic and hypocrite belief on casteism. Eventually, Hayagreeva’s moral conscience awakens and he later became a very honest and truthful man through the intervention of Indrani in his life. The following extracts would enlighten the matter:

HAYAGREEVA. Yes, Indrani, of course. Tell me, why must I love this slave? He is low-born, a shudra.
INDRANI. And you?
HAYAGREEVA. I am a kshatriya.
INDRANI. Prove it.
HAYAGREEVA. I have none. I was born of a tree.
INDRANI. And you believe this fairytale?
HAYAGREEVA. What do you mean?
INDRANI. Your father must have found you under a tree. No one can be born of a tree. Such absurd things do not happen in nature. (Dutt 40)

Hence, Indrani upheld Hayagreeva’s conscience from the state of fanaticism and hypocrisy to the moral and rational world. General Hayagreeva realized with this enlightenment that each human being is equal irrespective of gender and social status in the material world. By putting the character of Indrani with the coherent
reformative enthusiasm, Utpal Dutt endeavors to make modern men realize about their hypocritical and vitiated social hierarchical order.

Utpal Dutt asserts that “The petty bourgeois is also fundamentally anti-feminist. He needs the woman to keep his house, to bear him children, to keep alive the illusion of permanence of the petty-bourgeois family” (Dutt 31). The play *Hunting the Sun* focuses on different aspects of the society which are contaminating resulting in shaking and weakening of the social fabric of the society. Male supremacy over the women is considered one of the outrageous and vital social diseases in the society of Bengal. In the traditional society women were used as pleasurable object by men. In the play *Hunting the Sun* Utpal Dutt dexterously foregrounds the monstrous patriarchal norms and consuetude. The general Hayagreeva uses women as a single night’s fantasy and nothing else. In accordance with the patriarchal norms women are not supposed to argue on an issue with a male and they also use religion for their defense against the women. Once in the play *Hunting the Sun*, general Hayagreeva states that in the Kingdom of Samudragupta the Brahmanical code is law in which a woman cannot speak and debate with a man. The patriarchal norms treat women as a second class human being.

BASUBANDHU. To you therefore a woman is merely flesh that you enjoy for a night?

HAAYAGREEVA. Naturally. Every night I suck the life out of a fresh body and the following morning, toss the dry meat out on the dungheap. (Dutt 31)

Utpal Dutt displays the barbarism and inhumanity of the upper class people through the portrayal of slavery system of India. There is no difference between the life of a beast and a man’s life to them. In this heinous custom, the process of buying or selling a man is similar to that of selling of an animal. While Hayagreeva purchases a slave Madhukarika, he is advised to check her teeth. The similar kinds of process are generally practiced in the trading of horses. In the entire procedure of bargaining they even frequently compared a slave with an animal.

SURYAVARMA. Proficient in all household duties. Look at her teeth and you will realize how young she really is.
HAYAGREEVA. That’s the way you tell a horse’s youth.
SURYAVARMA. Also a slave’s. Slave and beast are similar animals.
BASUBANDHU. But one thousand dinars? You can get a slave in the market these days cheaper than a dog. (Dutt 34-35)

In the play *Hunting the Sun*, Utpal Dutt also represents the dominating social forces and powers which are passed on through several intuitions and systems such as laws and prison, knowledge and discourse, permission and prohibition in the society. Many contemporary intellectuals study these concealed social forces and emphasize how these social forces serve the supremacy of the people in power. Here one may refer to the investigations of Foucault who asserts that:

> It is not the “privilege”, acquired or preserved, of the dominant class, but the overall effect of its strategic positions – an effect that is manifested and sometimes extended by the position of those who are dominated. Furthermore, this power is not exercised simply as an obligation or a prohibition on those who “do not have it”; it invests them, is transmitted by them and through them; it exerts pressure upon them, just as they themselves, in their struggle against it, resist the grip it has on them. This means that these relations go right down into the depths of society, that they are not localized in the relations between the state and its citizens or on the frontier between classes. (Foucault 26-27)

Thus, it can hardly be an exaggeration to state that Utpal Dutt has very effectively captured the feigning and noxious outlook of the society in the play *Hunting the Sun*. The play is scintillating with the various deleterious aspects of the society which are weakening the social foundation of the society. Through the delineation of all these vital societal issues the playwright Utpal Dutt wants to make modern men realize about their unethical and vitiated social norms. Utpal Dutt delineates the character of Indrani by putting adequate zeal of reformation and revolution in her and makes the character very pregnant and apt in the context of the contemporary society of Bengal. The play *Hunting the Sun* is dazzling with the playwright’s ardor of reformation which ushered in an ideal society.
II

Like *Hunting the Sun*, through the play *The Great Rebellion* Utpal Dutt also tries to draw the attention of the contemporary intelligentsia and common man to the ongoing exploitation and suppression of common man. Dutt represents the current socio-political and economic disorder of Bengal through the veil of historical settings of the play. From the long British rule and colonization India got independence on 15th August 1947. But the socio-political, economic and cultural milieu of India has not changed so far. After independence, in Bengal as well as in India the political control or hegemony of a specific political party prevailed. The socio-political ambience of Bengal seemed that it was again under some colonial control or a kind of neocolonialism. The playwright Utpal Dutt minutely observed the practice of capitalism or indirect socio-political hegemony in Bengal after the independence by a particular political party and he aptly wrote the play *The Great Rebellion* (*Mahavidroha*) in nineteen seventies to depict the tumultuous days of 1857. The people of post independent period of Bengal witnessed penury, poverty, food crisis, oppression which resulted in uncertainty, confusion, disillusionment, depression etc. The rise of moneylenders, land grabbers, mafia raj in nineteen sixty and hereafter was eventually destroying the society of Bengal. Utpal Dutt closely observed the practice of capitalism by a specific political group in post independence era of Bengal and that is why he wrote the play *The Great Rebellion* to portray the days of crisis in colonial time and contextualized it in the prevailing situation of Bengal in the sixties and after.

The play *The Great Rebellion* expounds the internal dilemma and catastrophe of the people of India during the period of the great rebellion in 1857. There was penury and severe food crisis among the common people and the sepoys were suffering from internal dilemma and dispute. Many of them internally allied with the British and many were fighting for the motherland. Those, who were internally associated with British, were taking huge property and land from the common masses under the new law of British East India Company. The Following extract from the play would portray the internal conflict of sepoys and the exigency that prevailed among the contemporary people of India:
MIRZA. My fingers have been almost hacked off by an English cavalryman’s sabre this afternoon. I can’t hope to hold pen for weeks.
HEERA. I shall write it.
MIRZA. Will you be so kind? A very important letter.
HEERA. Is it about repairs to the factory?
MIRZA. Write on. I have a plan… This money was forward to me …by Hodson himself.

_Heera looks up surprised. Mirza snatches the letter away._

MIRZA. Traitors! Spy of English! Guard! Seize this man. He was writing a letter to the traitor Rajab Ali. I have it in my hand. (Dutt 206)

This is how the internal conflicts were destroying the unity of the sepoys in the great rebellion of 1857. A particular group trapped another in such a dreadful traitorous manner that led to the suffering of the common masses. Likewise, in Bengal from sixties onward same sort of circumstances was created by the then ruling political party of the state. Through the depiction of people’s plights and crisis of the period of the great rebellion of 1857 Utpal Dutt endeavors to contextualize it to the current socio-political atmosphere of contemporary Bengal and seeks to rectify the socio-political environment of Bengal.

In the play _The Great Rebellion_, Utpal Dutt delicately elucidates the problem of caste hierarchy and communal conflict in the various regional societies of India. During the great rebellion different sepoys belonged to different caste, creed, and religion and collectively fought for the nation. But, there were various factions on the basis of caste and religion which diluted the strength of Indian sepoys. In the play, Lachman Singh asked for water but he was denied and told not to touch any vessels as he belonged to lower caste. In the rural region or villages of those days, if the shadows of lower caste people fell on the upper caste men, the lower caste man was lynched by mob. The people belonging to upper caste were destroying the society and they exploited the lower caste people in different ways.

GOVIND. Don’t touch it. We’re not going to lose caste because of you.
LACHMAN. Why should you lose caste?
PARANTAP. Anyone who drives a locomotive is a renegade. Go to hell, you apostate.
LACHMAN. Religion? When you burn widows alive to steal their property, you call it religion. In the name of caste, you reduced millions to penury and call it religion….

MUHABBAT. Peace, peace. Obviously Hindus cannot stand the sight of you.
LACHMAN. In the village, if our shadows falls on them they lynch us. (Dutt 153)

On the contrary, there was a long history of communal conflict and dispute in India from the pre independence era. Through the illustration of different sepoys from different religion Utpal Dutt strived to limn up how communal clash weakened the social fabric of multi religious Indian society. During the period of crisis in the great rebellion a sepoy belonging to one religion denied to take food prepared by another person belonging to different religion. Consequently, the British took advantages of communal disharmony of the Indians. On the other side, the cartridges used by the Indian army which were made by the fat of cow and pig led to another division in the Indian army. The British very tactfully took advantages out of it. Through the representation of communal dispute of the time of the great rebellion Utpal Dutt ventured to contextualize it in the context of existing scenario of communal disharmony of the Bengali society from nineteen sixties. The playwright wished to reform the society of Bengal through his demonstration of these communal clashes and make modern men cognizant about the hypocrisy and exploitation of the common masses in the name of religion.

LACHMAN. God, just talking to you gives me a pain in the neck.
MUHABBAT. Do you eat with Muslims?
LACHMAN. I eat even with Englishmen. Give me bread.
PARANTAP. A curse on him. He eats what Muslims have touched.
MUHABBAT. I fear you may be killed one of these days. (Dutt 154)
Therefore, it is observed that the playwright Utpal Dutt gives a detailed account of the caste hierarchy and communal dispute of the pre-independence era of India in the play *The Great Rebellion*. The playwright keenly scrutinized the societal milieu of Bengal since 1960s and wrote the play in 1970s in which the settings were the background of the great rebellion of 1857. Through the depiction of the scenario of India at the time of the great rebellion playwright tried to make it appropriate and logical in the context of the society of Bengal in 1960s and he made the contemporary men realize that similar kind of supremacy and exploitation was practiced in Bengal by a particular political wing. Utpal Dutt portrays the character of Lachman Singh in the play *The Great Rebellion* with the fervor of revolution and reformation as he always protested against hypocrisy and exploitation in the name of caste and religion.

**III**

Unlike *The Great Rebellion*, the play *Nightmare City (Duswapner Nagari)* (1974) candidly unreath the social and political circumstances of 1960s and 1970s West Bengal in a lucid manner. “Duswapner Nagari- a play about the murder of Communists in Calcutta by Congress gangsters, and the way police, the press and the so-called Congress youth leaders cooperate in the task” (Dutt 109). Utpal Dutt adroitly represents governmental hooliganism and hypocrisy and oppression of common people by the government agencies of the then ruling government of West Bengal. The play gives a detailed description of congress (Indian National Congress Party) led government and how it contaminated the social ambience of Bengal of that time. The local and regional leaders of the ruling congress party were controlled by the mafias and they exploited the common men. The ration foods and other basic ingredients were illegally consumed by the mafias which were primarily meant for the poor people. The local leaders were bribed in huge amount for their support to the gangsters and helped them earn huge illegal profit through black-marketing. Similarly, the mafias also helped the congress leaders to win the election through their coercing and threatening election campaigning tactics.

**SHIV.** There is no rice in the ration shops. What do we eat during the weeks?
GIRIN. I think this punk goes too far.
SHIV. Prices, sire, prices! My stomach burns with hunger! (Dutt 259)

The play *Nightmare City* competently displays the rise of communists in Bengal politics and how they were oppressed and harassed by the ruling congress government. The agencies of the ruling government and the gangsters associated with the local congress leaders were purportedly and strategically suppressed the communists. The mafias of the local leaders of ruling congress party itself tactically created uproar and they raised slogans like ‘Long Live Mao Zedong’, ‘Long Live Jyoti Basu (Communist leader)’ and so on and consequently the state led police held responsible the Communist Party of India (Marxist) workers and oppressed them through their brutal acts. Sometimes they even murdered common men and pasted the red festoons around the place that trapped the communists and the government agencies held the leftists cadres responsible for this. The paid gangsters of the local leaders of congress party threw bombs to the party offices of the congress Party and the state led police and other agencies diplomatically reported that the Naxalites or Marxists were doing this job and they were presented as an enemy of the democracy and socialism. In such a deliberate way the ruling congress party of the contemporary West Bengal polluted and infected the social milieu of the state through their hooliganism. The playwright Utpal Dutt brings up all these anti-social activities in his play *Nightmare City* to highlight the evil practice in the society while desiring to make an orderly and crime free society.

PALIT. Tomorrow night, you will enter these parts of the city *(pointing throw the window)* screaming, ‘Long live Mao Zedong’, and with all the deftness you are known for, stab the first police man you see. The night after, you will come again, this time yelling the glories of the Marxist leader Jyoti Basu, and toss a bomb into the local office of the Congress. You will then re-enter the zone previously indicated, and, screaming, ‘Red Salute to Naxalbari’, assassinate the Communist, Swapan.

MONI. Nothing at all. But this affair looks fishy to me. The Chief of Police does not seem to object to the murder of a constable. That’s not natural.
ROY. The particular policeman who will be on duty there tomorrow night- one Modak by name- is the secretary of the policemen’s union, an obnoxious person who has given us many sleepless night with his incessant demands for higher wages and bonus. (Dutt 250-251)

The state led police became the puppet in the hands of the gangsters of local congress leaders and the duty of police reversed i.e. the policemen protected the mafias instead of common men. The chief of police namely Mriganka Roy was always present in the meetings of gangster Lakshman Palit where all the plots of unsocial and criminal activity were made.

Lakhan Palit is a formidable businessman, a black marketer and employer of gangsters. He is the antagonist of the play. He is a representative of the oppressive force of the Central Government which has discriminated the people of West Bengal by not giving them sufficient food and adequate financial support. (Mukherjee 196)

The ruling government and the local leaders of congress party used the police for their personal interest and benefits. The state police diplomatcally trapped the communists and took them in their custody. There were several custodial deaths reported in those times and the prisoners faced brutal and violent police assault in the custody.

GOSWAMI. What about the 12 corpses at Barasat, with bullet holes in the back of the head and coal-tar smearing the faces? That too was an achievement of the Calcutta police.

ROY. Inside the Presidency Jail the other day, as you must have heard, they beat 10 violent Naxalites to death and not a man of them so much as flinched. At Tollygunge, in the south, 200 of them defeated in the battle and then killed two tough belonging to the Marxist Communist Party.

PALIT. Apart from the heroic rape of the girl Ashima Poddar by only four of them inside a police station. Here I am paying wages to bnch of gangsters who are supposed to be protected by the police. (Dutt 229-230)
This is how the defenders of common masses became the assailants and police coerced the common people for the sake of their hoodlum masters. Utpal Dutt’s play exhibits how the ruling party efficiently uses the different agencies of power with the help of police. French thinker Michel Foucault expounds the functioning of the police as a case of decentralized and capillary power. Dutt’s depiction of police in the play *Nightmare City* reminds of Foucault’s concepts of the ‘Police Power’. As Foucault rightly states:

> But, although the police as an institution were certainly organized in the form of a state apparatus, and although this was certainly linked directly to the centre of a political sovereignty, the type of power that it exercises, the mechanisms it operates and the elements to which it applies them are specific. It is an apparatus that must be coextensive with the entire social body and not only by the extremely limits that it embraces, but by the minuteness of the details it is concerned with. (Foucault 213)

People of any democratic society generally vote for a particular political party for the safety and security of life and property and for job, placement and a better future etc. Likewise, people of Bengal voted for better tomorrow and the youngsters expected jobs and a secure life from the congress led government. But, unemployment remained one of the burning issues of post-independent era of congress led West Bengal. Unemployment is a kind of disease which creates a vacuum of frustration, cynicism, depression, disillusionment, and pessimism among the youngsters. The disillusionment and pessimism make the subsistence of human being an absurd one in this maternal world and it also creates spiritual barrenness among the people. Unemployment enhances asocial activities, criminal activities, deceitfulness and hypocrisy among the masses. Utpal Dutt, indeed, tries to draw the attention of his audience to this specific aspect in the play *Nightmare City*. In the play, Monibhushan Mitra was a well educated young man, who, due to unemployment, associated himself with the underworld. At first he murdered Anupam Sarkar who was a communist. As Monibhushan Mitra was a well educated man, he realized his misdeed and suffered from hallucination and schizophrenic attacks. He strived to come out from the underworld but he cannot come out as the goons were threatening him by saying that
his role will be revealed to the police. Consequently a hallucination of the character of Monibhushan appeared by the name of Devdutt who worked as his conscience. This is how Monibhushan Mitra split into two i.e. one is usual self and another one is his hallucinated self, Devdutt, who represented his inner conflict.

PURNIMA. How many times must I tell you- you did not kill him.
Kailash killed him, Kailash from downtown.
MONI. Kailash from downtown.
PURNIMA. Yes, he stabbed Anupam. (Dutt 232)

MONI. One murder makes you a criminal
A million murders for profit
Get your picture in the paper-
They call it Success Story.
DEVDUTT. You are plagiarizing Chaplin from Monsieur Verdoux….
MONI. No, I beg of you, Mr. Ghost, not now. I am waiting for
Purnima. Inflict your miracles on me later. (Dutt 267-268)

It seems in the play Nightmare City that ‘State Machine’ states its political and ideological supremacy through various agencies of power such as police, press, media and even the gangsters. Playwright exposes the fact that through the cruel and brutal violence, the ruling party expresses their susceptibility. The ruling party is against any person or organization which refuses to accept the hegemonic culture and ideology. To this specific aspect of state’s power mechanism one can refer to the inquiries of Foucault who asserts:

Power is no longer substantially identified with an individual who possess or exercises it by right of birth; it becomes a machinery that no one owns. Certainly everyone doesn’t occupy the same position. Certain positions preponderate and permit an effect of supremacy to be produced. This is so much the case that class domination can be exercised just to the extent that power is dissociated from individual might. (Foucault 156)
Hence, it is evident that Utpal Dutt has written the play *Nightmare City* with a zeal of reorganization and reformation of the society of Bengal. The playwright concretely scrutinizes the societal structure of Bengal and the hegemonic tools used by the state machine to retain their dominance over the common people. Like a true stalwart of Bengali Renaissance Utpal Dutt through his writing endeavored to expose all kinds of evils and follies which prevailed in the society of contemporary Bengal. It is natural when a political party is in power, it generally tries to use its power to sustain its dominance over the masses. But, in early nineteen seventies the hooliganism and political vendetta of Congress led government of West Bengal and their failure to provide the security of life and property are blameworthy. Through the depiction of all these asocial practices and burning issues of that contemporary society of West Bengal Utpal Dutt ventured to rectify the society and awaken the people to be aware of the evils in the social ambience of Bengal.

IV

Like Utpal Dutt, Mahasweta Devi’s works always challenge the established order of the societal structure and there is a special kind of zeal for reorganizing the society on the basis of equality and justice. The massive body of Mahasweta Devi’s plays displays a concern for the marginalized, oppressed, and downtrodden communities of the society. Mahasweta Devi said in her Preface to *Shrestho Golpo* that “Since I never learnt to do anything more useful, I have gone on writing. I have found authentic documentation to be the best medium for protest against injustice and exploitation”. As an activist, Devi, in her entire life struggled for the cause of underprivileged and deprived communities of society. Likewise, her major plays are committed to reformation and reorganization of the society. “Profound humanism imbued with a deep-rooted love for the suffering humanity is the core of Devi’s philosophy” (Athista 627).

Mahasweta Devi’s works are basically fiction and stories. They are dramatized later for the purpose of performance. Language of all the five plays of Mahasweta Devi is lucid and vivid. In all the five plays of Devi, translator Samik Banddyopadhyay uses a lot of dialect in their originals, and carry nuances alien to standard Bengali. In the act of imprinting the materiality of Bengali into English, the translation holds the original
sence of the locale. The words are normally short and common ones and there is a severe economy and also a curious freshness in their use. The language of the plays like *Aajir*, *Bayen* and *Water* are imagistic and gestural and very rich with the local tribal dialect of southern part of West Bengal. Both *Mother of 1084* and *Urvashi and Johnny* are enriched with the local dialect of urban Kolkata as these two plays are set in Kolkata. Mahasweta Devi effectively employs the common man’s speech to bring her theatre to a realistic and sensible flavor. The ordinary and simple language without any constraint of stage artificiality is really innovative in its impact. It provides the playwright with an opportunity to maintain the rhythm, idiom and vocabulary of the social class that she writes about. Therefore, her plays abound in colloquialisms and unconventional swear words. However, the translation attempts its best to maintain the original dramatic sense of the texts.

The people of West Bengal witnessed the rise of Naxalite Movement in early nineteen seventies. The motto of Naxalite Movement was to raise their voice against the established social order, against the exploitation of landless laborers by the landlords, exploitation of the poor people by the industrialists and bureaucrats etc. On the backdrop of Naxalite Movement of West Bengal in nineteen seventies Mahasweta Devi wrote *Mother of 1084 (Hajar Churashir Ma)* (1974). Mahasweta Devi slightly shifted her usual theme of producing literature against the marginalization and oppression of the tribal communities to the world of urban elite class society in the play *Mother of 1084*. In the play *Mother of 1084* Mahasweta Devi exhibited how a group of youngsters came together and revolted against the unalterable and oppressive mindset of a particular section of the society. She also focused on the world of elite class people, vapidity and hollowness of the upper class people and how their classiness undermined the social ethics, humanism and morality.

Mahasweta Devi sketched the character of Brati Chatterjee in the play *Mother of 1084* with elements of revolution and reformation. Like the fellow youngsters of contemporary Bengal, Brati was also disenchanted and disillusioned with the existing and established social order. The prevailing societal structure gives shelter to many malice components and innocents are made victims of the misdeeds of so called elite class intelligentsia. People’s Movement started in response to ongoing injustice in the rural Bengal with the peasant movement and eventually it spread in the urban
societies of Bengal. Like his mother Sujata, Brati Chatterjee also had no fascination for the fancy and lavishness of the rich elite culture in which they lived.

If there is someone who has dared to be different, it’s Brati. Sullenly rebellious, right from his childhood, Brati has made no secret of his disregard, even contempt, for his familial code and value-system. Turning his back upon this decadent and defunct code, Brati decides to join the Naxalite movement sweeping through the State of West Bengal in late 1960’s and early 1970’s. (Tariq 3)

Brati was well aware of the exploitation and oppression of the common masses and he determined to work for the cause of underprivileged and deprived section of the society. Accordingly, Brati with a group of youngsters revolted against the pseudo social institution symbolizing the repudiation of social and moral ethics. But, the representative of state machine Saroj Pal ruthlessly smashed the rebellious youngsters and labeled them as “A cancerous growth on the body of democracy!” (Devi 11). This notion led to the torturous police action and the fake encounter in which Brati and his groups were brutally killed. Here, in this particular aspect one may refer to the inquiries of Louis Althusser who expounds two kinds of state apparatuses i.e. Ideological State Apparatus and Repressive State Apparatus. The ruling class or state machine primarily tries to govern the people through Ideological State Apparatus but if they fail, they use Repressive State Apparatus. The ruling class or state is against any individual or organization which refuses to accept the dominant culture and ideology. And they use the state agencies to repress the rebellious individual or organization. To repress the revolt or uprising, the state agencies use their brutal and violent action.

Ideology always has a material practice, and is embodied in an apparatus that has a *material* existence. State power is maintained through *Repressive State Apparatuses* (RSAs) like the police, the army, law courts and prisons that operate through actual or threats of *coercive* force/violence. (Nayar 121)

The number ‘1084’ has been conferred to the dead body of Brati Chatterjee which signifies the terrorizing ambience that gripped the life of commoners during the cruel
suppression of People’s Movement of Bengal. Through the sacrifice of lives of the youngsters to overthrow the established social order and discrimination Devi realizes her commitment to eradicate the exploitation and marginalization from the society. As she asserts, “Those whose lives are aflame, I have full faith, will never err. They have never erred - neither in Telangana, nor in Naxalbari” (Devi 19).

In *Mother of 1084* Mahasweta Devi presents an account of police’s brutality and how it violated the human rights during the Naxalite Movement. In the name of suppression of the Naxalites or “a cancerous growth on the body of democracy”, the agents of government hardheartedly tortured the rebellious people which even led to making a person handicapped. While Nandini came out from the prison on parole, she gave the account of torturous and heinous acts of police. Nandini has blinded in one eye as a consequence of cruel police treatment inside the jail. Even thousands of rebellious people were in jail without trial and they were denied to get the status and treatment as political prisoner. The police-torture continued with more sophistication and with more secrecy. They already killed one thousand and eighty four people in the name of encounter and thousands were in prison without trial. The following extract from the text will explicate the ruthless treatment of police inside the jail.

SAROJ PAL. What was your relationship with Brati Chatterjee? Was he a friend? *(Bends closer to her, lights a cigarette, presses the lighted cigarette to Nandini’s cheek. She screams.)* *(The questions and the pattern continue.)*

SUJATA *(her voice trembles).* Nandini! Nandini!

NANDINI. That was the beginning. I won’t be able to tell you all that happened after.

SUJATA. Treatment?

NANDINI. My right eye’s blind from the gleam of the thousand-watt lamps. There is little sight left in the left eye. *(Devi 33-35)*

Mahasweta Devi’s writings always focus on the violation of human rights and time and again she herself raises these issues to bring it to the knowledge of the intelligentsia. Through the depiction of police brutality in *Mother of 1084*, Devi lashes out at the government agencies, police and the ignorant class of rich people.
In *Mother of 1084*, Mahasweta Devi deftly elucidates various noxious aspects of the society which are flagging and deteriorating the social foundation of West Bengal. The patriarchal norms always weaken the normalcy of a society as it suppresses the women through male’s hegemony. In the play, Sujata’s husband, Dibyanath Chatterjee was a womanizer and corrupt man. Sujata knew everything about her husband but she never objected as they were living in a male chauvinistic society. Instead of objecting she joined a job in order to escape from all these stress. But, Sujata’s joining a work itself was a kind of protest against her husband and the patriarchy. At the very outset of the play news came that Brati had died and police called them at Kantapukur. After receiving the news of Brati’s death, Sujata became deplorable and disturbed to go there. Everyone ignored her pain in the house although she was the second important person of the house. The following lines show that how much she was neglected in her own house.

SUJATA (*uncomprehending, in a panic*). What will you hush up?
What are you talking about?
DIBYANATH. Jyoti, there’s no time to waste. (*Exit*).
SUJATA. Jyoti! (*Jyoti is busy dialing a number. He does not reply.*)
Jyoti! (*Reproving*). Jyoti! What’s happened?
JYOTI. …… (*Devi 4-5*)

Therefore, it can be stated that Mahasweta Devi’s *Mother of 1084* is one of her representative plays as it compendiously naked up all kinds of detrimental aspects of the society of Bengal. Through the depiction of all sorts of contaminating elements of society she strives to make modern men cognizant about their deleterious practices. Through the demise of Brati, and anguish and sufferings of Sujata, Nandini and the mother of Somu Devi tries to show the vitiated impacts of inhumanity and the playwright creatively presents the play to reform the society of Bengal from all kinds of malpractices.

The play *Aajir* is akin to *Mother of 1084* as it also exposes the exploitation and oppression of the downtrodden communities. Throughout the play *Aajir* playwright dexterously presents sordid and awful scenario of slavery system which existed in the
major parts of the rural agricultural West Bengal. “Exploitation in India operates beyond the law and with the tacit acquiescence of an exploited class held in thrall by a load of conventional role obligations” (Chakraborty 3). The term “Aajir” in Bengali language stands for one person who has sold himself or herself into slavery for paltry sum. Although the settings of the play are in the past, it is essentially an explicit representation of present state of exploitation of the marginalized section of the society. The play Aajir competently unearths the system and custom of bonded labor to mirror the exploitative state of society.

The play portrays how the lower castes have been treated as slaves, denied human dignity in the name of a bond which had already turn to dust; their struggle against human violations and ultimate freedom, a cause for which the author has been fighting for the past fifty years or so. (Dasan 80)

Through the portrayal of the character of Paatan, Mahasweta Devi expresses the dreadful aspects of the bonded slavery systems and how a lower caste man is denied his fundamental rights. Paatan was a bonded slave of Maatang as his forefathers had signed a contract of bond long ago. There was a great famine in Bengal in which people were dying and famishing due to lack of food. In the meantime Paatan’s ancestors sold themselves and their future generation to the forefathers of Maatang who represented a present feudal tyrant in the play. But, unlike his ancestors Paatan wanted to free himself from the clutches of bonded slavery. Being well aware of his insecure societal position, Paathan strived to free himself. In spite of being mentally unprepared to accept the custom of slavery which was started by his ancestors, Paatan had to follow it. As he wished to marry and free himself, Maatang felt Paatan’s internal rebellious turmoil and he tried to suppress it hardheartedly. Maatang callously beat Paatan because of his wish to free himself from the clutches of slavery.

MAATANG. What a body the bastard has! Strong as a horse! I beat him up, and my hands are aching now. (Bawling) Hey, wife, give me some water and some molasses.
MISTRESS. Were you beating Paatan?
MAATANG. I had to! He’s a horrible sinner.
MISTRESS. Why?
MAATANG. Why does he forget he’s an aajir? His forefathers sold him away. He won’t keep that in mind. He dreams of marrying, having a family of his own, looking upon the face of his own son. *(Spits on the ground).* (Devi 49-50)

In the play *Aajir*, the protagonist Paatan was struggling for his identity which was suppressed long ago by his forefathers. Paatan suffers with existential crisis and he tried hard to get back his existence as a human being. Here is a close resemblance between Mulk Raj Anand’s hero Bakha of *Untouchable* and Devi’s Paatan. In *Untouchable* Bakha was also denied right to live a life with an equal value of human being likes Paatan in *Aajir*. In *Aajir*, the bond of Paatan’s slavery dusted long ago though traditionally he was served as a slave. While Paatan strangled the wife of Maatang, Maatang himself acknowledged that even he did not know about the contract of slavery and it dusted in the gaamchha long ago. The entire process of how Paatan’s ancestor and his future generation became bonded slave is aptly recalled by Paatan in the play. The following extract from the text will present the whole procedure:

Watch, gentlemen, how a man becomes a slave from birth. Please allow me to become my forefather, Golak Kura.

GOLAK *(Shouting).* Is there anybody here ready to buy me? Husband and wife, we’re here to sell ourselves.

RAAVAN. I’ll buy you.

GOLAK. That’ll be a great relief.

RAAVAN. I have the bond already written out. The witnesses are here.

GOLAK. We’ll be slaves, husband and wife. Our children?

RAAVAN. They’ll be slaves too.

GOLAK. Their descendants?

RAAVAN. I’ll buy them all up.

GOLAK. We’ll never have to worry about our food again. (Devi 46)

The playwright Mahasweta Devi depicts another kind of exploitation in the play through the delineation of Punnashashi’s character who was a town whore in the play. “The position of the town-whore is created and legitimized by the upper class-caste patriarchal authority. She is marginalized in terms of class, caste, gender and
sexuality” (Behera 89). Punnashashi became the victim of feudal tyranny and male chauvinism in the play. Punnashashi was reduced to a simply sexual and pleasurable object. To protect the society from famine and water crisis a strange kind of ritual was observed in which the prostitute Punnashashi nakedly roamed in the society. And her body in the process of roaming was owned and violated by the community in a very violent manner. Through this bizarre ritual the woman’s body turned into a medium of tantra celebration. The town whore Punnashashi protested and was agonized against the traditional bodily torment inflicted upon her body. Punnashashi revolted against the societal norms which degraded a woman’s body into a mere sexual object.

I have to fast the day through and then roam through the night till the evening star crosses to the other end of the sky. I can’t bear it any longer. (Breaks into weeping) Isn’t a whore’s body a human body after all? You bastards, you had to tear me apart, and then I have to fast without a drop of water. (Devi 59)

Maatang, who represented a present feudal and tyrant in the play Aajir, was afraid to meet his wife’s amorous demand and he regularly visited Punnashashi. Maatang was impotent and incapable to give a child to his wife. A professional whore generally does not complain against her sexual dissatisfaction and she praises despite the incapability of a man for the sake of money. While Maatang’s wife accused him of having illicit relationship with prostitute, he branded her as a fallen woman. In the male chauvinistic norms of the society the female transgression is generally punished but the male transgression is not.

Thus, Mahasweta Devi adeptly captures all the deleterious prevailing malice of the society in the play Aajir. Through the character sketch of Paatan and Punnashashi she endeavors to visualize the modern men with their attitude to human being and the denial of value of life of a particular human being. Though Devi sets the play in past, it very aptly represents the present state of exploitation of the downtrodden communities in West Bengal as well as India. As Mahasweta Devi in her entire life struggled to end the discrimination and injustices to the marginalized section, the play Aajir also represents her lifelong struggle.
VI

The play *Urvashi and Johnny* is a characteristic play of Mahasweta Devi as it documents the sufferings and plights of the poor and common masses. It gives a concrete picture of an urban life and how the urban elite class people lead a life like a soulless flesh. Mahasweta Devi skillfully portrays the life of the street beggars and the life of poverty stricken people of the slums of Kolkata city in the play. The play *Urvashi and Johnny* realistically represents the sordidness, soullessness and spiritual bareness of the elite class and simultaneously it also gives detailed account of the sufferings of the marginalized and suppressed masses of metropolitan Kolkata. Mahasweta Devi protests against the pursuit of materialistic pleasure of the urban elite class people through the play *Urvashi and Johnny*.

Mahasweta Devi portrays two living worlds in the play *Urvashi and Johnny* i.e. urban elite class and the life of the poor masses of the urban slums. It represents an insight scenario of the life of Kolkata city. The modern civilization gets degraded by the evil selfishness, soullessness and materialistic attitude of the people. Through the portraiture of the protagonist of the play Johnny, Devi exhibits how he struggled for his existence. People like Johnny who was alienated from the ordinary life obliged to live a life like a beast. Far away from his home Johnny became a ventriloquist and through ventriloquism he earned his livelihood. But, in due course of his profession Johnny’s throat got affected with cancer. As he was a ventriloquist, he used his voice through the talking doll namely Urvashi. But, with the degradation of his voice he became mute and consequently his profession of ventriloquist was ruined. The play ends with the struggle of Johnny for the final show of the season. In fact it was the last show of his life as well. Johnny devoted himself to the happiness of the others and he was inspired by the sympathetic feeling of the sufferings of the humanity.

RAMANNA. Give up Urvashi, pal.
JOHNNY. Why do you say that?
RAMANNA. She will finish you off.
JOHNNY. I know it, Ramanna, I know it all,
Urvashi my beloved,
I’ve loved her all these days,
and the days have gone by in tears and laughter.
If I see her no more,
it’ll be death for me, I’ll drop dead, my man….
RAMANNA. I know.
JOHNNY. Is there anybody who’ll live forever? You tell me! You
know how beautiful life is, everyone yearns for happiness. They all ask,
How’re you, Urvashi? She says, In great happiness. The public asks
her, How are we? She says, In great happiness. (Devi 78)

There are thousands of orphans living in the slums and pavements of the various
metropolitan cities of India. The life of the slum dwellers is very pathetic and
deplorable and it is worse than the lives of beasts. Johnny is also an orphan of the
slums of Kolkata but he strives hard to live a respectable and good life unlike the
other thousands of orphan of the cities. His hunt for good life leads him to do a
profession in which he uses his voice through a talking doll Urvashi. Eventually, in
the course of his profession it becomes his livelihood and later it develops into an
obsession for him. Johnny makes it a medium of expression of his inner thought. As
Johnny is an orphan, he does not know his religion. Johnny tells Ramanna that after
his death Ramanna should at first burn his body and then put it into the grave.
Through the character sketch of Johnny playwright Mahasweta Devi wishes to display
the struggle for existence of the slum-dwellers and how the elite class people
delightfully pretend to be unaware of the harsh reality of life. “Like Brati of the
Mother of 1084, Johny is also after the role of crusader for human rights and
betterment. Johny, in spite of being aware of his insecure social status, is committed
to the cause of the suffering and struggling masses” (Singh 330). Playwright here
satirizes the educated urban people who pleasingly avoid the sufferings and the
exploitations of the poor masses. Due to the denial of humanistic approach of the
educated urban intelligentsia, the people of the upper class are suffering from
existential exigency and living in a state of fear psychosis. On the contrary, people
like Johnny are struggling hard for their survival and livelihood in this material world.

RAMANNA (singing). Who knows how you were born,
who knows what’s your religion?
You, son of the orphanage…..
JOHNNY. Burn the body first, then collect the ashes and put them into a grave. Then, make a real ceremony of the last prayers. Call out the Lame one’s gang, Magandas’ gang, all of them, to a grand feast on the sidewalk. Hire bearers from the caterers.

RAMANNA. Who’s going to pay, for that?

JOHNNY. It’ll all be free service when Johnny’s dead and Urvashi’s dead. Everything for free……. (Devi 79-80)

In the play *Urvashi and Johnny*, Mahasweta Devi expounds many vital social concerns which need special attention of the educated intellectuals. Devi documents how poverty and penury make a person compel take a work like prostitution and begging in the streets of Kolkata. After forty or fifty years of independence, the common masses of India are suffering from severe poverty. India got independence from the clutches of colonialism but it needs freedom from the discrimination and injustices done to a particular section of the society. The following extract from the text stated by One-Eyed One expresses the worse condition of poverty faced by the incapacitated people of the slums of Kolkata.

…with twelve families clustering in the slum, and a single bathroom! They let their children shit right on the doorstep. A real hell, what a hell!... (To Urvashi)

They travelled through so many lands before they reached Bombay where they bought you off Hamid. And ever since he’s been your slave. Eventually, I became a whore, then I became old, now I’m a slum owner. (Devi 85)

Hence, it could be stated that Mahasweta Devi with her skilled artistic caliber proficiently illustrates each aspects of the urban society of Kolkata. Materialistic and self-centered attitude of the modern urban educated people make the material world merely a wasteland. The noxious effects and the vapidity of the modern men’s mindset, subjected to confront many vital problems in the society. Mahasweta Devi strived hard all through her life to annihilate all these materialistic attitude of the people, injustices and inequalities, discrimination in the society. The play *Urvashi and Johnny* is one of her representative plays which adroitly elucidates all the perverted existing
orders of the society. Through the delineation of all the sordid aspects of the urban society Devi endeavored to pluck up all the feigning structure of the society.

**VII**

There were various kinds of superstitions and malpractices which griped the rural society of Bengal such as witchcraft, practice of sati, widow marriage, child marriage etc. in nineteenth and early twentieth century. The great stalwarts of Bengali Renaissance like Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo etc. in nineteenth and early twentieth century tried hard to socially and culturally reform the society of India particularly the society of West Bengal. In most of such malpractices women were made victims and they suffered pathetically as a consequence of those sordid practices. Many people believed in reality of witchcraft, and as an outcome the life of numerous innocent women were spoiled. A large number of social reformers came and strived to reform the society of Bengal from all those perverted norms and they had been successful in the long run. But, unfortunately even during late nineteenth and twentieth century many incidents related to the practice of alleged witchcraft were reported in rural Bengal that ruined the life of several innocent women.

any strange thing or event can be attributed to the ‘witches’ and they can be killed with popular ‘approval’ … Majority of the victims are women and it is estimated that six hundred women are killed annually on this charge. (Venugopal 2)

In the backdrop of the notion of practicing witchcraft, Mahasweta Devi wrote the play *Bayen* in which Devi represented a concrete and real picture of superstition and its vicious consequences upon a particular woman. *Bayen* displays an innocent mother’s agony for her child and husband. A child was leading his life without his mother though his mother was also living in the same society. As the mother was branded as a bayen (witch) by the society, they had to live separately. Moreover, the play *Bayen* exposes many other heinous consequences of the alleged practice of witchcraft in a rural society of Bengal.
In the play *Bayen*, Chandidasi Gangadasi, a professional grave digger, buries the dead children and guards the grave at night. Chandidasi marries Malinder who is a government employee in the morgue. Their conjugal life is very happy and they are blessed with a child. After giving birth to a child Chandidasi realizes the pain of a mother and she feels hurt to bury the dead body of little innocent child. She guards the grave whole night tender heartedly as she is also a mother and the whole night she pines for her little son. Eventually, Chandidasi feels deeply hurt for the dead infant and she decides to give up the job of grave digger and guard. But, one of her relative’s children named Tukni dies and she is accused of practicing witchcraft believing that she has an evil eye. Chandidasi feels deeply pained and she refuses to do the child’s last work. On the request of Tukni’s father she agrees by stating her condition that it will be her last burial work. Later, Chandidasi is held responsible for the death of all infant children in the village and she is accused of practicing evil magic and witchcraft. All the villagers with Chandidasi’s husband Malinder and her relatives brand her as a bayen and she is thrown out from the village and socially boycotted. In such a pathetic condition, Chandidasi is compelled to leave her little child Bhagirath and her beloved husband. Malinder convinces his little child Bhagirath that his mother died at the time of his birth. Chandidasi is forced to live a life in a little hovel at a secluded place of the village and weekly Malinder serves little bit daily ingredients at the door step of her hovel. Chandidasi agonizes for her little child Bhagirath and she recalls her good time with Malinder with deep sense of torment and nostalgia. This is how the life of innocent Chandidasi Gangadasi is made like hell by the perverted societal norms.

I don’t have anybody anymore, nobody.
When I hadn’t become a bayen, I had everybody.
I used to rock him like this, suckle him, all that milk,  
a real flood, the milk from the breast spilt on the floor, and that’s  
why…. They give me my ration on Saturday, with a little rice. (Devi 97-98)

My looks are gone forever.
Haven’t used a comb for I don’t know how long.
No oil for such a long time, it’s all in a mess. There was a time when Gangaputta loved to stroke my hair. (Devi 119)

While coincidentally Malinder encounters Bayen (Chandidasi), he covers the face of Bhagirath. It is believed that if people see the face of a bayen it would be harmful for him or her. Even Malinder, Chandidasi’s husband (bayen), does not see the face of Chandidasi. But in the end of the play, Chandidasi, who lives in a little secluded hovel beside the railway track, sacrifices her life for the sake of the railway passengers. The woman who is accused of practicing evil magic and taking the life of innocent infants sacrifices her life for the cause of common masses. Chandidasi is a woman full of human qualities. She has a strong love for human life and a deep sense of compassion for the agony and suffering of humanity. When Chandidasi becomes the mother of a child, she decides to give up her job of grave digger, as she feels the pain of a mother for her innocent child. When the train is about to hit the bamboo placed on the railway track, she screams as if she is really a bayen and everything must listen to her order. Chandidasi repeatedly shouts and asks to stop the train otherwise it would face a horrible disaster. The following extract from the play depicts the agony and anguish of an innocent woman when she is branded as a bayen (witch).

God, if I’m truly a bayen, then all the creatures of the nether world should follow my orders. 
Why don’t they? Why can’t I then stop the train?
Why? Why can’t I stop the train?
Stop the train, don’t come any nearer. There’s a mountain of bamboo poles here. The train’ll jump the track, and it’ll be disaster. Stop it!
Stop it! Stop it! (Devi 120-121)

In the whole play we can witness how all the people of the society are engulfed in the darkness of the superstitions and misogyny. Even Chandidasi considers herself a witch and bad for the people. This is the reason that stops her son from talking to her. But in this dismal scenario Bhagirath, the son of Chandidasi, emerges as a ray of hopes and as an embodiment of revolution and reformation. Though Malinder forbids Bhagirath not to even glance at bayen (Chandidasi), the boy dares to see the sight of Chandidasi. Bhagirath even talks to Chandidasi but she threatens him to tell his father. Chandidasi (bayen) says to Bhagirath that there is a poison in the air where she
breathes. She advises Bhagirath not to see her shadow. But, Bhagirath replies that he has no fear and his interaction with Chandidasi gives a new dimension to the existing relationship between child and mother. When Chandidasi dies on the railway track, Bhagirath says to the railway guard that the dead woman is his mother and she was never a bayen. The following lines would display the anguish and distress of a boy for his mother who is socially boycotted by the perverted norms.

My name Bhagirath Gangaputta… My father, the revered Malindar Gangaputta….. residence, Domtoli, village Daharhati… My mother… my mother, the late Chandidasi Gangadasi… my mother, the late Chandidasi, Sir. Not a bayen. She was never a bayen, my mother. (Devi 122)

In the play Bayen, the character of Malindar represents a patriarchy in which a woman is never allowed to fulfill her desire and wish. In a male chauvinistic society, often the sentiment of women is neglected and denied. In the play Bayen, Chandidasi makes Malindar aware of the people’s evil intention and its upcoming consequences but Malindar does not pay attention to the consciousness of Chandidasi.

Malindar played a role of authoritative husband who was colored completely in the color of patriarchy. Being a male element of suspicion on women is always innate in his mind when he was pushed by the society, his believes perpetuated and he goes with society against his wife and lastly without hearing her explanation and considering on her part an unfair judgment is given against her and she was declared ‘Bayen’ by her own husband and thus became a victim of social injustice. (Rai 166-167)

As a consequence of neglect of Chandidasi’s concern, the entire family especially Chandidasi suffers. Mahasweta Devi depicts the patriarchal mind-set and its disastrous effects on the society with her high skilled craftsmanship and rare vision.

Thus, it is noticed that Mahasweta Devi has been successful in her attempt to draw the prevailing social superstitions and people’s belief in unreality and witchcraft. Through the sufferings of Chandidasi Gangadasi the playwright strives to show the vicious
effects of belief in unreality and magic and how it ruins the life of the innocent. Around one hundred years ago different social reformers of Bengal tried to reform the society from all these sordid practices likewise in the late twentieth century Mahasweta Devi also struggled to wipe out these evil superstitions from the society of Bengal. The play *Bayen* remains one of the finest works by Devi on societal issues and distorted social practices.

**VIII**

Like all the other plays of Mahasweta Devi the play *Water (Jawl)* also deals with the theme of exploitation and oppression of the downtrodden and marginalized section of the society. The play *Water* displays a concern for the oppressed communities of rural West Bengal. It delicately reflects the noxious consequences of caste hierarchy, hypocrisy of the upper caste and the sufferings of the marginalized communities for the daily basic amenities. *Water* exhibits how the ruling class people violate the rights of human being and make them sub-human due to lack of proper implementation of law and the policies of the government. “Water provides a powerful indictment of the existing social values and Devi’s unfailing commitment and passion for the uplift of the tribes” (Athista 629).

In the play *Water* Maghai Dom, who is the protagonist of the play, belongs to the lower untouchable class. Traditionally Maghai Dom is the water diviner by profession. Though Maghai plays the key role to dig up wells in the village, he is denied to take water from the well. He and other villagers are not allowed to use the water of any wells including government wells as they belong to the lower caste Maghai. Santosh Pujari, who is the archetypal figure of exploitation, makes the common innocent masses suffer for his own personal benefit. He uses Maghai Dom for the digging up of government wells in the village which are meant for the common people but he takes all the wells under his control and forbids the lower caste people of the village to get water from them. The common people wail for a drop of drinking water in the village but Santosh Pujari uses the governmental wells for the bath of his cattle and beasts. Even the poor people of the village are not allowed to touch the wells of the village as they belong to the lower caste. Santosh with corrupt officials take hold of all the funds and all the ingredients sent by the government for
the drought or flood affected people and create famine like situation. As Santosh Pujari seizes all the relief funds and stocks stuff in his store house, the common masses suffer from food scarcity and unavailability of basic amenities. The government sends team of doctor and the medicines for the people but Santosh gets only his family members treated and takes all the medicines in his store house and all the villagers remain untreated.

His needs come before everybody else’s,
and he needs a lot of water. His cattle, his servants,
his contract labourers, his temples, his houses, his
cowsheds, his barns, his farms labourers. So he has
five big wells and three small ones. All for his exclusive
use. The village’s full of his relations. And they
have three to four wells at each house. But will they
let the doms, the chandals or anyone from the
lower castes approach any of the wells? Never. (Devi 159)

The great Indian social reformer B. R. Ambedkar condemned the caste hierarchy of Indian society and he tried hard to bring social reformation in India. Amongst those who fought against the caste hierarchy and untouchability is Ambedkar. Ambedkar not only studied and struggled for the annihilation of untouchability and caste hierarchy but he had real experience of untouchability in his own life.

According to Dr. Ambedkar the caste system narrows down public opinion. It sets up each of the hundreds of indigenous group against other and kills the broad sense of brother hood. Caste system has made suddhi or re-conversion in Hinduism impossible because the caste system has no place for the convert. So long there is caste there will be no suddhi and no sanghathan in Hindu society and therefore Hindu society will remain divided and weak. (Kaushik 53)

In the play Water Mahasweta Devi demonstrates the sufferings and poverty of the marginalized communities who suffer due to the caste hierarchy and untouchability in the society of rural West Bengal. The common downtrodden people of the society are famishing due to lack of food and water and the upper caste Santosh Pujari along with
all his relatives enjoy the water and food which are essentially provided for all the people of the village by the government.

They won’t allow us to touch it- we’re the untouchables. Even at the government wells, we aren’t allowed to draw water. That’s why we have to go and dig at the sands of Charsa. (Devi 126)

Although Maghai Dom is exploited by Santosh, he never refuses to work for Santosh Pujari. But, Dhura who is the son of Maghai Dom always revolts against the exploitation and suppression of the common villagers by Santosh Pujari. Dhura strongly protests the established order and the system which are the root cause of their sufferings. He is influenced by the Naxalite activity and becomes impatient whenever he finds that the things have gone wrong. Dhura like Brati of Mother of 1084 is a follower of idealism and justice. Dhura strives hard to make his communities aware of the fact that Santosh Pujari is the real cause of the distress and dehumanizing condition that they are facing. On the other hand, his father Maghai Dom continues to work for Santosh Pujari. Dhura lashes out his father’s fatalistic attitude towards and belief in Santosh Pujari. The revolutionary zeal of Dhura finds a fine expression in the following lines.

MAGHAI. That’s our fate, dhura.
DHURA. There I don’t agree with you. I won’t accept fate.
What a shame, we burn our hearts to cinders
to divine water, then to raise it from the bowels of
the earth, and then they refuse us a drop of water,
not a drop for the doms and chandals. I spit upon fate, if that’s our fate.
(Devi 146)

Though Maghai Dom is continuously oppressed and exploited by Santosh Pujari, he never objects to his behaviour. Even when his son Dhura tries to make him understand Santosh’s exploitative and oppressive action against them, Maghai says that it is their fate and they must accept it. Here, one may refer to the investigations of Marxist thinkers who argue that the dominant class uses ‘ideology’ to naturalize an exploitative relationship and convince the common people that this is how things are.
Ideology stops the recognition of exploitation and repression by the oppressed. Hence, it is a fanatic, a curtain which prevents the oppressed from actual understanding.

Although the dominant class can use military and police force to repress the working class to maintain its dominance and achieve interpellation, it more frequently than not chooses to use the Ideological State Apparatus, or the hegemony. In effect, the dominant class’s hegemony prevents the insurrection of the working class. (Bressler 199)

The tribal people of the village are also denied their right to education. Books, slates, notebooks and all the other items of school are sent by the government for the children but Santosh Pujari with corrupt government officials grab all these materials. And due to untouchability the children of dom, chandals and other lower castes are not allowed to enter the school premises. Consequently, the children of the tribals start working in the households, grazing cattle in the fields, collecting firewood from the forest and so on. With the support and help of Jiten Maiti who was educated Mahishyaa and the newly appointed teacher of the village school, the tribals fight against the discrimination and injustices done to them. Jiten asks the villagers to send their children to the school. He also assures the local tribal people of the village that he would provide the free book and all other necessary materials for the education of their children. Jiten Maiti starts questioning the ineffectiveness of law and the failure of policies of government. While Jiten asks Sub-Divisional Officer about the exploitation by the upper caste in the village, the SDO expresses his helplessness.

Laws are made because they have to be made.
They never enforced. The laws have abolished agricultural debt, the system of bonded labour is banned. But what do you find in reality? Me? Who the hell am I? I’m powerless. If I threaten a moneylender, the minister will jump on me. (Devi 173)

When Jiten fails to convince the government officials, he suggests the villagers to construct a dam across the Charsa River to store water for the time of drought. Jiten makes the people understand their right and he hints them to deny water from the dam to Santosh. They also assert that they would not allow Santosh to bring labourers from
the outside and as they themselves would harvest the land. The villagers would take the daily wages of their work. As a consequence, the outrageous Santosh comes with police force and ruthlessly open fire at the masses. They crumble the dam and Maghai Dom mercilessly gets killed in police firing.

Therefore, it is viewed that Mahasweta Devi very keenly observed the prevailing untouchability, discrimination, nepotism, corruption and injustices in the rural society of West Bengal of the nineteen seventies. Through her dexterous literary skill Mahasweta Devi depicts all the sordid practices in *Water*. *Water* exhibits how the tribal people are denied their basic human rights and how they are made to face severe discrimination and oppression from the upper caste people. Mahasweta Devi struggled for the rights of tribals in her entire life. The play *Water* is also an emblematic product of her life long struggle. All through her life Devi wished to bring a social reformation in which there will be no untouchability, discrimination, corruption, nepotism etc. Through *Water* Devi shows the malicious social practices and how they create the existential exigency for a particular section of the society.

**IX**

Like Mahasweta Devi, the major plays of the playwright Manoj Mitra generally deal with the socially, culturally and educationally backward people of West Bengal. His plays are concerned with the typical social structure and social dilemmas of the lower and lower middle class society. Manoj Mitra always takes a dig at casteism, social taboos and the social hierarchies which existed in the contemporary society of Bengal. The lower cast and the backward classes of the society were deprived of their basic human rights. The downtrodden communities suffered from existential crisis as they were controlled by those people who held the top position and enjoyed all the privileges in the society. Being a true figure of Bengali theatre, Manoj Mitra depicts all these eclectic views of the society of contemporary Bengal in his plays. Manoj Mitra dreamt to create a society in which the dimensions of conflict and violence between different social forces come to an end. “He along with Utpal Dutt, Ajitesh Bandopadhyay, Bijon Bhattacharya and few more succeeds to enable the theatre frames to raise questions among people regarding social violence, injustice, and conflict” (SK 54). The playwright wishes to bring all the sections of people to the
same ground of humanity. *The Tale of Hekim-Shaheb (Galpo Hekimshaheb)* by Manoj Mitra is set against the background of permanent settlement act in nineteenth century West Bengal which cast in the genre of historical play. The play is centred on the corruption, misrule, religious fundamentalism, revenue-extracting British, exploitative zamindars, talukdars, tehsildar and chepattanidars etc. About the play *The Tale of Hekim-Shaheb* Manoj Mitra said in an interview with Samik Bandyopadhyay that:

*Galpo Hekimshaheb* too was not a historical play, but had to be taken back into history, for the simple reason that I could not afford to make the statements that I sought to make about the contemporary reality, in plain, direct terms. (Mitra 263)

The play *The Tale of Hekim-Shaheb* is set on the implementation of permanent settlement act of nineteenth century Bengal in which the revenues and taxes were collected from the people. In this act the revenues were collected by the zamindars and talukdars, the local Indians who were considered and treated as landowners. Through the representation of the systems of zamindari, talukdari playwright Manoj Mitra captured the exploitation and oppression of common people by the zamindars. The main concern of the zamindars was selfish pleasure and the extraction of revenues and taxes from the common masses for the colonial office. Formally, the responsibilities of health, education, livelihood of the people of a taluk should be taken care of by the respective zamindars or talukdars. But, the zamindars were only concerned with the collection of taxes from the commoners and the common people were treated by them as object of exploitation. In the play *The Tale of Hekim-Shaheb* the common people suffer from hunger, poverty, diseases, malnutrition but the talukdars do not bother about their accountability.

HORTUKI. What’re you doing about the ailments of the subjects, eh? It’s time to collect the dues of Chaitra. (*To Hekim*) If you don’t cure them fast, these bastards will use their illness as excuse and not to pay up. Do you get that?

WALI. Son, cure them fast. Concentrate on your work. I’ve placed the healthcare responsibilities of seven villages of my taluk in your hands.
Now it’s up to you to attend to the patients and see to it that we don’t lose the taxes… (Mitra 57)

In the play *The Tale of Hekim-Shaheb* the Hekim devotes his life for the cause of common people. He with his lame donkey visits the taluk and treats the ills and disease affected people. Hekim treats the sickness and illness of people free of cost for the cause of humanity. There are two taluks in the play namely Dariyagunj and Palashpur. The talukdar of Dariyagunj Wali Khan has given the responsibilities of healthcare of his taluk to Hekim Shaheb who tirelessly visits remote villages of the taluk by his lame donkey and treats the ills. In the portrayal of Hekim, “Manoj Mitra creates an archetypal figure that rises above the corruption and callousness of the times” (Chowdhury 4). While Hekim treats the disease affected people of the taluk free of cost, he faces several obstructions from the talukdar Wali Khan. When Hekim needs red rose for the discovery of the medicine for leprosy, he is denied because the new baiji of talukdar Wali Khan loves red roses. Hekim tries to discover a medicine for a dreadful disease and just for the pleasure of baiji he is denied red rose. Later it becomes evident that the baiji is a spy of Wali Khan’s opponent Pashupati, the talukdar of Palashpur. Whereas, to get the Hekim in his taluk Palashpur talukdar Pashupati plays a dirty trick with Hekim through Mohor Bai which makes him a traitor in Dariyagunj. Pashupati is familiar with the fact that it is not possible for him to get Hekim in Palashpur, hence he sends Mohor Bai to Dariyagunj so that his life becomes unbearable and he is thrashed in Dariyagunj. Accordingly Hekim is proved disloyal to Wali Khan and Hekim is mercilessly beaten up by the talukdar. But, finally Wali Khan realizes that his new baiji Mohor Bai is a spy of Pashupati. This is how playwright Manoj Mitra exhibits the hypocrisy and oppression of the talukdars and how the common masses are exploited in the hands of the talukdars of that contemporary time of Bengali society.

WALI. What? I cannot punish? When did it come to this? (Addressing Hortuki) What have you reduced my taluk to? I cannot punish my own subjects? Eh Hekim, come here, come close to me… (As soon as Hekim comes near, Wali jabs him in the belly with the bronzed top of his walking stick.) Eh Hekim, do you think I can’t punish you?

HEKIM. Beat me up as much as you want to. But leave those people
alone. They are poor and weak. They don’t have food…they don’t have medicine.…

WALI. Why is it of any consequence to you? This is my taluk, they are my subjects. Who should be concerned about their life and death? You or me? (Mitra 83-84)

In the play Wali Khan is a wealthy and powerful man but Hekim is a poor man who practices unani medicine. In comparison with Wali Khan Hekim is nothing but his servant. In the course of the play it is observed that because of the indulgence of Mohor-Bai, talukdar Wali Khan severely beats up Hekim. It is also noticed that Hekim wants to discover a medicine for a dreadful disease but he is denied to take red rose which is one of its most important ingredients. In the last section of the play it is viewed that talukdar Wali Khan and Mohor-Bai get affected by that awful disease and they come to Hekim for treatment. And Hekim open-heartedly treat them and cure them. Manoj Mitra here shows and advocates the Foucaultian notion that the man of higher social force does not have full control over all the social power relations. They sometimes need to come to the feet of the ordinary people. Here, playwright also shows what Foucault says ‘the productive aspect of power’ in Hekim’s saving Wali Khan’s and Mohor-Bai’s life through his power of unani medicine. Hekim has power and utilizes it to make the good example by treating Wali Khan and Mohor-Bai whereas Wali Khan has power which he uses to exercise domination over others. As Foucault rightly says in an interview that:

But it seems to me now that the notion of repression is quite inadequate for capturing what is precisely the productive aspect of power. One which has been curiously widespread… If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it? What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. (Foucault 119)

It is viewed that sometimes poverty and hunger enhance the criminal and anti-social activities in the society. Here, in the play The Tale of Hekim-Shaheb Manoj Mitra
highlights this specific aspect. The hoodlum robber Bhondul Bagdi becomes a very violent criminal in the play because of penury. As he is a wanted criminal, his wife Gangamoni takes up the job of a maid against her will to feed the stomach of her own and her child. Gangamoni becomes the maid of Hekim and she helps him to prepare medicine. But, the two talukdars Wali Khan and Pashupati play a dirty trick over the criminal Bhondul Bagdi. Bhondul Bagdi works for Wali Khan and he loots the money and property in the taluk of Pashupati and creates circumstances of fear and terror. Although his wife Gangamoni does not like his criminal activity and forbids him to engage with the underworld, she takes the earnings of Bhondul due to poverty and penury Gangamoni is bound to take the loots of Bhondul. But, the hypocrite talukdars play foul game with a hoodlum criminal and his unlawful activity. In the end Gangamoni herself murders her criminal husband Bhondul Bagdi.

GANGAMONI. Chhayem-chacha, have you heard? A group of robbers has been caught in Palashpur? I wonder what happened to my man.

CHHAYEM. What can happen? No one in Palashpur can catch Bhondul. He’s a tiger cub.

GANGAMONI. Don’t encourage him any further!

CHHAYEM. But Moni, Bhondul earns plenty of loot! And you happily eat out of it.

GANGAMONI. Yes, all these years I have. What could I do? Two stomachs to feed- I had my child as well. I hated it but I had no choice. But no more…no more will I touch his earnings! That’s why I have taken up the job of a maid! (Her voice chokes.). (Mitra 46-47)

In *The Tale of Hekim-shaheb*, Manoj Mitra uses a language that rises out of the sense of the age and place. The language of the medicine, disease and care attempts to give a sense of the lived world of nineteenth-century Bengal. In the act of imprinting the materiality of Bengali into English, the translation holds this sense of the milieu. In order to keep the colloquial sense of the age the translator retains many Bengali words in their performative utterance. In the play, alliterations are often the language of the lay-poetic as in Chayem’s exchange over the sparrow. The translation tries its best to
render a rhythm so that this ironic sense is conveyed in the best manner often staying close to the rhythm of the original text.

Hence, it is discernible that the playwright Manoj Mitra closely observes the existing societal ambience of contemporary Bengal society. Like a keen observer of the society through the depiction of talukdars and the sufferings of the common masses from hunger and poverty Mitra represents a real picture of poverty stricken Bengal. It also envisages the existential crisis of women in the male chauvinistic society and how the identity of Gangamoni is suppressed and she is known more as a wife of robber Bhondul Bagdi than as Gangamoni. Through the representation of these eclectic and vicious tales of the society of contemporary West Bengal, Manoj Mitra offers his fightback to all the sordid and awful practices from the atmosphere of Bengal and dreams for a society to usher based on equality and justice.

X

Like *The Tale of Hekim-Shaheb* the play *Honey from a Broken Hive (Chak Bhanga Modhu)* of Manoj Mitra expounds the exploitation of the marginalized section by the upper class people who hold the power. The play is set in the backdrop of Naxal movement of Bengal in the nineteen sixties and seventies. During the pre-independence era the social structure of Bengal or rather the whole Indian societal structure was divided into different layers of power structures from the landlord to the landless common people. This mechanism of dominance continues decades after the Independence too. In nineteen sixties and seventies West Bengal witnessed the massive rise of moneylender and land grabber who exploited the common people by lending the money in interest. Through the play *Honey from a Broken Hive* Manoj Mitra unearths the class conflict, exploitation and oppression of the common masses by the landowner and the moneylender. *Honey from a Broken Hive* also demonstrates the social milieu of the poverty incapacitated common people of nineteen sixties and seventies West Bengal and their agony and resistance.

Among the new playwrights of the mid-seventies, only Manoj Mitra who had made a strong appearance with *Chak Bhanga Modhu*, a moving play on the life and moral dilemma in a semi-tribal community, seems to have retained some creative energy. (Jain 210)
The play *Honey from a Broken Hive* is centered on Matla Ojha and his family who belong to a lower semi-tribal Ojha community. Aghor Ghosh is the moneylender who exploits the whole villagers through his strategy of lending money to the people. He lends money to the common people and if they fail to pay interest, he grabs the land and property of the commoners. The people of the whole village are ruined in the monstrous money lending tactic of Aghor Ghosh. Matla Ojha also takes money from him and he has been exploited by Aghor Ghosh for several years. Aghor Ghosh is bitten by a snake and venom of the snake reaches all parts of his body. Matla Ojha has the power to take the poison out of a body bitten by a snake. Now it is up to Matla Ojha, who possess the knowledge to take the poison out of Aghor’s body, whether he should save the body of his class enemy or not and the main plot of the drama revolves around this dilemma. The comatose body of Aghor is taken to the house of Matla Ojha. Initially Matla refuses to save the life of Aghor Ghosh as he is the main cause of the destruction of the people of the whole village. But, Matla’s daughter Badami thinks that they should save Aghor Ghosh and in return of his life he would spare them from debt. On this ground Matla takes the poison out from Aghor’s body and saves his life. But after being cured, Aghor Ghosh, instead of acknowledging Matla’s power, rebukes Matla for taking long time to take poison out from his body and demands interest of his money which he lent them. Aghor also shows an immoral wish for Matla’s daughter Badami and he wants to take her to his home. But, the outrageous and angry mob of the village gathers in front of Matla’s house and they beat up Aghor to death.

**AGHOR.** Pay my interest!

**MATLA.** Interest!

**AGHOR.** Give back my *taka*! Tried to kill me, cheat me….

**DAKKHA and SHANKAR.** Right!

**SHANKAR.** Pleading at the feet of these swines was all that was left for me to do…

**AGHOR.** You thought I was dead! All had ended!

**MATLA.** Master, we gave you life….

**AGHOR.** No! You talked of killing me! I know all! You talked of killing! Killing me! *(To the duli-bearers)* Spill his brains. Not pay interests, then plan to kill! Bastard! Hit him! *(Mitra 171-173)*
Manoj Mitra endeavors to demonstrate the existing class conflict in the society of Bengal of that particular time period in the play *Honey from a Broken Hive*. Aghor Ghosh belongs to the upper class who lends money on a high interest to the poverty stricken common people of the village and if they fail to pay back, he grabs the land and property of the poor. He represents the power mechanism over there in the play while the lower class Ojha family embodies the marginalized section of the society. Matla and his family are ruined by the oppression of the Aghor Ghosh. Matla and his uncle Jata often considers leaving the village to get rid of Aghor’s catastrophic trap.

Aghor, the *Jotedar*, will ‘grab all he sees before him, if they could not pay him the interest. Jata’s wife once ends her life by committing suicide when it reaches beyond her patience to bear the pangs of hunger. Manoj Mitra here uncovers the struggles of the ordinary people who are not able to survive the situation the power apparatuses of the landowners and moneylenders create over them. (SK 58)

To carry out a sociological and cultural study, it will take us to the inquiries and investigations of some modern cultural thinkers. New historicists envisage a literary text as a production of the cultural practices and ‘codes’. As M. H. Abrams states that:

…new historicists conceive of a literary text as “situated” within the totality of the institutions, social practices, and discourses that constitute the culture of a particular time and place, and with which the literary text interacts as both a product and a producer Of cultural energies and codes. (Abrams 244)

In the play *Honey from a Broken Hive* playwright Manoj Mitra realistically and vividly dramatizes the penury, poverty, hunger and destitution of the people of that specific time period of the rural society of West Bengal. The play is a discourse of the penuriousness of the people. Hunger and pennilessness grip the villagers to a great extent. Snake bite is a risky matter as it can ruin a life in a moment but hunger reaches the Ojha family in a situation that Jata once says “after such a long time we’ve found a man with a wound. Snakes don’t bite people any more…such a bad days these are” (Mitra 138). In the nineteen sixties and seventies the landowners and money-lenders transformed the rural societies of Bengal into a place of panic and famine. *Honey*
from a Broken Hive mirrors the societal ambience of the sixties and seventies rural Bengal. At the very outset in the play, the conversation between Matla and Badami indicates the seriousness of hunger and poverty. All the members of the Ojha family have been starving for a week due to lack of food and money. The wife of Jata gets tired of bearing the food crisis and finally commits suicide. It is observable that in a deliberate and strategic manner an artificial famine and penilessness are created by a particular section of people who enjoy all the powers in the society. As a consequence, the wealthy become wealthier and poor become poorer. Manoj Mitra tries to visualize the exploitative and inhuman attitude of a section of people and how the downtrodden people get exploited and ruined by them.

BADAMI (expectantly). Have you brought anything? Could you get anything? No? Nothing? Three days and you’ve not been able to get a single grain! Let it die, the demon in my belly-let it die!
MATLA. Don’t you see my state? Barely able to walk, I crawl on my chest like a snake…Why? Why has the husband of yours left you here? Take heed of what you say.
JATA. That grandma of your who starved for seventeen days in a row and finally jumped into the river…. (Mitra 118-121)

Though Aghor Ghosh is the class enemy of the Ojha family, they save the life of Aghor Ghosh. Humanity gets victory over the class enmity and class conflict here. Initially Badami comes forward to recover Aghor on the ground that after coming to his life he would help and save her unborn baby. Badami also hopes that Aghor would spare them from debt. But, all the villagers are against Badami’s humanistic attitude towards Aghor Ghosh. Finally, Matla saves Aghor Ghosh by taking out the poison from his body. Aghor Ghosh, who represents the oppression, gets life back on the mercy of Matla who represents the downtrodden class. The playwright Manoj Mitra rightly said in an interview with Samik Bandyopadhyay that:

how the two retainers at one point seem to give Aghor Ghosh, the devilish moneylender, a lift of sorts, as they convey their love for him so gushingly, evoking his childhood- quite unexpected from the two toiling men, and quite uncalled for. (Mitra 261)
In *Honey from a Broken Hive*, playwright Manoj Mitra uses the dialect of Sunderbans region of West Bengal. The dialogues of the central characters, Matla, Jata and Badami, as opposed to those of the city dwellers, are sparse and often choppy. The conversation is however a simple reproduction of the way people talk. The language is imagistic, idiomatic and gestural having puns and alliterations. The translation tries its best to provide a rhythm so that the original sense is conveyed in the best manner.

Thus, from the above discussion it can be said that the playwright Manoj Mitra delicately encapsulates the class inequalities, class conflict and the exploitation of the common man in the rural societies of Bengal of a particular time period. Through the depiction of Aghor Ghosh’s oppressive and exploitative mind setup Manoj Mitra tries to show the catastrophic consequences of injustices and oppression taking place in the society. On the other hand, Badami’s humanistic attitude towards her class enemy Aghor Ghosh shows the victory of humanism over the enmity. Manoj Mitra wishes to create a classless society which should be founded on the basis of humanity and there would be no discrimination, hunger and biasness.

**XI**

The play *The Shadow Palace (Chhayar Prashad)* is a distinctive play of Manoj Mitra. Like *The Tale of Hekim-Shaheb* and *Honey from a Broken Hive* the play *The Shadow Palace* is also concerned with the subject of religious fanaticism and fundamentalism, corruption, lawlessness and the exploitation of the downtrodden in the name of social hierarchy. The play *The Shadow Palace* also comes under the genre of historical play. As Manoj Mitra admits that in order to address the contemporary issues, he takes back the audience to the history. He could not afford to make statements about the contemporary reality in direct and open terms that’s why he addresses the contemporary issues through the veil of historical settings.

I have felt the need to expose my people to other people, other experiences, other beliefs and perceptions, and let them move beyond the confines of their immediate reality. This is the notion that led me to attempt for the first time a play in a historical setting. (Mitra 263)
The play *The Shadow Palace* is set in the reign of Emperor Bindusara, father of Ashoka. The play addresses the various contemporary issues of West Bengal through the representation of diverse aspects of the society during the reign of Emperor Bindusara.

The play *The Shadow Palace* draws an especial attention of the audience to the foul trick of witchcraft in the rural societies of West Bengal as well as India. To accomplish their personal benefit the hypocritical people and the ruling class victimize a woman and easily brand an innocent woman as a witch. In the play *The Shadow Palace*, as the head of Chandona village fails to fulfill his sexual desire and achieve a young girl namely Shubhadrangi, he brands the innocent young girl as a witch. The lecherous old man, the head of Chandona village, and his men hurl stone and coal to Shubhadrangi and spoil her marriage ceremony. In order to save their life, Shubhadrangi and her adopted father Dwaipayan run away from the village.

DWAIPAYAN. Greed! Lecherous greed! That old swine was after our lives, dying to lay his hands on my girl. But I threw cold water on his lust, arranged her marriage elsewhere. And that fat old man came hollering with his army of demons! Set fire to the ceremony! Told everyone that if my girl lived, the village would be destroyed! (Mitra 183)

After running away from the village, father and daughter reach the palace of the Emperor Bindusara to seek justice. Initially the Emperor and the royal servants treat them affectionately and sympathetically, assure them of justice and give them shelter at royal palace. But, soon after the royal priest Khouni manipulates the Emperor and distracts the mind of Emperor. In order to maintain his hypocritical and fanatical dominance over the people and the Emperor, the royal priest Khouni also declares that the girl has an evil power. To retain his power and kingdom, the emperor should immediately drown the witch girl to death. In such a hypocritical manner both the village chief and the royal priest Khouni ruin the life of an innocent girl. The play has a very close resemblance to Mahasweta Devi’s play *Bayen*. In the play *Bayen* the protagonist Chandidasi Gangadasi is also victimized with the foul trick of witchcraft. To accomplish their personal advantage and dominance, some people in the play *Bayen* in the similar way destroy the life of the innocent woman Chandidasi.
Gangadasi. Though the play *The Shadow Palace* is set in the regime of Emperor Bindusara, the playwright Manoj Mitra actually represents his contemporary society of Bengal through the historical setting. Manoj Mitra displays the hypocrisy and cruelty of ruling class and how they brutally destroy the life of an innocent person in the name of malicious social customs and beliefs.

KHOUNI. Emperor, waste no time in getting the palace rid of this evil. Sentence the witch to death. Drown her.
QUEEN. Calm down, Royal priest!
KHOUNI. Crown prince is obsessed with the girl. He is not safe. No one is safe in this palace. Do not waste any more time. Abandon that witch, order her to be drowned to death as per the laws of this land.
(Mitra 210, 231)

On the contrary, in the play *The Shadow Palace* Manoj Mitra takes a dig at the ruling class through their very well kept practice of the game of witchcraft in the rural societies. When the ruling class fails to fulfill their promises and assurance, they play the foul trick of witchcraft to divert the attention of the people. As the majority of the people of rural societies are illiterate, in the name of witch they become busy with the celebration of several rituals and customs and forget their protest and complaint. In the mean time, the deceitful rulers also increase their tax, decrease the rate of the crops and gain the illegal profit from the common masses. In such a deliberate manner the common people are made fool as well as victims of witchcraft by the rulers. In disguise the playwright Manoj Mitra represents the contemporary scenario of the societies of Bengal as well as India in the play.

B. R. Ambedkar is the most significant name among those who fought against the untouchability and malicious social hierarchy of India. Ambedkar devoted his life for the removal of untouchability and throughout his life he struggled for providing justice and right to the untouchable. He tried hard in his entire life to annihilate the caste hierarchy from the Indian social structure. Ambedkar condemned the caste system and social hierarchy and compared it with class and asserted that:

The caste system is infested with the spirit of isolation and in fact it makes the isolation of one caste from another a matter of virtue. The
class system it is true produces groups. But they are not akin to caste
groups. It does not make isolation a virtue not does it prohibit social
intercourse. (Ambedkar 53-54)

It seems that the playwright Manoj Mitra is influenced with the thought of Ambedkar
and he skillfully displays the casteism and social hierarchical problems in the play
The Shadow Palace. The play dexterously exhibits the hateful caste hierarchy and
social structure and how they dilute the social fabric of the society. The play
represents how the lower caste Shudras are denied their basic human rights and get
exploited and abused by the ruling class. The shudras are not allowed to take water
from the common place and they are denied land, education and other cultural rights.
The shudras are deprived of all the fundamental rights which are guaranteed by the
constitution. There is a double marginalization in the women of the shudras i.e. they
belong to lower caste shudra and another is they are women. In the play Hangshi, who
is a shudra woman, is exploited and sexually abused by the road kotwal Shakharam.
When Hangshi takes water from Birohi mountain, she is sexually abused by
Shakharam. Similar kind of contaminated social milieu is found in the royal palace as
well where Dwaipayan’s adopted daughter Shubhadrangi is initially denied shelter
and later she is sexually abused by the Emperor. The following conversations from
the various parts of the text would explicitly elucidate the monstrous casteism and
social hierarchy which prevailed in the society.

DWAIPAYAN. Dear one, can you pour a mouthful of water into my
daughter’s mouth?
HANGSHI. Babathakur, I am but an untouchable shudra. How can I
give water to anyone?
SHAKHARAM. There’s nothing that’s yours! Neither water nor land
nor river nor moonlight …

… the shudras have absolutely no right to anything…. Aye, aye, this
heresy cannot be allowed in the pious Hindu kingdom of Maurya King
Bindusar….(Mitra 184-187)

HANGSHI. I’d dipped my cup into the stream, made his water impure!
Would he have left me until he’d pulled me into his bed and made me
pure! Finally, with a blow of this axe……

SHAKHARAM. Don’t you know that in the Mauryan Empire shudras are forbidden from taking up arms? And it’s twice forbidden for women! (Mitra 218-222)

The playwright Manoj Mitra portrays the character of young prince Sumon with the noble fervor of reformation. In the play Sumon revolts against all kinds of social superstitions and vicious social customs. While Dwaipayan and his adopted daughter Shubhadrangi come to the royal palace, Sumon accept them in the palace. Even Sumon at several times in the course of the play argues with his father Emperor Bindusara on various issues related to social practices which are superstitious. Sumon regrets his failure to save the life of a girl child and a child-bearing pregnant woman. Both of them are murdered in the name of witchcraft and evil power in the villages. He tries hard to save the life of Shubhadrangi. Like the robust figures of Bengali Renaissance who were struggled to eradicate the superstitious social customs from the society of Bengal the young prince Sumon in the play figures as a man of Bengali Renaissance.

I’ve known witches to exist only in fairytales. I wonder who beckons them into the Mauryan Empire…why are they being called… I know. This time when I went to Kusumpur, I walked through the streets. I came to know everything. Superstitions…. blind superstitions. Deadly weapons to chastise the weak! (Mitra 196)

In the Palace of Shadows, Manoj Mitra uses the local dialect of southern part of West Bengal. In the original Bengali text, the poetic speeches of Dwaipayan are gestural and bring together the songs and accents of the rural traveler, subaltern irony and the performances of female parental care. In this translation, translator tries to keep the impressions of an archaic poetic diction as much as possible throughout the whole text. The translation also attends to the alliterative language of the play. In order to maintain the colloquial sense of the age, the translator retains many Bengali words in their performative utterance in the translation of Palace of Shadows. However, the translation tries its best to preserve the original dramatic sense of the text.
From the above discussion it is manifest that the superstitions and malicious social practices griped the rural societies of Bengal. And the ignorance and fanaticism of the illiterate rural people were used by fraudulent rulers as the best weapon to exploit them. Playwright Manoj Mitra himself acknowledges that through the veil of historical setting, he actually addresses the contemporary issues. Although the settings, event and incidents of the play takes place in the regime of Emperor Bindusara, playwright is basically concerned with the contemporary rural societies of Bengal. Manoj Mitra through his lofty craftsmanship captures the noxious and catastrophic social practices of the rural societies of Bengal and how hey helped the deceitful rulers to exploit and oppress the common masses in a shrouded manner. In the play he gives a stark look at the flagitious and deleterious system of caste and social hierarchies of Bengal. Through the portraiture of all these contaminated social norms and traditions the playwright Manoj Mitra aspires to reform the society. And the social reformation would usher a society which would be founded on the basis of justice, equality and fraternity.

XII

Hence, after closely investigating various aspects of the plays discussed above it can be stated that the three playwrights i.e. Utpal Dutt, Mahasweta Devi and Manoj Mitra are deeply concerned with different societal issues. Almost the entire bulk of their plays is scintillated with the injustices, exploitations, oppression and discriminations of the common people of the society. All the three playwrights harshly denounce the governmental hooliganism and nepotism in their respective dramatic works. Theatrical literature of these three playwrights of Bengali theatre gives a stark look at the flagitious and toxic system of caste and social hierarchies of West Bengal. The major works of these playwrights are mirror reflecting piece of works as they delicately facsimile the contemporary social ambience of Bengal in their works. The critical scrutiny of the major plays of these three playwrights showcases how the religious fanaticism, superstitions, poverty, penury and hunger grip the rural societies of Bengal. And these three playwrights like the stalwarts of Bengali Renaissance devotedly produce social dramatic literature that is performed in the theatre in order to divulge the social follies and disorder of the society on the stage. The plays like Hunting the Sun, The Great Rebellion, Aajir, Bayen, Water, Honey from a Broken
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Hive and The Shadow Palace minutely portray the naked social realities of contemporary Bengal. These plays are deeply concerned with the theme of social inequalities, gender biasness, class conflicts, casteism, religious fanaticism, superstitions, lawlessness of the government of the day, oppression and discrimination of the marginal class of the society. These playwrights are socially committed writers and throughout their life they struggled for the justice and equality of the marginal class of the society. Playwright Utpal Dutt in his entire life produces and performs plays which are characterized with the elements of revolution and reformation. As he severely criticized the oppression of the working class and the autocracy of the contemporary government, he was put behind the bar by the then state government. Likewise, Mahasweta Devi devoted her whole life for the justice and uplift of the underprivileged and tribal people of the nation. She is an activist and writer. Her works such as Aajir, Urvashi and Johnny, Bayen and Water etc. are dedicated to the cause of the deprived section of the society. Similarly, Manoj Mitra also through the play Honey from a Broken Hive and The Tale of Hekim-Shaheb reflects the prevailing societal milieu of Bengal. Through the portraiture of all the sordid social practice and norms Manoj Mitra wishes to bring a social reformation to the society of Bengal and to India as a whole.

But, each of the playwrights has certain individual technique of depiction of these issues which makes them distinct and different from each other. Utpal Dutt’s works ideologically reflect his endorsement with left wing ideology in politics and socialism. He is the only figure in Bengali theatre who openly denounces the autocracy and hooliganism of Congress led state government of 1960s and 1970s West Bengal. His plays distinctively condemn and denounce the feudal bourgeois class and advocate for the working class. Most probably he is the first one who makes the labor class the central theme of the plot in his plays. Similarly, Mahasweta Devi is a social activist turn writer. She is a strongly determined and devoted social activist who works with and for the marginalized and oppressed section. Her works always uniquely speak for the justice of adivasis and the tribal people of West Bengal as well as India. “One of the main concerns that emerge from Mahasweta’s own works relate to tribal independence, self-possession and the historical possibility of peasant insurgency” (Sen 26). Her works, exclusively in Bengali dramatic literature, embody the socio-political and economic-cultural circumstances ranging from the urban bourgeois to the
urban underworld, from rural untouchable societies to tribal segments, and exhibit a viewpoint of India barely ever seen in any sort of Indian literature. “She presents the rare combination of an activist and a writer who has been leading a spirited crusade against social injustice meted out to the disenfranchised and the dispossessed” (Asaduddin 236). In the same way, certain qualities which exist in the works of Manoj Mitra make him unique and different from his predecessors and other contemporary playwrights of Bengali theatre. His plays distinctively represent the class conflicts, typical societal structure and social dilemmas of the lower middle class society. Exclusively, the supernatural and mythological figures of his plays act and behave like a real human and come to the world to solve various day to day and domestic issues of the common people. He candidly confesses it in an interview with the noted theatre critic Samik Bandyopadhyay that “had to be taken back into history, for the simple reason that I could not afford to make the statements that sought to make about the contemporary reality, in plain, direct terms” (Mitra 263).
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