CHAPTER V

"BELIEF IN THE VILLAGE" : THE TAMARIND TREE

In his fourth novel, *The Tamarind Tree* (1975), Romen Basu shifts his attention to the rural Bengal. Among Romen Basu's special fields of interest are "the economic and social problems of Bengali villages, and a wide range of the troubles that face them are woven into the narrative of *The Tamarind Tree*."¹ The novel seeks to present in fictional terms the success of a village girl, Mohamaya, in helping "to bring a smile or two in the midst of misery"² in the village Balavpur in an unobtrusive, unassuming, selfless and non-violent way and in bringing about peace, unity and communal harmony. Romen Basu appears to understate Mohamaya's quiet confidence and fearless crusade against the evils of the village life. Balavpur is a microcosm of the village life in India and calls for a similar crusade and passion to cleanse the village life, for the roots of India are in its villages. The novel is an affirmation of Gandhian values such as Hindu-Muslim unity, prohibition, removal of untouchability and, above all, non-violent approach to social problems. Hence the immense relevance of the novel.

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1. Betty Kelen, rev. of *The Tamarind Tree*, Trans India, p. 3.
2. Romen Basu, *The Tamarind Tree* (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1975), p. 218. All further references are to this edition and the page numbers will be given parenthetically at the end of the quotations.
In the present novel, Mr. Basu's main concern is about "the middle class joint family and how it is dying out as an urban institution in urban India besides the villages which, cut off from the mainstream of the national life, are becoming breeding grounds for social, political and caste rivalries." The novel begins with Anukul Ghosh visiting his ancestral village, Balavpur, ten years after he had settled in Calcutta. His grandfather had left for Calcutta from Balavpur after his appointment at the university. Anukul has come with his three brothers, his son Biren, his daughters, his two sons-in-law and daughter-in-law to celebrate Biren's return from England as a textile engineer. 'Durga Puja' is arranged. At Balavpur, Anukul has paternal property of a pond, a house, coconut trees, mango grove and a tamarind tree. His relative and caretaker of the property, Gobindo, has cheated him. As Anukul watches catching of fish in the pond, Gobindo comes and challenges his right on the pond. He says that the property claimed by Anukul no longer belongs to him. Anukul's pride is hurt. A scuffle between the men of Annadasankar, Anukul's cousin, and those of Gobindo is stopped by the intervention of Mohamaya, the headmaster's daughter. The man who has 'masterminded everything' turns out to be Anukul's cousin, Harihar. Gobindo "drives home the idea that it was Harihar not he who had been scheming to force Anukul out of Balavpur" (p. 25). Anukul orders Gobindo to "tell Harihar he was a fool to tease king cobra." (p. 26). He is out to avenge: "I want to punish Harihar. I will make him

crawl at my feet. He will soon see who is remembered in Balavpur, his grandfather or mine." (p. 35).

In his attempt to retrieve his property, Anukul sends his son, Biren, to Balavpur to stay with Rashbehari, Harihar's brother, to get the inside information and also to get his legal opinion. Biren gets interested in the village affairs and in Mohamaya. He is not really interested in working as his father's agent. He decides to work for a compromise between the 'two immature adults,' namely, Anukul and Harihar, even by way of telling lies. He tells Harihar that Anukul has asked his pardon and, at the same time, tells his father that Harihar is ready for a compromise. Later he sees that his plan does not work and tells his father the truth that Harihar has demanded direct apology from him. This enrages Anukul further. Anukul goes to Balavpur on the headmaster's request to visit the school. Meanwhile, Mohamaya manages to bring Harihar to the school. The unexpected meeting of the rivals results only in further recriminations. Harihar wins the property case in a court of law. Anukul sends his men to attack Harihar and his sons. He sacks the headmaster. He gets the magistrate transferred and wins the criminal case against Harihar. Biren turns against his father in favour of Mohamaya.

Meanwhile, it is time for Durga festival at Balavpur. It is followed by the marriage of Biren and Mohamaya. In spite of her dislike for city life, she goes to Biren's house in Calcutta. She is unable to adjust to the aristocratic, joint family life with so many customs and to the city life. Yet, she wins the love and
affection of her in-laws. One day, Paramanik, a barber from Balavpur, goes to see her and narrates the deteriorating conditions at Balavpur such as the Hindu-Muslim factions, blackmarket operations, lawlessness, atrocities of money-lenders and selfish contractors, drought and so on. Mohamaya thinks that she is responsible for the conditions. She decides to go back to Balavpur to set things right. Biren pursuades her not to go but in vain. Mohamaya uses her goodwill with the Muslim leader, Bakshi, and shows skill, pursuasion and diplomacy in avoiding a Hindu-Muslim conflict. She pleads for unity among all castes of Hindus. She is in a mood of discontent as she thinks of Biren. She writes him to come and see her. Meanwhile, Biren also realizes the need to live with her and work for the development of Balavpur. The novel ends with Mohamaya and Biren hoping that their son would be a village doctor.

While Mohamaya's role in the village affairs forms the main plot of the novel, the subplot is supplied by Anukul's property affair. The main plot and the subplot are fused since the scene of action for both of them is Balavpur. The focus of the novel shifts from Anukul and Harihar to Mohamaya after the fifteenth chapter. The property issue is structurally important as it gets Biren introduced to the village affairs. Mohamaya's marriage with Biren is the turning point in the novel. With this the scene of action temporarily shifts from Balavpur to Calcutta. Mohamaya's return to Balavpur provides the element of suspense as to how she would solve the problems of the village. The novel ends with a note of hope and faith in the future of the village. It is
interesting to note that the author goes for a large number of chapters as he did in one of his previous novels, A Gift of Love.

As a reviewer says, "what gives quality to this novel, despite its thin and predictable plot, is the author's quite remarkable ability to create completely credible characters." Obviously, Mohamaya emerges the most significant character in the novel as the fictional focus rests on her. She is hailed as "Basu's most thoughtful creation." The following conversation between Biren and Mohamaya is revealing:

"Do you go to School?"
"No."
"Then what do you do all day?"
"Roam around the village."
"All the time?"
"Yes"
"Why?"
"To take care of people."
"Aren't you too young for that?"
"I am not so young. I am seventeen." (pp. 29-30)

Gobindo calls her 'a gift from heaven' and adds: "Without Mohamaya, Balavpur would not be livable. She is everywhere—with the 'chamars' 'kanoras' 'Domes' Musalmans." (p. 37). A reviewer says:

She had grown up in the village and was a

strange child from the start, a little St. Bright with an uncontrollable tendency to make fast friends among the social, political and religious groups, the castes and outcastes that are so variegated even in a small plot of India.

Mixing with the untouchables has been her habit since her childhood. "... no one could change her ways, although everything was tried." (p. 37). Gobindo tells Biren: "... she does what satisfies her. No one can persuade her to go against her instincts." (p. 38). People only think that she "wastes her time with lower-class." (p. 42). The caste-fnicky Brahmin families in the village have forbidden the mastermoshai's (headmaster) family from entering their homes. Mastermoshai would have drowned the girl but for Gobindo's timely intervention. Sailaja, her mother, kept her locked in the room for a whole month. They even shaved her head once and poured cowdung water. But, surprisingly, "that girl would go from home to home, Kayasthas and pods alike, singing devotional songs." (p. 38). Even after her marriage, Mohamaya does not change her ways. She never commands the servants even though she is disapproved of by her in-laws for this. She finds no necessity to wash the house after the 'untouchable' sweeper has completed her work. She tells the second aunt: "I don't believe in untouchables. I grew up with them, shared meals with them." (p. 133). She is accused of 'heretic behaviour.' The old lady calls her 'a God-defying outcast' for allowing the village barber to enter the house.

Aversion to city life is another major trait of her personality. She explains the reason to Biren:

"I will never go to Calcutta."
"Why?"
"I don't like big cities."

"I grew up in the village. My likes and dislikes are quite different from people like you. I would not be comfortable riding in a bus or tram or going to a cinema. The only thing I wish I could see is the Howrah Bridge." (p. 53).

After her marriage, she finds unable to adjust to the prejudice and snobbery inside and outside Biren's family. The imitation of western culture is too hard for her to put up with. She feels sick at the food and dance in the night club. She finds "the distance between Balavpur and Calcutta as a gulf too wide to be bridged." (p. 140). When she returns to Balavpur, she tells the villagers: "I lived a year in the city. Nothing attracted me there, so I dreamed a lot for my village." (p. 182).

Thus, for Mohamaya, Balavpur is her world. Her identification with the people and their problems is total and she is consistent in her attachment to them throughout the novel. The introduction of her character in the novel begins with one such incident. When the supporters of Annadasankar and Gobindo are about to fight, she boldly tells Anukul: "Jethu, please stop them. Just think how much fun everyone was having. Is anything so important to spoil it?" (p. 23). Anukul is stunned when she calls
it childish on his part to stay away from the celebration of Durga worship. Finally, 'her mournful appeal with folded hands and tearful eyes had its effect' and Anukul disperses the crowd. Biren admires her for her daring act, which is something he wouldn't have ventured to do. He says: "When Gobindokaka was shouting at the top of his voice, flying his hands in all directions, I saw how you came from the back of those fishermen and took him away. It was quite remarkable, really." (p. 29).

A similar gesture from Biren for the welfare of the people wins Mohamaya's respect for him. She is very much worried when the wife of a villager, Bhushan, is in her twelfth day sick with typhoid. Biren appears at the right moment and is ready to send a good doctor to attend on her. She tells him: "God has answered my prayer. Your arrival is a miracle.... If Bhushan's wife lives, she will owe her life to you." (pp. 42-43).

As Biren comes into closer contact with her, he finds her unusual in her tastes and opinions. She sees that caste barriers have made people small-minded. She tells him: "In our village everyone considers it beneath him to talk to anyone below his caste ..... No one wishes to be bothered with the problems of the lower castes." (pp. 50-51). She asserts that "even if they kill me I will not discriminate between people." (p. 51). Biren further asks her:

"You don't want anything for yourself? Nice clothes, jewellery?"

"No one here has them. Why should I?"

...........
"You cannot live this way all your life."
"I live from day to day."
"Who taught you to think this way? Your father?"
"No. I just think like that myself." She was utterly unself conscious. (p. 51).

Mohamaya is not only straightforward but wants to be truthful in her approach. She advises Biren 'to act as your conscience guides you' and tells Anukul not to think of gaining control "of a few coconut trees and ponds to punish Hariharkaka." (p. 51). She teases him when she comes to know that Biren lied to his father that Harihar was ready for a compromise.

"Shame on you, telling lies."
"Have you never told a lie in your life?"
"Never."

"My mother taught me never to tell a lie." (p. 63)

She feels that "it was best to be honest and tell the truth before it went any further." (p. 64). She wants to save Biren from the situation. At her instance, her father invites Anukul to visit the school. She also invites Harihar to the school 'saying there was a pleasant surprise awaiting him.' When tempers run high between them, she intervenes to tell them: "Uncles, please sit down and listen to me for one minute. Everyone in the village is talking of your quarrel. Some are going to be badly hurt unless it is settled soon." (p. 78). But her advice falls on deaf ears. She sympathizes Harihar for being attacked by Anukul's men. She takes a moral stand against Anukul and requests her father 'not to take
sides for four times the salary Anukul offered.' She asks Biren "to try again to convince his father that he was wrong." (p. 97). Her marriage marks the end of enmity between Harihar and Anukul. Overwhelming with joy, Anukul says to Harihar:

"I have no words for your change of heart, Hariharda."

"How much longer do you think I have left? You too will change after you have been exposed to her." (p. 120).

Mohamaya's marriage opens up a new challenge and crisis for her. It is interesting to juxtapose her with Mohini in Bhabani Bhattacharya's novel, Music for Mohini. Mohini is city-bred, cultured, refined, and rational. She is set against her mother-in-law in Behula village who is the epitome of all the time-honoured customs, traditions and superstitions the breach of which is considered a sacrilege. Thus, the author presents the clash between tradition and modernity. Mohini reestablishes harmony within herself only by her psychological growth and her change of outlook. Mohini appreciates all that is good in the tradition and assists her husband, Jayadev, in reforming the village.

On the other hand, in Calcutta, "Mohamaya saw her life as a circus in which she was asked to play the role of the clown, the acrobat, the horseback rider. The tent, the cheering and jeering crowd, confused her. Who am I? What am I to become? she asked and asked." (p. 145). The 'responsibility to domesticate Mohamaya' is assigned to her co-daughter-in-law, Nirmala. Mohamaya is given a
series of instructions such as keeping her head covered in front of elders, attending her father-in-law at his dinner, learning to cook, massaging her mother-in-law's gout-ridden legs until midnight or one o'clock. Mohamaya lives up to the expectations but she has singularly failed in trying 'to learn the ways of the city.'

Nirmila's behaviour gave her a good deal of insight into aristocratic ways, but she was not willing to be a pupil for upper middle-class sophistication. She felt no one cared to understand her. They were so impressed with their status that the 'village girl' was only a source of amusement. (p.132).

Biren knows her problem. He tries to reason with her:

"You cannot go on being unhappy. You have to adapt."
"Sorry, no. I shall not be here for very long."
"If you are homesick, why don't you visit your parents for a few days? I have been urging you to go."
"Once I go, I shall not return." (p. 144).

The only reason for leaving Calcutta is this: "I don't feel free here" (p. 145). In another context she says: "I feel like a prisoner." (p. 146). She has no grudge against the people in the house. She has no particular dislike for Anukul. She finds the old lady 'kind underneath' and her co-daughter-in-law 'sweet.' They are livable with 'if I wanted to live here,' she tells him.

The beauty of Mohamaya's character lies in the fact that "Calcutta, where she comes to live after marriage, could not touch
Mohamaya's desire to get back to Balavpur gets the colour of urgency as she learns about the worsening situation at Balavpur through Paramanik. He tells her: "We miss you terribly. Our village has lost its soul since you came away." (p. 47). He informs how the people have been ruined by the habit of drinking liquor:

These men, whom you helped to feed in their bad days, whose children you nursed in sickness, whom you protected against the tax-collectors, have turned into real monsters. They beat their wives, starve their children. That position is ruining so many homes and still the evil is spreading. (p. 150).

He tells her that "within a year none of the old villagers would be found in Balavpur unless someone could help them" (p. 154) and requests her to "come and see us before half of us are dead." (p. 155).

Mohamaya is in tears as she tells Biren about Balavpur. "Biren realised that she held herself responsible for these misfortunes and that the burden of her guilt grew stronger, the more she brooded about them." (p. 159). He tells her that she "cannot stop these powerful social forces." But he "had hoped that she would try to make concession until he had come up with some plans." (p. 160).

For Mohamaya, the love and affection of her people at Balavpur outweigh that of her husband. She tells the villagers:

"Husband is one and you are so many. How can he compete with your love?" (p. 167). Mohamaya is at her best in this section of the novel as it brings out the leadership abilities in her. She is one of those women Welthy Fisher used to talk about when she said, 'If you want to get any real work done, look for the strong women of the village.' What strikes the reader is how she underplays her role in reforming the village affairs. She wants to reason with Bakshi. She compliments him on running a chicken farm and on managing it so well without anybody's help. She remembers him how much he loved her as his own child. She recalls the past days of Hindu-Muslim unity. When Muslims of the village were asked to go to Calcutta for want of food, Hindus came forward to share things with them:

I came and cried at your feet not to tell them to go away: we vowed to live or die together. That night we collected every coconut or jackfruit we could lay our hands on beside the railroad track. All of that we distributed in Musulman-para. (p.183).

Similarly, she recalls that when a Muslim was arrested on a trespassing charge, she bailed him out and saved a bloodbath. She reminds him of his social obligation.

Mama, you are one of the leaders in our village now. If you don't take a stand when things go wrong, who will? (p. 181).

But Bakshi remains adamant because he feels that Muslims have been blamed for all the ills of the village. He is prepared for a riot:
Let there be a riot. Let some blood flow. We are not so weak any more (p. 184)

Mohamaya’s visit to Bakshi is mistaken by the Hindu community for ‘siding with the Muslims.’ She tells them that the visit was only in keeping with her intimacy with Bakshi since her childhood. She remains objective and refuses to be swayed by their anti-Muslim feelings. She tells them that they should forget caste distinctions among them. Because of the caste distinctions, the Muslims have been able to lure the low-caste Hindus to their side:

Why has it been easy for Haider Khan’s men to invite some of you to drink Cholaimod with thorn or eat goat’s ear? Is it because your Brahmin or Kayastha neighbours will never ask you to share a glass of coconut water? (p. 187)

A villager explains her argument:

Mohamaya is saying that we should live here as one community. So much is changing around us that it is not right to pull in all directions because of our religion or castes. (p. 187).

Finally Mohamaya sums up her vision:

A day will come when no one in this village will go hungry, no one will shut his door to a Chamar or a Musalman. If you want that day to come sooner, you have to work harder for it. (p. 188).

Next time when she visits Bakshi’s house for lunch, Mohamaya proceeds with a proposal. She requests Bakshi to be the president
of the Jubak Sangha—a new youth organization to be formed to act as "our conscience, a vanguard in times of trouble" (p. 190). Such an organisation is necessary because

Everyone was for a new beginning. Bring in a new life. Our village is not big enough to have a Panchayat. Nothing, nothing. We are left to ourselves to live or die. (p. 191).

She tells him that as the president he will have to build them a gymnasium and rebuild the football field at his expense. Bakshi is puzzled by the proposal that a Muslim should become its president but finally agrees. The villagers wonder how Mohamaya could change the stubborn Bakshi:

It is a miracle how he has changed in such a short time. Mohamaya has some strange power. Whatever she says, our mia listens. He was so starved for some recognition. (p. 195).

Mohamaya's success with Bakshi is a starting point for the easing of many tensions in the village. First, Bakshi is instrumental in making Salim seek apology for having tried to molest Paltu's wife in a heavily drunken state. Second, Bakshi has also made it known that 'anyone seen drinking will be dealt with real hard.' Third, he gives up the idea of felling the tamarind tree to build a godown. He decides to open a dispensary on Mohamaya's advice. Fourth, the weekly market place is renovated so as to provide many more permanent stalls. Fifth, it is also to be inferred that the land dispute of Nilmani is also amicably solved between him and a Muslim, Hider, at the instance of Bakshi.
Summing up her triumphs, a reviewer says:

"Without being too explicit in her methods, Mohamaya could handle almost all rural problems, heal differences between family members, between caste Hindus and the Untouchables and between Hindus and Muslims by sheer will power that transcends her own personal happiness."  

Mohamaya's dream is fulfilled as Biren comes to Balavpur to stay with her. She is one of the rare women characters in Indian fiction in English. She is a shining example of the virtues, strength and wisdom of Indian womanhood.

The character of Biren is only second in importance to that of Mohamaya in the novel. He is the connecting link between the main plot and subplot. He has returned from England as a textile engineer, yet he is 'not a bit like a Sahib' as Mohamaya tells him. He is employed in one of his father's establishments. He is 'babied' by his father and he is 'resentful' of it. In fact, "he wished that he was strong enough to refuse to become a textile engineer" (p. 47) as his interest was in philosophy.

Biren is introduced to Balavpur in connection with the celebration of his return from England. His interest in Mohamaya through his father's property affair is equally accidental. "Her exposed arms, oval face and large eyes had caught his fancy at first sight,"

but the way she'd handled his father had a profound influence on him." (p. 27). As he comes to know of Harihar's high-handedness and the behaviour of the upper caste people through Rashbehari, he begins to take a genuine interest in the village. His idealism is kindled. He thinks that the villagers themselves should improve their conditions with unity. Rashbehari asks him:

"Would you be interested in coming here and helping these poor people?"

"Most certainly. Yes, I would," Biren spoke out firmly.

Biren further tells him:

Ever since I saw how they live on farms in England my mind has not been at ease. If we expect the Government to do something, we will have to wait another fifty years, or until the whole system changes. But you, father, and the people themselves could do a lot. (p. 42).

Biren goes through the village to 'get a feel of this place' for himself. He is touched by the abject poverty and backwardness. A farmer who he meets requests him: "May be you educated will be able to think of something so that we farmers can look for a better day. Not for me of course, but perhaps for my children." (p. 47) and "the farmer's faith in the educated stayed in his mind."(p.47).

Biren is charmed by Mohamaya's personality. She is his idealism translated into action. He finds her worthy of emulation. He wins her heart by his genuine interest in the welfare of the people. She emboldens him not to be afraid of his father and to
act according to his conscience. He tells her: "Courage has to be built gradually. Give me time." (p. 52). He does not hesitate to defy his father when he knows that Anukul had ordered Harihar to be beaten up. He reproves his father:

How could you do such a dreadful thing? Do you really believe you can buy respect with your money alone? Make everyone submit to force? (p. 92).

He takes up a job in a small mill some miles from Calcutta. He pleads with Mohamaya not to leave the village with her father in search of a job for him. In a 'tempestuous fury' he tells her: "No one can take you away from here as long as I am alive." (p. 98).

The only thing that Biren finds intriguing in Mohamaya is her consistent aversion to city life. At first he believes that once she is exposed to the glitter of city life, she would develop a liking for it. But his hopes prove futile even one year after her stay in Calcutta. When he discourages her to go to Balavpur, it is not as if he were half-hearted in his liking for Balavpur. Going to Balavpur is still a dream for him while it is a passion for Mohamaya.

Every day that Biren spent with Mohamaya before and after marriage, he thought of the possibility that they might one day live in Balavpur. He had many dreams too--making this village an example of harmony and progress through unity. He pictured himself as their leader, making a legend. There were other dreams too, not so ambitious, but nothing had crystallized. They spoke about it
together and he encouraged her to think that they should be true partners in the service of the people. But he needed time. Her impatience exasperated him. (p. 146).

But he fails to draw up a definite plan for constructive work at Balavpur.

The more he tried to plan, the less adequate he felt. Mohamaya was consistent and he was not. His convictions about the values of village life had been transient. Her will was rewarding. She knew that city life had a corrupting influence. (p. 215).

But, Biren slowly grows out of his dilemma. Though he has no definite plan as such, he decides just to go to Balavpur first and help Mohamaya and believes that the future will take its own course:

He realized that, just as it takes time to fight prejudices and superstitions, so it takes time to possess self-confidence to give up the old ways. He wanted to get a new lease of life. The rest would take care of itself. (p. 216).

He assesses his own evolution:

He had freed himself from his father's bondage and from public opinion. That was no small achievement. (p. 216).

He decides to make a modest beginning:

Mohamaya needed help. Together they could do at least twice as much if not more. At first she
would have to guide him, but living with the problems daily he would give birth to new ideas. He was excited thinking that these were his own thoughts. (p. 216).

He even dreams as if he had gone to Balavpur and helped the people from the devastation caused by an earthquake. He realizes that Balavpur is 'the right way to fulfilment.' Thus, he appears in the novel as a follower of Mohamaya's vision and ideals. Commenting on Biren's decision to go to Balavpur, Jogendra Saksena writes:

This is something which we need badly today in every part of the country. We also want our city-bred and foreign trained young men to go back to the villages, as Biren does. The message which Romen Basu conveys through his novel is timely. 9

Vinanti Sarkar expresses a similar view:

"When I finished the last page, I heaved a sigh of relief. There was this extraordinary gift ... or was it "hope" that our educated young men and women trained abroad are finding their way back to the simple life of village India. Romen Basu firmly believes that the future of India lies in her villages, in nourishing food and education." 10


Besides Mohamaya and Biren, the other characters worth referring to are Anukul and Harihar. They are important in the subplot and may be studied as a contrast.

Though Anukul settled in Calcutta, he was widely respected whenever he visited Balavpur. Harihar was no match to him. Rashbehari tells Biren about those days:

Sundays were always like a Darbar. Everyone came to meet Anukul. They spoke about needing help for a job, to reduce taxes on the land. Anukul listened to everything, he offered help the best way possible. Many private disputes were arbitrated. (pp. 40-41)

Anukul was also progressive in his outlook. He had no caste distinctions unlike Harihar. Rashbehari tells Biren:

When your father built the school, Harihar protested that lower-class children could not be allowed to sit with the Brahmins and Kayasthas. Anukulda said as long as that attitude did not change, there was no need to build a school. Let the village manage with the pathsala. (p. 41)

A gap of ten years has brought a lot of change in his outlook on life. Hence Biren "could not believe that Rashbehari was talking about the same man who kicked a servant in the stomach over an argument because he demanded a raise of two rupees." (p. 41).

While Anukul has turned out to be an arrogant bully, Harihar has grown deceitful. Rashbehari tells about him: "He
wants to remain here and dominate." (pp. 41-42). When Harihar wins the two cases on Anukul's property, Anukul resorts to intimidation. His men grievously wound Harihar and his two sons besides setting fire to the godown. But Anukul manages to win the criminal case. "His son's near tragedy had made a different man of Harihar. He promises Mohamaya to be tolerant ...." (p. 97). Mohamaya also contributes to the reform in him. Implying Harihar, Mohamaya reminds him of the role of village elders for the 'dishonesty, corruption, licence' in the community.

She reminded Harihar to look back. Who was responsible for all this? When the refugees, the potters, the field labourers came, they looked up to the elders in the village. They asked to set the rules of conduct for them. Who broke them? Who corrupted them? (pp.96-97).

Anukul finds a changed Harihar at the time of Mohamaya's marriage. Harihar tells Anukul: "You too will change after you have been exposed to her." (p. 120). Anukul has accepted for Biren's marriage with Mohamaya much against his will. Yet, when she goes back to Balavpur, he feels her absence. Biren muses:

His father's change of attitude was not easy to understand. He compared Mohamaya's strong convictions with his elder daughter-in-law's obedience and sense of duty. "I did not like telling her anything, but it was interesting to watch how she handled herself with the others" ....Biren did not know either what it was that
made her absence unbearable to others.

(p. 211)

Harihar remains aloof when Mohamaya tries to settle the affairs of the village. Referring to his non-interference in her constructive work, a villager says: "if that unfortunate incident had not taken place with his son, and he had gone into voluntary isolation, all this would not have been so easy to arrange." But he remains a 'fly in the ointment' in Mohamaya's attempt to bring back Hindu-Muslim unity. He calls the 'Hindu-Muslim embracing unreal' since no "Hindu of any respectable caste will share food from the same plate with a Muslim." (p. 195). He warns her that "she would have to answer to God for these heretic activities. As for him, he preferred to be left alone." (p. 196).

Thus, in spite of their initial enmity between them for domination over Balavpur, Anukul and Harihar are brought together indirectly by Mohamaya and she takes the credit for reforming them to a large extent.

Romen Basu makes use of mostly omniscient point of view in his narration. At times, he narrates the story through one character. For instance, Gobindo informs Anukul how Harihar had annexed his property one item after another to consolidate his hold on the village. Later, Rashbehari tells Biren the story of the village from the time of the latter's grandfather. In the same way, the author makes use of the character of Paramanik to inform Mohamaya all the developments in the village during the one year after her marriage. Similarly, when Mohamaya goes back to
Balavpur, the villagers go to her and narrate in detail the Hindu-Muslim conflict in the village.

The reminiscences of characters also form a part of the author's narrative technique to keep things in proper context. For instance, at the end of chapter one, Anukul remembers how he used to visit Balavpur as a boy along with his grandfather and enjoy himself the rural beauty. Similarly, after returning to Balavpur, Mohamaya goes to market and buys things used for worshipping Lord Shiva. Then she remembers how she held worship of Shiva dear to her heart just as his mother did and how she did not even play with stones which had the shape of 'Shivalinga.' She remembers how her mother used to go on a fast on the day of 'Shivaratri' even though she was 'on the point of collapsing.' She had told Mohamaya: "If you want a good husband, you should also worship Shiva." (p. 201). Mohamaya also remembers her mother's opinion about Biren. "I know Biren. There is no nicer boy in any corner of the globe." (p. 201). On the other hand, Biren's fascination for village life is associated with his fond memories of his childhood in a village. Interestingly, his fear of ghosts is rooted in his boyhood days in that village.

Romen Basu also employs the technique of probing the thoughts of characters in certain situations. A particular reference may be made to the probing of Anukul's thoughts at length after Mastermoshai proposed the marriage of Biren and Mohamaya:

He had found Biren unmanageable in recent months .... True, he acknowledged that children get
shocked the first time they saw their parents in less than honest, less than just, roles, but how could Biren exaggerate such trivial matters? He was certain that Mohamaya had poisoned his mind. She was a witch, really evil. Why otherwise should she go about so relentlessly trying to disrupt the social order? .... He instinctively recoiled thinking of the danger of receiving her in his home. Imagine what this marriage could mean in his family. Mohamaya would demand all kinds of freedom in the house.... He would rather give up his son than accept Mohamaya. (pp. 107-108).

Mohamaya's thoughts about Biren after coming back to Balavpur are similarly traced to speak of her appreciation of him:

Was there any other village like Balavpur, she wondered. So tiny, so insignificant that it mattered to no one. Why did she not have the same feeling for people elsewhere? Kind hearts should know no boundaries. Biren was infinitely more kind than she was. It was no small sacrifice to alienate one's parents, champion unpopular cause and bear all the burden of rebuke and disapproval. He had done all that for her. If only she were a little more considerate. She did not show in words or gestures what he meant to her .... She could not understand why such things made him unhappy and the obvious escaped his attention. (p. 202).

One can see here Mohamaya's thoughts passing on from Balavpur to Biren and subsequently to her relationship with him. The continuity of thoughts is captured realistically.
The *Tamarind Tree* is a novel imbued with realism particularly in presenting the rural social conditions. Commenting on this, a reviewer says:

The rustic simplicity, the bitter quarrels, the chasm between the comforts and extravagance of the upper middle class and the patterns of life of the majority in rural India are portrayed with subtle, wistful humour. If Bengali writers generally have an intimate grasp of the rural scene, caricaturing human behaviour and foibles is Basu's special forte."¹¹

Biren's thoughts give a picture of Balavpur:

Balvapur was a typical village without any amenities, just open fields, dug-out ponds, dispersed huts for some thousand people. Without the presence of Ghosh-Para and its educated, city-employed few, most farmers might never have had any concern for the rest of the world. They would be living concerned with growing and consuming rice until death. For all these men and women, the turmoil from want, suffering and sickness and prayers to the Almighty were all their lives were meant to be. (pp. 214-215).

Caste system is rooted in rural India and is still assiduously followed. Balvapur is one such village where untouchability is also prevalent. Mohamaya tells Biren: "In our village everyone considers it beneath him to talk to anyone below his caste" (p. 50)

and "no one wishes to be bothered with the problems of the lower castes." (p. 51). In temples, while distributing prasad, the priest calls the Kayasthas first and the chamars last. Even at Mohamaya's wedding, seating arrangements are according to caste. Muslims are seated slightly apart.

Petty quarrels are a common sight in the village. For instance, two villagers, Gangadhar and Muktaram, become rivals on a petty dispute as to who should clear a tree which has been uprooted in a storm and fallen in Gangadhar's pond. If the contending parties are rich, they invariably go to a court of law no matter how trivial the matter is. Rashbehari tells Biren about this malady:

.... in our society, honour is everything. The richer the man, the bigger is his ego. Brothers would rather watch their estates dwindle to zero than settle out of court their quarrels over two mango trees or a sliver of a paddy field.

(pp. 38-39)

Exodus from villages to city is a normal affair. A villager tells Biren: "A village is a dirty place. Why do you think people escape to the city as soon as they can afford it?" (p. 49).

As in all Indian villages, agriculture is the mainstay at Balavpur. Biren watches a poor farmer ploughing the field:

The farmer's biceps were strong and firm. Each time the blade got stuck on the ground he used all his force to pull it out. He was perspiring from head to toe and, exposed to the Sun day
after day, his skin was black and glossy. His eyes were set deep inside the frame of protruded forehead and high cheekbones. (p. 44).

Biren learns from him that a farmer has no holiday. He cannot have a fixed income. "It is not enough to feed a family of seven a fistful of rice a day." (p. 45). "When the harvest is good, I can keep the rice for my own need and may be sell some of it for twenty or twentyfive rupees. That helps to buy salt and kerosene" (p. 46), the farmer tells him. The farmer lives in a room with mudwalls, the roof covered with palm leaves on bamboo sticks with no doors and windows. Cooking is done in earthen pots using cowdung cakes. Machines are ruled out. Even paddy is pounded.

When such a village breeds such social evils as Hindu-Muslim riot, blackmarketeering, sale of toddy and rice wine, smuggling, and pimping, the situation becomes abominable. The mute, poor people put up with deterioration with fatalism as reflected in the words of Gouri, a village woman, who tells Mohamaya that "it was foolish for her to clamour for change. The one above watching over everybody knew when to change things but mortals were powerless." (p. 205). Matters of public life are considered a taboo for a woman. Hence Gouri tells her that "she ought to go back to Calcutta. Give comfort to her husband, be a dutiful daughter-in-law. That was the lot for a woman. There was no point in pretending that she was different." (p. 205). Sailaja, Mohamaya's mother, also thinks that she should not 'take the responsibility of a headman.'
The author has a keen eye for detail. In chapter 17, he vividly describes how the Durga Puja is performed at Balavpur. Similarly, the description of Mohamaya's marriage in chapter 22 also stands out for its realism and nativity. Thus,

Basu depicts for us its sights and smells and sounds, its wondrous variety of inhabitants, its conflicts and sorrows and abiding appeal. The reader's observation of these is heightened by a few contrasting chapters about a well-to-do joint family and the social whirl of Calcutta, reminiscent of the author's captivating first novel, *A House Full of People*.  

We have a glimpse of Calcutta as seen through the eyes of Mohamaya.

The contrast between the two places was staggering for her. She had not heard of contentment from any lips in Calcutta. In her little village, she would have to walk three miles, enter ten houses may be to hear the same complaints she saw and heard daily under one roof. There was only one Harihar in Balavpur for every hundred in Calcutta. Here each one chose his way of life, strove hard for fulfilment of his dreams which grew bigger until his realization came that they were not attainable. (p. 145).

Each man is an island in the city. Night club is a part of city culture. Mohamaya is disgusted to know that women go completely

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naked in cabaret dance 'because men like to see them that way.'
No wonder that "for Mohamaya, Calcutta was nothing but a huge prison." (p. 139).

In spite of such differences, there are areas where the city and the village converge. For instance, people of high-caste are caste-conscious not only in the village but also in the city. Mohamaya observes that the servants in Biren's house are looked down upon. Talking to them is a condescension, let alone visiting their dwelling places. Floor washed by the low-caste servant is cleaned again. Mohamaya is called 'heretic' both at Balavpur and in Calcutta for not being caste-conscious. Another similarity is seen in the desire for jewellery in the upper class both in the village and in Calcutta. Biren tells Mohamaya that "Hariharkaka and Reshbeharikaka's wives wear armful of gold bangles and heavy gold chains around their necks." (p. 51). Similarly Mohamaya observes the penchant for wearing jewellery in her in-laws' house.

Anukul's family is another typical joint family authentically presented by Romen Basu. It has a number of people as members and is presented as traditional and orthodox on the one hand and attempting to look aristocratic and modern on the other. Freedom is limited and conformity is expected. "Mr Basu lobs a few shots at the joint family, pseudo-westernization and the nouveau riche." 13

One important aspect of Romen Basu's use of language in *The Tamarind Tree* is the employment of a large number of Bengali words. It gives the touch of nativity to the novel. Second, the author makes use of the names of birds and animals to suggest the qualities of the persons referred to. For instance, Anukul calls himself a 'cobra' (p. 26) meaning that teasing him would be dangerous. Similarly, in another instance, the author refers to Gobindo as a 'crocodile' (p. 31) to mean that he is a hypocrite. Further, Anukul says that he has grown up Biren as a 'maina' (p. 92) to suggest that he is no better than a domesticated bird.

Third, the author's use of characters in Hindu Puranas and epics is a modest but significant contribution to the use of language in Indian fiction in English. For instance, Annadasankar is called "an unemployed vagabond, goes round playing the role of Narad" (p. 22), a puranic divine sage, who carries comments and views of one person to another so as to give rise to a quarrel ultimately leading to the success of good over evil. In the same vein, Bakshi refers to Hindu epic characters when he says: "We Muslims have far more guts than the Hindus. A Hindu does not like to fight. Even in their religion it says that God had to persuade Arjun to fight his enemy." (p. 171). A knowledge of the *Bhagavad Gita* tells how Bakshi has eminently misunderstood Arjuna's predicament in his attempt to give communal colouring. One wishes that Indian writers came up with more such allusions to the Puranas and epics of India in view of their capacity to convey so much by association, succinctly and effectively.
As a reviewer says, some of the most enjoyable gifts on display in the novel are "the highly entertaining conversation and the portrayal of volatile moods and extravagant sentiments." Also, Romen Basu has an eye for the living scene. The fishing scene in the first chapter is a testimony to this:

.... the men bent down in perfect harmony to water level and firmly clasped the beaded rim of the net .... Their slow march through the purple water hyacinths gradually turned the water from emerald green to muddy black .... the net flew into the air, fanning itself out towards the sky with a strange delicate music, then slowly came down on the water as if for a long rest. (p. 1).

In another instance, Basu writes:

Putting her hand through the wooden rods of the window, she (Mohamaya) caught hold of a branch of a custard apple tree and began to shake it vigorously. The water on the leaves created a mock rain. She was amused by it and felt disappointed when there was no more water left. A little sparrow, soaking wet, was standing at the edge of a palm tree looking pathetic, unable to move. She threw a twig to test her. The bird shook her feathers, scratched its underside with its beak and flew off. (p. 202).

Coming to the other aspect of Romen Basu's use of language, one cannot compromise with syntactical errors such as we

Romen Basu makes use of conflict as an important part of his technique in the novel. The conflict is both external and internal. External conflict is presented between Anukul and Harihar. There is also conflict between the caste Hindus and Muslims. Balavpur provides setting for both the conflicts. Internal conflict is presented in the character of Mohamaya when she finds it difficult to adjust to the city life and to the conditions in the in-laws' house. She struggles to leave for Balavpur. Once Mohamaya leaves him, Biren also undergoes internal conflict. In other words, he finds himself in a dilemma between his desire to be with Mohamaya and his diffidence about his usefulness to the people in the village. Finally he overcomes the dilemma and finds peace at heart. "Just as he stopped worrying about people calling him a fool for his new life, so too did he terminate his concern at going emptyhanded." (p. 218).

Contrast is another dimension of the author's technique and is seen at more than one level. First, there is contrast between the conditions at Balavpur before Anukul stopped visiting Balavpur and the conditions which later set in. Rashbehari tells Biren how Anukul had commanded respect from all people and how
he was generous to everyone. When Anukul stopped visiting the village, Harihar took command of the entire village. Caste and communal consciousness grew. Harassment of Muslims led to vindictive nature in people like Bakshi. Again, there is contrast between the conditions before Mohamaya's marriage and conditions after her marriage. She worked as a catalyst for harmony to prevail in the village among all sections of people. After her marriage, things have worsened to the extent described by Paramanik to her in Calcutta. Sailaja thinks: "When Mohamaya was a little girl, it was different. A kind gesture went a long way. In those days people were different. Now they were vicious and mean." (p. 173). Thus contrast is employed to denote the deterioration of affairs in the village. Later, with the communal harmony setting in, tensions are pacified in the village by Mohamaya's efforts.

Furthermore, there is also a contrast between the rural life and city life represented by Balavpur and Calcutta. On another plane, there is also contrast between rural life in England and that in India. Biren recalls his visit to a village with his friend in the heart of rural England. The village was not 'rural enough':

(He) arrived at his friend's great white mansion. He had seen the neighbouring houses were smaller, but none were thatched. There were no barns, no cows anywhere .... Biren saw nothing that was his idea of a village square. There were many small shops, a candy store, a
tiny restaurant, a greengrocer, a hardware merchant, an antique shop, and then a very fancy pub. Biren asked Simpson why he called the place a village. (p.215).

Biren wonders

how long would it take before all the villages like Balavpaur could have tarmac roads, public auditoriums, cinemas? Those did not really matter. He would be satisfied if only the farmers and artisans could find a doctor before someone's appendix burst. Couldn't the distances be shrunk with a few more shops closer than a three or four miles walk for a bottle of kerosene oil? (pp. 215-216).

Mohamaya finds a contrast between her marriage and her parents! While her mother's life is one of obedience and dedication to her father, Mohamaya finds their relationship incomplete. Also she thinks that she has not been able to make Biren happy to that extent.

She compared her marriage with her parents'. Her father was considered an ideal husband and her mother a model wife, but for her so much was missing in their lives. She took care of him the way he wished it to be and he was always thoughtful and kind. But she had not known anything besides acceptance. She wanted her life to be quite different. Until Biren, she had not given any thought to marriage or husband. She cared for him so much, yet found no answer to make him happy. (p. 209).
It is interesting to note how irony operates in the novel. Mohamaya has aversion to city life from the beginning but ironically she is made to go to Calcutta after her marriage. Similarly, it is ironical that Anukul is forced to accept for the marriage of Biren with Mohamaya in spite of his strong dislike for her for fear of estranging his son, Biren. It is even more ironical that Biren, a foreign-returned engineer, settles in a village. Biren muses: "What irony that his fate should be so closely tied to the village, all by accident." (p. 214). "He vowed that when he grew up he would live in the village" and his decision to live at Balavpur is a fulfilment of the vow with a sense of purpose too.

Romen Basu employs dream as a fictional device in the novel. Following his decision to leave for Balavpur for good, Biren gets a dream in which he already finds himself at Balavpur. He notices an earthquake and rushes along with Mohamaya to rescue people. He dreams that he has saved more than twenty lives and also that he has promised the affected to provide them with basic facilities with his own money. All the villagers praise him while Mohamaya feels proud of him. This dream seeks to reinforce his commitment to the village.

The title of the novel, The Tamarind Tree, is infused with a good deal of significance. Like Toru Dutt's poem, Our Casuarina Tree, Basu's The Tamarind Tree is more than the fictional evocation of a tree. It is recapturing the past, and what is more, immortalizing the moments of time so recaptured. We
may say that the tree is both tree and symbol and, as in the case of Toru's Casuarina tree, both time and eternity are amply implied in it. The tree strikingly refers to the big tamarind tree at Balavpur. The tree is also a symbol of continuity and a witness to the events in the village for three generations. It has sacred association for Anukul because his father used to sit there in the evenings and read the Bhagavad Gita. The tree is also a witness to Mohamaya's love for Biren, for she has inscribed, on top of the tallest branch, her love for him and the date when she first felt something for him. It is a place of solace and source of thought for her. "Whenever she walked without any plans, it invariably brought her to the tamarind tree. Sometimes she would be surprised by the suddenness of her presence before the tall and mighty tree." (p. 208). Bakshi's decision to spare the tree is symbolic of the fact that wisdom at last has not drained out of the villagers.

In conclusion, it may be pointed out that The Tamarind Tree calls for a 'belief in the village' and demonstrates the victory of forces of unity over forces of disintegration. The novel is also an affirmation of 'the values of village life.' One feels that it is with justification it has been called "the finest of Basu's novels" and "one of the best contributions to Indo-English fiction from Bengal." 15