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## UTOPIAN ART AND LITERATURE FROM MODERN INDIA

# Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay's *Caitālī ghūrṇi* and The Dystopia of Hunger

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The article reviews one of the lesser-known novels of Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay, *Caitālī ghūrṇi* (1931), as a dystopian narrative. In an attempt to review potential dystopian elements in vernacular texts, the article evaluates and compares the prominent features of western dystopian fiction to explore the characteristics and uniqueness of *Caitālī ghūrṇi* as a dystopian novel. In the process, the study sheds light on the relationship of such texts with the rise of realism in literature or *bāstabādī sāhitya* in early twentieth-century Bengal and how that ushered in literary modernism. The primary aims of the article are to chart the contribution of the novel in expanding the horizon of dystopia as a literary genre to accommodate similarly themed literature produced in the vernacular, and thus to look beyond the confines of a western definition of dystopia. This is achieved through a close content-oriented reading of the novel, especially focusing on the aspects of hunger, social and familial relationships, and sexuality.

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## I

Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay [tārāsamkar bandyopādhyāy] (1898–1971) is known as a deft storyteller, who portrays human life with scathing honesty and has an exceptional command of Bengali prose. Often picking unsung, hardworking men and women as his subjects, Bandyopadhyay is known for offering to his readers such expanse and depth of human emotions in his writings as is rarely come across. Hence the ordinary becomes exceptional in his stories. This article offers a close reading of his novel *Caitālī ghūrṇi* (Whirlwind of Caitra [March–April], henceforth referred to as *CG*) and uses it as a model to examine vernacular dystopian writing in twentieth-century Bangla literature. The novel necessitates a close reading to compensate the obscurity it has suffered and furthermore because it has the potential to broaden the conventional (western) definitions of dystopia as a literary genre, to accommodate comparable literature from former colonies. In the heart of the novel rests the tale of hungry people. Hence, this article focuses on human hunger and how something as intimate and physical as hunger can become the key constituent of dystopia. In a genre usually dominated by themes like cloning and rerogenetics, surveillance, artificial intelligence, and nuclear war,<sup>1</sup> something as intimate, perpetual, and urgent as hunger offers a fresh perspective to the dystopian imagination. Keeping *CG* as a case study, the article explores the following major points: first, how dystopia in Bangla literature, as intimately related to realist fiction, emerged, accommodated, and negotiated modernity; second, the dystopian features and unique aspects of *CG* and how the novel can contribute significantly to broadening the genre of dystopian literature; and, finally, how the text focuses on the core dystopian element of conflict between the individual and the collective, with the destruction of the former along with a decline of family and personal relationships. This article adopts a content-oriented approach toward reading *CG* as a dystopia, focusing on the portrayal of

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, E. M. Forster, *The Machine Stops* (1909), Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *MaddAddam* (2013), Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), Ridley Scott, *Blade Runner* (1982), William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (1984), Andrew Niccol, *Gattaca* (1997), Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* (2005), Alana and Andy Wachowski, *The Matrix* (1999–2003), and Russell Hoban, *Ridley Walker* (1980), among others.

social and interpersonal relations, since despotic and oppressive regimes and their effect on individuals have always been a focal point of modern dystopias.

The western definition of dystopia evokes an apocalyptic vision of chaos, wreckage, and annihilation, usually adhering to the political, environmental, and technological aspects of society. Dystopia, consisting of the Greek words *dus* and *topos*, signifies a bad place, a failed utopia. The usage was coined around 1747 but gained popularity in the late twentieth century in the western world, mainly within apocalyptic science fiction (Voigts and Boller, 2015; Claeys, 2017). Twentieth-century Bangla literature does not have an analogous and comprehensive category of utopian and dystopian writings. However, that does not signify an absence of fantastic, satiric, anti-colonial, anti-totalitarian, or anti-industrialization depiction of the society therein. Social satire, as a form of dystopian writing, made its mark in the nineteenth century (Sen, 2012). Yet, since much of these writings appeared as satire, or social/political treatise, genre-specific nomenclature is missing in the vernacular. Scholars like Barnita Bagchi (2012), Samita Sen (2012), and Subhoranjan Dasgupta (2012) have explored Bangla utopian and dystopian writings in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Bagchi's exhaustive analysis and feminist reading of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream* (1905) and *Padmarag* (1924), and Sen's rereading of nineteenth-century tracts like *Meye Parliament*, are concrete steps toward unearthing valuable additions to the genre of literary utopia and dystopia. Even though *CG* is the first of Bandyopadhyay's novels, contributing to a fair share of the author's popularity, it was eclipsed by the popularity of some of his subsequent novels like *Dhātrī debatā* (1939), *Gaṇa debatā* (1942), and *Hāsulibāker upakathā* (1947). This dismissal is symbolic of the sweeping trend of overlooking *bhāṣā* (vernacular) dystopian literature, further complicated with postcolonial studies scholars confining their work to canonical texts of the genre and globally-read Indian writers (writing in English), to chart the growth of postcolonial utopias/dystopias, and hardly engaging with the assorted tributaries of utopian/dystopian writing in pre-independent India. *Bhāṣā* dystopia definitely merits further exploration and projects. This article is an endeavor toward provoking dialogue as well as interest in such projects.

Even though fantasy and fiction have ruled the genre, realism is still a major component of dystopian narratives. In the realm of western dystopian literature, realistic dystopias have garnered more attention and popularity. *1984* (1949) 'inspired dread above all, that is precisely because its materials are taken from the real world' (Meyers, 1975: 268). So is *The Year of the Flood* (2009), which the author Margaret Atwood herself claims as 'fiction, but the general tendencies and many of the details in it are alarmingly close to fact' (2009: 433). Relatability makes the horror of dystopia more real. As Claeys sums up, '[T]he writer's function is to tell the truth, not to sell dreams. And even if we assign utopia the latter task, dystopia's is surely the former' (2017: 431). In the vernacular context, literature's engagement with reality is well articulated in Premchand's Presidential address delivered at the First All India Progressive Writers' Conference on 10 April 1936. He remarked:

Literature properly so-called is not only realistic, true to life, but is also an expression of our experiences and of the life that surrounds us. It employs easy and refined language which alike affects our intellect and our sentiments. Literature assumes these qualities only when it deals with the realities and experiences of life. [...] Literature can be best defined as a criticism of life (Premchand, 2011: 82).

In Bengal, *bāstabādī sāhitya* also made its mark, by virtue of prominent literary figures' insistence on realism as a literary technique. Their endeavor gave rise to a form of resistance, which came from within the established literary structure that heralded modernism in Bangla literature. We get a sense of the changing scenario in Ranjt Kumar Mukhopadhyay's doctoral thesis on Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay. He writes:

An important trend in Bengali literature during the post-First War years was a controversy between Ravindrists and the opponents which started a little earlier through the journals like 'Sabujpatra' and 'Narayan'. During those days of Saratchandra's great popularity some younger novelists with artistic minds chanced upon certain flaws in his novels. Very soon, as a reaction

against Saratchandra's novels, indications of change in subject and form of Bengali fiction became prominent in the pages of journals like 'Bharati', 'Sabujpatra' and 'Kallol' (Mukhopadhyay, 1979: 1–9).

A distinctive brand of creative literary modernism is championed most prominently through the *Kallol* group of writers, which included Premendra Mitra, Kazi Nazrul Islam, Buddhadeb Basu, and Achintyakumar Sengupta, among others. *Kallol* was a literary journal, which was in circulation from 1923 until 1929, and founded by four young writers, Gokulchandra Nag, Dineshranjan Das, Sunita Debi, and Manindralal Basu, who established the *Catuṣkalā*, the Four Arts Club. The editors were Gokulchandra Nag and Dineshranjan Das, both young and involved in other professions besides writing (Manjapra, 2011). The journal had a commendable effect on Bengali literature and heralded the transition from Tagore's humanism<sup>2</sup> to a thematic and ideological focus in creative literature, which formed the cornerstone of modernist Bengali literature (Bhattacharya, 2014).

One can find thematic affinity between the ideologies of the *Kallol* group to the almost contemporary Progressive Writers' Movement (Gopal, 2005), a pre-partition literary movement in India headed by Sajjad Zaheer, Mulk Raj Anand, Joshi Parshad, Pramod Ranjan Sengupta, and M. D. Taseer, which wanted literature to be realistic and critical about the social injustice and articulate the transitions society was going through. A social regeneration through self-critique was what these literary movements espoused, and they considered painting a social order with all its

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<sup>2</sup> The need to break away from Tagore's footsteps is succinctly explained by Dipesh Chakrabarty:

The issue of personal tastes and animosities apart, at the heart of these debates around Tagore's alleged lack of realism was the question of modernism in Bengali literature. The Bengali middle-class in Calcutta was born and raised within the miserable government institutions of a colonial capitalism. The experience of the school and the university, of examinations which led to degrees rather than education, of being a petty clerk in some office, of having to cope with crowded streets and derelict modes of transport, of the grime, heat, dust, dirt and diseases bred in the insanitary conditions of the city—these were critical to the everyday sense of being a middle-class Bengali person. Yet the greatest Bengali poet experienced few or none of these situations deeply in his personal life, having been saved from them by the good fortune of being born in a wealthy landed aristocratic family of the city (1999: 34).

inherent unfairness and debasement as the first step toward atonement. As a result, a dystopian strain of thought, usually in the form of shattered idealism, is evident in many of the writings of the era, prominent in the novels of Manik Bandyopadhyay and Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay among others.<sup>3</sup> Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay, though not often associated with the *Kallol* group, was an enthusiast and participant in their discussions, and, like his contemporaries, brought the marginalized classes of society into focus as protagonists in his tales and wrote about their daily lives. In his own words, '[I]t is reality that has inspired and provided me with materials to write about. My mind is not much attracted by any theory, but this real life brings out some philosophy or reveals itself as truth in my stories and novels' (as quoted in Mukhopadhyay, 1979: V-9).

Hunger and famine dominated the twentieth-century literary sphere. In his article on the artistic and literary documentation of the 1943–4 Bengal famine, Sourit Bhattacharya illustrates how, in order to adequately capture its violence and trauma, the 'mode of representation predominantly took a realist form but this realism went through significant modifications for the enormously significant nature of the tragedy' (2017: 57). One finds an overwhelmingly emotional narrative technique in *CG*, which is naturally in sync with the author's impassioned and humanitarian writing style. The novel foresees the calamity of famine and offers a condensed preview of the effect of hunger on individual lives and relationships. The novel also provides stringent critique on the existing social conditions in the early decades of twentieth-century Bengal. The text lucidly sums up the economic, political, and moral anxieties of the era with a dash of skepticism for any possibility of redemption, given the infinity of human greed.

Bandyopadhyay has often been criticized as a 'loud writer lacking in finesse' (Devi, 1969: 74) by his contemporaries. However, that alleged crudeness, which on the one hand announced his departure from the styles of the much-lauded

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<sup>3</sup> Bibhutibhusan's *Āranyak* (1938) talks about the destruction of nature to accommodate human encroachment, the dichotomy between the rich and the poor, and displacement of a tribal community; *Aśani Samket* (1959), written about the infamous 1943 Bengal Famine, or Manik Bandyopadhyay's *Padmānādir Mājhi* and *Putulnācer Itikathā*, both published in 1936, feature the complexities of rural societies under threat, manipulation, and exploitation.

Rabindranath Tagore (whose approval Bandyopadhyay did seek),<sup>4</sup> on the other hand complemented and condensed the trend of narrative realism in Bangla modernist prose—which makes a solid contribution to the dystopian flavor of the novel. If one finds exaggerated and melodramatic imaginings of human distress, erroneous yet inevitable strides toward steady atrophy, and all of that firmly rooted in the realistic world order an excess—that is because *CG* embodies the excess and turbulence of an impending apocalypse. The novel borders closely on apocalyptic literature (*Keyāmat sāhitya*) with its strong sense of doom. However, I would differentiate between the two genres, following Benjamin Kunkel, who writes:

The end of the world or apocalypse typically brings about the collapse of order; dystopia, on the other hand, envisions a sinister perfection of order. In the most basic political terms, dystopia is a nightmare of authoritarian or totalitarian rule, while the end of the world is a nightmare of anarchy (2008: 90).

This novel is a prototype of *Keyāmat sāhitya* and dystopic fiction rolled into one, where human hunger becomes a force that irrevocably destroys the social fabric and forges an atrocious and perverse 'order'. As subsequent analysis will show, the ending of *CG* does not offer a closure through a collapse of order. The anarchy that one might read in *CG* is also controlled by authoritarianism. While the powers that be crush even the basic demands of laborers, such as a wage hike, hunger crushes their dissent and any other attempt of rebellion. While authoritarianism acts as the external force, hunger is the internal force that compels human will to submission

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<sup>4</sup> Mahasweta Devi writes:

Self-conscious and naturally shy, he did not send his books to Tagore though he wanted to, very much. After much hesitation he sent his books *Rai Kamal*, a novel, and *Chhalanamoyee*, a book of short stories to the poet. Tagore wrote to him saying that he had enjoyed reading *Rai Kamal*. Later, Tarashankar wanted to know from the poet whether his words were merely consolatory or not, since he was being criticized as a crude writer. Tagore's reply, which reached him within four days, began with the lines that he did not know who criticized him but he, Tagore, was pleased because Tarashankar did not belong to the group of writers who did not believe in story telling (1969: 74).



and brings them back to the 'fold'. Whatever semblance of disobedience one reads in the novel, produces mass submission, which is another defining feature of dystopias. In a microcosm (the novel is only 80 pages long), Bandyopadhyay takes up ordinary lives, makes them go through the run of the mill trials and tribulations of lives under oppression, and gives them an equally ordinary ending. It is a tale of humans who are incapable, fall prey to their inner weaknesses, and who live unremarkable lives and die uninspiring deaths.

*Caitālī ghūrṇī*<sup>5</sup> was published in 1931<sup>6</sup> and dedicated to Subhash Chandra Bose, whom Bandyopadhyay met in the same year. It is a story of a young couple, Gostha and Damini, living in a remote village in Bengal. Having had to give up their land to the zamindar, they live in perpetual debt and fear of moneylenders. After losing their only child to hunger, they flee to the city where Gostha finds a job in a factory. However, misfortune follows and in an unorganized labor unrest, he loses his life. The novel ends leaving the reader to speculate the fate of Damini.

## II

Central to my reading of *CG* as a dystopia is the spatial dimension, which has been fundamental to Bandyopadhyay's vision: he projects the *dus-topos* through the dying villages, decaying cities, scorched lands, putrid cremation grounds, and claustrophobic rooms, eventually sustaining all of these—a coercive society.

The village where Damini and Gostha live is nameless, which makes it pervasive, as well as paradigmatic. Jan Wilm, in his article on postcolonial dystopia, writes:

A grim sense of desolation and a crippling atmosphere of stasis pervade the beginnings of the great Western dystopias. [...] In very different ways, the beginnings of *We*, *Brave New World*, and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* design waste lands of extreme hopelessness [...] (2015: 187).

<sup>5</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all translations from the original text cited in this article are mine.

<sup>6</sup> The novel was published serially in *Upasana patrika* in 1929. Later, in September 1931, it was published in its current form by Sabitriprasanna Chattopadhyay of Upasana press, 2, Wellington Lane, Calcutta.

Bandyopadhyay tosses the readers in the middle of a disturbing setting at the outset of the novel with an ominous and foreboding description of the village nature—a sky, which has attained a smoky and arid appearance due to the heat waves and prolonged absence of rainfall, an ominous smoke over the village, and an unbearable heat wave which brings ashes from the cremation ground situated in the outskirts of the village. Gostha and Damini reminisce about a not so distant past when the village used to be affluent, with everyone having enough to eat. The cacophony of dogs, vultures, and jackals coming from the adjoining cremation ground provides a contrast to the silence reigning in the village—a deathly silence which makes Gostha uncomfortable. The enervating heat and inclement weather have robbed the land of all its life-sap, with the shriveled and grayish vegetation struggling to stay alive. Contrasting the lifelessness of the land and the vegetation is the vitality of the animals in the cremation ground:

They feast on the melting dead bodies, with sharp excited clamor, their greed insatiable even though their stomachs cannot take food anymore. [...] When darkness descends on the land, demons start to caper. In fact, the scrawny villagers are sometimes mistaken as demons and they even become demoniac, [...] transmuting the village into the kingdom of the dead (Bandyopadhyay, 1950: 4).

This description reads akin to a post-apocalyptic landscape, which is a staple of so many dystopias. Ruin, death, and decay as popular dystopian motifs has been symbolic of the secular cynicism (Claeys, 2017) that has acted as a catalyst of literary dystopias.

*CG*'s dystopian nature is further bolstered by Bandyopadhyay's cynical stance on Bengal as a safe haven for the poor. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya mentions the first generation of migrant writers from outside Calcutta and East Bengal, who:

[w]ere closer to village Bengal than the old Calcuttans had ever been. A recurring theme infuses creative writings from the 1920s: a rural-urban dialogue, reflecting nostalgia for the village that was left behind and, on the

other hand, an ambivalent surrender to the attraction of the life and mind of the city (2014: n.p.).

However, nostalgia for village life is not discernable in *CG*. In the plot, the village has been rendered uninhabitable due to human greed and does not fare any better than the city.

Bandyopadhyay achieves the objective of conjuring up a terrifying future where neither the village nor the cities will be rendered habitable. Placed in the backdrop of the agrarian crisis, depression,<sup>7</sup> and the collapse of rural credit, *CG* is a dystopic reality. Compared to the unnerving description of the nature and cruelty of the zamindar, the city does not provide a significant alternative or relief to Gostha and Damini. Blackened with coal dust and soot, the heat is unbearable. While the village was sapless and deathlike, the city brandishes and vaunts the stone streets, iron instruments, and boilers, like 'everything is on fire' (Bandyopadhyay, 1950: 43). Bandyopadhyay's frequent reference to heat and fire to describe the discomfort and unsustainability of dystopic spaces reminds one of their resemblance to depictions of hell and torture of souls. Industrialization itself is depicted as an onslaught to nature with rain tracks 'slitting' the heart of the soil: '[T]rack signal pillars are as if victory symbols of iron's conquest of the world. The red lights on their heads are as if signs of ravenous human greed, which remain awake even in the sleeping world, burning in its own severity' (Bandyopadhyay, 1950: 43).

In such a city, the place where the laborers stay is no better. They live in the heat, right next to the railway tracks in little 'pigeonholes':

Their slums are the cesspool of the society and dustbin of the moneyed class.

In the east, there are the factories, lined with chimneys belching smoke the whole day. Same as in the north. In the west is the rail warehouse—bringing money to the moneylender and obstructing light and air to the laborers.

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<sup>7</sup> The 1930s also saw the Depression that fueled agrarian crisis. Collection of rent from the land suffered majorly and while '[S]ome zamindars turned to the courts in the hope of enforcing rent-payments; others relied on extra-legal forms of coercion, employed lathi-weilding paiks to evict stubborn peasants from their holdings' (Chatterji, 1994: 21).

Rail engines too emit smoke. On the south, is the pub, looting the money the hapless earned by bartering their life and longevity. The smoke clouds the sky, sunshine is dim here. Everything appears stupefied and delirious in the stench of the liquor and pallid light (Bandyopadhyay, 1950: 44).

While Gostha goes to work in the factory, Damini becomes a prisoner of that small claustrophobic space, starved and brooding over her fate. The room becomes a prototype of the larger dystopic society that the novel symbolizes—oppressive, unhealthy, dark, and depressing. The picture of industrialization and the condition of the laborers that the author projects are not that far from the reality of twentieth-century Bengal, which however downplays what Booker calls the 'principal technique of dystopia fiction,' namely defamiliarisation:

By focusing their critiques of society on spatially or temporally distant settings, dystopian fictions provide fresh perspectives on problematic social and political practices that might otherwise be taken for granted or considered natural and inevitable (1994: 19).

However, even though *CG* is neither spatially nor temporally distant nor unfamiliar, it does reiterate the social and economic problems to which one might turn a blind eye. One can read Bandyopadhyay's description of the factory work, coercion in the process of production, and rising profit of factory owners and money lenders as essentially Marxian, though he himself would have probably refuted that idea, as Mukhopadhyay claims in his thesis:

Though Tarasankar had practical idea and experience of exploitation and was engaged in political and social activities he did not consider Marxism as the only way of eradicating poverty and social problems. It appears from the comments and indications of labourers' revolt at the end of 'Caitali Ghurni' that Tarasankar had faith in revolution and communism. But from his own statement in 'Āmār Sāhitya Jīvan' it becomes clear that he was never attracted in Marxism nor could accept materialism. He only realized Economic Determinism as an established truth (1979: V-8).

In the novel, the factory owners fabricate an ingenious reason to deprive the laborers of their rightfully earned wages—‘there is no point in giving them more money, they say, because the more money the laborers will have, the more they will spend since they do not know how to save’ (Bandyopadhyay, 1950: 56). Through Gostha, the author projects the greed of the capitalists:

The spiked wheels, girting their spikes [teeth] effortlessly runs that massive iron reign, without fatigue, without irritation, without depression. Gostha staring at the boiler thinks and murmurs to himself, ‘...just like those obese owners, resolutely and relentlessly swallowing the world, without aversion, without pause, incessantly’ (Bandyopadhyay, 1950: 57).

The hungry body is another locus in the novel, on which power relations are played out. Commencing with the heart-wrenching description of the death of Damini and Gostha’s child from hunger, to prostitution in the city, and ending with Gostha’s violent death, the emphasis on the onslaught of hunger and violence on the body-scape in the novel is noteworthy. The author continues to fervidly relate and portray what constitutes collusion of Marxian labor alienation to a dystopic society, bringing corpse (and later animal) imageries in several places:

After work, when the coal-soot blackened, parched bodies, with dry bosom containing a thirst akin to the desert, rush toward the pub, they appear as semi-charred corpses, risen from the pyre with an infernal spirit. The entire course of universal human civilization shudders to see their appearance: it is indeed their alternative reflection. That frenzied behavior seemingly narrates the story of world civilization, and the history of its defeat is written with the ink of that flagrant wreath of skeletons (Bandyopadhyay, 1950: 53).

In another particularly poignant passage, the author writes:

Like a fiery volcano, the entrails [of a starving stomach] boil like lava. But crowds of ignorant children scream with hunger. Mother’s milk becomes condensed and congealed, not like cream, but like the blood of mother’s

breast. Children find it unpalatable; their tender throats cannot swallow it (Bandyopadhyay, 1950: 80).

After some weeks a famine takes place. People crave and grieve for a handful of rice or fragments of grains: '[Their] saliva becomes viscid, their tongue sticks and no sound come out. Mother shouts so do father, only the children do not. They live with great effort. Mother earth's love renders them incapable of leaving the refuge of the living skeleton' (Bandyopadhyay, 1950: 80). Eventually, some from the dissident laborers' group surrender themselves to the rich owners begging for food only to be rudely and forcefully declined. The other faction of the laborers sees it as betrayal and in a fit of hunger and rage, a fight breaks out: '*Like animals*, they bite each other's neck, crack one another's skull; stones, bricks, sticks. Like demons, they dance the ultimate dance of destruction. The sufferers' screams resemble the elation of the demons' (Bandyopadhyay, 1950: 81; emphasis added). In this fight, Gostha dies a gruesome death.

### III

This section focuses on the intimate and social relationships in the backdrop of a hunger-ridden and unequal society, as portrayed in *CG*. The individual versus the collective is a central theme of many western dystopian literatures. Claeys notes this important aspect:

From the 1900s [...] dystopias are less concerned with how plutocratic or collectivist regimes emerge and function, and more focused on how the Apocalypse feels, and whether it brings out our better or (as commonly) our less desirable attributes, both individually, when the monsters within are released, and in the groups which increasingly dominate us. A concern with the later, as we have seen, and the loss or destruction of our individuality, remains a central element gluing together the historical, sociological, and literary emanations of dystopia (2017: 489).

Bandyopadhyay's portrayal of human relationships in *CG* emanates a sense of doom, in consonance with the overall atmosphere of the novel. Spatial dystopia is

messily entangled with doomed interpersonal relationships. While space does not provide security or solace, neither do relationships. Hence love, in the face of hunger and greed, is rendered helpless and shorn of its redemptive value. This is illustrated in several episodes. In the first few pages of the novel, the couple loses their only child to hunger. The reader notes that the frustration that starvation even makes Damini helplessly wish for the death of her child. In the novel, hunger and starvation are normalized and integrated with the lives of the characters. In the face of that despondency, love between Gostha and Damini weakens considerably, especially after the couple's escape to the city. As a new factory worker, the author writes, 'Gostha apparently loses his mind. On some days, half of his income is wasted, on other days, the entire daily wage is spent on buying alcohol' (Bandyopadhyay, 1950: 66). This is a significant transformation from the cowardly yet kind Gostha the readers are initially acquainted with. His gradual yet steady degeneration and his addiction symbolize the release of the 'monster within' that Claeys (2017) talks about. Damini and Gostha's relationship houses a third person, Subal, who used to be a childhood companion of Damini when she first came to Gostha's family as a child bride. With the passage of time, that easy companionship becomes uncomfortable and humiliating for Damini and a concupiscent chase for Damini's affection and attention for Subal. Due to Gostha's inability to provide and stand up for Damini, she has been forced to accept Subal's financial help in certain occasions, which added to her contempt for him. However, Subal did become a savior figure when in an exhaustion-induced trance, Damini dreams of Subal offering her a plate of food and a seat, the way one would worship a goddess. Her unflinching love for her husband starts to waver in the face of hunger and her dreams tend to get confined to physical satiation. Subal indeed comes with a tray of uncooked food, intending to wear down Damini's resistance toward his courtship. Damini, touched and helpless, accepts the gift but does not eat it. After Gostha wakes up from his alcohol-induced sleep, he notices the food:

Gostha pulls the tray near him and start gobbling the snacks. He hears a sigh and turns around to see Damini's eyes fixed upon him. Gostha slowly turns toward her and nervously asks, 'Did I beat you yesterday?'

Damini does not reply but weeps. Gostha says, 'Forgive me, will you not?'. Damini, in a voice both riddled with emotion and indulgence replies, 'Do not eat those' (Bandyopadhyay, 1950: 69).

Toward the end of the novel, Bandyopadhyay shifts focus from individual hunger to the collective starvation of the laborers who had called a strike against the factory owners, demanding better wages. As a countermeasure, the owners announce a lockout, thus throwing the laborers out of employment. Shopkeepers refuse them credit and all their determination and demands of a decent life start to disintegrate due to the all-consuming force of hunger. The author shows how the company of other laborers hastens Gostha's degeneration. The meek, fearful person turns aggressive and abusive. Gostha's relinquishing of self-control to his fellow laborers and the labor union, and his accidental death at the end of the novel, are symbolic of the annihilation of the individual by the collective, a theme that has been one of the mainstays of western dystopian literature. In fact, it is due to the stark skepticism for the collective and cynicism about a collective utopian experience, as well as perceiving the collective as a threat to individual freedom and accomplishment, that Booker justifies dystopian novels as bourgeois literature. He explains:

[...] the paradigm of dystopian fiction is an oppositional confrontation between the desires of a presumably unique individual and the demands of an oppressive society that insists on total obedience and conformity in its subjects. Zamyatin's *D-503*, Huxley's *Bernard Marx*, and Orwell's *Winston Smith* are all typical of this phenomenon, which marks dystopian fiction in many ways as a quintessentially bourgeois genre that identifies collective experience as a stifling threat to the freedom and integrity of the individual (Booker: 1995: 59).

Even though Bandyopadhyay's portrayal of Gostha is essentially antiheroic, characterizing him as weak and abusive, the author also depicts a loving, caring side of the man, though only in short spells, such as Damini's recollection of their brighter days in the village. It is the repressive society that gives Gostha his current shape.



#### IV

Problematic gender relations and misogyny have been central to the genre of literary dystopias. Western dystopias portrayed them in such texts like Suzy McKee Chamas' *Walk to the End of the World* (1974) and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). In *CG*, the tropes of lust and sexual immorality bring severity to the plot, and operate in unison with hunger and greed to strengthening the dystopian narrative. The novel adds regressive libidinal energies to the overall destructive social and economic forces, thereby making the spaces more suffocating. The author focuses on a lesser malevolent side of sexuality and a more regressive aspect of it as well. While Damini and Subal's relationship exemplifies the first, the immorality of the laborers in the city illustrates the second. Gostha is portrayed as one of the least reflective and conflicted of characters: he has a fair amount of love for his wife but is also preoccupied with his troubles at hand. Subal's feelings are unidimensional, with his inarticulated obsession for Damini, whom he has known since childhood. Damini's unflinching love and fidelity for her husband is punctuated by her conflicting and ambivalent emotions for Subal. Her sexuality is a problematic terrain, often bringing herself and her husband in jeopardy with unwanted and aggressive attention from males, as is her own intense inner turmoil. Bandyopadhyay sensitively explores Subal's repressed desires for Damini, bringing out the hidden dimensions of a forbidden affair. One of the first descriptions of their encounter brings out the subtleties and complexities of the relationship:

The one person she [Damini] wants to keep away, whose absolute servitude she hates, she runs to that Subal Das and handing him her bracelets begs, 'Give me two takas, and summon the doctor'. Young Subal, enchanted, gazes at Damini, then shyly looks down and in an embarrassed voice replies, 'Keep your bracelets, I am giving you the money'. As searing pain brings the body back to consciousness from a poisoned trance, Damini feels a similar pang in her heart from Subal's sympathy. She replies in an antagonistic tone, 'Why will I take your money like that?'. Subal turns pale and implores, 'Your husband is alive, bare hands...his tongue is paralyzed' (Bandyopadhyay, 1950: 9).

The novel also explores another side of sexuality which lacks the complications of passion, love, and morality. It is the vicious manifestation of immorality and lust in a dystopia. The laborers working with Gostha view Damini as the object of desire and do not make an effort to hide it. They leer and pass obscene comments: 'They are not afraid, nor ashamed. They jeer. Amidst the immemorial darkness, they do not recognize the vulgar face of the brazen banter' (Bandyopadhyay, 1950: 51). The other women in the city seem to have made a truce with their destiny. Prostitution is rampant in Bandyopadhyay's capitalist dystopia, symbolizing the blatant commodification of human beings, erasing the divide between the intimate and the economic. With darkness women come out in the streets to look for their admirer:

Even amidst the darkness of their dull eyes, burns the monstrous appetite of their heart. But the burning eyes do not only stare at the path of their men, but also gazes at the gloss of silver. Not only the heart's yearning is contained in those burning eyes, but hunger driven lust also burns in there. They say, 'One is lucky to be born a human. What will I do if not eat and dress?' (Bandyopadhyay, 1950: 56–57).

Thus, oblivion and willing suspension of rationality become a potent ingredient of the dystopian present. While to eat and live like there is no tomorrow preoccupies the mind, one forgets the consequences, both moral and spiritual, of one's actions. When every moment of the day is a struggle and bodies are only half alive, one cannot be bothered by thoughts of tomorrow, be it better or worse. In a moment of weakness, when Damini considers accepting Subal's gift of a sari, she recollects the affair between Khendi and the pointsman:

Khendi makes no effort to hide the affair and openly says, 'I need not go to heaven, dear. Well, you will go there; at least let me survive here'. Khendi is without a man. But Dasi has a husband. Still, she accepts money from Hajari Babu. She says, 'I will have to starve my husband if I now put up a show of chastity. If this keeps us alive, I prefer it' (Bandyopadhyay, 1950: 72).

Predatory male sexuality is a focus of the novel, and it is complemented by regressive sexual energies, unbridled and disruptive, which bring about further chaos and social degeneration. Poor and desperate women, who rank lowest in the social chain, use their sexuality to survive. The depraved nature of sexuality in dystopia, couple with remorselessness and lack of self-reflection, signifies the rot and collapse of a social structure more than anything else. In one instance, when the elderly and reserved Boro Mistry expresses his disapproval of the usual obscene, flirtatious banter of Choto Mistry toward Damini, he defends himself by replying, 'all birds eat fish, yet only the kingfisher is blamed. It is our fault. We do not hide—whatever is in our mind, we say it' (Bandyopadhyay, 1950: 89). Thus, uncouth lust is garbed and paraded as straightforwardness and transparency.

One of the allegations made against Tagore's writings by younger poets was 'the relative absence of poverty and sexuality' (Chakrabarty, 1999: 33) in them, which in turn made his work lose touch with reality or *bāstabata*. Poets like Jibanananda Das directly complained to Tagore about the growing ideological gap. In a letter, Das wrote to Tagore, '[Y]our enormous luminosity and my insignificant life have [together] always created a gap between [us] that I have never been able to cross' (Das as quoted in Chakrabarty, 1999: 33). One can note in *CG* the author's unmistakable effort to break away from that aesthetic tradition and stay connected to the corporeal reality of the poor and the destitute, without an effort to gloss over the uncouthness of their everyday existence. In fact, Bandyopadhyay's rhetoric of emotional excess can appear smothering to the readers.

Jürgen Habermas explored, among other things, Bloch's emphasis of hunger over libido, thereby downplaying Freud and other contemporary Marxists' preoccupation with sexuality and establishing hunger as the prime driving force for humankind, as the 'elemental energy of hope' (Habermas, 1970: 311). He writes:

Ever renewed hunger makes man run, widens self-preservation into self-expansion, and in its most enlightened development transforms itself into a force blowing up the prisons of need. Informed hunger, another form of *doctaspes* (learned hope), unfolds into a resolution to abolish all conditions

under which men vegetate as shipwrecked creatures (Habermas, 1970: 311; emphasis original).

Hence, the perpetuity of hunger has the principle of emancipation inherent in it, which can make humans transcend the travails of existence and spur them to surpass boundaries toward a utopian existence. The opposite would be the soul-destroying toxicity of unbridled greed and hunger joining forces to dismantle the social structure and taking down human civilization with it. Bandyopadhyay's novel, through the depiction of an emblematic as well as apocalyptic hunger, spells out an initiation toward that dystopia with a flickering hope that revolutionary whirlwind might just be around the corner. The last four lines of the novel bring a little glimpse of hope in the darkness:

Nearby on the edge of the rail tracks, some coolie-children are playing mock-strike. Pummeling the earthen machines with their stick, a group shouts [in Hindi], '[We have] demolished it, demolished it'. Sibkali gazes that way and murmurs to himself, the weak cyclone of Caitra is a precursor to the stronger south-westerlies (Bandyopadhyay, 1950: 82).

While on the one hand the reference to the imminent albeit uncertain transformation softens the apocalyptic climax of the novel heightened by Gostha's death, and overtly spells out the faint possibility of a more just social structure, on the other hand it also signifies the necessity of an upheaval to bring in the desired change, for which a handful of individuals is starkly inadequate. Wilm notes that the longing for transformation and resurrection in western dystopias 'is made in equal parts in earnestness and in irony: In earnestness, since a few do fight ceaselessly against the Leviathans of autocracy; and in irony, since in the face of the oppressive forces, the individual's solitary fight seems altogether futile' (2015: 188). *CG* encapsulates this thought.

## V

In his realist novels, Bandyopadhyay comes across as more of an observer than an analyzer. He refrains from offering a solution to the social problems he so poignantly and meticulously describes (Mukhopadhyay, 1979); instead, he philosophizes life.

'Tarasankar's political and social view is more emotional and subjective than objective' notes Mukhopadhyay (1979: V8). His other novels, like *Manvantar* (1944) and *Uttarayan* (1950), offer a close look at the 1943 famine and the Bengal Bihar riots of 1946 respectively, excelling at the depiction of the events. However, these depictions are accompanied by a strong social conscience, which marks the evolutionary process of Bangla literature of the early twentieth century. Disasters like famine, coupled with the prevailing economic crisis, further stoked the consciousness of capitalist exploitation and injustice, which novels like *CG* showcase through the resentment and misery of their characters. *Manvantar* and *Uttarayan* also simultaneously reflect the 'New Humanism' that was born out of solidarity between readers and writers belonging to the lower-middle class of the society undergoing transformation through the inspired democratic and socialistic ideals.

Reading *CG* in the global context of a dystopian narrative not only unfurls novel ways of experiencing and expressing dystopia by diversifying the genre itself but also adds to the humanistic reading of such texts, which to me is one of the most crucial contributions that *bhāṣā* dystopias can bring to the global literary table. While *CG* and Orwell's *1984* send the message that human values and tender emotions are out of place in a totalitarian, materialist, industrialized/technological world, the former does it with a more empathetic and humane touch. The assertion that dystopia can very much be a part of the everyday reality of the third world might indeed trigger the possibility of a revolutionary transformation. The portrayal of industrialization, the subsequent 'development' and the consequent loss of tradition, environment, and local culture, not to mention the alienation of the individual, are all too recognizable and present today, thereby depriving the readers of the reassurance of a future that *might* go wrong. In *CG*, this claim is made further compelling by adding the dimensions of physicality and urgency of human hunger—the result is a dystopia shorn off any form of absurdity. Additionally, it is significant that a western bourgeois form of literature, i.e. the dystopian novel, should be used to talk about the hunger and hungry bodies of the marginalized classes. I see authors like Bandyopadhyay as non-western and active agents of the transmission of ideas, exercising their choice to add to/alter the existing

western models of a literary genre, and synchronously carving out space for their literature through an agency, distinction, and exchange. Model western dystopias' preoccupation with human cloning, surveillance, industrialization, and artificial intelligence, to name a few features, has kept it conveniently and exclusively attached to the developed societies. *Bhāṣā* dystopias add further or alternative perspectives to the genre, bringing it out of the restricts of the developed world, thereby making it more democratic and inclusive.

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