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New Trends in Bengali Historical Novels: An Analytical Study of Samaresh Basu's *Uttaranga*

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores the transformation of the Bengali historical novel through an analytical reading of Samaresh Basu's *Uttaranga* (1976). Moving beyond the classical historiographical models set by Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and his successors, Basu redefines history from the perspective of subaltern lives and marginal social groups. The novel situates the failure of the 1857 Sepoy Rebellion and the emergence of colonial industrial capitalism within the lived experience of peasants, workers, and outcasts. *Uttaranga* thus challenges elite-centric historiography and reimagines history as a record of collective struggle. Integrating Marxist and postcolonial insights, this study argues that Basu's narrative technique marks a paradigm shift in the Bengali historical novel—from the glorification of royal heroes to the portrayal of common people as history's true protagonists.

KEYWORDS: Bengali historical novel, Samaresh Basu, subaltern studies, Marxist criticism, class struggle, colonial modernity.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Bengali historical novel occupies a distinct position within Indian literary history. Since the late nineteenth century, it has been a key medium for reinterpreting the past and shaping collective consciousness. In the early phase, writers like Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay infused their narratives with nationalist idealism, portraying history as a source of moral and patriotic inspiration. His *Anandamath* (1882) and *Durgeshnandini* (1865) reimagined Bengal's medieval and colonial past in mythic terms, reinforcing the idea of a sacred nation (Chattopadhyay 77–79).

However, by the mid-twentieth century, the genre began to undergo a significant transformation. The horrors of Partition, industrial exploitation, and urban poverty demanded new literary perspectives that could accommodate the voices of those historically silenced. It is within this shifting context that Samaresh Basu's *Uttaranga* emerged as a landmark work. Published in 1976, it replaced the heroism of kings and warriors with the quiet resilience of peasants and workers. In doing so, Basu bridged the gap between fiction and historiography, producing a people's history of Bengal under colonial rule.

HISTORICAL AND LITERARY BACKGROUND

The roots of Bengali historical fiction are deeply intertwined with the intellectual currents of the Bengal Renaissance. Bankimchandra's novels provided the ideological foundation for nationalist thought, yet they were predominantly concerned with elite figures—nobles, priests, and revolutionaries. As Meenakshi Mukherjee observes, early historical novels "constructed a history of the privileged" while ordinary people "remained mere backdrops to heroic action" (*Realism and Reality* 62).

In contrast, the decades following independence saw writers turning their attention to the working classes and the dispossessed. Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay's *Hansuli Banker Upakatha* and Manik Bandopadhyay's *Padma Nadir Majhi* had already reoriented Bengali fiction toward rural realism. Samaresh Basu inherited this legacy but took it further by combining narrative realism with a Marxist understanding of history. His experiences as a laborer, trade union activist, and political detainee gave his fiction an authenticity that few others achieved (Chaudhuri 91–94).

In *Uttaranga*, Basu situates his story in the aftermath of the 1857 Sepoy Rebellion, exploring the socio-economic collapse that followed. The rebellion's failure, he suggests, was not merely a military defeat but a rupture in the moral and cultural fabric of Bengal. Through this framework, Basu depicts how colonial capitalism replaced feudal hierarchies with a new system of exploitation, thus transforming the peasantry into industrial laborers and beggars. His perspective aligns with what Dipesh Chakrabarty later conceptualized as the "provincialization of Europe"—the reclaiming of

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local histories from Eurocentric narratives (*Provincializing Europe* 42–44).

Discussion

1. SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

Uttaranga is set during the transitional period when British imperial power consolidated its control over India's economy. The novel's protagonist, Hiralal, a sepoy who fought in the 1857 rebellion, reemerges as Lakhai Bagdi—a member of a marginalized community living by the Hooghly River. His personal transformation mirrors the collective dispossession of the Indian masses under colonial rule.

Through Lakhai's experiences, Basu exposes the economic violence embedded in the rhetoric of progress. The introduction of railways, factories, and jute mills, portrayed as symbols of development, in fact represent new forms of bondage. At one point, a character laments that "the famine began the day the railway reached Hooghly," a remark that captures the irony of colonial modernity (Basu 146). Such imagery resonates with Marx's observation that capitalism "comes into the world dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt" (*Capital* 245).

Basu's Bengal is not merely a geographical space; it is a metaphor for historical trauma. The displacement of peasants, the decline of indigenous industries, and the commodification of labor all find expression in his narrative. By integrating these economic realities into his storytelling, Basu transforms fiction into a vehicle of historical consciousness.

2. **CHARACTERIZATION AND THE SUBALTERN VOICE**

Lakhai Bagdi, the central figure of *Uttaranga*, embodies the existential condition of the colonized subject. Formerly a soldier who resisted the British, he becomes a nameless laborer in their industrial empire. His transformation signifies both survival and loss—the erasure of identity alongside the persistence of dignity. Basu's portrayal of Lakhai rejects melodrama; instead, it relies on the authenticity of lived experience.

Kanchi, Lakhai's companion, stands as a symbol of feminine resistance. Within the patriarchal and caste-based society of nineteenth-century Bengal, her relationship with Lakhai defies social norms. She represents the moral and emotional strength of the oppressed, challenging both colonial and domestic hierarchies (Basu 183–84).

Murli Baba, the hypocritical priest, serves as a critique of religious corruption. His complicity with colonial power exposes the ideological collaboration between faith and empire. Through such characters, Basu articulates what Ranajit Guha later termed the "political consciousness of the subaltern" (*Elementary Aspects* 21–22). The novel thus restores agency to those excluded from elite histories, depicting rebellion not as organized revolution but as the stubborn endurance of the poor.

3. NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE AND SYMBOLISM

Stylistically, *Uttaranga* departs from the ornate diction of earlier historical fiction. Basu employs a flexible, rhythmic prose interspersed with regional idioms, working-class slang, and the natural cadences of Bengali speech. This linguistic realism enhances the novel's authenticity, grounding it in the socio-linguistic texture of Bengal.

The recurring image of the Hooghly River carries deep symbolic weight. It represents both continuity and change—the eternal flow of history and the cyclical nature of human struggle. When Lakhai reemerges from the river after his defeat, the scene signifies rebirth: the transformation of rebellion into endurance (Basu 119). The river, as a living presence, connects the personal and the historical, the physical and the spiritual.

Basu also uses the industrial landscape—the mills, furnaces, and railways—as metaphors for alienation. These are not sites of progress but of entrapment, where human bodies are consumed by the machinery of empire. His realism, influenced by socialist aesthetics, merges political critique with lyrical intensity, giving the narrative both moral urgency and artistic depth (Mukherjee 102).

4. **COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE: FROM BANKIM TO BASU**

In comparing *Uttaranga* to earlier works such as Bankimchandra's *Anandamath*, the contrast is striking. Bankim's monks fight for a divine nation, while Basu's peasants struggle merely to survive. The shift from idealism to materialism marks the evolution of Bengali historical fiction. Bankim mythologized history to inspire patriotism; Basu demythologizes it to reveal exploitation (Chaudhuri 113–15).

Similarly, Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay and Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay humanized the rural poor, but Basu radicalized them. His peasants are not symbols of moral purity but agents of resistance within an unjust system. The transition from *Anandamath* to *Uttaranga* thus parallels the

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intellectual journey from nationalism to Marxism, from divine history to people's history.

5. THW NEW TRENDS IN BENGALI HISTORICAL FICTION

Basu's *Uttaranga* inaugurates a new phase in Bengali historical writing—one that prioritizes social realism over nationalist romanticism. Three major trends characterize this transformation:

1. **People's History:** The focus shifts from rulers to the ruled. History is told from below, through the experiences of marginalized communities.
2. **Economic Determinism:** Historical events are explained through class relations and material conditions rather than divine destiny.
3. **Cultural Realism:** The use of folk culture, dialects, and oral traditions grounds the narrative in Bengal's indigenous ethos.

Through these innovations, Basu extends the function of the historical novel beyond entertainment or moral instruction. His fiction becomes an archive of suppressed voices, anticipating later developments in subaltern historiography. As Partha Chatterjee observes, such reimagining of history allows "the colonized subject to reclaim the power of narration" (Chatterjee 58).

II. CONCLUSION

Samaresh Basu's *Uttaranga* stands as a milestone in modern Bengali literature. By portraying the 1857 aftermath through the eyes of common people, Basu redefined both history and fiction. His Marxist sensibility, emotional realism, and moral commitment combine to produce a narrative that is at once literary and political.

Unlike the glorified past of earlier historical novels, *Uttaranga* gives us a past filled with hunger, toil, and survival. It democratizes history by restoring humanity to those whom history forgot. In this way, Basu transforms the historical novel into a tool of cultural resistance and ethical reflection. The novel remains a powerful reminder that the true heroes of history are not kings or warriors, but ordinary people who endure and persist.

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