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Research Article

Sociology Of Novels Published In The Post-Independence Period: Rural Perspectives

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With the progression of urban civilization, human life has increasingly become more complex. In the modern world, the transformation of social life and the profound shifts in human mentality have become inevitable realities. Time itself turned into a combustible force, and naturally, this turbulent period found its reflection in literature. The post-independence era witnessed significant events like the Naxalite movement, the Tebhaga movement, the Liberation War of Bangladesh, and the Vietnam War, which inaugurated a new chapter in Bengali society and literature. In the 1960s, students and youth in West Bengal initiated a bloody struggle to bid farewell to the old political order and embrace a new era. They sought to break societal stagnation and embarked on a path of violent revolution. The ideal that "political power flows from the barrel of a gun" resonated strongly within them. Educated but unemployed youths moved to rural areas to merge with farmers and dismantle the class disparities in society. Their goal was to instill class consciousness and a revolutionary mindset among farmers while liberating themselves from urban middle-class prejudices and aligning with the lower strata of society.
This "Red Guard" identified class enemies and launched attacks against them. In response, the police, under the pretext of maintaining law and order, imprisoned many and secretly killed others. These conflicts left student and youth revolutionaries displaced. The entire state apparatus, liberal intellectuals, wealthy industrialists, and the feudal landlord class were gripped by fear of this movement. Simultaneously, social and political movements were erupting in other countries, though their objectives and characteristics were distinct. These movements arose within the local economic, social, and political contexts of various regions. However, the youth movement in Bengal stood somewhat apart from other global movements, even as it drew inspiration from them. Understanding these post-independence movements necessitates a thorough analysis within the socio-economic and political framework of India.

Many critics viewed the Naxalbari movement as a narrative of shattered dreams. Asim Chattopadhyay observed: “For a long time, the hope and aspirations for liberation in a colonized country created enormous expectations surrounding independence. In the public imagination, particularly among the youth, the concept of 'freedom' evolved into an idealized myth—as though it were a panacea for all ailments, capable of erasing the poverty and hunger that plagued the nation, and bringing prosperity and abundance. Independence triggered an 'explosion of expectations' among the populace. But by the 1960s, this dream faltered. Burdened by imperialist pressures and fettered by feudal chains, our journey on the path of limited capitalist development became stuck in the stagnant quagmire of a static economy. It became evident that under a decaying capitalist regime, our so-called independent experiments in capitalism were distorted, incomplete, stagnant, and devoid of future prospects. For a while, the specter of a reckless war with Red China was used to conceal this cruel truth. But soon, the war-ravaged economy began gnawing at the homes of laborers and farmers, infiltrating the kitchens of the middle class and even the wealthy elite. This was the backdrop of the youth movement of the 1960s. From this context emerged the beginnings of a new stream and a new direction for youth movements.”[1]
The notable beginning of the Naxalbari movement occurred on May 24, 1967, when a violent clash broke out between the police and local indigenous farmers in Naxalbari, North Bengal, over land rights. This event marked the inception of a new chapter in Bengal's political and social history. However, the roots of the movement were deeply embedded even before this incident, as farmers had already been waging collective struggles for land rights.
One specific incident deserves mention: a landlord named Buddhaman Tirki evicted his tenant farmer, Beegal Kishan, from his sharecropping rights. Beegal Kishan filed a lawsuit against this eviction and, armed with a court order, attempted to cultivate his land on April 13. However, Buddhaman Tirki, along with his gang of hired thugs, attacked Beegal Kishan, injuring him severely and even cracking his skull.

Such acts of feudal oppression intensified the farmers' struggle for land rights, culminating in the explosive events of May 24. The Naxalbari movement profoundly impacted not only Bengal's agrarian society but also its literary and cultural movements, leaving an enduring mark on subsequent literature and cultural history.
In Beegal Kishan's words:
"I collapsed in the field under the blows of the landlord's thugs. Word spread quickly, and under the leadership of the forests, hundreds of farmers armed with sticks charged in. The landlord's goons fled in fear. The forests left marks of their sticks on me and seized the land. At the mention of the forests, landlords would tremble with fear. It was decided that landlords wouldn't be allowed to stay in the villages. From Kotiya to Lalji, Chhotomaniram to Dhakna Prasadjote—landlords abandoned their villages and fled to the cities. The slogan echoed: *'Land belongs to those who plow it.'*
On the morning of May 24, we heard that the police had arrived in Hatighisa to protect the landlords. Thousands of farmers ran across fields and gathered in Hatighisa. The police came to arrest the farmers to safeguard the landlords. But we decided we wouldn't let them enter the village. Every farmer carried either a stick or a bow and arrow. Workers from the Tukuriah tea plantation also joined us, standing shoulder to shoulder with the farmers, armed with sticks. Farmers and laborers surrounded the police, and upon seeing thousands of us armed with sticks and arrows, the police dropped their guns and fled. Inspector Sonam Wangdi and another officer from the Naxalbari police station were hit by arrows. Sonam Wangdi succumbed to his injuries."[2]
The Naxalbari movement, with its rallying cries and revolutionary fervor, reshaped the socio-political landscape of Bengal and became a symbol of resistance, deeply influencing literature and cultural expressions of the time.
In protest of this incident, the entire Naxalbari region became turbulent. On May 25, 1967, a massive women's assembly was called at Prasadjote, where the police unexpectedly opened fire. This resulted in the deaths of several people, including seven women. On May 30, the CPM state committee issued a statement strongly condemning the police firing, demanding a judicial inquiry into all the events in Naxalbari, and adequate compensation for the families of those killed by police bullets.
The impact of this event spread across various villages in West Bengal, with many people supporting the movement. Although this movement might be considered impulsive in hindsight, with elements of extreme radicalism and misapplication of Marxism, the Naxalbari uprising exposed the gaps and flaws in Indian politics to the common people. It marked a new awakening in the consciousness of rural folk.
This movement also deeply influenced Bengali society, literature, and culture. It jolted the collective consciousness of the Bengali people—a tale of both dreams and disillusionment. Numerous stories and novels have been written about the Naxalbari movement, but its true significance lies in the profound transformation it initiated in Bengali society and culture.
"As a matter of fact, the landless peasants, for whom and because of whom the Naxalite movement was launched, did not participate in it to a significant extent. In rural Bengal, the movement did not take widespread root. Poor farmers, daily laborers, and small-time craftsmen such as masons and carpenters—the very people who might have been mobilized through the theory of class struggle—were not sufficiently engaged by the emotionally driven young Naxalite leaders like Saroj or Yamini Gupta.
Thus, the relentless attacks aimed at eliminating 'class enemies' did not garner the active participation of the landless poor in the way that impassioned and immature youths joined in. Identifying and eliminating landlords seemed to become the sole objective of these armed groups. Consequently, the movement dissipated before it could achieve broader upheaval.
The Naxalite movement lacked competent leadership to guide it properly. Critical questions—why they were fighting, who their enemies and allies were, where and how to begin the struggle, and who would lead the various Naxalite groups across India—remained unresolved. Instead, they indiscriminately embarked on eliminating 'class enemies.'
Naturally, the police and administration took an active role in suppressing the Naxalites. Furthermore, Congress leaders in power understood well that if the Naxalite movement succeeded, political power in West Bengal would soon shift dramatically."[3]
Alongside the Naxalite movement, another significant event unfolded in the 1970s that profoundly influenced Bengali society and literature—the Bangladesh Liberation War. This war began in 1971 in what was then East Pakistan, now Bangladesh. Highlighting this political event is crucial, as the Liberation War marked the dawn of a new era in the literature and cultural life of East Bengal.
The independence India achieved in 1947 came with the partition of the subcontinent based on the two-nation theory, leading to the division of Bengal. This partition fragmented the political geography of the Bengali nation, splitting it into two. As the British transferred power and left, the subcontinent was declared an independent state. However, partition brought immense suffering, igniting communal riots in Punjab and East Pakistan. Along with independence came the horrors of violence, famine, and black-market exploitation, leaving people devastated.
The plight of displaced individuals was widespread. Thousands of women sought refuge in camps, many faced sexual violence, and over 200,000 women went missing. Millions were forced to migrate from East Bengal to West Bengal, leaving behind their ancestral homes for unfamiliar surroundings. Many lived on railway platforms, streets, or temporary shelters, acquiring the derogatory label of "refugees." Darkness engulfed their

lives, and although countless stories and novels have been written about partition, a comprehensive narrative of this epochal tragedy remains unwritten.

The Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 was the culmination of long-standing struggles. One significant milestone was the 1952 Language Movement, where martyrs like Rafiq, Salam, Barkat, and Jabbar sacrificed their lives, securing the people of East Pakistan's right to their mother tongue. This sparked the rise of progressive nationalism, replacing bourgeois nationalism.

Three key factors contributed to the growth of progressive nationalism:

1. A millennia-old folk heritage and anti-British imperialist movements.
2. Secular democratic ideals, humanism, and scientific rationalism from the West.
3. Ideals of anti-imperialism and values from socialist movements.

The Liberation War shook all of Bangladesh.

"After the March 25 genocide, no one in Bangladesh was safe. The Pakistani military specifically targeted Awami League workers, Hindus, and young people capable of joining the war effort. The Bihari population in Bangladesh also joined the atrocities, forcing a massive segment of the population to seek refuge in India. According to the United Nations and *Newsweek*, around ten million refugees fled to India. With a population of only seventy million, this meant one in seven people left their homeland."[4]

India extended support by providing shelter, food, and aid, despite immense pressure. Astonishingly, Agartala had more refugees than its native population. Refugees endured immense hardships, battling food shortages, disease, and extreme living conditions. Cholera and diarrhea claimed many lives, especially among children and the elderly. In some camps, no children survived by the war's end.

The people of East Pakistan embodied humanity and compassion. They embraced both Eastern and Western progressive thought, enriching their folk traditions. This amalgamation expedited the growth of progressive nationalism, inspiring the Liberation War. Driven by the struggle for linguistic rights, the people of East Pakistan fought tirelessly.

The war culminated in the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, leading to the victory of East Bengal and the establishment of an independent Bangladesh, with Bangla as its state language. India played a pivotal role in this success, extending support in various ways. This solidarity profoundly impacted Bangladeshi literature, infusing it with new dimensions.

The ethos of the Liberation War added a fresh perspective to Bangladeshi novels, emphasizing secularism. During the war, individuals stood by one another, echoing the call: "Humans are suffering; stand by them."[5] This secular spirit was instrumental in Bangladesh's victory.

The 1970 general elections were pivotal. For the first time, elections were held across Pakistan, but the overwhelming victory of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's Awami League (160 out of 162 East Pakistani seats) shocked the Pakistani military elite, who had anticipated no single party achieving majority power. Mujibur Rahman declared his commitment to his Six-Point Program, vowing to frame the constitution accordingly.

Unwilling to relinquish power, the Pakistani military under General Yahya Khan unwittingly set the stage for the emergence of a new state—Bangladesh.

In 1947, immediately after the partition of India, Urdu was declared the state language of Pakistan. This decision sparked outrage among the Bengali-speaking people of East Pakistan. The dissatisfaction was not limited to language; high-ranking positions in various government offices were dominated by people from West Pakistan. On March 21, 1948, during a massive gathering at Racecourse Ground, Mohammad Ali Jinnah declared that Urdu would be the sole state language of Pakistan. This declaration ignited deep resentment among Bengalis, who feared that the exclusive recognition of Urdu as the state language would threaten their identity. This created an undercurrent of tension among the Bengali population of East Pakistan.

The people of East Pakistan realized that the government of West Pakistan posed a threat to the existence of the Bengali language and culture. The discontent among Bengalis grew steadily, and organizations like the Muslim League, Chhatra League, Rashtrabhasha Sangram Committee, and Awami Muslim League formed the All-Party State Language Action Committee. On February 4, 1952, a massive movement against the neglect of the Bengali language began across East Pakistan. The movement, initiated by the All-Party State Language Action Committee, spread nationwide, and the demand for recognizing Bengali as one of the state languages gained momentum. On February 21, a robust general strike was launched throughout the region in support of this demand.

Students actively participated in the strike, supported by teachers and intellectuals. Dhaka city was flooded with posters and banners. To suppress the growing unrest, the Pakistani government-imposed Section 144, deploying armed forces against Bengalis in Dhaka. The police used brutal force, including baton charges and tear gas, and opened fire on protestors. This led to the deaths of Rafique, Salam, Barkat, Jabbar, and many others, which only intensified the public's anger. The news of their deaths spread rapidly, fueling protests across Bengal. The agitation even reached the Legislative Assembly, where prominent figures like Dhirendranath Datta and Manoranjan Dhar walked out in strong protest against the killings.

The following day, government employees, students, and youth joined the demonstrations, and the discontent spread like wildfire. The situation in then-East Pakistan turned dire as people united, proclaiming that they would sacrifice their lives to save their language. Hindus and Muslims together took to the streets, showing an unyielding spirit. The language movement of 1952 became a global example of the power of linguistic love. As

Zafar Iqbal aptly said: "The oppression of a nation's language, culture, and heritage is far greater than economic exploitation, and this was exactly what the rulers of West Pakistan initiated. Pakistan was born in 1947, and by 1948, its founder Mohammad Ali Jinnah declared in Dhaka that Urdu would be the state language of Pakistan. The Bengalis of East Pakistan immediately protested, and the movement reached its peak on February 21, 1952, when Rafique, Salam, Barkat, Jabbar, and others sacrificed their lives to police bullets. Despite their efforts to suppress the movement, the Pakistani rulers had to recognize Bengali as a state language in 1956. The place where our language martyrs sacrificed their lives now stands the iconic Shaheed Minar, and February 21 is not just a significant date for Bangladesh but has been recognized worldwide as International Mother Language Day."[6]

In the post-independence period, the old political systems became increasingly irrelevant amidst the severe impacts of the war. The wounds of partition, the suffering of famine-stricken people, and social turmoil broke down existing societal structures. The clash between the old and the new led society into a new trajectory. Traditional values, conservatism, and past ideologies disintegrated, giving way to the growth of industrial civilization. People increasingly lost their humanity, becoming mechanized and sacrificing compassion and sensitivity to the allure of technology and modernity.

The rapid progress of industrialization and urbanization created a stark divide between urban and rural populations. On one hand, the rise of the urban salaried class; on the other, the struggle of rural agricultural workers deepened inequalities. The middle class also emerged with new demands and lifestyles. By the late 20th century, children moved away from playing with clay dolls to engaging with video games, Kinder Joy, television remotes, and computer mice.

With technological advancements came growing individualism. People began to isolate themselves from their surroundings, and self-centeredness led to loneliness. This isolation caused society to fracture, with individuals confined to their own "islands," giving rise to deep-rooted loneliness within communities. The Naxalbari movement created a stir in Bengal's social landscape: "The Naxal movement gained extensive support from Kolkata's student organizations. Many students abandoned their studies to join revolutionary activities, with intellectuals from renowned schools, colleges, and universities being influenced by the movement. Charu Majumdar advocated for revolutionary activities to extend beyond rural areas and spread nationwide. He instructed Naxalites to eliminate class enemies, including landlords, university teachers, police officers, politicians, and others.

At that time, all schools in Kolkata were shut down. Naxal-influenced students occupied Jadavpur University and used its machine shop to produce firearms for battles with the police. Presidency College became their headquarters, and they even planned to assassinate Jadavpur University's Vice-Chancellor, Dr. Gopal Sen. Within a short time, the Naxalites gained significant support from India's educated society, with Delhi's St. Stephen's College becoming a key hub for their activities.

The government eventually decided to take strong measures against the Naxalites. Then Chief Minister Siddhartha Shankar Ray ordered a crackdown on the Naxals, granting police inhumane powers to kill indiscriminately and detain anyone arbitrarily. Custodial killings, staged encounters, and extrajudicial executions were common. Within a month, the government suppressed the Naxal movement. The Indian government and police conveyed to the public that the country was in a civil war against extremists, leaving no room for democratic ideals. This narrative eroded the Naxals' public image, and they lost the sympathy of their supporters."[7]

From the post-Naxalite period onward, under the pressures of the modern world, our love, friendships, and emotions devolved into falsities. We began suffering from emotional poverty. Opportunism, contradictions, false pride, cunning selfishness, heartlessness, and self-deception became the building blocks of an enormous edifice. In politics, personal opportunism, the rampant spread of yellow journalism, the nexus between political leadership and broker classes, and a vote-centric political system exploited thousands of unemployed individuals and landless rural people. By the late 20th century, these factors plunged society further into darkness.

Thousands of villagers began migrating to cities in search of livelihoods. Educated youths wandered in pursuit of jobs. Industrialization simultaneously created and destroyed employment, throwing society into a state of turmoil witnessed by those who grew up during the 1970s and 1980s. The rise of multinational corporations during the era of liberal imperialism devastated rural populations. Western culture infiltrated villages beyond the cities. Privatization confined education to the urban middle class, leaving rural communities marginalized for long periods.

The Naxalbari movement marks a significant event in the history of the Communist movement in West Bengal. However, this movement not only shaped the Communist struggle but also profoundly altered Bengal's socio-economic and political landscape. It exposed the fissures in Indian politics and economics to the masses. Post-Naxalbari, Bengali novels presented rural life from a fresh perspective. Rural people's love, relationships, emotional moments, and socio-economic-political conditions became a source of inspiration for writers. The village emerged anew in Bengali fiction. Writers depicted the exploitation of rural people's simplicity and brought the serene, unpretentious life of villages, with its vibrant landscapes and rustic charm, to the forefront.

Authors, driven by their political convictions, infused their works with the essence of rural life. Standing alongside the oppressed, they chronicled the plight of farmers and laborers exploited over decades due to their ignorance. In post-1970 Bengali literature, the pain, deprivation, and exploitation of farmers found vivid representation. Despite the arrival of multinational corporations, rural poverty persisted. Villagers could not benefit from the advancements of science and technology. Post-independence, Bengali novelists brought the lives of the proletariat to their pages, unleashing their fervor against imperialism in their narratives.

The renaissance Bengal experienced was fractured, limited primarily to the urban middle class. India's first Census Commissioner and internationally renowned economist Ashok Mitra, in his census report, observed: "The wealth plundered from millions of farmers was taken to the cities by rich landlords, who claimed cultural renaissance. Their spokesperson was 'Raja' Rammohan Roy. This so-called renaissance was a misnomer, often misunderstood. It was glorified by the very class that benefited from it. The rural economy remained untouched by this 'renaissance,' which was confined to cities and to the parasitic landlord class that sought to become subordinate partners of the colonial rulers and English merchants. This 'renaissance' failed to impact the vast rural Bengal beyond a few urban centers."[8]

This observation makes it evident that the renaissance was upheld by a few urban elite educated in English. Consequently, the divide between rural and urban societies deepened. Parasitic tendencies gradually infiltrated the urban psyche. The renaissance leaders themselves were riddled with contradictions. Seeking its cause, Dipankar Chakraborty noted:
"The newly acquired English education and its accompanying advanced social consciousness from the West—liberal, democratic ideals, rationalism, and even European socialist thought—stirred their intellectual world. Inspired by this, they advanced reforms in religion, social customs, education, and literature. However, their existence being dependent on others meant their awakening was intrinsically tied to the colonial governance and land systems, confined to a particular boundary. Hence, the progressiveness borrowed by Bengal's renaissance leaders was limited to that specific sphere, which became the source of their inherent contradictions in thoughts and actions."[9]
As carriers and proponents of modernity imported from Europe, we began neglecting the broader rural expanse. The borrowed standards and English education from Europe taught individuals to scorn and reject their own traditions. The 'Young Bengal' group, with their radical antics, tried to establish a utopian vision in Bengal but ended up exacerbating the divide between rural and urban societies. Gradually, history itself was declared dead. The past became absent from our identity, the present rootless, and the future without refuge.
In this context, the concept of *cultural hegemony* becomes relevant. Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci, in his renowned work 'Selections from the Prison Notebooks', states: "To govern any society, it is not enough to rely on brute force alone. The ruler must secure the consent of those they govern. Without this consent, governance cannot rely solely on coercion. This process of constructing consent is what I term hegemony."[10] Gramsci's insight emphasizes the critical interplay of power and consent in shaping societal structures, highlighting how cultural and intellectual influence can become tools for sustaining dominance.
In conclusion, the narrative of Bengal's socio-cultural and political evolution reveals a complex interplay of tradition, modernity, and hegemony. The intrusion of European modernity and English education created a deep chasm between rural and urban societies, distancing individuals from their cultural roots while fostering a dependency on external ideals. This fractured identity led to a disconnection from the past, an unstable present, and an uncertain future.
The cultural hegemony, as Gramsci elucidates, showcases how dominance is not merely enforced but secured through consent, shaping ideologies and practices to maintain power structures. Bengal's history, marked by the efforts of movements like the Naxalbari uprising and critiques of the so-called Renaissance, underlines the persistent struggle between exploitation and emancipation. To bridge these divides and address the enduring inequalities, it is imperative to embrace a more inclusive vision—one that values rural traditions alongside urban aspirations and acknowledges the interconnectedness of all societal segments in shaping a cohesive future.

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