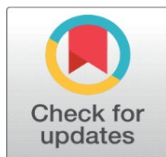


# MAPPING THE MARGINS: A SOCIO-CULTURAL STUDY OF TISTAPARER BRITANTO

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DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i5.2024.3036](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i5.2024.3036)

**Funding:** This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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## ABSTRACT

"We aim to reinterpret old Bengali narrative literature through the lens of modern novelistic experiences, much like Mikhail Bakhtin delved into ancient European carnival literature, Greek comedy, Menippean satire, and Christian confessional writings to analyze Dostoevsky's novels. Without modern novelistic aesthetics, it would have been impossible to uncover the narrative lineage from ancient and medieval literature to contemporary times. Bakhtin's exploration of the past was intended to expand the aesthetic scope of the modern novel and to define its unique features. Similarly, we must also approach Bengali's old narrative literature using the aesthetic principles of the modern novel."

Debesh Roy, in his renowned essay collections *Upanyas Notun Dhoner Khoje* and *Upanyas Niye*, provides critical insights into the evolution of Bengali novels over the past 125 years. He delves into how Bengali literature has recurrently borrowed narrative forms from English literature. However, in his novel *Tistaparer Britanto* (*The Narrative of Teesta Bank*), Roy employs an indigenous narrative style that had previously been overlooked in Bengali literature. Regarding this, Roy notes in *Upanyas Niye*:

"We aim to reinterpret old Bengali narrative literature through the lens of modern novelistic experiences, much like Mikhail Bakhtin delved into ancient European carnival literature, Greek comedy, Menippean satire, and Christian confessional writings to analyze Dostoevsky's novels. Without modern novelistic aesthetics, it would have been impossible to uncover the narrative lineage from ancient and medieval literature to contemporary times. Bakhtin's exploration of the past was intended to expand the aesthetic scope of the modern novel and to define its unique features. Similarly, we must also approach Bengali's old narrative literature using the aesthetic principles of the modern novel."<sup>1</sup>

*Tistaparer Britanto* primarily focuses on the life and struggles of the people living in the Teesta River basin. While the Teesta River stretches approximately 168 kilometers, Roy concentrates on a small segment where the river transitions from the mountainous terrains of Kalimpong into the plains near Jalpaiguri. This geographical focus shapes the narrative, encompassing rivers, forests, roads, farmlands, and the socio-economic dynamics of the surrounding community.

The novel begins with the depiction of land surveys conducted on the vast estate owned by Gayanath, a prominent landholder. Set in the late 1970s during the Left Front government in West Bengal, the story revolves around the construction of a barrage over the Teesta River in the Gajoldoba region. Land surveys for the project commenced around 1968, following a devastating flood, and were intensified under the Left regime to facilitate the barrage's construction.

The narrative intertwines the technical aspects of land surveys and barrage construction with the socio-economic and political history of the region. After the Partition of India, many Bengali refugees settled on the Teesta riverbank's char lands. The novel captures their long-standing struggle for survival and livelihood. The story also highlights conflicts between landless farmers, who occupied government lands, and the surveyors tasked with facilitating the barrage construction.

The construction project, framed as a developmental initiative, led to significant environmental destruction, including deforestation and the displacement of marginalized communities. These events gave rise to a broader resistance movement known as the *Land Save Movement*. The struggles of the Rajbanshi community—a historically significant group that ruled independently from 1510 to 1773 and later as a princely state until 1949—are also intricately woven into the narrative.

The political scenario of West Bengal, marked by the rise of non-Congress governments in 1967 and 1969, is central to the story. While these governments pledged land reforms, they often struggled to balance development projects like the Teesta Barrage with the welfare of marginalized communities. The barrage construction, initiated under political pressure, was hastily inaugurated despite being incomplete, leaving the affected communities more vulnerable.

*Tistaparer Britanto* transcends being a geographical or socio-political chronicle. It also explores the cultural and anthropological dimensions of the Rajbanshi people, including their beliefs, traditions, and way of life. Roy's background in journalism lends the narrative an authenticity, blending factual precision with a nuanced portrayal of grassroots realities.

One of the novel's most striking passages illustrates Roy's observational prowess:

*"The paved road meanders through the dense greenery, ending abruptly at the banks of the Neora River. To board the ferry, one must wade through knee-deep water. Amidst the chaos of passengers scrambling for space, a man shoulders a goat, ensuring its hooves don't muddy his clothes. As the boat sets sail, the passengers jostle for balance on the slippery deck, evoking a scene of raw, unfiltered humanity."*<sup>2</sup>

Through such vivid descriptions, Roy captures the pulse of a community caught between tradition and modernity, development and displacement. *Tistaparer Britanto* is not merely a story about the Teesta River but a profound socio-cultural exploration of the people living along its banks. It delves into their geography, history, politics, and struggles for survival while highlighting the deep socio-economic inequalities exacerbated by development projects. Roy's novel stands as a testament to the resilience of marginalized communities, offering a poignant critique of progress that overlooks the welfare of the very people it claims to uplift.

When Debesh Roy wrote his novels, he often brought to the pages of his fiction the extensive events he had witnessed firsthand. A primary element of his novels is his linguistic style. Language is the soul and the controlling force of a novel. Accordingly, Debesh Roy showcased a distinctive linguistic artistry in his novels. His sentence structure, use of simple and short sentences, polyphony, and multiple layers of meaning within each line captivate readers.

Rivers play a pivotal role in the development of civilization, especially in a country like India. From *Padma Nadir Majhi* to *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam* and *Ganga*, when we think about the themes of *Tistaparer Britanto*, we see how Debesh Roy brings to life a deeply local, rural time and space. His novel *Tistaparer Britanto* reflects the multiple perspectives of rural settings as he saw them. Beyond rivers, he beautifully portrays the socio-economic and political conditions of the people living in riverine areas.

The construction of a barrage on the Teesta River is essential for civilization's development, but it brings unbearable suffering to people like Bagharu. They sink deeper into darkness. When urban development encroaches on villages—when roads are built over rural areas to connect cities—the rural landscape is plunged into even deeper darkness. Often, there is no escape from this gloom; people are forced into deeper despair. With the advent of modernity and urbanization, the marginalized rural populace suffers even more. This harrowing narrative finds expression in *Tistaparer Britanto*. Characters like Gayanath, Bagharu, and Suhas represent the marginalized rural community. Most of the characters in the novel belong to the Rajbanshi community, whose lives, beliefs, and struggles are depicted in various episodes.

Debesh Roy employs the language of the Rajbanshi people to tell their story. The dialogue and conversations are primarily in the Rajbanshi dialect, elevating the novel beyond the limitations of time, space, and setting to create a universal rural landscape. This polyphonic harmony is what makes *Tistaparer Britanto* a multi-dimensional novel.

*"As soon as the crowd saw Suhas approaching, they stood up. Priyanath and Anath had already reached there. They had set the survey table under a sal tree. Nearby, a chair was visible—empty, also under the tree. Around the table and chair, a diverse group of people had gathered. A short distance away, under another tree, a tea stall was set up, the kind often found in local markets."*<sup>3</sup>

The construction of the Teesta Barrage leads to ecological imbalance, marking a chapter in the river's history. Humans, animals, and nature all suffer. In the name of development, rural people are pushed into even greater darkness. These are the central themes of *Tistaparer Britanto*. The novel delves into the political and historical significance of these issues, repeatedly highlighting the conflicts and struggles of rural life. It describes in detail how urban economies thrive by dismantling rural economies and how the development of cities worsens the conditions of rural inhabitants. Political parties rise to power and fall, but the plight of ordinary people remains unchanged. Despite the touch of modernity, the economic and social conditions of rural people stay stagnant.

Debesh Roy presents a poignant picture of the unbearable plight of rural people, vividly illustrating the struggles of village life. His writing reflects the reality he witnessed, and thus, it would not be wrong to call him the *kirtaniya* (chronicler) of contemporary times.

In *Tistaparer Britanto*, Debesh Roy extensively uses the Rajbanshi or Kamrupi dialect. Most of the people in North Bengal belong to the Rajbanshi community, and the language used in the novel reflects the speech of those living along the banks of the Teesta. The narrative centers around the village of Gajoldoba, spanning the Jalpaiguri district. Debesh Roy's firsthand experience with the rural life of Jalpaiguri—gained through his involvement in politics—allowed him to closely observe the joys and sorrows, the economic conditions, and the cultural nuances of the Rajbanshi people. These observations find vivid expression in the novel. Over time, many Rajbanshi words have started disappearing, but Debesh Roy meticulously incorporated these into his writing, making them an integral part of the narrative.

The linguistic differences between characters are also evident in the novel. While living in the same village, their cultural positions differ, leading to variations in their speech. Debesh Roy explains his use of the Rajbanshi dialect in the novel during a conversation with Shivaji Bandopadhyay:

*"I learned the Rajbanshi language for political purposes. Initially, I never intended to write regional stories using that dialect. But as I progressed, I discovered that a story narrated in this dialect acquires a different meaning, creating multiple layers of narrative. Regional language can change the dynamics of storytelling, making it a vital part of the narrative itself."*<sup>4</sup>

From Debesh Ray's statement, we understand that the author used regional language not just to write regional stories but to transform the narrative of modern novels. Very consciously, Debesh Ray has been able to alter the plot of the narrative. By incorporating the colloquial language of village life into the novel, he has beautifully portrayed the rural environment, the socio-economic, and political status of the village in the novel. This sets him apart from other novelists. The use of regional languages, including Rajbanshi, has brought the novel to the center, giving it a new dimension. This is precisely what Debesh Ray was looking for in the novel. His use of language plays an important part in the novel's unique exploration.

Debesh Ray didn't write *Tistaparer Britanto* to create a regional language novel but to present the narrative in various layers using regional language. Focusing on the fluidity of the Rajbanshi language, the novelist has consciously used pure language in the novel. As Shivaji Bandopadhyay notes:

*"In Tistaparer Britanto, the language is neither rigid nor stagnant, and certainly not just ornamentation. If that were the case, the region of North Bengal would have become just a place in the world. The reader would then be a mere tourist. But this novel demands active participation. It brings the intended reader into history. Whether the language is Bengali or Rajbanshi, the language of the Tista banks pulls the reader into history."*<sup>5</sup>

Debesh Ray has restructured the regional language in this novel not to write regional history, but to portray the lives of rural people. The use of regional language makes the rural life clearer and more precise in the novel. Through careful depiction of the joys and sorrows, smiles and tears of rural people, Debesh Ray has made an effort to make it easier for readers to grasp their emotions. By using regional language so skillfully, he brings a unique dimension to the narrative. This enables readers to relate to the people living along the Tista river, forming a deeper connection with their struggles. Debesh Ray's *Tistaparer Britanto* is a great example of his search for a new kind of novel, portraying the life of rural Bengal with sensitivity. In contrast to the artificial city life, he places rural life at the center, giving it new meaning in Bengali literature. Through his vivid portrayal of rural Bengal, using regional language beautifully, Debesh Ray gives the rural life a fresh perspective. In this novel, he succeeds in documenting the history and culture of rural people.

In the fourth section of the novel, there is a significant episode about Bagharu's return, along with a description of a flood. When forest trees are cut down and washed away by the flood, Gayanath brings Bagharu back from the floodwaters. Following the advice of Dayanath, four trees are tied together to create a raft, which floats in the floodwaters, fighting against the current. The raft stops at Nitai's field, and Bagharu is rescued under government supervision. Upon hearing the news, journalists, radio, and TV reporters come to take photos of Bagharu, a helpless villager. This highlights the disparity between city life and rural life, where the media may feel a sense of satisfaction, but for Bagharu and others in his village, life remains one of neglect and exploitation by political and economic forces.

"Light shines as a car stops on the road. But the noise tells us it's a motorcycle. When it moves, it makes more noise. The headlight swings left and right, flashing light on the jungle and the houses. Then it turns back toward the field, and the noise increases. The headlight falls on the porch and then moves toward the house, replacing the hurricane light."<sup>6</sup> This passage beautifully portrays the rural-urban divide through the noises and actions of a motorcycle, drawing attention to the contrasting lives of the rural people and their struggles, using the language to capture the essence of rural life in Bengal.

The fifth section of the novel is the *procession section*, where various aspects of the Rajbanshi community's past glory and their present deprivation are discussed. It includes the discussion of the movement for the establishment of an independent Kamata Kingdom. This part contains references to programs, conferences, and speeches by different leaders aimed at achieving the goal of an independent Kamata kingdom. When talking about the Rajbanshis, the author emphasizes their tribal identity.

In the final section, the *sixth part*, the story of Madari Ma and her quest for an independent state unfolds. This section explores Madari and her mother's painful life history. Despite having many children from several men, none of her children survived. Madari, who was her last remaining possession, also perishes at the Teesta Barrage. As the elections approach, the Teesta Barrage is inaugurated, despite opposition from the people. Development proceeds, but it comes at the cost of the people's resistance, and the inauguration takes place. Along with many others, Madari and her mother attend the event. It is here that Madari meets Bagharu, and the two, along with the leaderless Bagharu, begin their journey in search of new forests and rivers, ignoring the man-made forests, rivers, and so-called developments around them. The river will change, paths will change, the environment will change, but the suffering and anguish of the people will remain the same.

As the construction of the Teesta Barrage progresses, the water level of the river decreases, and the flow of water diminishes, resulting in a gradual decline in crop production. The dire situation of the people's lives is continuously narrated throughout *Tistaparar Britanto*. The author presents the devastating economic reality of rural life, emphasizing the dismal conditions of the laboring masses. This novel is not just a story; it is filled with the portraits of the suffering and distress of working-class people. Under the guise of development, common people are displaced, and the so-called development is expedited at their expense. However, the suffering of the villagers remains unchanged, and this harsh reality is depicted throughout the novel.

In his books "*The Search for a New Kind of Novel*" and "*On Novels*", Debesh Ray reflects on the development of Bengali novels over the past 150 years, especially focusing on how Bengali novels were shaped by English literature and European models. In this context, Debesh Ray has remarked, "*Bengali novels have not incorporated the folk masculine energy, and the stories have not embraced the folk muscles of breaking myths or ancient traditions.*"<sup>7</sup>

For a long time, Bengali novels followed the European model in shaping their structure. However, in his novel *Tistaparar Britanto*, Debesh Ray followed a unique path. He wrote the novel based on indigenous traditions, with the folk milieu as the central theme. He intricately portrayed the dark side of rural life and nature's hardships. This is where he stands out, as he deviated from the traditional structure of novels and created a new language and style.

*Tistaparar Britanto* is not just about the water flow of the Teesta River or descriptions of nature; it also tells the story of the people of the Teesta basin.

In conclusion, *Tistaparar Britanto* by Debesh Ray emerges as a significant departure from the traditional structures of Bengali literature, primarily influenced by European models. The novel marks a shift towards a more indigenous, localized storytelling method, where the rural landscape and its people become the focal point. Ray crafts a narrative that intertwines human life with the environment, making the Teesta River and its surrounding areas not just the setting, but also an integral character in the story.

Ray's approach to depicting the life of the Rajbanshi community in *Tistaparar Britanto* is both profound and poignant. The novel explores the socio-economic challenges faced by this community, particularly their struggles with displacement and marginalization. By focusing on the impact of development projects like the Teesta Barrage on the lives of the rural poor, Ray highlights the tension between progress and preservation. The construction of the barrage, aimed at boosting economic development, ironically leads to the destruction of the very environment that sustains these communities. The consequences of this "development" are devastating, resulting in the drying up of the river, the destruction of crops, and the further impoverishment of the villagers.

The novel is not just a story about a river or a community; it is a larger commentary on the struggles of laboring people across India who face the harsh realities of industrialization and urbanization. Ray paints a vivid picture of the rural economy, which is deeply intertwined with nature, and the devastating effects of technological advancement that disrupt

the delicate balance of this relationship. Through the character of Madari and her mother, the novel encapsulates the pain of loss and displacement, emphasizing that while nature may change, human suffering remains constant.

Ray's writing is a tribute to the indigenous people whose voices are often drowned out by the narrative of national progress. By centering the story around the Teesta River and the lives of the people in its basin, Ray creates a powerful metaphor for the larger issue of environmental degradation and social inequality. His work calls for a reevaluation of what constitutes true progress, urging readers to consider the impact of development on marginalized communities and the environment.

Through the novel, Ray does not only tell the story of a community's struggle against an external force; he also delves deep into the internal dynamics of human existence, where identity, survival, and a connection to the land are intertwined. The pain and resilience of the characters, especially Madari and her mother, reflect the broader socio-political realities of rural India. Their journey is not just one of survival but also of resistance to the forces that threaten their way of life.

In literary terms, *Tistaparer Britanto* is a milestone in Bengali literature for its innovative narrative style, its focus on folk traditions, and its deep engagement with environmental and social issues. It provides an alternative perspective to the dominant discourse on development and progress, highlighting the importance of recognizing and addressing the needs of the most vulnerable sections of society. Ray's novel is a reminder that while the world may change around us, the struggles of those who are least equipped to adapt to these changes must not be ignored.

## **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

None.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

None.

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