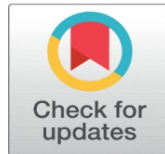
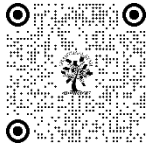


# THE TRANSFORMATION OF RURAL BENGAL AMIDST THE STRONG WAVE OF GLOBALIZATION: CONTEXTUALIZING DEBESH RAY'S NOVEL

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## ABSTRACT

"My grandfather's forest, Ranga-didi's zamindar house, and the earlier Baghmara house where I was born. Perhaps something of that house stayed with me. Towards the north of Baghmara, behind a somewhat tall house, was a large, tree-covered, secret pond with dark water."

The vivid description reflects not just his nostalgia but also the socio-cultural essence of rural Bengal, which forms the backbone of his literary works. At the age of just seven, Debesh Ray moved from East Bengal (now Bangladesh) to Jalpaiguri. As a result, he did not retain any strong memories of Bangladesh. Since he left at such a young age, it is natural that his recollection of his early childhood would be limited. Debesh Ray was opposed to indulging in nostalgia without reason. He wrote: "In West Bengal, those who came from East Bengal have turned Bangladesh into a permanent land of memory, locked within a perpetual settlement. I try to save myself from getting caught up in this emotional quagmire."

Debesh Ray was born on December 17, 1936, in Pabna district, which is now in present-day Bangladesh. His father was Kshitiś Chandra Ray, and his mother was Aparna. His grandfather's name was Umesh Chandra Ray. Debesh Ray's wife, Kakali Ray, was a distinguished music artist. Debesh Ray spent his childhood in the village of Baghmara. Speaking about Baghmara, he reminisces:

*"My grandfather's forest, Ranga-didi's zamindar house, and the earlier Baghmara house where I was born. Perhaps something of that house stayed with me. Towards the north of Baghmara, behind a somewhat tall house, was a large, tree-covered, secret pond with dark water."*<sup>1</sup>

The vivid description reflects not just his nostalgia but also the socio-cultural essence of rural Bengal, which forms the backbone of his literary works. At the age of just seven, Debesh Ray moved from East Bengal (now Bangladesh) to Jalpaiguri. As a result, he did not retain any strong memories of Bangladesh. Since he left at such a young age, it is natural that his recollection of his early childhood would be limited. Debesh Ray was opposed to indulging in nostalgia without reason. He wrote: *"In West Bengal, those who came from East Bengal have turned Bangladesh into a permanent land of memory, locked within a perpetual settlement. I try to save myself from getting caught up in this emotional quagmire."*<sup>2</sup>

This statement reflects his desire to avoid sentimentalism and focus on a grounded understanding of identity and memory. Debesh Ray spent his school and college years in Jalpaiguri. He completed his school finals in 1952 and enrolled in the Intermediate Arts (IA) program at Ananda Chandra College. In 1956, he graduated from the same college with a

BA (Honors) degree. For higher studies, he moved to Kolkata in 1958 and earned his MA in Bengali from the University of Calcutta. After completing his education, he returned to Jalpaiguri and began teaching at Ananda Chandra College. In 1975, Debesh Ray relocated to Kolkata and joined the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences. His literary career reached a significant milestone in 1989 when he received the 'Bhuwalka' Award from the Indian Language Council. The following year, in 1990, he was honored with the Sahitya Akademi Award for his seminal novel *Tistaparer Britanto* (*The Narrative of the Teesta Shore*). From childhood, Debesh Ray was deeply inspired by his ideals and beliefs. He was a lifelong believer in communism. However, by the mid-1980s, he began observing the global decline of communism. The weakening of the ideological framework in various countries disturbed him deeply. Reflecting on the dramatic changes of that era, he wrote: "By the end of the 1980s, the global socialist system faced an almost explosive yet eerily silent collapse. Within just three or four years, the Soviet Union and the socialist countries of Eastern Europe disappeared from the map. From the earliest stirrings of my consciousness, the socialist dream had become a political imagination for me, nurtured daily by the realities of India."<sup>3</sup>

This statement underscores how deeply intertwined his personal vision was with the socio-political upheavals of his time. Despite his disillusionment with communism's global decline, Ray's works remained a profound reflection of his ideals and his commitment to exploring the complexities of human existence. Alongside his literary pursuits, Debesh Ray also worked as a journalist. From a young age, he contributed to local newspapers in Jalpaiguri, such as *Janamat* and *Trisrota*. During his teaching years in Jalpaiguri, he regularly gathered and reported party news for party-affiliated publications. After moving to Kolkata, Ray worked for the newspaper *Kalantar*. His direct experiences as a journalist enriched his understanding of life and society, providing substantial material for his novels. Debesh Ray himself acknowledged the profound influence of journalism on his fiction writing:

*"Journalism deals with facts, and so does storytelling in novels. Journalism lays the groundwork for the kind of factual base upon which stories and novels can create a human document. Journalism does not destroy language; rather, it nurtures it. Through its reliance on and narration of facts, journalism helps build a strong linguistic foundation."*<sup>4</sup>

This perspective highlights how Ray viewed journalism not merely as a profession but as a vital source of creativity and truth-seeking, which ultimately shaped his narrative style and thematic depth as a novelist. Debesh Ray was not only a storyteller, essayist, editor, and journalist but also an eminent novelist whose identity was profoundly rooted in this craft. Among his many works, *Tistaparer Britanto* (Chronicles of the Teesta) stands as a landmark novel in Bengali literature. Another noteworthy work centered on the Teesta River is *Teesta Puran*, which is regarded as a modern and innovative addition to Bengali novels.

Ray began his journey as a novelist after 1961, while continuing to write short stories. Several contemporary events of the time deeply influenced his thoughts and creative process. These include the formation of the Communist Party's first government in Kerala in 1957, the death of his close friend Dipendranath Bandyopadhyay, the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1958, the Sino-Indian War in 1962, and the subsequent ban on the Communist Party. These incidents significantly impacted Ray and laid the foundation for the themes explored in his novels. Ray's attachment to the villages of Jalpaiguri, the Rajbanshi people, the natural beauty of the region, the laborers of tea plantations, the Teesta River, the forests, and the wildlife was profound. Having spent years in these areas, his lived experiences found their way into his novels. He often mentioned that the seemingly minor events of Jalpaiguri, which he witnessed firsthand, inspired much of his writing. Initially, Ray devoted the first ten years of his literary career to short stories, refraining from novel-writing. However, around 1963-65, he drafted his first novel, *Manush Khun Kore Keno* (Why Do People Kill?). His search for innovation in novels became a recurring theme, and he penned several experimental essays exploring new forms in fiction. Ray critically analyzed the disconnect between modern Bengali literature and its medieval roots. He explored this idea in his essay collection *Uponyasher Notun Dhoner Khonje* (In Search of New Forms in Novels). He argued that Bengali novelists need to reconnect with traditional storytelling forms, such as *Bratakatha*, *Panchali*, *Kathakata*, and *Kirtan*. Debesh Ray highlighted the colonial impact on the Bengali novel, stating:

*"About a decade before 1865, with Vidyasagar's advocacy, the British colonial administration legalized widow remarriage. However, in 1865, the first Bengali novel's heroine declared to the world, 'This prisoner is my lord.' This proclamation was false—just as similar proclamations were false in other colonies and continents. However, despite its falsehood, the language of this proclamation sounded truthful. This colonial power entered the language, merging speech and meaning, eroding our identity as storytellers. From that point onward, we began losing our distinct narrative tradition, mistaking the colonial model as the essence of a novel."*<sup>5</sup>

Ray emphasized that traditional storytelling forms had a unique structure, where even fixed frameworks allowed for creative flexibility. The storyteller infused contemporary elements into these age-old stories, creating multiple layers of meaning. These indigenous narrative styles, including *Panchali* and *Kirtan*, resisted colonial influence and flourished

even in urban settings like Kolkata through *Akhrai*, *Kabi*, *Khemta*, and *Kehuar*. These styles, rich in visual storytelling, represented a vibrant cultural reaction to colonial domination. By revisiting these traditional forms, Ray sought to establish a deeper connection between Bengali novels and their cultural roots, offering a fresh perspective to modern storytelling. Debesh Ray's novel *Mofassoli Brittant* vividly portrays various aspects of the rural life of North Bengal farmers. The novel is divided into seven chapters, encompassing the struggles of Khetu, his nephew Charket, Charket's wife, TulTuli, their children, and their six-year-old son. Throughout the novel, the predominant theme is the cry of hunger. The narrative intricately captures a detailed picture of society, the scenic description of paddy fields, the civil disobedience movement, and the villagers' agony of starvation.

By the end of the 1980s, socialist systems in the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries began to collapse. The author envisioned a socialist society and believed it could address many economic challenges. Driven by this belief and imagination, Debesh Ray wrote several novels, including *Tistaparer Brittant* (1980), *Atmiya Brittant* (1988), *Samay Asamayer Brittant* (1993), *Khorar Pratibedan*, and *Dangar Pratibedan*. The title *Mofassoli Brittant* itself reflects a harmonious tale of people and nature. The novel revolves around the open fields, rivers, Rajbanshi society, water, and hunger of North Bengal's villages. It also depicts the neglect of rural development by urban society. In 1975, when Debesh Ray moved to Kolkata, his experiences of rural life in North Bengal, especially the villages, remained vivid in his memory and writings. Although he lived in Kolkata's urban environment, his mind often wandered back to Teesta, the forests of Jalpaiguri, and the Rajbanshi community. This inner conflict of memory and urban reality is what makes '*Mofassoli Brittanta*' unique. While writing *Tistaparer Brittanta*', Debesh Ray penned another narrative-driven novel, '*Samay Asamayer Brittanta*', which portrays contemporary rural life and politics. The novel reflects the society he observed directly, encapsulating multiple narratives and stories. Events such as the plight of a Naxalite worker named Bishwanath, who went underground, was arrested by the police, escaped from jail, and lived in obscurity, are vividly described. The novel also exposes the economic and social exploitation of rural women, including their indiscriminate abuse and physical and mental oppression, orchestrated by a handful of urban elites. In *Tistaparer Brittant*, the rural setting is as vast as the Teesta River itself. It spans regions like Teesta, Diana, Fulbari, and Gazoldoba, portraying the lives of engineers, cooperative members, shopkeepers, market-goers, Rajbanshi villagers, and border security forces. This extensive narrative encapsulates rural life with a distinctly Indian form. The novel, consisting of six parts and nearly 219 chapters, begins with the "Survey of Gayanam's Land" section, which recounts the devastating flood of 1968 and the subsequent land survey in the Teesta region. This survey brings in characters like the cunning Gayanath, who manipulates and deceives the common people with his clever words.

Through the survey, the novel introduces Radha Ballav of the farmers' union, leading to a struggle between farmers and laborers. The conflict ultimately ends with the intervention of a local MLA, adding a political twist to the tale. The MLA, on his way to Fulbari for political work, is carried across the river on the back of Bagharu, Gayanath's accomplice. During this journey, Bagharu reveals his desire for a better, more humane name. In the second part of the novel, Bagharu faces exile. Upon returning from Fulbari, the MLA instructs Gayanath to ensure Bagharu's rights, but Gayanath deceives him, leading to Bagharu's exile in Diana Char. Here, Bagharu takes charge of cattle grazing and performs his duties with diligence. This section also provides a vivid description of the Duars forests, agricultural practices, and milk supply to military camps, highlighting rural economics. The novel seamlessly integrates various aspects of rural livelihood within its framework. Through *Tistaparer Brittant*, Debesh Ray explores new narrative forms, establishing a distinctively Indian structure. The third section of the novel *Mofassoli Brittant* is titled "Char Parba" (The Section of the Sandbars). This part vividly portrays the devastating floods of the Teesta River, highlighting how these annual floods submerge sandbars (chars) and force their inhabitants to take refuge on embankments. The author empathetically narrates the harrowing experiences of the sandbar dwellers, capturing their daily struggles and survival stories with heartfelt compassion. One such instance is the tale of "Nitai's Char," where people vigilantly guard against the floods at night. Efforts by panchayat officials to rescue people, cattle, and other belongings to safer ground during the floods also find mention in this section. Additionally, the novel delves into how government relief is distributed during such calamities, showing both the unifying spirit and the grotesque realities of human suffering. For instance, there's a poignant depiction of a homeless girl left vulnerable, who becomes a victim of sexual violence — a stark portrayal of the darker side of humanity.

The novel also exposes how rural ignorance is exploited socially, politically, and economically, reflecting the grim realities of exploitation that pervade its second section as well. Authors like Bibhutibhusan, Tarashankar, and Manik attempted to depart from European literary models but often did not succeed entirely. Bengali novels, nurtured under the shadow of colonialism, were shaped repeatedly by Western thought. Many early novelists disconnected from indigenous traditions, believing that only by emulating European styles could they create great literature. Debesh Roy challenged this premise, asserting that the colonial influence left Bengali literature detached from its native roots.

Through his unique narrative techniques, he brought local traditions and rural life to the forefront of his works, creating a new literary form deeply rooted in the Indian ethos. Debesh Roy emphasized that what we consider a "novel" and its structure was taught to us by Europeans. He critiqued this legacy, arguing that colonial writers developed a framework devoid of connections to indigenous traditions and rural life. Instead, they repeatedly ignored the realities of rural Bengal. Debesh Roy's writing, however, demonstrated his commitment to expressing the consciousness and values of the people. He brought local life and traditions into his novels, giving them a unique dimension. His works, including *Mofussili Brittant* and *Teestaparar Brittant*, resonate with the heartbeat of real life, avoiding excessive fantasy while staying closely tied to reality. In his essays, especially in *Uparnasher Notun Dhoner Khoje* (In Search of a New Form for Novels), Roy expressed his belief that the traditional Bengali narrative forms—like **Panchali**, **Katha-katha**, **Kirtan**, and **Kabigan**—offered a distinct storytelling method. However, these indigenous forms were discarded in favor of Western models during colonial rule, leaving the cultural memory of these traditions fragmented. Debesh Roy lamented how even post-colonial writers continued to accept the European model as the standard, resulting in a loss of native storytelling methods. He wrote: "What do we mean by the form or model of a novel? It is that which transforms the novelist's experience or knowledge into a novel. As I ascend the hills of my past and look down on the expanse of Bengali novels, I helplessly realize that there is no salvation in the European model. We once had our own methods of storytelling—through **Panchali**, **Kirtan**, and others. Yet, they have been discarded like trash after the enjoyment was over, especially as the English introduced us to printing presses, and we learned to read stories in print."<sup>6</sup>

Through his writing, Debesh Roy sought to develop a form that represented India's diverse traditions, blending consciousness with local values. His works illustrate rural struggles, the vibrancy of village life, and the exploitation that underpins their socio-economic realities. With *Teestaparar Brittant*, he created a vast narrative that spans multiple regions and social groups, including engineers, local committees, traders, market-goers, and border guards. This novel, structured in six sections with 219 chapters, vividly portrays the lives of people along the Teesta River, capturing their struggles and aspirations. In *Mofussili Brittant*, Roy masterfully combines the rural and urban, the remembered and the experienced, reflecting the dichotomy of his own existence. Living in Kolkata, he remained rooted in the memories of North Bengal's villages, integrating them into his literary creations. By blending tradition with innovative narrative techniques, Debesh Roy redefined the Bengali novel, making it a medium for expressing the essence of Indian rural life. Debesh Roy sought to capture the essence of the folk narrative tradition embedded in Bengali culture, where tales were retold within set frameworks but evolved over time through the interpretations of different storytellers or "Kathak Thakurs." In the 19th century, the widespread influence of colonialism and the allure of Westernization dazzled our perception, leading us to forget our traditions, rural settings, and folk heritage. Ensnared by the illusion of colonial modernity, we gradually neglected our rural roots. Failing to recognize ourselves as subjects of a colony, we began to comprehend and adopt modernity according to the standards imposed by our colonial masters. Consequently, our indigenous folk traditions that once embodied life's truths were erased. An example of this phenomenon can be drawn from Trailokyanath's novel *Kankabati*, where the character of Mr. Gimish humorously attempts to mimic the colonizer, portraying the absurdity of becoming a "native sahib." Over time, as we lost our solid grounding and succumbed to the infections and corruptions of colonial modernity, we reached a phase of degeneration. Debesh Roy repeatedly tried to make us understand that salvation could not be found in the European model. So, what alternative did he propose? Should we return to medieval traditions by composing *Mangal Kavyas* or drawing inspiration from the *Mymensingh Geetikas*? Such notions might seem laughable in the 21st century. Then, what exactly did Debesh Roy want?

Debesh Roy himself explained: "If a novelist ever seeks to say something meaningful, they must rediscover and re-lose the connection with the pre-colonial past. ... We are striving toward a new reading of Bengal's ancient narrative literature from the experiences of reading modern novels. Just as Mikhail Bakhtin turned to ancient European carnival literature, Greek comedies, dramas, and the confessional literature of Christian Europe to interpret Dostoevsky's novels, we too need to look back. If modern novels hadn't been written or if their aesthetic characteristics hadn't become evident over the last three to four centuries, or if the narrative and descriptive elements of novels hadn't emerged as an aesthetic concept in our literary experience, Bakhtin wouldn't have been able to discover the novelist's narrative within ancient and medieval literature.

Bakhtin did not seek to trace a historical continuity in novelistic narratives from ancient and medieval literature to modern times. Instead, he sought equivalence in these older forms to the aesthetic experiences of modern novels. Without the codification of the aesthetic experience of modern novels, it would have been impossible to decode novelistic narratives within ancient and medieval literature. Bakhtin's journey into the past was driven by the necessity to expand the aesthetic experience of modern novels and to further refine the artistic principles of novel-writing. Similarly, when



we attempt to trace novelistic descriptions in Bengal's ancient narrative literature, we too must start from the modern reading of novels."<sup>7</sup>

This passage clearly indicates that Debesh Roy did not aim to simply revive the past in its entirety. The traditional narrative forms of Bengali folk literature such as *Bratokatha*, *Panchali*, *Kathakatha*, and *Kirtan*, which were integral to rural life, need to be brought back to the center of modern reading. In today's institutionalized world, novels have become commodities for sale, sources of entertainment and enjoyment. Novels are being written about the design and advantages or disadvantages of blouses. Today, a novelist's attention is split between the market and profits—whether their novel will sell well, whether it will become a bestseller. A novelist today also eyes the television screen—wondering if their novel will be adapted into a serial. When novel writing reaches such a low point, Debesh Roy becomes highly necessary for us. He repeatedly emphasized stepping away from the European model in his works. He created significant novels like *Tistaparaer Britanto*. In terms of plot construction, Debesh Roy completely broke the traditional beginning-middle-end structure, a hallmark of English novel writing. In *Tistaparaer Britanto*, the first chapter begins with an unusual line: "Two signboards were going together on the same path of the market, which is rarely seen." This departure from tradition is a key feature of the novel's narrative style, called *Brittanter*, where the conversation moves from one subject to another in a circle, shifting seamlessly between different narratives.

A key feature of Debesh Roy's novels is his detailed descriptions. One cannot provide detailed descriptions unless they have profound experience with the subject matter. And when he does offer such descriptions, they make the novel's world more tangible. In *Tistaparaer Britanto*, the river, people, and nature are described with firsthand knowledge, which is why the novel is filled with vivid details.

In the past, from the start to the end, novels followed the European model of beginning, middle, and end. This structure required a clear, complete storyline with a defined beginning, middle, and conclusion. The novel adhered to this structured form, with events unfolding as the plot progressed. However, in *Tistaparaer Britanto*, Debesh Roy breaks free from this rigid format and introduces a new narrative construction. The title itself hints at this shift, as *Brittanta* does not represent a fixed point—it neither begins nor ends. *Brittanta* signifies an endless journey, with our society moving forward into the future. Though Debesh Roy might appear to have concluded his novel in a seemingly final way, *Tistaparaer Britanto* carries the implication of future possibilities. The journey will continue. In this sense, the novel's protagonists, Bagharu and Madari, walk endlessly, embodying the cycle of life and the journey of the novel itself. The novel begins with the concept of a market, where there is no set path for entry. Anyone can enter from any direction, and leave just as freely. The narrative style of *Tistaparaer Britanto* mirrors this openness, with various stories intertwining, moving forward through a multitude of *Brittantos*. Just as a market is full of different voices, cultures, and activities, this novel also contains many voices. From afar, one might perceive a dominant tone, but as we approach, we hear a variety of sounds. This polyphonic novel, with its harmonious blend of voices, is undoubtedly a new addition to Bengali novel literature. Through *Tistaparaer Britanto*, Debesh Roy has made a significant contribution to the world of Bengali novels. In conclusion, Debesh Roy's *Tistaparaer Britanto* represents a bold departure from the traditional narrative structures that have long dominated Bengali literature, as well as a critique of the modern novelistic landscape. Through his innovative approach, Roy challenges both the content and form of contemporary fiction, which often prioritizes marketability and entertainment over depth and authenticity. His works, especially *Tistaparaer Britanto*, offer a refreshing and thought-provoking alternative, grounded in the richness of rural life and the complexities of human experience. One of the most striking aspects of Roy's narrative style is his rejection of the conventional beginning-middle-end structure that has historically defined the European novel. In doing so, he introduces a more fluid, circular approach to storytelling. The term *Brittanta*, as used in the title of the novel, suggests a narrative that is ongoing, that does not conform to a linear progression. This approach mirrors the unending, unpredictable nature of life itself—where events and experiences are often interconnected, with no clear-cut starting or ending points. By adopting this structure, Roy not only offers a new way to engage with a story but also invites readers to reconsider their assumptions about how novels should be written and consumed.

The choice to focus on the rural, riverine landscape of *Tistaparaer Britanto* is also significant, as it stands in stark contrast to the often urbanized, market-driven settings of modern literature. Roy's attention to detail in describing the river, nature, and the lives of ordinary people reflects a deep familiarity with the world he is depicting. This realism is enhanced by his intricate, descriptive style, which provides a vivid, almost tactile sense of place. Such detailed descriptions do more than just set the scene; they become an essential part of the story, enriching the narrative and making it more immersive. Roy's profound understanding of rural life, coupled with his ability to capture the nuances of human relationships, makes his work resonate with authenticity and emotional depth. Moreover, Roy's novel is marked by its polyphonic nature, where multiple voices coexist and contribute to the story's larger narrative. This multiplicity of perspectives reflects the

diversity and complexity of human experience. Just as a marketplace is filled with voices and sounds that coexist and interact, *Tistaparaer Britanto* weaves together various strands of dialogue, thought, and experience, creating a rich, multifaceted narrative. This technique allows Roy to present a more holistic view of life, one that acknowledges the multiplicity of viewpoints and experiences that shape our world.

Debesh Roy's *Tistaparaer Britanto* can be seen as a critique of the commercialization of literature and the loss of narrative depth in contemporary fiction. In a world where novels are often seen as products to be sold, his work challenges the commodification of art and reaffirms the importance of literature as a tool for exploring the human condition. By breaking free from the conventional structure of the novel, Roy demonstrates that storytelling can be a dynamic, evolving process that refuses to be constrained by market forces or rigid formalities. In summary, *Tistaparaer Britanto* is not just a novel; it is a statement about the possibilities of fiction and the power of narrative to transcend boundaries. Through its innovative structure, rich descriptions, and diverse voices, Roy's work paves the way for new directions in Bengali literature, offering readers a glimpse into a more expansive, open-ended way of telling stories.

## **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

None.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

None.

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