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PIRATES VS. THE BENGALI BOYS: A STUDY OF THE CONFRONTATION UPON THE OCEANIC SPACES IN THREE EARLY 20TH CENTURY BENGALI ADVENTURE NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

In the first half of the twentieth century, the Bengali literature reflected abundance of support from the educated middle class towards the rising militant nationalism and the attempts of refashioning of the Bengali masculinity. This was a prominent feature particularly found in the children's adventure fiction of the time. Within the premises of this genre, the young male Bengali protagonists were deliberately exposed to various sorts of hardships out in the world in which they exhibited exemplary courage and determination before returning victorious to their own turf. The plotline involved adversities that were relatable yet exotic in the Bengali life under a colonial rule. The Bengali boy heroes explored all the three realms: the unknown forests of Africa or the far North East India including the Myanmar, the aerial domains, and the faraway seas and oceans. This essay closely inspects three major Bengali novels in this genre to find out a pattern of performative Bengali masculinity against the pirates in the watery spaces of the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal, which was historically a place of perils during the early colonial rules.

Keywords: Pirates, Bengali Masculinity, Children's Adventure Fiction, Militant Nationalism, Literature of the Empire

1. INTRODUCTION

The second half of the 19th century in Bengal was a time for a sudden outburst of socio-economic changes seen never before. The life of the urban Bengali middle class was undoubtedly in a great flux. The early decades of the century had seen a decline in the economic prospects of the Bengali middle class. This, in its turn, boosted the colonial stereotyping of Bengali effeminacy. As Tanika Sarkar has observed, … "'manhood' in colonial society was related to a particular relationship to property: it was this relationship to property that was gradually eroded for the Bengali middle class in the second half of the nineteenth century" (Sarkar, 2001). There was an attempt on the part of the urban, sophisticated families to improve the social and ethical status through various calculated measures. The European education was made available in Calcutta through the establishment of various educational institutions including the Hindoo College in 1817. The Brahmo reformist movement (introduced in 1828 by Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Dwarkanath Tagore) was crucial behind a social change in the Bengali upper tier where the Brahminic caste system slowly gave way to an upward social mobility for the culturally advanced families. The Bengali men were mocked at for being 'soft' and 'feminine'. As Luhrman (1996) had pointed out,

"…to defend themselves against their desire and their pain, the British…constructed themselves as dyadic opposites, particularly around the categories of gender, age and race. The British were hyper masculinised, scientific and progressive, a high step on the evolutionary ladder, the Indian were effeminate, childlike, primitive and superstitious."

To counter this stereotyping, there were attempts at various levels. Calcutta saw a sudden rise of kushti akharas (training clubs for wrestlers), gymnasiums, Bratachari clubs, lathi-khela (performances of fights and self-preservation with bamboo poles) weight lifting and many other sports meant for men to build a strong body and a fearless mind. There was also a Hindu Mela introduced by the Tagore family in 1867, in which all sorts of physical prowess and art were displayed and encouraged. The 19th century was also the time for awakening of a nationalistic sentiment in Bengal as well as India. Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, a teacher of the Hindoo College was among the first to write about Indian nationalistic sentiments, and slowly it spread across. Several major poets and essayists started writing vehemently in vernacular as well as in English about the degraded political and social situation of the country, and the past glories of India. In this atmosphere of a change, the Bengali urban educated middle class resorted to secure their future status by bringing up their children in a "proper" way by exposing them to a regime of systematic cultural conditioning. As Sikata Banerjee has observed, " The recovery of manliness became an important political agenda as Bengal slowly descended into cataclysmic epidemics in the late nineteenth century under the impact of colonial modernization"(Banerjee, 2015).

2. THE SYSTEMATIZED MASCULINIZATION OF A MALE CHILD THROUGH ADVENTURE NOVELS

The need for the formation of a new, stronger and enlightened Bengali masculinity targeted primarily the boy-child as belonging to the base level of the family structure. A male child bore all the future hopes of the nation, and 'catching them young' was the best way to get a desirable result towards social conditioning (Kakar, 1978). Starting from the 18th century, Europe had experience multiple theories on child education, and it was also transported to the upper fabric of the Indian society as a crucial factor for remodelling of their identity. However, the child education eventually followed the well-traversed, traditional route of didactic preaching. As Chatterjee (2009) mentions,

"As in Victorian England, the Indian idea of the child inhabited a paradoxical space, a being both innocent and exploited, to be protected as well as coerced,"

The primary function of children's literature had always been less of an entertainment and more of a hurried attempt to mend them into a socialised form before it became too late. The male child of an urban educated Bengali family was already burdened with all the societal and national didacticisms. Incidentally, it was the time for the rise of adventure fictions for boys in British literature, which were readily available in the educated families of Calcutta. The British imperialist sentiments were instilled in the adventure fiction of the 18th and 19th century England which promoted a hyper-masculinised culture. The tradition of "Literature of the Empire", as it was popularly called, started with seemingly innocuous tales of a marooned sailor or a kidnapped soldier in a far-off land and their surviving the odds to return and tell the tales. Robinson Crusoe (1719) or Gulliver's Travels (1726) belonged to this category. But soon it was time of hyper-masculinised tales of blood and steel, in which the British adventurers killed all the native people of a faraway land who dared to resist them from loot and plunder. These tales got wildly popular in the Victorian England and became published in multiple editions. G. A. Henty (1832-1902) and R. M. Ballantyne (1894) were popular novelists of this genre. All their adventures involved a voyage of an adolescent European protagonist to an exotic land, mostly Africa of India, their plunder and killing to get a lot of wealth, followed by the journey home to big fame and prosperity. This pattern became very popular and played a crucial role in forming the nationalist pride. This also promised to fulfil the aspiration of upgrading their social status by means of physical prowess and bravery in the younger generation of British citizens. There were always the real-life heroes like Robert Clive or David Livingstone to encourage them. As Butts (2002) puts it,

"Many Victorian children, particularly boys, shared their parents' interest in the Empire, expecting to work there when they left school…the British public's interest in thrilling deeds in faraway places, normally within the hegemony of British Imperialism, helped to create a cultural climate in which young people wanted to read adventure stories in which the heroes and (less often) the heroines were young people like themselves".

The genre of adventure fiction received immediate popularity in Bengal initially through translations of the English classics. The Bengali writers felt the need to incorporate these adventures in a nationalised avatar to the boys of Bengal. Soon enough, there was a large number of Bengali novels celebrating one or a group of Bengali young adults entering into the perilous journeys for the sake of thrill and a masculine arrival. The adventure genre remains one of the most

popular till the present day in Bengali children's literature. As Ashok Sen has observed, although the life of a Bengali lacks adventures, there is no dearth of adventures in Bengali literature for young readers (Sen, 2000). The practice of Piracy in its various forms has been a social threat all along the medieval period through the early colonial rules till the 19th century, when the British government attempted to take measures against these. The rampant attacks of the Arakan, Portuguese and the local pirates left the villages on the banks of the rivers in the southern Bengal and the Sunderbans in ruins. There were threats on the sea and river voyages for the pilgrims, businessmen as well as ordinary travellers who were stripped of their belongings and often murdered by the pirates. Together with these, these pirates were working as slave traders and their primary targets were the helpless villagers of these areas. Many villages were left deserted owing to these attacks while pilgrimages and trades faced severe setbacks. Yet, historians have observed that the medieval Bengali literature hardly mentioned these events in their tales. The pirates and their threats to the ordinary life were mentioned in the biographical accounts of some of the medieval poets and in the Mangal kavyas in the 16th and the 17th century. It was not until the early 20th century when the Bengali writers of the adventure fiction found great possibilities in the pirate tales to build up a premise of armed revolution and confrontations. This served a nationalist purpose in the context of the masculine anxiety of the Bengali middle class.

The aim of this essay is to inspect closely three novels in this adventure fiction genre that revolves around pirates and their encounters with Bengali boy-heroes in the Indian Ocean, Bay of Bengal and the riverine lands of the Sunderbans and their role in the formation of a masculine, nationalist image of Bengali males. The three novels in discussion are: Amarlata (Pub: 1937) by Satikanto Guha, Birer Dol (A Team of Heroes, pub: 1941) by Debendranath Ghosh, and Sundorbone Saat Botsor (Seven Years in the Sunderbans, pub: 1952) by Bhubanmohan Roy and Bishutibhushan Bandypadhyay.

3. A LIFE OF ADVENTURE ON THE OCEAN AS A PIRATE: AMARLATA (1937)

The pirate tales as a genre have some typical traits bearing on the verge of romanticism which appeals to an imaginative reader. First of all, out on the open seas, the world of a pirate is beyond the rigorous laws of the land. The fluidity of the ocean lends a fluidity of social and even moral rigours, and so a life of piracy involves some amount of freedom and agency. Secondly, the pirates form a community on the ship where they can get access to wealth irrespective of their ethnicity, class or social status. That enables an ordinary, working-class boy to dream of an affluent and socially upgraded future life. Third, the pirates embody a romantic model of outlaws, and in popular imagination this rebelliousness hide the ugly truth of violence and plunder that lies at the core of piracy. The European boy stories of piracy had travelled to Bengal all through the 18th century, and authors were either translating or rewriting them in Bengali for the boys. As the adventure genre became widely popular, the tales of Bengali pirates were also coming up. One of these is Amarlata by Satikanto Guha, published in 1937. This novel is a nice blending of fantasy, fairy tales, pirate tales as well as the bravado of Bengali young men. The protagonists are two brothers from Bengal who, in search of an adventure and means of survival, eventually get captured by the pirates on the Indian ocean and in quite a plot twist, end up becoming pirates themselves. These two brothers, Kalibhushan and Khsitibhushan get adopted by the leader of the pirates, Dibyabarna who reigns supreme on the shipping routes between India and Srilanka. The rest of the novel describes how the two boys from the Bengali background turn into ferocious "Bombetey" themselves and rule over the Indian Ocean in the 18th century.

This plotline of this novel seems greatly inspired by the pirate tales of British literature. With the improvements in the navigational sciences and the geographic data accumulation of the 16th to 17th centuries, the Europeans had been spreading across the globe on the naval routes primarily looking for the possibilities of trade and the spread of Christianity. This brought back strange stories of adventures and perils in exotic territories. The risks involved in a voyage were manifold including the natural disasters and the rampant attacks from the pirates. Most of the merchant ships were loaded with wealth, and so piracy was quite a lucrative business on the oceans. Hence, the successful voyagers who managed to return used to tell tales which got wide audience. To the listeners at home these tales of pirates became a popular genre of adventure as they had ample dramatic materials including risk, bloodshed, murder, hidden treasures etc. Pirate literature became a genre that cut across multiple forms including memoirs, news materials, biographies, adventure fiction and travelogues. Moreover, in some versions these pirates embodied a sort of nationalism as the fights on the seas involved enemies from other countries. Historically, many of the pirates, after winning these fights and bring back loots, were pardoned by the Royalty and were given some lands, thus allowing them the rank of gentility.

All of these fictional materials have been amply used in Amarlata. The life of two ordinary, orphaned boys, from a humble beginning reach a peak of power, authority and wealth. Although in Amarlata there is a hint of romance as well in the form of a possible relationship between an enigmatic female and the younger protagonist, this never takes the centre stage. The point that has been established in the novel is how the Bengali boys are capable of taking up arms against the notorious pirates to a point where they are accepted as leaders. The bhadrolok agenda is upheld through their identity of being firmly situated within the Bengali gentility and yet achieving the feats usually assigned with the martial classes of Indian subcontinent: the Sikh, the Pathan and the Rajput.

Amarlata remains a pronounced statement against the colonial discriminations and the imperial feminization of the Bengali middle class.

4. "POLITICAL POWER GROWS OUT OF THE BARREL OF A GUN" : BIRER DOL (1941)

In Birer Dol (A Team of Heroes, pub: 1941) by Debendranath Ghosh, the exploits are more in the nature of a celebration of organized teamwork against the adversities to get through. The author deliberately brings in the setting of a 16th century rural Bengal which was under severe plunders delivered by the ruthless "Mog" invaders: a term given to the pirates and slave traders originating from the Arakan who regularly ransacked the Bengal villages around the Bay of Bengal and captured all the able-bodied men and women to sell them to the rich households and the ship builders in Myanmar. They were also working in joined forces with the Portuguese pirates and the villages around the Sundarbans were left in ruin after these attacks. While this was a result of the slack ruling on the part of the local zaminders who could not achieve any strong resistance against this sort of violence, the novel is a wish fulfilment of a sort. This novel is the story of a group of village boys who got abducted by these pirates and were sold to the far away port. After the initial chaos and despair, they got united following instructions from a brave boy called Shankar. The novel is a story of escapades and perilous journeys through the rivers of south-east Bengal and finally the Bay of Bengal. This adventure story became immensely popular not only because it expressed the need for armed rebellion and careful planning to achieve success against a ruthless exploitation, this story also deliberately instilled a sense of militant nationalism as it was a tale of Bengali boys fighting with the firearms that they snatched from their abductors. Given the strong support of the Bengali bhadrolok towards the militant nationalism at the first four decades of the 20th century, this novel expressed the yearning of the Bengali educated middle class for an arms-wielding image of masculinity.

Following the Partition of Bengal by Lord Curzon in 1905, there had been an uprise of militant nationalism which turned into armed attacks on the British officials, their families and their Indian allies. Under some experienced leaders, most of these revolutionaries were underage boys. Using firearms was their most preferred policy. Significantly, The Indian Arms Act passed in the 1878 had maimed the Indians by refusing them to use a firearm under most circumstances. While the Bengali educated middle class was already being ridiculed for their "feminine" built (Sinha, 1995), the denial of arms left them feeling discriminated and humiliated. This appeared like a personal blow to their manliness. The general sentiment was against the British who had deliberately denied the Bengali male an access to the modern arms. With this discourse in place, Bengal saw an uprise of secret import of firearms as well as carefully planned attempts of robbing arms and ammunition from the government armoury. The revolutionaries became quite a role model for the Bengali middle class and the young boys were inspired by their actions. With the moral and ethical support of the bhadrolok class towards these armed rebellions, leaders like Aurobindo Ghose, Subhash Chandra Bose, Masterda Surya Sen, Bagha Jatin, Khudiram, most of whom accepted martyrdom, became icons of Bengali masculinity with a nationalist turn. Predictably, these nationalist figures got their reflections in the literature written for the young readers. Novels that were supposed to instill patriotism in the boys like Babuibasa Boarding were being written which promoted this bhadrolok empathy towards the armed revolutionaries resisting the colonial Government's policies. Put in that context, the armed rebellion of the boys in Birer Dol became completely in harmony with the popular sentiment of the time. As Banerjee (2015) has observed,

"In their quest for manhood they looked to the martial races of India as well as models of armed masculinity recovered from a pre-colonial past".

The boys of Birer Dol represented a protest that should have been there in history. It is a story of armed resistance of a group of village boys against a powerful, organized force from the outside, though in documented history, there are no such records of villagers fighting against the pirates. This novel, like many others in its genre, became a fictional wish fulfilment for a nation in crisis. While Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya attempted the same through multiple novels

meant for the mature readers, like Durgeshnandini (1865), Anandamath (1882), Devi Chaudhurani (1882) etc, Birer Dol became the children's counterpart of those. Their fight against the pirates served as a metaphor for the armed revolutions by the young patriots rampant in Bengal.

5. MYTH-MAKING AND THE CALL OF THE MOTHER: SUNDORBONE SAAT BOTSOR (1952)

Sundorbone Saat Botsor (Seven Years in the Sunderbans, pub: 1952) by Bhubanmohan Roy and Bishutibhushan Bandypoadhyay was a novel which had been first written in a serialised form by Bhubanmohan Roy way back in 1895, but he could not finish it due to his untimely death. After a series of failed attempts to finish it by various authors, the novel was completed by Bishutibhushan Bandypoadhyay and was published after his death. The protagonist here is an adolescent Bengali boy from the southern districts of Bengal who got abducted by a band of robbers on his pilgrimage to Gangasagar, a famous spot of Hindu worshippers, in the southernmost point of the Sunderbans. He was transferred to a Mog pirate to be sold as a slave, who kept him a prisoner in his home as a playmate for his son of about the same age. The protagonist went through a series of adventures in the perilous land of Sunderbans and had close brushes with death several times. Finally, he manages to escape and comes back to his village home to be reunited to his mother after seven years, who had passed away by then.

In the hands of one of the best authors of his time, Sundorbone Saat Botsor became an engaging tale of a boy protagonist facing hardships, life-threatening situations as well as many coming-of-age moments against the scenic yet dangerous backdrop of the Sunderbans. But this novel very cleverly delivers the prevalent agenda of the period: the need of arousing a pronounced Hindu nationalism in the young readers. While the boy protagonist strolls aimlessly around the dense jungles, he finds random ruins of Hindu temples which have been long forgotten. As the boy ponders over the past history of these temples, the author reminds us about the theme that he has used extensively in another novel: Hira Manik Jwole (The Flash of Jewels) published in 1946. As Banerjee (2015) has observed,

"Equating Imperialism with an expression of proper manliness, many among the middle-class intelligentsia…recalled a golden age of Hindu imperialism wherein ancient Indians armed with swords brought Hindu civilization…to areas of South East Asia".

In the context of the present novel, the discovery of some Hindu temples in the dense, dangerous forest symbolises the expansion as well as tenacity of the ancient Bengali Hindu Kings.

Tenacity and the trust in the middle-class ethics becomes the key factor for the protagonist of Sundorbone Saat Botsor, Nilu, to face the adversities with patience and to return to his mother as well as his own land. He had closely escaped a fate of getting sold off as a slave, but he did not become satisfied with remaining permanently with his adoptive family and become a pirate himself. His bhadrolok values helped him get in a favourable position to Monu, his companion and his father, by not betraying them to the police. But he would not become a pirate and forget his origin. Rather, he started teaching Monu whatever he had learnt including stories from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and telling him that there is a better life beyond this. His desire to get back the life that he had lost and his yearning for his mother makes him temperamentally a representative of the young revolutionaries of Bengal who swore by the image of the mother: not just the biological mother, but the Nation imagined as the Mother.

In Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's Anandamath (pub. 1882) there was the vision of a Mother Goddess in the form of Kali, who was distraught, violent and robbed of her glory as well as her clothes. In the same book was the image of Jagaddhatri, the past of India, who was beautiful, glorious and full of wealth. Chattopadhyay also showed the hope that India would eventually overcome this state of ignominy and get back her glory in full in the form of goddess Durga, by defeating the enemies. The chant "Vande Mataram" , included in this novel, became a term of salutation and prayer for the revolutionaries across India. Sumathi Ramaswamy has discussed exclusively about this connection between the armed revolutionaries and the nation imagined as the mother. She had called this "family romance of Indian Nationalism" - a term that refers to not only imagining the nation as the mother, but also the appropriation of the New Woman of the late 19th century Bengal. As she observes,

" In the closing years of the 19th century, this reforming zeal yielded to a new patriarchy as the nation came to be valorized as a "home" and "family" whose well-being could be guaranteed by the figure of the educated mother…who raised her children into productive citizens. The woman as wife or conjugal male yielded to the woman as mother, the nation as home is presided over by her archetype, Mother India" (Ramaswamy, 2011).

Thus, the tale of Nilu's homecoming becomes a metaphor for a young boy turning into a capable adult who would claim back his status of a proper man and his masculine arrival would be established along the line of the Bengali bhadrolok mappings in a nationalist atmosphere.

6. NATIONALIST IMAGE- FORMATION THROUGH THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE "OTHER"

The early 20th century Bengali adventure fictions operated through the creation of multiple "others" that helped build a new image of virile masculinity for the Bengali middle class. In the context of the present essay, it has been proposed that the formation of a strong Hindu nationalist masculine identity was at the base of these boy stories. First of all, the creation of a virile masculine image involved finding out a convenient "other" in the New Women in the late 19th century Bengal. Many scholars had referred to the "woman question" looming large in the consciousness of the newly Westernized middle class educated Bengali. Although these women were educated, cultured and in many instances, active in the armed revolutions, the masculine anxiety was obliged to keep them firmly situated in the traditional role of a nurturer who would be a mother or a wife, to whom the man would return after the revolutions. The adventure genre, with an almost absolute absence of the active female characters, ensured that the children's fiction would serve as a reference for the young readers of both the genders. They were expected to learn their respective roles in the life that lay ahead. Second, this otherizations was also done against the pirates of the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal, who were invariably belonging to the non-Hindu sects and devoid of the cultural trappings of a Bengali bhadrolok. Hence, their ferocity, bloodthirstiness and lack of education was held as the binary to the sons of Bengal who got involved into the fights for the cause of the nation. Finally, the new Bengali masculine identity was constructed in these novels against the old imperial model of weak, feminine bodies of the much-ridiculed, middle-aged "babus" by bringing in boy-heroes who suggested a new adventurous, brave, gun-wielding identity formation for the Bengali masculinity. These adventure stories represented the dream of a nation to rebuild itself through its boy heroes.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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