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Earthsongs and Music of the Minstrels in Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay's 'Rasakāli' and 'Harāna Sura'

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Earthsongs and Music of the Minstrels in Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay's 'Rasakāli' and 'Harāna Sura'

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Abstract: This study focuses on the interrelationships between the human and the cosmic self in selected short stories of the Jnanpith-Award recipient Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay (1898–1971). It presents a text-intensive reading of two stories – 'Rasakāli' and 'Harāna Sura' – that depict the changing nature of the Vaiṣṇava figure, living through a clash between tradition and modernity, in the high literary traditions of the twentieth-century short-story genre. The cultural milieu of Bengal within which Bandyopadhyay lived and wrote such compositions was shaped by the variegated and dynamic Vaiṣṇava tradition of devotion to Śrī Kṛṣṇa. This paper explores the distinctive language of Bandyopadhyay's Vaiṣṇava characters. These stories are remarkable for their earthy texture and intricate symbolism, yet they have a serio-comic vision. Bandyopadhyay's short stories, based on Vaiṣṇava practices, depict a vibrant, popular, and enduring tradition that extends beyond faith and is intricately woven into the quotidian fabric of Bengali rural life and aesthetics.

Keywords: Earthsongs, Śrī Kṛṣṇa, Rādhā, melodies, Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay, short stories.

Earthsongs

The aim of this research is to present a text-intensive reading of the complex interrelationships between the human self and the cosmic self in selected short stories written by the Jnanpith-Award recipient Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay (1898–1971).[3] The two selected stories, 'Rasakāli'

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[3] A brief part of this paper was presented in the XVIth Biennial Comparative Literature Association of India (CLAI) Conference, held from 20 November to 22 November 2023 at Sikkim University, India.

Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay (1898–1971) was born in Labhpur, a remote village in the Birbhum district of West Bengal, India. He has written 65 novels and 190 short stories along with essays, some plays, a book of poems, his autobiographies, and a series of letters called *Gramer Chithi* ('Letters from the Village').

(1928) and 'Harāna Sura' (1929), represent the figure of the Vaiṣṇava within the high literary traditions of the twentieth-century short-story genre. The onset of European education systems in Bengal in the nineteenth century led to a web of intricate cultural conflicts between tradition and modernity that challenged the existing socio-literary order. These trends also presented new ways of imagining and representing ancient cultural motifs such as the figure of the Vaiṣṇava. The perception of high moral idealisms started undergoing cataclysmic alterations with the onset of Western educational practices, leading to the emergence of new forms of literary fiction representing the rural ethos, and specifically the Vaiṣṇava character, in light of the emerging scepticism of the early twentieth century. These are fictional tales which have their roots in the popular belief systems and ritualistic practices of rural Bengal. Bandyopadhyay was well versed in the nuances of Birbhum's traditional Vaiṣṇava practices but was also aware of the younger generation of literary writers and short-storytellers from Kolkata and the surrounding urban areas.

This paper explores the distinctive language of Bandyopadhyay's Vaiṣṇava characters. These stories are remarkable for their earthy texture and intricate symbolism. The term 'Earthsongs' has been used as an identifying referent latent in these stories that have emerged from the cultural and geographical depths of rural India. The word 'earthy' is used to imply raw human experiences of everyday life that can be observed in the form of colloquial language, music, and its expressions. The word also symbolizes the fragrance of the earth. The title of this paper is inspired by Michael Peters and Ruth Irwin's reading of Jonathan Bate's seminal work *The Song of the Earth* (2000). Peters and Irwin use the expression 'Earthsongs' to signify the ecological subtleties located in the nature-conscious writings of Heidegger and his philosophical formulations of 'dwelling' (Peters & Irwin 2). In Vaiṣṇava traditions, nature is sometimes represented as Rādhā-*tattva* and Rādhā-*bhāva* that is in constant cosmic play with Kṛṣṇa-*tattva* or Kṛṣṇa-*bhāva*.

In one of his musical compositions, 'Madhura Madhura', Bandyopadhyay offers a poetic invocation to the divine that is latent in the human form. He invites his readers to explore the interconnectedness between the individual self and the cosmic self. The aesthetic and spiritual bond expressed in Bandyopadhyay's song demonstrates a complex grammar that is associated with practices emerging from Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa's esoteric love. The song and its translation, quoted below, speak in lucid poetic verses of the dense layers of relationship between the human and that which is beyond human comprehension. The poem not only speaks of love in its physical sense, but also marks the highest metaphysical longings in Vaiṣṇava poetry. Bandyopadhyay's thoughts are symbolic of the highest quest for the self in Indian spiritual literature, where the body and the soul, the human and the divine, are in constant play:

He received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1956, and the Bharatiya Jnanpith Award in 1967. Bandyopadhyay was awarded the Padma Shri in 1962 and the Padma Bhushan in 1969.

In this paper, Sanskrit terms and Bangla terms have been transliterated using standardized Sanskrit (IAST) rules. Proper nouns, such as names of individuals, have been left without diacritics in order to maintain uniformity and ease of recognition, especially when these names appear commonly in English-language contexts. Similarly, proper nouns and names of places such as towns, districts, or villages have been rendered without diacritical marks.

মধুর মধুর বংশী বাজে
কোথা কোন কদমতলীতে
আমি পথের মাঝে পথ হারালাম
ব্রজে চলিতে
পোড়া মন ভুল করিলি
চোখ তুলিলি পথের ধুলা থেকে
রাই যে আমার রাঙা পায়ের
ছাঁপ গিয়েছে এঁকে
ঢুকলি ছেড়ে পথের ধুলো
চন্দ্রাবলীর কুঞ্জ গলিতে।।
অনেক আলোর ঘটায় অনেক
ছটা ঝলোমলো
আমার হাতের মাটির পিদীম
লাজে নিভাইলো
এখন যে হায় গভীর আঁধার
কোন পথে ঘাট বলো ললিতে।।
মধুর মধুর ...

Sweet, sweet is the sound of the flute
Flowing from a distance, along with the breeze
From somewhere beneath the Kadamba tree.
I lost my way along the path
While walking towards Vraja.
Oh, my weary heart, you made a mistake,
For you lost this path.
You raised your eyes from the dust of the road.
The imprint of Rāī's *āltā*-laden feet
Has left its mark on the soul.
I left behind those dusty roads
To walk through Candrāvalī's *kuñja* alleys.
In the glimmer of shiny lamps
The clay lamp in my hand
Extinguishes in the shame of its ordinariness.
Now, alas, in this deep darkness,
Which path should I take, O beloved?
Sweet, sweet ...

(Bandyopadhyay, 'Madhura Madhura', 62)[4]

[4] All translations from Bandyopadhyay's works presented in this paper are those of the authors.

This song composed by Bandyopadhyay reflects the deep, bittersweet longing of the beloved for Her soulmate.[5] The sound of the flute draws Her in, but she becomes lost, symbolizing Her inner turmoil and a deep separation from Him. The extinguishing of the clay lamp in the presence of brighter lights symbolizes Her feelings of insignificance and highlights the pain of separation, leaving Her unsure of the path ahead, with an intense yearning for the beloved's presence. Such imagery, emotional texture, and lyric quality is exemplified in several of Bandyopadhyay's short stories. He portrays the human connection with the cosmic self through layered symbolism and poetic contrasts that intertwine the emotion of love with everyday life. These stories portray the power that is latent in nature and perhaps more profoundly in the emotional depths of human love.

The cultural milieu of Bengal within which Bandyopadhyay lived and wrote such compositions was shaped by the variegated and dynamic Vaiṣṇava tradition of devotion (*bhakti*) to Śrī Kṛṣṇa. In Bengal, Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu (1486–1533) was the proponent of *bhakti* philosophy in the Vaiṣṇava *mārga*. Śrī Caitanya encouraged individuals to express their devotion to Kṛṣṇa through displays of love and affection, irrespective of caste and gender.[6] Central to the philosophy of Vaiṣṇavism in Bengal are the figures of Śrī Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā Devī, revered as the supreme beings. Within this Vaiṣṇava context, Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa are worshipped as an inseparable cosmic human couple deeply immersed in celestial play. The tradition of Vaiṣṇavism, particularly of the kind associated with Śrī Caitanya and his teachings, profoundly shaped Bengal's social, religious, and political landscape and significantly influenced religious and cultural practices, giving rise to a unified community or tradition (*sampradāya*) known as Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism or Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism.

The Vaiṣṇava tradition is dense and broad in its philosophical positions as practised in the context of Bengal, Orissa, Assam, and other parts of eastern and north-eastern India. These traditions have branched out into distinct belief systems and practices that are located in nuanced cultural heartlands. A complete analysis of these branches of Vaiṣṇava practice would be a separate research project and is beyond the purview of this paper.[7] The Vaiṣṇava traditions in Bengal have Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism as a predominant orthodox tradition that was followed by the intellectual and social crust of Bengal's upper class. Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism is characterized

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[5] The pronouns 'Him' and 'Her' used for Śrī Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā Devī are capitalized throughout this paper to reflect Indian sensibilities and respect for the reverence accorded to the figures of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā.

[6] For a more detailed analysis of devotion to Śrī Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā Devī, and of Śrī Caitanya's extreme emphasis on human values within divine discourses, see Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja's *Caitanya Caritāmṛta.*

[7] Scholarly interest in Bengali Vaiṣṇavism spans disciplines like Indology, religious studies, literature, and sociology. Foundational texts like Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja's *Caitanya Caritāmṛta* (trans. Dimock, 1999) have shaped the field. Early literary historians such as Dinesh Chandra Sen (*Chaitanya and his Companions*, 1917; *Chaitanya and his Age*, 1922), Sushil Kumar De (*Early History of Vaiṣṇava Faith and Movement in Bengal*, 1961), and Ramakant Chakravarti (*Vaiṣṇavism in Bengal*, 1985) explored Vaiṣṇavism's cultural significance, while scholars like Akshay Chandra Sarkar and Jagadbandhu Bhadra worked to collect Vaiṣṇava literature. Recent studies, including Durgadas Mukhopadhyay's *Religion, Philosophy and Literature of Bengal Vaishnavism* (1990), Sukanya Sarbadhikary's *Place of Devotion* (2015), and Varuni Bhatia's *Unforgetting Chaitanya* (2017), continue to expand the scholarship, addressing both the historical and the experiential dimensions of Vaiṣṇava practices.

by deep asceticism and is marked to a certain extent by *dāsabhāva*, or a master–servitor relationship. This entails restraint in food, love, and practices of livelihood. The *jāta*-Vaiṣṇava practitioners[8] and the followers of Sahajiyā *bhakti* paths[9] provide other voices within Bengal's Vaiṣṇava society that are distinctive because of their unorthodox and sometimes non-dual practices of Vaiṣṇava philosophy. These paths involve accepting the love for Kṛṣṇa as an integral part of everyday practices, life, and rituals. Kṛṣṇa is imagined as a human lover, friend, husband, and sometimes in the extreme forms as the very self of the devotee. On these paths, the cosmic and the mortal sometimes become the same. It is these Sahajiyā-*mārga* practitioners of rural Labhpur who may have inspired Bandyopadhyay to write a series of short stories loosely based on the practitioners of Vaiṣṇavism in rural Birbhum. He was inspired by the polyglossic character of the lived experiences of people in these regions. The demarcations between the different branches of Vaiṣṇava philosophy are not rigid and clear: cross-cultural exchanges and inter-region movements have caused the lines to be fluid. In Orissa, Vaiṣṇava practices are more orthodox, and this tradition known as Utakālīya Vaiṣṇavism is closely related to the ancient temple-cultures of Mahāprabhu Śrī Jagannātha.

While there has been a plethora of scholarship on the historical, religious, and socio-political dimensions of Śrī Caitanya and Bengali Vaiṣṇavism, the role of comparative literature in understanding the tradition has found surprisingly few takers. There has been relatively little exploration of tales, in short-story traditions from India, centred on Vaiṣṇava figures or set within the rich and complex tradition of Vaiṣṇavism. Comparative literature may provide

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[8] Jeanne Openshaw, in the glossary of her work *Seeking Bāuls of Bengal* (2002), defines Jāt-Vaiṣṇavas or Jāti-Vaiṣṇavas in the following way (p. 256):

> A complex category which comprises, generally speaking, those for whom 'Vaishnava' functions, either positively or despite themselves, as a caste identity. They may be differentiated from those for whom the identity 'Vaishnava' co-exists with a separate caste identity, such as Brahmin, Kayastha etc. They also differ from those Vaishnavas who have renounced householder life and along with it caste identity of any sort. Traditionally the progeny of any inter-caste (or otherwise discernibly irregular) union were consigned to this 'caste'. Such people are 'Vaishnava through having lost caste' (*Jāt hāriye vaiṣṇava*).

For a detailed discussion of the Jāt-Vaiṣṇavas, see Joseph T. O'Connell, 'Jāti-Vaiṣṇavas of Bengal: "Subcaste" (Jāti) without a "Caste" (Varṇa)' (1982).

[9] In several studies on the various groups of Vaiṣṇavas in Bengal, the Sahajiyās are discussed as unrepresentative of the orthodox Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas. In *Religion, Philosophy and Literature of Bengal Vaishnavism*, Mukhopadhyay observes (p. 33):

> In theology, the Sahajiyas do not differ much from the Gosvamins; but in religious practices they discard their teachings of *vidhi marga* (the path of spontaneous love), which they profess ... A Sahajiya requires a woman other than his married wife as a companion of his *sādhana*, looks upon his companion as Rādhā and himself as Krishna. He worships Radha–Krishna not in images, nor in his heart, but in his guru and the guru's female companion.

For an extended discussion of Vaiṣṇavas and Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyās, see Edward C. Dimock's *The Place of the Hidden Moon: Erotic Mysticism in the Vaiṣṇava-Sahajiyā Cult of Bengal* (1966) and Shashibhushan Dasgupta's work *Obscure Religious Cults as Background of Bengali Literature* (1946), part of which examines Sahajiyā schools and thought.

valuable insights by examining how the devotional practices of Vaiṣṇavism manifest in the everyday lives of individuals in these fictional spaces, particularly within domestic settings. Bandyopadhyay's narratives delve deep into the tradition of some rare qualities of Vaiṣṇavism, portraying it as a blend of storytelling, music, and a way of life. The everyday textures of Vaiṣṇava devotion in his stories are inherently raw, emotional, and spiritual. They are not bound by Victorian morals or by socio-cultural restraints. The stories encompass ritualistic elements, everyday experiences, and the intricate interplay of the spiritual, the individual, and the social.

Bandyopadhyay's formative years in the village of Labhpur in Birbhum were infused with the cultural and musical traditions of Vaiṣṇava singers who wandered through the villages as *bairāgī*s,[10] begging for alms (Bandyopadhyay, *Āmār Sāhitya Jīban*, 20–21). He has written a range of short stories featuring Vaiṣṇavas in rural Birbhum, such as 'Rasakāli' (1928), 'Harāno Sura' (1929), 'Raikamal' (1930), 'Mālācandan' (1932), 'Rādhārāṇī' (1938), 'Prasādamālā' (1931), and 'Bañcapūraṇa' (1951). In addition to the Vaiṣṇava communities, he has also written numerous other short stories set within the rural Sāntāl, Bāgdi, Ḍom, Beḍiyā, and Pāṭuā communities. Bandyopadhyay wrote around 190 short stories during his literary career. His first short story, titled 'Rasakali' and published in the *patrikā Kallol*,[11] was a creative response to the new literary idioms that were being developed by his contemporaries in Bengal such as Achintya Kumar Sengupta (1903–1976), Premendra Mitra (1904–1988), and Manik Bandyopadhyay (1908–1956). These contemporaries of Bandyopadhyay brought a new stark social realism and naturalistic strain into their storytelling practices in neo-urban thematic spaces.

In his Vaiṣṇava stories, Bandyopadhyay was engaging with a subject that was reminiscent of the high classicism of Rabindranath Tagore's (1861–1941) rural tales. However, Bandyopadhyay's language was deliberately contemporary, raw, and realistic. In these tales, his writing has a unique serio-comic style. For instance, in the story 'Mālācandan', Bandyopadhyay presents a blend of Vaiṣṇava devotional practices with grounded, often earthy realism, creating a complex and layered portrayal of rural life, where devotion and human emotions are intertwined. The ritualistic practice of *mālācandan*, in which characters exchange garlands (*mālā*) and apply sandalwood paste (*candana*) to each other's foreheads, symbolizing a sacred union (Bandyopadhyay, 'Mālācandan', 178), is juxtaposed with the everyday complexities of the Vaiṣṇava characters' lives. The stories challenge simplistic dichotomies

[10] Openshaw defines a *bairāgī* as 'a Vaishnava renouncer; also applied to Jati-Vaishnavas' (Openshaw 254). *Bairāgī*s are renouncers who have left their formal ties with 'this world' and wander as religious mendicants.

[11] The Bengali *patrikā Kallol* emerged as a significant cultural and literary platform during the early twentieth century in Bengal. The literary periodical *Kallol*, whose name meant 'the sound of waves', began publishing in 1923 and continued until 1929. Founded in 1923 by eminent Bengali intellectuals like Dineshranjan Das and Gokulchandra Nag, it included contributors such as Buddhadeb Basu, Premendra Mitra, and Subhas Mukhopadhyay. In his essay 'The Two Histories of Literary Culture in Bengal' (2003), Sudipta Kaviraj points out that the writers of the *Kallol* represented a collective identity of the youth of Bengal who took upon themselves the role of producing realism in literary writings without resorting to the highbrow aesthetics of the earlier generation (Kaviraj 559).

between the spiritual and the worldly, offering a rich exploration of how love, betrayal, and devotion are experienced in the everyday lives of the characters.

Tagore's engagement with the Vaiṣṇava tradition in Bengal was an integral component of his own experience of the literary world. Tagore's aesthetic sensibilities resonated with Vaiṣṇava sentiments, imagery, and values in writings like *Bhānusiṃha Ṭhākurer Padāvalī* (1884), which is a collection of Vaiṣṇava lyrics, and selected poems from *Gitanjali* (1910). Joseph T. O'Connell in his paper 'Tracing Vaishnava Strains in Tagore' (2011) states that Tagore retained in his poetry and songs much of the same emotional sensibility, psychological insight, and aesthetic values that characterized Vaiṣṇava *padāvalī*s (O'Connell 150–52). The impact of Vaiṣṇava thoughts is clearly visible in Tagore's humane depiction of Binodini's character in the novel *Chokher Bali* (1903, translated into English as *Binodini*), including her desires, passion, and a major flaw in her personality.

As fiction writers, both Tagore and Bandopadhyay carry the distinctive voices of storytellers, with the highs and lows of a moral universe, even while they embody the large brush-strokes of Vaiṣṇavism in their literary world-vision. In *Chokher Bali* the denial of love and the intense physical desire that characterizes Binodini makes her palpable and realistic, denying a high spiritual order to her widowhood and forced asceticism. In the short story 'Boshtomi' (1914) Tagore presents the character Anandi, who lives beyond the stipulations of domesticity, survives on land gifted by devotees, and treats every act of consuming food as an act of *prasāda-seva*. Her life is based on the principle of renunciation. However, her devotion has its own uniqueness in terms of her interpretation of divine love as a service to the human narrative voice (a man). Anandi personifies the male narrative voice as the divine higher self. She is filled with the physical intimacy of devotion, as when she touches the unnamed human narrator's feet and insists on receiving and consuming the food he has eaten as *prasāda*, regardless of social perceptions. The character Binodini is earthy, real, and driven by the pain of separation, desire, and denial, while Anandi's personal grief at losing her son, Gopal, transforms into perpetual longing for the divine that she is able to perceive in other human selves. Tagore and Bandyopadhyay draw upon the philosophical richness of *bhakti* in the Vaiṣṇava school of thought while basing their storytelling on the prose traditions of Bengal, in order to encapsulate the lived essence of *bhakti-bhāva*s in the everyday lives of their characters.

Bandyopadhyay's Vaiṣṇava stories emerged in the twentieth century during a period of rapid mechanization, existential re-evaluation, and social upheaval. Amid world wars, a Eurocentric education, the rise of individualism, and the breakdown of the feudal system, a new class of highly conscious individuals emerged in Bengal, influenced by nineteenth-century western discourses on liberty and morality. While contemporaries like the *Kallol* group explored urban anxieties and rural changes, Bandyopadhyay felt alienated in the company of his urban contemporaries (Bandyopadhyay, *Āmār Sāhitya Jīban*, 79). His narrative conclusions emphasize a hopeful outlook towards rebuilding after upheaval. In his autobiography he has expressed this inherently positive attitude within his literary vision of seeking peace and solace, reflecting a hopeful outlook (Bandyopadhyay, *Āmār Sāhitya Jīban*, 80). This hopeful perspective is evident in many of his Vaiṣṇava stories, such as 'Tṛṣṇā'. In that story, the protagonist Khudiram, a *kīrtana* singer, is initially excluded from the village's *kīrtana* group

due to his lack of material wealth and low social status.[12] However, he ultimately finds acceptance among the fishing community. The rural community's need for a devotional space during a cholera outbreak gives Khudiram an opportunity to fulfil this role, symbolizing how spiritual and communal unity can transcend caste and class distinctions. The story underscores the futility of social divisions in the face of human connection, portraying Khudiram's journey as one that finds true solace in the communitarian bond rather than in the validation of hierarchical structures. The story's social critique, framed within the context of Vaiṣṇava devotion, offers a profound meditation on the universality of love and respect, untethered from caste and class. These stories emanated from Bandyopadhyay's experience of the times he lived in and served as a response to the extraordinary pressures of his era, a silent recourse. However, it would be unjust to perceive these stories as a means of escape from everyday reality. Instead, he was attempting to explore the undocumented spaces of society and sought a degree of acceptance within the cultural system.

In his stories, Bandyopadhyay does not specify village names. In 'Rādhārāṇī', he describes the arrival of a Kṛṣṇa-*yātrā* troupe in a '**বৈচিত্রহীন অঞ্চল পল্লীজীবনে**' ('an ordinary rural life'; Bandyopadhyay, 'Rādhārāṇī', 160). The musical expressions of *kīrtana*s and *yātrā*s, performed by wandering minstrels, echo the *kīrtana*s and *harināma saṃkīrtana*s that Bandyopadhyay may have witnessed during his childhood in Labhpur, which he mentions in his memoir *Kaiśora Smṛti* ('Childhood Memories', 1951; Bandyopadhyay, *Kaiśora Smṛti*, 86). In 'Rādhārāṇī' the manifestation of devotion occurs through the performance of these musical traditions when Gauradāsa Adhikārī, who plays the role of Rādhā in Kṛṣṇa-*yātrā*s, fully immerses himself in Her emotions, particularly during moments of Her physical separation from Kṛṣṇa. His identification with Rādhā's emotional state is so deep that he enters an experiential consciousness of Rādhā-*bhāva*, a devotional state in which he embodies Rādhā's longing for Kṛṣṇa (Bandyopadhyay, 'Rādhārāṇī', 170). The story offers devotion as a lived experience that transcends the boundaries between the self and the divine.

The language employed in the stories of Bandyopadhyay is enriched by the 'ordinary speech of everyday life' (Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, 194) and infused with the colloquial expressions, erotic symbolism, and speech patterns of rural discourse. The expressions are typically concise and are often sung as one-line melodies by the characters. Bandyopadhyay crafts an idiom that brims with witty phrases, epigrams, and earthy adages. As expressed in classical poetry, Vaiṣṇava ideals are elevated and philosophically demanding and are sustained through ornate poetic language and highly stylized expressions. By contrast, Bandyopadhyay's short stories consciously eschew such ornamentation, embedding Vaiṣṇava themes within the rustic dialects and everyday speech-patterns of rural Birbhum. This stylistic shift reflects the expectations of the short story, drawing attention to everyday lived realities rather than abstract philosophical idealisms. The earthy idioms with their intricate esoteric symbolism and the inherent sublimity in the melodies and utterances of the Vaiṣṇava characters transcend the polarities of the grotesque and the sublime (Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 285). In terms of both language and ideals, the intermingling of the sacred and the profane, the high and the low, leads to a

[12] *Kīrtana*, sometimes referred to as *līlā-kīrtana*, generally means the recitation of songs in honour of God, especially relating to the activities of Lord Kṛṣṇa, in which case they are also referred as Kṛṣṇa-*līlā*s.

carnivalization within the melodies and expressions in these stories.[13] These stories have human relationships at their core, and so the divine play of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa in the orthodox Vaiṣṇava traditions tends to become humanized: characters depict the divine love-play with human-like qualities. The high divine ideals latent in Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa's ethereal bond is at times diluted into a realism limited to the physical bonds of eroticism between two human beings.

The prospects for incorporating Bandyopadhyay's stories into literary and language studies in India as critical readings remain relatively underexplored. In particular, the short stories with Vaiṣṇava characters have not been studied, translated, or adapted into other mediums. Up until the early 1980s, Bandyopadhyay's short stories were adapted into cinematic mediums.[14] However, that form of adaptation declined. Perhaps these stories were subsequently overlooked because they were misconstrued as inappropriate or decadent. The reader's experience of the polyphonic existence in Bandyopadhyay's stories can be limited by a lack of appreciation of its idioms, resulting in inappropriate demarcations between 'high' and 'low' and between 'grotesque' and 'sublime'.

The two stories analysed in the following sections revolve around love and emotional complexities within the devotion of a *bhekadhārī bairāgī* in 'Rasakāli' and the everyday life of a Vaiṣṇava household and its individuals in 'Harāno Sura'. There is a certain dialogic relationship between the self and the *other*, and there are larger cultural constructs that these stories present. They may be read to creatively understand the emotional state of Vaiṣṇavas beyond the pure/impure and high/low binaries. The short stories of Bandyopadhyay unfold the nuanced spaces of complex domestic trivialities and connect them to greater domains of the cultural tradition. The emotive terrain of men and women – their spirit of devotion, and their idealized affection for the cosmic – is driven by individualism and the experience of *bhakti*[15] within the boundaries of a day-to-day state of being.

In Pursuit of the 'Self' in 'Rasakāli'

Bandyopadhyay's first short story, 'Rasakāli', was published in the journal *Kallol* in 1928. The story, inspired by Bandyopadhyay's interactions with Vaiṣṇavas in the villages of Birbhum, offers a rich, multilayered exploration of love and devotion, capturing the deeply personal and experiential nature of Vaiṣṇava *bhakti*. The story presents an aspirational dimension where the symbolism associated with love seeks union with the cosmic self. In his autobiography *Āmār Sāhitya Jīban* (1953), Bandyopadhyay has written about his encounter with a young Vaiṣṇava girl during his travels through the villages of Birbhum. He was inspired towards

[13] The concept of literary carnivalization, as conceptualized by Russian thinker Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975), challenges closure and is characterized as 'ambivalent and unfinalized' (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 66–67). It reflects the intermingling of the sacred and the profane, the high and the low, in both language and ideals.

[14] Films adapted from the short stories of Bandyopadhyay include *Jalsaghar* (1958), *Naa* (1962), *Kanna* (1962), *Harano Sur* (1969), *Agradani* (1980), and *Pratima* (2005).

[15] In his work *Bhakti Yoga* (2003), Swami Vivekananda defines *bhakti* 'as a real, genuine search after the Lord, a search beginning, continuing, and ending in Love. One single moment of the madness of extreme love to God brings us eternal freedom' (Vivekananda 3).

conceptualizing the story of 'Rasakāli' by her beauty, playful demeanour, and complete spiritual abandonment. He wrote:

> আমার নায়িকা মঞ্জরী, জীবদেহের সরোবরে পদ্মের মত জীবন নিয়ে ফুটল। শুধু আমার গল্পের নায়িকা মঞ্জরীই ফুটল না - আমার মনে হল, আমি কেমন করে আচম্বিতে পৃথিবীর মায়াপুরীতে এটা ওটা নাড়তে নাড়তে সোনার কাঠি কুড়িয়ে পেলাম।
>
> I found a story. My protagonist, Manjari, bloomed like a lotus amidst a lake of sensuality embodying a vessel of life. And it was not only my story's heroine, Manjari, who bloomed. I felt as though while aimlessly wandering in the enchanted land of this world, I somehow stumbled upon a golden wand in the form of Manjari.
>
> (Bandyopadhyay, *Āmār Sāhitya Jīban*, 22)

Manjari, the protagonist of the story 'Rasakāli', mirrors the figure of Rādhā and yet transcends conventions to embrace and unite with the cosmic self. This cosmic self is beyond physical, sensual, and cognitive limitations.

Central to 'Rasakāli' is the exploration of Vaiṣṇavism not just as a devotional practice but as a deeply personal and emotional experience, transcending conventional binaries. Bandyopadhyay's portrayal of the *bhekadhārī* Vaiṣṇava protagonist, Manjari, and the *jāta*-Vaiṣṇava Pulin foregrounds a complex interplay between sectarian and caste identities and personal relationships. Manjari, belonging to the *bhekadhārī* sect, is suggested as a potential bride for Pulin. However, Pulin's uncle, Ramdas, vehemently objects to the match due to the sectarian disparity. The term *jāta*-Vaiṣṇava traditionally referred to individuals who renounced the caste into which they were born after their initiation into the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition. Although Vaiṣṇavism ideally welcomed adherents from any caste or religion, in practice those who became *jāta*-Vaiṣṇavas often came from marginalized backgrounds. The Bengali saying '*jāt harāle boṣṭuma*', which means that one who loses their caste becomes a Vaiṣṇava, reflects the ideal of casteless devotion (Bhatia 69–70). On the other hand, the *bhekadhārī* Vaiṣṇavas are those who are initiated into the sect after receiving *bhek* from a guru (Bhatia 87).[16] Such distinctions are emblematic of the social realities of rural Bengal, where initiation into Vaiṣṇavism carried implications for caste, sects, and gender. This also suggests that fictional spaces such as the stories of Bandyopadhyay serve to explore the nuances of sectarian distinctions and social realities among Vaiṣṇavas.

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[16] *Bhek* refers to the clothes worn by a Vaiṣṇava after being initiated into Vaiṣṇavism. Sukanya Sarbadhikary in her work *The Place of Devotion* (2015) describes the initiation ceremony in the following way (p. 92):

> As a sign of abstinence, they then give up their *deś* (old residence), *veś* (old dress), and *keśa* (hair). Leaving the old residence symbolizes that they now seek to place themselves in Vrindavan. *Bābājīs* refer to this as receiving *bhek* from the guru. *Bhek* refers both to the renouncer's external features, such as loincloth, and to his mental state. He then renounces the material world and attaches himself completely to Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa's thoughts.

However, the emotive terrains of the characters, especially Manjari, suggest a *bhakti* that moves beyond these societal boundaries. Pulin and Manjari share a profound connection. Bandyopadhyay suggests that this human bond is akin to the timeless love between Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, where emotional depth and personal experience become central to their spiritual relationship. Bandyopadhyay's depiction of Manjari's love and yearning transcends social hierarchies, illustrating how the Vaiṣṇava tradition, especially in its more esoteric forms, challenges rigid sectarian and caste divisions by placing emotional and spiritual connection at the forefront. The lyrical eloquence of Manjari's poetic expressions presents a passionate charm, and the love between her and Pulin is made palpable through sensuous descriptions of emotions. The one-line verse that Manjari hums reflects the tradition of a cosmic union, where the physical body becomes a site of spiritual and emotional expression:

> তোমায় আঁকছি হে অঙ্গে যতন করে
>
> With much care and love, I have painted you on my body.
>
> (Bandyopadhyay, 'Rasakāli', 36)

The melody affirms Manjari's emotional, physical, and spiritual experience of love for Pulin. The term 'paint' carries profound symbolism signifying an act wherein a beloved desires to be 'tinged' into the transformative charm of the *other*. In this context, the Bangla word *āṅkachi* should not be translated just as 'coloured'. The word 'coloured' has a limited purpose in terms of artistic expressions, considering there is a possibility of removing that colour. In this devotional space of high Platonism that Bandyopadhyay presents, the sensual and the spiritual are 'tinged' into one union. The word *āṅkachi* captures the essence of the blissful union with the divine, reminiscent of the Vaiṣṇava poetic tradition's expressive language. The motif of colour is a recurring element in the poetic and lyrical compositions of Vaiṣṇava *padāvalī*s, where it symbolizes heightened emotional and spiritual states. Śrī Rūpa Gosvāmīn's *Padyāvalī*, a sixteenth-century compilation of Sanskrit verses, includes a verse by Śrī Dāmodara that captures a conversation between Rādhā's and Candrāvalī's *sakhī*s (female companions). The verse expresses their jealousy over Kṛṣṇa's preferential treatment of one *sakhī*. The verse reads:

> O *sakhī*! be not proud if your cheeks are embellished with the flower bud that Kṛṣṇa has sketched on them with His own hands.
> For can not anyone be blest with such an adornment if only the impediment of tremor does not manifest itself in the likeness of an enemy.
>
> (Gosvāmīn 202, trans. Raina)

In the Sanskrit version of the poetic verses of Gosvāmīn, the phrase that has been used to refer to Kṛṣṇa's artistic splendour is *kṛṣṇasvahastalikhitā navamañjarīti* (Gosvāmīn 201). Gaurav Raina has translated the phrase as 'Kṛṣṇa's attempt to sketch'. It is Kṛṣṇa's attempt to 'write' and put His signature on a display of cosmic love for the *sakhī*. The Sanskrit word *likhita* resonates with the word *āṅkachi* in Bangla. This verse describes a specific, intimate moment

where Kṛṣṇa attempts to sketch a flower bud on the *sakhī*'s cheeks, but Her body trembles, interrupting the act. The 'sketching' of the flower bud is not merely a physical act but a metaphor for the emotional and spiritual bond between Kṛṣṇa and the *sakhī*. Writing, sketching, and painting are the expressive negotiating mediums of that human-cosmic play.

The title of the story, 'Rasakāli', is a significant metaphorical device employed by the author. The visual image of the term *rasakāli* is an identifier of Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* on the forehead, nose, and throat. In the story, the *rasakāli* mark symbolizes a spiritual connection between Manjari and Pulin. Bandyopadhyay uses the phrase '*rasakāli paṭāno*' or 'establishing *rasakāli*' (36) to symbolize the building of a relation between two souls. Drawing on and putting sandalwood paste on each other's foreheads is a prevalent marriage-practice among certain Bangla Vaiṣṇavas. The ritualistic practice of applying sandalwood paste to each other's foreheads symbolizes an enduring spiritual bond that parallels the ritual of marriage, indicating that Manjari and Pulin's love, though thwarted by societal constraints and sectarian differences, exists on a higher, spiritual plane. Here again, the terms 'painting' or 'drawing' *rasakāli* reflect the physical manifestation of *bhakti*, where love transcends corporeal desires and becomes intertwined with the cosmic.

The profound love between Manjari and Pulin undergoes a transformation, turning into envy and remorse when Pulin marries Gopini. The bride Gopini is the daughter of a single mother Srimati. Srimati was the wife of Ramdas during their youth, but Srimati, unable to bear Ramdas's unpleasant face, one day abandoned the life he had built for her and disappeared (35). Thus, the lives of these characters are bound into a complex web of relationships spanning across generations, across past and present. Ramdas encounters Srimati on her deathbed in Shridham, where she asks him to take care of Gopini and arrange her marriage to Pulin (37). When Manjari comes to know of this, she is infused with jealousy and a sense of betrayal (38). Her jealousy and hurt upon learning of Pulin's marriage are expressed through rustic language, revealing the rawness of her emotions. The lines she hums, mocking Gopini's perceived inferiority, expose the vulnerability and pride of a woman whose love is forsaken:

> পাঁচ সিকের বোষ্টুমী তোমার,
> ওহে গোসা করেছে, গোসা করেছে
>
> This five-penny-worth *boṣṭumī* of yours
> Oh, she is furious, she is furious.
>
> (Bandyopadhyay, 'Rasakāli', 38)

In fairs such as Jayadeva-Kenduli, frequented by Vaiṣṇavas, there were designated areas for *mālācandan*, where a Vaiṣṇava could select a female partner with her consent by paying a fee of *pāñc sike* (five coins) to the regulatory authorities. These unions, while socially sanctioned, were often devoid of lasting emotional or spiritual depth. Within this context, the phrase *pāñc siker boṣṭumī* comes to signify a relationship formed through transaction rather than affection, a union lacking emotional investment. Manjari's sarcastic remark draws on this connotation to belittle the bond between Gopini and Pulin. Although their marriage is not literally formed through such a practice, Manjari implies that their relationship similarly lacks emotional depth.

Her mockery, particularly in repeating *gosā korechhe* ('she is furious'), casts Gopini's expressions of hurt as insincere.

The complexity of Pulin's emotions also comes to the fore as he grapples with the guilt of abandoning Manjari in favour of Gopini. When he meets Manjari after his marriage, the mutual sense of despair and longing between them is vividly expressed. Despite being married to Gopini, Pulin's emotional attachment to Manjari remains impassioned. He admits his reluctance to return to Gopini and desires to stay with Manjari. Pulin's love for Manjari increases significantly after he is forced into his loveless marriage with Gopini. The ruggedness in his expressions reflects his internal turmoil and the harsh realities of the situation. In response to Manjari's query about whether Gopini would allow him to leave, Pulin remarks:

> ছাড়বে না? মারের চোটে ভূত ছারে, তা জান? হুঁ হুঁ, কথায় আছে, 'পড়লে পরে দুধু ভাতু, না পড়লে ঠেঙার গুঁতু'।
>
> Won't let go? Even ghosts leave under a beating, right? Ha-ha, there's a saying, 'If you study, you get milk, if not, you get the stick.'
>
> (Bandyopadhyay, 'Rasakāli', 40)

Pulin's words imply a grotesque reality, where his only desire is to break away from the 'sacred' bonds and emotional complexities of marriage.

In their passionate craving for loving union and in their desperate suffering in each other's absence, Manjari becomes the personification of the great feeling that is heedless of societal proprieties and unbounded by conventions. However, she is fully aware of the potential consequences of their actions and the difficult situation of Gopini, and she chooses to distance herself from Pulin. Despite her initial resentment, she ultimately chooses not to indulge in the possibility of a transgressive relationship with Pulin after his marriage. She decides to sleep in the shed to avoid temptation and preserve propriety. This represents a moral turning point:

> বাহিরে গিয়াই দরজা টানিয়া শিকল আঁটিয়া দিল ... শিকল টানিয়া দিয়া আঁচলে চোখ মুছিতে মুছিতে ঢেঁকিশালায় আসিয়া মঞ্জরী আঁচল পাতিয়া শুইয়া পড়িল।
>
> As soon as she stepped outside, she pulled the door shut and latched it ... After latching the door, Manjari wiped her eyes with the edge of her saree and came to the part of the shed where the husk lever was stowed. She spread her saree, and lay down to sleep.
>
> (Bandyopadhyay, 'Rasakāli', 41)

Bandyopadhyay suggests that this act of restraint is not merely about adhering to the societal norms, ethics, and customs of appropriate behaviour in marriage, whereby an outsider – whether a man or a woman – is not to be welcomed in the inner circle of a married couple. He shows Manjari's deeper interpretation and her understanding of the word *bhakti*, where personal sacrifice and physical renunciation lead to a higher form of spiritual fulfilment. Her

realization that Gopini, too, is deserving of Pulin's love speaks of the pursuit of the cosmic self that often entails the renunciation of earthly attachments.

Through Manjari's internal struggle, Bandyopadhyay illustrates the profound emotional and moral complexities that accompany human relationships. The story's exploration of envy, desire, and self-sacrifice transcends the boundaries of a simple love-triangle, inviting deeper reflection on the nature of love, guilt, and spiritual transcendence. Bandyopadhyay's stories allow delicate interplay between the human and the divine, the physical and the emotional, within Vaiṣṇava practice. The idea of 'deviance' in several stories centred on the Vaiṣṇavas is complex and is deeply intertwined with the real and the historical, challenging simplistic categorizations. The Vaiṣṇava traditions within these stories navigate between absolute abstinence from all kinds of earthly relationships on the one hand, and a profound physical connection with the consciousness called Kṛṣṇa on the other. Many of Bandyopadhyay's stories may seem to be ambiguous and to be permeated by elements of the latent socio-political and literary polemics of twentieth-century colonial Bengal, and so the reader's experience of these polyphonic practices may be limited because of the lack of depth in the contemporary critical and theoretical language for interpreting the experiential realities of *bhakti bhāva*s.

At the end of the story, Manjari departs from the village, symbolizing her ultimate renunciation. Her decision to leave Pulin and Gopini behind and undertake a pilgrimage to Vrindavan mirrors the spiritual abandonment of Vaiṣṇavas, who relinquish worldly ties in pursuit of cosmic union. Manjari's act of leaving, while seemingly an abandonment of personal desires, can be interpreted as the fulfilment of a deeper quest for the self. Manjari leaves the village humming a song:

> লোকে কয় আমি কৃষ্ণ কলঙ্কিনী
> সখি সেই গরবে আমি গরবিনী গো,
> আমি গরবিনী।
>
> People call me Kṛṣṇa's Blemished One,
> But, oh friend, that mark is my pride.
> In that pride, I am indeed the Proud One.
>
> (Bandyopadhyay, 'Rasakāli', 41)

In her final song, where she proudly embraces the title of 'Kṛṣṇa's Blemished One', Manjari's devotion reaches its culmination. Deprived of fulfilment in her earthly love for Pulin, Manjari's emotions find transcendence in her ultimate desire and love for Kṛṣṇa. Both the human form of Pulin and the divine form of Kṛṣṇa pave the way for her ultimate penance and her personal journey towards renunciation. Her pride in her cosmic connection transcends societal judgments, and she finds fulfilment not in her relationship with Pulin but in her spiritual bond with the cosmic. Here Bandyopadhyay invokes the limitless nature of love within the Vaiṣṇava tradition, where the earthly and the cosmic converge. Haraprasad Mitra, in his analysis of 'Rasakāli' in the essay 'Tarasankarer Premer Galpa' ('The Love Stories of Tarasankar', 1958), compares Manjari's departure from the village and her beloved Pulin to 'Birbhum's deserted

fields, to the vast blueness of the sea and to the endless sky' (Mitra 162, our translation). In Vaiṣṇava fashion, this act of renunciation is connected to the strong emotional currents of man and woman. Manjari's journey echoes the practice of renunciation, allowing her to discover the most profound form of love and devotion. Manjari embarks on a journey which is not one of indulgence or disconnection, but rather of voluntary abstinence, a conscious withdrawal from material and sensual entanglements to access a higher, cosmic consciousness. This transcendence signifies her union with the cosmic self, a realm untouched by physical, emotional, or cognitive boundaries. Central to Bandyopadhyay's story is the pursuit of the cosmic, and of self-discovery undisturbed by earthly miseries.

In Bandyopadhyay's story, there is an organic combination of the high, lofty ideals of *bhakti* which one finds in Vaiṣṇava poetry, and the everyday experiences of Vaiṣṇava characters. The poetic traditions of Vaiṣṇavism may be associated with 'high' literature because of the Vaiṣṇava compositions in the classical Sanskrit language in Bengal. But in contrast to the grammatical finesse of these compositions, Bandyopadhyay adopts a different linguistic approach. The language and expressions in the story are plain and devoid of embellishments. For Bandyopadhyay, the ornamentation lies in the metaphorical and allegorical qualities inherent in the colloquial Bengali words within his verses. The melodies and expressions are articulated in the local dialect and idiom, employing tones and language redolent of personal conversations and deep unfulfilled desires. But the *bhakti bhāva*s inherent within these expressions transcend the human realm, possessing a cosmic dimension. Within the story, there is a subtle subversion embedded in the fabric of the language and expressions, altering the focus from elaborate poetic ornamentation towards a more straightforward yet symbolically rich narrative.

In his story, Bandyopadhyay probes into questions of 'appropriate' and 'inappropriate', exploring how these boundaries are shaped by the limitations of expressing *bhakti* experiences within linguistic constructs. There is a synthesis of the human with the cosmic as that one ultimate union that transcends the binaries of life and death, good and evil, love and hate. The story serves as both a reflection on the emotive terrain of Vaiṣṇava practice and a subtle critique of the societal structures that shape such experiences.

In the following section, the dynamic between householders and ascetics is discussed, as reflected in the story 'Harāno Sura'.

Music of the Minstrels

The short story *Harāno Sur* ('The Lost Tune', 1929) was Bandyopadhyay's second short story, and it was also published in the Bengali *patrikā Kallol*. The story offers a profound exploration of deep emotional states within the context of Vaiṣṇava devotion, highlighting in particular the interplay between spiritual longing and the burden of worldly responsibilities. The story presents a paradox between the *gṛhastha* (householder) and *sannyāsī* (renunciant) Vaiṣṇava characters. The difference between the everyday lives of Vaiṣṇava householders and renouncers emerges as a central theme in the story. Within the story's plot, Bandyopadhyay explores the dilemma of choosing between fulfilling familial householder responsibilities and embracing spiritual aspirations.

Nonipal, the protagonist, embodies this struggle. His deep connection to music, especially his love for playing the flute, symbolizes his yearning for a life dedicated to spiritual pursuit. His passion for music sharply contrasts with the material concerns that preoccupy the rural community around him. Nonipal's renunciation of material wealth and his rejection of worldly pursuits is poignantly expressed through his music:

> এ--- তোমার ভালো তোমাতে থাক
> আমায় তো আর ভাগ দেবে না--
> এ-- তোমার ভালো--
>
> Let your well-being remain with you,
> You are not going to share any of it with me anyway –
> Let your happiness remain only yours.
> (Bandyopadhyay, 'Harāno Sura', 47)

Nonipal's spiritual devotion supersedes his material aims, and his philosophical shunning of attachment finds a place in his musical compositions and his tunes. In *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* there is a mention of the word *virakti* to indicate extreme distaste for worldly attachments: *bhaktiḥ pareśānubhavo viraktir anyatra syāt* (*Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 11.2.42).[17] This sentiment of acquired non-attachment is reflected in Nonipal's spiritual emotions. The tune he plays while his neighbours celebrate the rewards of farming reflects his indifference to the successes and failures of mundane life, suggesting that his true fulfilment lies in music and the emotional resonance that it carries.

For Nonipal, music is not just an aesthetic pursuit to provide him with momentary happiness. It is a medium for his spiritual expression, a way to transcend the overwhelming weight of the material world. Through the Vaiṣṇava practices of *bhakti*, music and spirituality are intertwined in the everyday lives of Bangla Vaiṣṇavas, often manifesting as *kīrtana*s and *līlā*s (sacred enactments). The musical tradition of *līlā*s and *kīrtana*s is an integral part of Vaiṣṇava cultural practice, whereby devotees express their emotional and sensual connection to the cosmic. Shaped by the complex interplay between love, devotion, and separation, the everyday lives of the Vaiṣṇava characters in 'Harāno Sura' reveal intricate philosophical underpinnings through musical experiences.

In the story, Nonipal's spiritual ecstasy is disrupted when he marries Giri and transitions into the life of a householder. Giri, representing the responsibilities of domestic life, disapproves of Nonipal's constant flute-playing and singing. She exclaims:

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[17] Swami Tapasyananda's translation of the quoted Sanskrit verse is as follows (p. 12):

> The efficacy of the practice of the Bhagvata Dharma is wonderful. Just as to one eating, every ball of rice gives pleasure, strength of body, and freedom from hunger at the same time, so does a devotee, who has surrendered himself to the Lord, obtain simultaneously three things: intense devotion to the Lord, experience of Him, and detachment from all objects of the world.

> মা গো মা! কি মানুষ গো তুমি! গেরস্ত ঘরের এই কি ছিরি? ঘরে একখানা কাটকুটো নাই, কিসে রান্নাবান্না হয় বল তো? ভাগ্যে তবু এইগুলা ছিল, বাঁশের বাঁশী! এতো বাঁশী কি হয় সাঁওতালদের ঘরের মত?
>
> *Maa go Maa*! What kind of person are you! Is this how a household is run? There isn't even a single piece of wood at home, how do you expect to cook? Luckily, we still had these bamboo flutes! Who keeps so many flutes, like in a Sāntāl's house?
>
> (Bandyopadhyay, 'Harāno Sura', 48)

This sparks a quarrel, and Giri confronts him, declaring that his musical pursuits will no longer be tolerated now that he is married. This confrontation marks the end of Nonipal's ecstatic musical journey, which had once defined his existence.

> সেই দিন ননী বাঁশী ছাড়িল,--সংগীত ছাড়িয়া সম্পদের সাধনায় ডুবিল; সে ডোবা যেমন তেমন নয়,-- সাধ করিয়া গলায় ভার বাঁধিয়া ডোবার মত।
>
> That day, Noni gave up his flute. Leaving his music behind, he immersed himself in the pursuit of wealth; but that immersion was not the same, he pursued it as one would drown into a pond, burdened by the weight around his neck.
>
> (Bandyopadhyay, 'Harāno Sura', 49)

Bandyopadhyay articulates the divisive binary between the freedom of music and the confinement of domesticity as follows:

> একতারার ঝঙ্কার পথের ওপরেই বাজে ভালো, বাঁশীর সুর বনে উপবনেই ভালো জমে, কিন্তু বদ্ধতার গৃহকোণে গানও কাঁদে, গায়কের জমে না।
>
> The *ektara*'s tune resonates well on the path. The flute's melody lingers beautifully in the deep woods, but the musician's song and sorrow do not fit within the confinements of a stifling home.
>
> (Bandyopadhyay, 'Harāno Sura', 47)

In the story, Nonipal's experiences are such that he longs for spiritual and artistic freedom, while he is compelled to remain within the boundaries of domestic life. The everydayness of his experiences illustrates how the burden of material responsibility drains the soul of its connection to the cosmic.

However, the story takes a surprising turn when Giri realizes that she is trapped in a loveless and mundane marriage with Nonipal. Bandyopadhyay has intricately portrayed Giri's

emotional evolution, showing how the very character who once embodied domestic obligations eventually realizes her role in severing her husband from his spiritual aspirations. This is made evident when Giri asks Nonipal to sing, and he responds with a melancholic melody:

> শ্যাম আবার কেন বাঁশী খোঁজ
> বাঁশী যে ডুবেছে জলে।
>
> Śyāma, why do you look for your flute again,
> The flute has drowned in the water.
>
> (Bandyopadhyay, 'Harāno Sura', 50)

This line signifies the profound loss of an integral part of Nonipal's identity, the music that connected him both to his inner self and to the cosmic self. Giri's realization of this loss reflects a shift in her understanding of love and devotion. The absence of music in her life has created an inner silence that is slowly consuming her:

> ক্রমে ক্রমে এই মাঝে মাঝে কিছুই ভাল-না-লাগা সুর প্রবলতর হইয়া যেন সারাক্ষণেই গিরির মনে বাজিতে লাগিল।
>
> Gradually, this occasional note of dissatisfaction grew stronger, until it seemed as if it was constantly ringing in Giri's mind.
>
> (Bandyopadhyay, 'Harāno Sura', 50)

She comes to recognize that her marriage to Nonipal is not merely a physical bond but also a spiritual one, and with this realization she experiences *viraha*, a deep longing and pain of separation from her beloved.

In Vaiṣṇava tradition, the experience of *viraha* goes beyond physical separation, representing a heightened emotional and spiritual longing that can only be fulfilled through union with the cosmic self. Giri's yearning for Nonipal mirrors the longing of Rādhā for Kṛṣṇa, a central motif in the songs and stories of Vaiṣṇava devotion. The story depicts Giri's distress in her separation from Nonipal, not in terms of physical distance but as an emotional void, and her agony in being unable to love him or 'unite' with him. Her subsequent participation in the village *kīrtana*s and the powerful emotions she experiences during the *līlā-kīrtana* performance evoke this cosmic connection:

> হরিনামের গুনে গহন বনে মৃত তরু মুঞ্জরে
>
> By the virtue of chanting the name of Hari, even dead trees blossom in the deep forest.
>
> (Bandyopadhyay, 'Harāno Sura', 51)

Giri listens to this verse as part of a *līlā-kīrtana*, consisting of songs of separation and union. The metaphor of the blossoming of a dead tree reflects Giri's internal awakening. She realizes

that through devotion, love can be revived and the mundane existence of domestic life transcended. Her participation in the communal singing connects her to a collective spiritual experience where the lines between earthly love and cosmic love blur. As Giri watches the performer embody Rādhā's love for Kṛṣṇa, her mind is captivated by the performer's expressive gestures, tear-filled eyes, and graceful movements. The rhythmic patterns of the sound and music surface emotional sensibilities within Giri. The boundaries between the performer and the audience blur, as Giri identifies with the longing that Rādhā feels for Kṛṣṇa. The *kīrtana*, in this sense, is not just a spectacle but a lived, embodied experience for Giri. Bandyopadhyay describes Giri's emotional state in the following way:

> গিরির উন্মুখ অন্তর ঝংকারে ঝংকারে ওই সুরের প্রতিধ্বনি তুলিল। তাহার বিহ্বল আবিষ্ট তন্ময় মুখ হইতে কখন বসনাঞ্চল শ্লথ হইয়া অবগুন্ঠন খসিয়া পড়িয়াছিল, তাহার হুশ ছিল না।
>
> Giri's anxious heart echoed again and again with the rhythms of the melody. From her overwhelmed, absorbed, and entranced face, the hem of her saree had loosened and her veil had slipped, though she remained entirely unaware.
>
> (Bandyopadhyay, 'Harāno Sura', 51)

These lines capture the deep emotional turbulence that Giri experiences as she immerses herself in the song.

The spiritual and sensual dimensions of the performance merge when Giri loses herself in the rhythm of the song, signifying a moment of transcendence:

> ... দীপ্ত চোখেমুখে অন্তরের ঝংকার যেন ফুটিয়া বাহির হইতেছিল।
>
> ... the radiance in her eyes and face seemed to release the inner resonance of her soul outward.
>
> (Bandyopadhyay, 'Harāno Sura', 51)

Here Bandyopadhyay illustrates the power of music to transport individuals beyond the limitations of their worldly existence, bringing them closer to the divine. Giri's ecstatic response reflects the ideal of *bhakti*, where devotion is not purely intellectual or ritualistic but deeply emotional and physical. The rhythm and music of the *kīrtana* becomes a form of spiritual surrender as Giri, like Rādhā, loses herself in the memory of her beloved. For Giri, the song transcends mere storytelling; it becomes a channel for her own emotions. The passion and yearning described in the verse evoke not only Rādhā's longing for Kṛṣṇa but also Giri's own unfulfilled desire for connection with her husband Nonipal.

In the story's climax, Giri's longing to unite with her cosmic self reaches its culmination. Having planned to leave for Vrindavan in search of spiritual fulfilment, Giri hears Nonipal playing his flute again. In this moment, she exclaims:

এই তো আমার তীর্থ মধুর, মধুর বংশী বাজে,
এই তো বৃন্দাবন।

This is my sweet pilgrimage, the sweet melody of the flute,
This is my Vrindavan.

(Bandyopadhyay, 'Harāno Sura', 56)

This final moment represents the reconciliation of worldly love and spiritual devotion. Giri no longer needs a journey to Vrindavan, the sacred space of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa's cosmic love, because she realizes that her union with Nonipal is itself a form of cosmic communion (56). The music, once lost, is found again, and through it the couple's estranged love is restored in a spiritual context. The composition beautifully blends rich poetic imagery with musical depth, delicately intertwining sensuality and the emotive essence of melodies. The dense poetic imagery of the Vaishnava short stories is delicately balanced with the sensuality of the *bhāva*s latent in these melodies and expressions.

In the story, the exploration of the cosmic play between Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa within the domestic lives of the Vaiṣṇava figures in the rural landscape of Birbhum brings the sacredness and sublimity of the tradition into the localized everyday space of a rural household. The story 'Harāno Sura' intertwines the spiritual, the sensual, and the humane, illustrating how music becomes a bridge between earthly existence and cosmic love. The title symbolizes a spiritual quest for a lost musical tune. Through the experiences of Nonipal and Giri, the story delves into the delicate interplay between the universal human struggle to pursue worldly responsibilities on the one hand, and spiritual longing on the other, ultimately suggesting that true fulfilment lies in harmonizing the two. Bandyopadhyay's story implies that the emotional expressions are too deep and dense to be sustained by mere speech and that only music can provide a sufficiently profound commentary on the nature of love, devotion, and spirituality among the Bangla Vaiṣṇavas.

Conclusion

This study has focused on short stories of Bandyopadhyay featuring characters loosely based on the Vaiṣṇavas of rural Bengal. Our research has made language and the everydayness of life the thematic core of the analysis. In common with the literary genius of his times and of the previous era, Bandyopadhyay's portrayals of Vaiṣṇavas do not pertain to the orthodox practices latent in the rituals and beliefs of the people. They are 'human', reflecting flaws of thought and action, instead of being target-oriented in terms of the high idealism and dense spiritualism that is the original spiritual quest of the Vaiṣṇavas. These stories present a picture of a vibrant, popular, and enduring tradition, intricately woven into the quotidian fabric of Bengali rural life and aesthetics. The tales are enriched by the divine love of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa and present the domestic trivialities of lovers who grapple with physical desires, longing, and the complexities of betrayal. The approach of the stories towards marriage and love often incorporates erotic symbolism, with the intimacy between a man and a woman serving as a metaphor to express the relationship between the human and the cosmic. Bandyopadhyay's works vividly portray

the spectrum of human emotions such as pain, doubt, anger, love, tenderness, and submission. In their symbolic interplay these stories combine the mundane and earthy expressions of rural Birbhum with profound spiritual melodies, opening a fascinating window onto the lives of Bengal's Vaiṣṇava figures.

The melodies and expressions within the short stories of Bandyopadhyay may be read as 'Earthsongs' written in the hope that they might provide solace to people battered by the harsh realities of everyday life. These stories emerge from within the depths of the land and are therefore connected to the colloquial expressions, raw emotions, and social realities of pre-independence India. But these stories may still provide hope in the twenty-first century. The uniqueness of the themes offered by 'Rasakāli' and 'Harāno Sura' lies in their departure from the predominantly tragic depictions within rural narratives. Despite hardships and social constraints, the characters discover meaningful forms of happiness along their individual journeys. Their serio-comic endings affirm the possibility of hope, renewal, and self-discovery, highlighting values that remain universally resonant in our own times, when individuals continue to seek solace amidst the complexities of modern life.

Engaging with Bandyopadhyay's stories may be challenging for scholars and students alike. The language of the stories can be difficult for the present generation of scholarship to engage with critically. There is a risk that surface-level interpretation of these stories may result in either over-simplification or extreme sociological objectification. The layers of meaning and the nuances of syntax offer more challenge than ease of access to the twenty-first-century reader, who may not be acquainted with the rural vocabulary or the philosophical depths of Bandyopadhyay's literary world-vision. The discerning reader must understand the spiritual completeness and abandonment of the *self* in the Vaiṣṇava traditions. A temporal distance separates these stories from the accelerated nature of reality in the present times, so readers of literature may have to travel the extra mile through time and space in order to critically appreciate the characters of these stories. However, these stories are deeply rooted in the Indian traditions and must be encountered on their own terms. Their power lies in the physical and emotional landscape that they offer. Bandyopadhyay invites his readers to appreciate that world, rather than attempting to change it. It may be rewarding for critical studies to explore some of the profound human experiences offered by such literary texts, especially within India's rural heartlands.

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