

# *Barishaler Jogen Mandal*: Construal of the Undisputed Dalit Leader of Undivided Bengal through a Twenty-first Century Bengali Novel

Suhasini Roy<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

*Barishaler Jogen Mandal* is a Bengali novel by Debes Ray, published in 2010 from Kolkata, India. The book revisits the socio-political arena of Bengal during the final decade of colonial rule by construing Namasudra politician Jogendranath Mandal (1904–1968) as the central figure. This article studies the novel as a literary appendage to anti-caste thought—as an attempt to reclaim the Dalit history of the nation and re-establish the significance of J.N. Mandal in the history of anti-caste politics. My reading of the novel reflects Bakhtinian perspective of inseparability between form and content. The novel traces evolution of J.N. Mandal's political disposition through novelisation of history, while addressing the nation building processes in late colonial South Asia and developing conceptual understanding of Dalithood in terms of imposed powerlessness as well as wisdom and culture acquired in the intimate connection they share with the habitat through everyday struggle for survival. I argue that the author develops his locus throughout the novel by adopting J.N. Mandal's own standpoint. With adherence to a definite *sudra* perspective, the text navigates history, challenging many of the discipline's standardised interpretations. It engages with the discourse of power by strategically situating itself at the peripheral locus of the Dalit life-world, and develops the narrative of power as it would appear from that fringe. By doing so, it effectually calls for a conceptual inversion of power, re-centring it in terms of Dalit history.

## Keywords

Jogen Mandal/ Jogendranath Mandal; Bengal 1937–1947; novelisation; Bengali novel; caste-system; schedule caste politics; Debes Ray

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of History, Shibpur Dinobundhoo Institution (College), West Bengal, India & Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of History, University of Calcutta, West Bengal, India

The mutuality of relationship between social sciences and literature is well-recognised in current academia. Dalit literature, for example, occupies an increasingly significant place in caste studies—the unique autobiographical approach of Dalit literary tradition remarkably expanding our understanding of subaltern life-world. The present study, however, engages with the discourse connecting caste and literature by underpinning the versatility of novel as a literary genre. Reviewing a contemporary Bengali novel based on anti-caste politician Jogendranath Mandal, this article develops a critique of the history of caste in late colonial Bengal. It analyses the novelistic representations of the caste system, Dalit life-realities, caste politics and its relation to wider nationalistic politics and state. By exploring the novel's powerful stand against the elements of sustained caste-Hindu domination in the society and politics of contemporary India, this study partakes to the discourse that connects caste studies with literary theories.

*Barishaler Jogen Mandal (Jogen Mandal of Barisal)* (Ray, 2010) is a Bengali novel by Debes Ray (1936–2020), published in 2010 from Kolkata, India. This over-1000 page book revisits the socio-political arena of undivided Bengal, and locates it within the broader Indian and wider imperial contexts during the final decade of colonial rule, by construing Namasudra<sup>1</sup> politician Jogendranath Mandal (1904–1968) as the central figure. The author delves into the socio-cultural edifices of caste in Bengal through the depiction of the deltaic-riverine Eastern Bengal as the quintessential Namasudra habitat. The novel depicts J.N. Mandal's entry into politics from a humble background in light of the widening opportunity for Dalit entry into mainstream politics with the Act of 1935 and the ensuing provincial elections in 1937—Mandal, though himself elected from a general seat, was representing a 'moment of political awakening'. His rise to the height of the undisputed Namasudra leader in undivided Bengal has been chronicled in relation to the complex and layered ideological and interest groups that interplayed in the mainstream politics of pre-independence Bengal. His distinct political line that focused on politico-ideological departure and autonomy from Varna-Hindu superiority, according to the novelist, is a significant phenomenon in the history of Bengal's caste movement. Mandal demanded political participation for the most downtrodden sections of Bengali society—the Dalits and the Muslim masses who were historically pushed to the social and political periphery. His leadership, for the time being, did ensure political representation of these marginalised groups at the provincial, and potentially at the national level of politics. By identifying strata of marginalisation present in colonised political existence, and probing into the roots of rapidly increasing communal tensions in Bengal, the text, at the same time, problematises our understanding of 'nation', as the concept evolved in India's colonised public life. The author argues that conceptual underpinnings of nationalism, despite attributes of colonial derivative, presented multivarious political possibilities through pluralistic and sometimes contradictory imaginations of *desh* and *jaati* and therefore questions the exclusivist trends in (and readings of) nationalism as

<sup>1</sup>Earlier known as *Chandala* (or *chaadaal* in Bengali), Namasudra is a downtrodden community in Bengal that belonged outside and below the four-fold Varna strata. The community acquired the name *namasudra* in the process of engagement in an upward social mobility movement during the colonial decades.

a product of elite domination. Our perception of the history of Indian nationalism, he remarks, needs to go beyond the elite tropes. The novel unfolds the multiple layers in the operation of power politics—including issues like colonial authoritarianism, to right-wing manoeuvring and ego conflicts between national and provincial level Congress leadership—as it construes J.N. Mandal's political career in the late 1930s and early 1940s. The space for Dalit political participation and their acceptance within nationalistic politics that Mandal searched for, as the undisputed Namasudra leader, was lost during 1946–47 in the context of political marginalisation and heightened communal tension in War and Famine-ridden Bengal, and in the haste of political manoeuvring for transfer of power. The novel is an attempt towards re-reading and de-coding of history to search for the factors that caused not only Mandal's political failure, but his eventual erasure from popular memory. The narrative of his political life and its potential must remain a significant phase in the history of Dalit struggle, more so in the context of the current rise in right-wing politics that increasingly attempts to mould Dalit politics. With these concerns, in this article, I share my experience of reading of the novel. This article contemplates the novel for being a literary appendage to anti-caste thought and intends an analytical understanding of the Dalit perspective represented in it.

Debes Ray's novels are characteristic in their representation of peripheral life world. He started writing in the 1950s and in his seven-decades long literary career has produced over forty novels, hundreds of short stories, and a number of non-fictional work including literary critique and studies on literary theory. Born in a Hindu upper-caste middle-class family in a small town in north Bengal, he was politically involved with the Communist Parties since an early age and his literary endeavours should be placed within the urban Left intellectual milieu of that time. Though he became distant from direct party politics later, imbued in his writing is a strong belief in Marxist ideology, blended with his litterateur's self-commitment to represent the polyphonic reality of his time. Multifarious life-realities in post-colonial South Asia form the theme of his writings and his works reflect life in its 'totality'—achieved through realistic and intricate contextualisation of the individual in her/his lifeworld. This pursuit for artistic totality reinforces a belief that art, though a representation and thus innately superficial in nature, must conform to the realities of the lived world. Novelisation, in his writing, is an aesthetic experience that implicates new signifier(s) to the individual's mundane and everyday life-moments by situating it in the wider spatial-temporal canvas. He is a critic of the essentialization of the West-centric notion of novel as a literary genre and emphasises the need and scope for integrating indigenous knowledge and storytelling formats in novel writing (Ray, 1994). Continuous experimentation with forms is indeed a key feature of his novels. We will see how many of these traits are present in *Barishaler Jogen Mandal*.

The author has premised his work on a theory of inseparable mutuality of form and content in the making of this novel. The novel recreates the past through exquisite narration, dynamic conversations, realistic characterisation of historical figures and narrative reconstruction of events using detailing as a key technique. As a novel founded on history, it adheres to absolute factual authenticity (Ray invested

much time and effort to collect data for the novel) and the text deserves merit for the historical depiction of Jogendranath Mandal, a relatively less studied figure in current scholarship, and for the analytical framework with which the author explains political events and situations during 1937 and 1947. Composed during the early years of the twenty-first century, it provides a rich ground for colligating our contemporary experience with this crucial phase in the history of the Indian subcontinent. However, merely an appreciation for the narrativization of history would indicate a very limited reading of the text. The distinctive reconstruction of history in this novel is a product of the author's cognizant perspective and theoretical position. The novel addresses the evolution of J.N. Mandal's political disposition through novelisation of history, and at the same time embraces his own viewpoint for revisiting the familiar history of nationalistic politics of the time. The author defines his locus in the novel through J.N. Mandal. By espousing him, the text develops and articulates its position that situates itself at a farthest point in the spectrum of power. With adherence to this definite *shudra* perspective, the text navigates history, challenging many of the discipline's standardised interpretations and in the process problematising our understanding of dimension and scope for Dalit political thought. Throughout the expanse of the novel, the author exercises fluent interchangeability between his own voice and that of his protagonist. At the crux of this dynamic engagement with Jogendranath Mandal lies a fundamental affinity the author shares with his protagonist. The novel holds on to this historical figure not only for his life account, but also for framing the ideas and theoretical foundation for the novel. The author here has tasked himself to reconstruct life-stories of Mr. Mandal by adopting his own standpoint. In other words, the approach of the novel is not only to expound but to adopt Mandal's own standpoint to revisit politics of his time and utilise this perspective to form an understanding of our contemporary politics. In that sense, J.N. Mandal is simultaneously the purpose and the subject for this novel.

The novel is an attempt to reconstruct nation-building processes in late colonial South Asia from the viewpoint of this Dalit leader.<sup>2</sup> The author subscribes to this primary point that the modern history of South Asia would remain incomplete without its understanding and interpretation from a Dalit standpoint. Throughout the stretch of the novel, Ray highlights the institutionalisation of power in everyday living through his exploration of caste system, colonial authority, communalism, nationalistic politics with its social predispositions, and other socio-cultural circumstances that regulated life in late colonial Bengal. The text engages with the discourse of power by strategically situating itself at the peripheral locus of Dalit life-world, and develops the narrative of power as it would appear from that fringe. By doing so, it effectually calls for a conceptual inversion of power, recentring it in terms of Dalit history.

The novel is significant in anti-caste studies featuring two vital aspects: first, it is a literary attempt to reclaim Dalit history of the nation and second, in connection to the

---

<sup>2</sup>Twentieth-century Bengal's caste-politics doesn't identify itself with the term *Dalit*. Debes Ray has used *sudra* in the novel. In this article I have interchangeably used both terms to denote politics and identity of the Dalits.

former, it re-establishes the significance of J.N. Mandal, an almost forgotten figure,<sup>3</sup> in the history of Bengal's anti-caste politics.

I intend to present my reading of the novel in four interconnected but thematically divided sub-sections dealing with the author's conceptualisation of *sudra* identity as being defined and redefined in history in terms of social and political structures of power (and powerlessness); Dalit politics in relation to nationalistic political formulations; distinctiveness of J.N. Mandal's political thought; and the eventual failure of his political line in the backdrop of War and Famine-ridden Bengal during the final years of transfer of power. My reading of the text endeavours to decode the narrative of power that has been portrayed and challenged in the novel through the author-subject union.

### **Sudratva**

The novel understands Dalit life reality and identity formation in connection to structural and ideological administration of power in everyday life. Constant marginalisation and conscious degradation of their cultural world stands at one end of the spectrum of *sudra* life. At the other end lies the unbound wonders that take place in lives sustained through labour and archaic coexistence with nature. The author indicates how this second aspect induces an inbuilt structural autonomy for *sudra* existence, beyond the domination of power. The novel is thus an attempt towards redefining *sudratva* (Dalit-hood), while conceptually extending its relation to power beyond the trope of domination-hegemony.

J.N. Mandal belonged to the Namasudra community that for long inhabited the riverine deltaic tracts of eastern Bengal, was traditionally engaged in various labour-intensive and menial occupations, and since the late nineteenth century experienced a process of social mobilisation (Sanyal, 1981) facilitated by introduction of cash crops like jute that brought a degree of economic stability for some within the community and utilising the new socio-cultural opportunities in the advent of British rule. The meaning of *sudratva* is reconstructed through persistent and well-manifested references to the socially entrenched forms of upper-caste domination in the Namasudra life. Belonging to the lowest level of caste hierarchy, to serve the upper-caste objective of sustaining status quo, is what defines *sudratva*. It is through continued degradation of the *sudra*'s social and cultural status that the upper castes reinforce their privileged position within the Hindu society. *Sudratva*, in this sense, is the flip side of the scheme of power. By focusing on Dalit life-world, the author searches for an alternative understanding of *sudratva* that accepts the latter as a prominent social reality but endeavours to challenge the elite-constructed meanings of it.

An embedded narrative within the novel retells an incident where a zamindar penalised and restrained a *sudra* by cutting his tongue off for his ostensible audacity of failing to convince a sahib when asked to provide a full name during an interrogation,

<sup>3</sup>Scholarship on Bengal's caste politics, for long, has failed to comprehend J.N. Mandal's role. For example, Sekhar Bandyopadhyay has discussed him little (Bandyopadhyay, 2004). Recently, Dwaipayan Sen's publication, however, is a significant attempt towards amendment (Sen, 2018)

that a Dalit's lowness implicates he shouldn't even deserve a surname. Incidents like this are inevitably ingrained in Dalit collective memory, violent and forced subjugation had been, and continues to be, such an incessant part of their life. Reading the novel in 2021, a reader may draw reference of a recent incident that received some degree of media attention—the Hathras rape case in 2020 (UP),<sup>4</sup> where the victim's (a young Dalit girl) tongue was taken off in a final blow of violence. Entrenched in deliberate and ruthless modes of silencing for generations, Sudratva, no doubt, is the 'tongue of a cut-off tongue'.

Hegemonic relations are often so engraved in Dalit life and subjugation so all-pervasive that an illusory harmony is created and entailed in the habitual forms of cohabitation with the upper castes.

[T]he Namasudras are so mingled, in everyday life, with the Brahmin-Vaidya-Kayastha households, that both the parties observe the diverse strictures of untouchability almost unconsciously, producing no apparent discord. Due to such long-standing relationship, many Namasudras... unwittingly imagine unified Brahmin-Shudra life to be real—can a Brahmin sustain himself without the sudra's labour? Likewise, can the sudras even breath [*sic*] without a Brahmin's shadow over them? Rules of untouchability, *jalchal-jal-achal*, taboos on touch and food—all these strictures, enduring hundreds of years of sustenance, are now so solid that neither the Brahmin nor the sudra need to remember the boundary...it genuinely creates an illusion of oneness...as if, these [the strictures] are external to actual living... (Ray, 2010, p. 299)

But even the apparent imperceivability of boundary is undoubtedly an illusion, effectively maintained only to sustain the implanted injustice in social practices of caste hierarchy.

The depreciative sudra existence, as essentially entailed in everyday practices of labour and work, is also intimately connected to the surroundings—the land and the environment to which the community belonged. Sudratva thus shares material as well as conceptual inseparability with the landscape and in turn gives a specific character to it. The author explores this mutuality of relationship in the context of the Namasudras and their habitat of the deltaic-riverine plains of middle and south Bengal. Namasudra predominance in the *bils* (marshland) of Khulna, Jessore, Faridpur, Barisal, Dhaka, Comilla, and Pabna can be traced back to the early colonial decades—presumably in consequence of 1770s Bengal famine that uprooted a large section of peasants and following the 1778 Dhaka flood that created these *bils* and *chars*, some of whom may have resettled in these marshlands. Situated at a geological confluence connecting the catchment basins of Bengal's major rivers and their tributaries with the deltaic estuaries of Sundarbans, this marshy swampy land is an assemblage of thousands of everchanging and often unpredictable waterbodies. Life-forms here are essentially determined by habits of water, and humans may make living possible in this uncertain marshland only through profound ecological knowledge and intensive

<sup>4</sup>For details see <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/hathras-gangrape-case-dalit-woman-up-police-6669922/>

labour. The Namasudras and Faraiji Muslims are primary agriculturalists here who had transformed the landscape into a remarkably high-productive agricultural zone. In the author's terminology this 'mythical-mysterious' landscape is the *Sudrabhoomi*—land of the sudras.

If cultural-ecological marginality of Sudrabhoomi and the community's socio-economic desperation are at one end of the sudratva spectrum, at the other end it touches upon the eternal connection that human labour shares with habitat in the history of civilisation. Intimate cohabitation with water and the wisdom to produce crops, a large variety of high-quality rice, in the marshlands, are key features of Namasudra life. Water and cultivation are thus prevalent in the community's folk repertoire, producing legends of mythical crops that magically harvest within a single night and enables the mother goddess to provide even for the insatiable begging hands of the God. In the author's explication, myths like this happen essentially in the context of everyday struggle for survival through labour, and are sustained to reinforce the community's right to its produce. Such cultural constructs are integral to sudra living and identity.

Ray evinces how the conceptual underpinning of Mandal's political philosophy was essentially rooted in sudratva—both in terms of the lived realities of marginalisation, and in affective spatiality of belongingness. Reconstruction of the Namasudra life world is a central theme of the novel, not only for its reflection on Mandal's background, but for providing the theoretical foundation upon which the author rebuilds the political history of late colonial Bengal and posits J.N. Mandal within it. To comprehend dimensions of his politics, however, we need to trace the novel's trajectory that locates the Dalits in relation to the history and discourse of Indian nationalism.

## **Colonialism, nationalism, and the Dalits in Nation-Building Processes**

Debes Ray develops a critical understanding of the history of Indian nationalism in this novel. The last decade under colonial rule, in his observation, was crucial for giving final shape to the concepts of 'nation' that emerged and were rehearsed in the subcontinent's public life for the preceding two centuries. The formation of the first provincial governments by the Indians in the 1937 elections following the Government of India Act of 1935, despite the restricted nature of native autonomy, was a significant step towards the political realisation of the Indian nation. The author identifies how the pluralistic possibilities in historical imaginations of 'nation' were politically underplayed, making Partition inevitable. The text engages with existing academic scholarship in formulating a nuanced understanding of Indian nationalism. Debes Ray is critical of many strands in the historiography of Indian nationalism including negation of nationalistic politics as a powerplay (as done by the Cambridge school) (Seal, 1971) and the 'derivative discourse' and fragmentary models of nationalism (Chakrabarty, 2002; Chatterjee, 1993).

Ray believes that the conceptual affinity of nationalism with European Enlightenment and Western rationality rendered an imbued modernity. At the level

of practise, however, a colonised or capitalistic socio-political setup accounted for its self-contradictions. While the Indian political leaders were struggling to construct achievable visions for a free Indian nation, the colonial administration was keen to exploit/utilise their dilemmas. Throughout, Indian nationalism retained a strong caste Hindu and elite bias/character. Hindu nationalism aimed to engulf all alternate visions for the nation—in a similar vein of Brahmanism's attempt to absorb the sectarian, ethnic and even religious diversities within its fold. The Indian National Congress, despite being the largest and most significant nationalist organisation, failed to go beyond its Hindu character. Its failure to acknowledge Jinnah, to utilise a non-hegemonic position of the Muslim League to represent Muslim politics even in 1937–38, and to befriend the alternate Muslim political groups, especially those in the Muslim majority provinces, resulted in rapid estrangement of Muslim population from the mainstay of India's freedom movement and, in turn, to politico-religious consolidation of identity. By the 1940s the alienation became complete with the Muslim League's two nation theory, and the gulf unbreachable in context of heightened communal tension, thus finalising the triumph of orthodoxy in both communities. It is true that the British government's 'divide and rule' policy nurtured communalism, yet, it was essentially rooted within the Indian social hierarchy. Nationalism, thus, should be comprehended in relation to both what it was and whom/what it excluded—the limitations as well as the possibilities it contained. The author's understanding of Dalit politics is premised on this theoretical understanding.

Due to the elite character of nationalist politics, both the lower castes and the Muslims remained largely dissociated from the mainstay of Bengal's political sphere. Some communities, including the Namasudras, underwent what is called the 'social mobilisation'—a socio-religious movement consequential to the betterment of the socio-economic position of some members within the community and aimed to achieve greater acceptance within the caste hierarchy through renewed self-proclamation. Matua sectarian movement of the Namasudras exemplifies this process of social mobilisation. The first Matua guru denounced the nationalist movement and instructed his followers to be loyal to the British rulers. Roots of this loyalty should be traced in the social and educational opportunities Dalits could enjoy due to colonial intervention in Indian society. However, since the 1920s, some amongst the educated and socially established members of Dalit communities associated themselves with mainstream Indian politics. Most leaders from the Dalit communities achieved political eminence as part of their social accomplishment, through which they managed to uplift their status to meet that of the upper caste bhadraloks. These leaders often joined one or more of the existing political parties like the INC, the KPP and the Hindu Mahasabha. While they remained emotionally connected to the community and wished for their own people's betterment, their political activities failed to identify Dalit agendas or promote Dalit political solidarity. In Bengal, thus, Dalit politics was under-pronounced for long, a fact that perhaps prompted some scholars to argue that caste discrimination was unimportant in modern Bengal's social hierarchy. Debes Ray offers a critique of this formulation through his portrayal of J.N. Mandal, with whom, he shows, a new and promising phase of Dalit politics began in Bengal.

## **J.N. Mandal's Brand of Dalit Politics: 'Sudras are not Hindu'**

J.N. Mandal stepped into politics by contesting the Legislative Assembly elections of Bengal in 1937 as an independent candidate in a general seat from Maistarkandi. He came from a poor Namasudra family who earned from boat-making and other menial jobs. By 1937, he was already a bright young lawyer in Barisal High Court. His humble origins coupled with the indepth knowledge of local issues which he highlighted during election campaigns, accounted for his acceptability among the Namasudras and the Muslims—the newly enfranchised mass of Barisal. His victory in 1937 against the Congress candidate, who was a local zamindar and nephew of legendary nationalist Aswinikumar Dutt, implied that a significant section of Barisal's urban educated bhadralok recognised this son of the soil as pioneer of a new political awakening in the aftermath of the Government of India Act (1935). Though Ambedkar failed to ensure separate electorate for Dalits due to Gandhi's staunch opposition, the Award of 1932 was indeed an important stepping stone for the scheduled castes who were granted reserved seats. It enabled the Dalit population to get substantial political representation for the first time. Mandal was the most promising candidate amongst the newly elected SC MLAs, and he became the first secretary of the Bengal Assembly's Independent Scheduled Caste Members League, created after declaration of election results. Thus, the Bengali scheduled caste leadership accredited him as an able leader to carry forward Dalit solidarity.

Under Mandal's leadership, independent Scheduled Caste MLAs did not provide support to the first KPP-Muslim League coalition government in Bengal but maintained an issue-specific negotiable position. Throughout, Mandal's political strategy was to extract political gain for the Dalits utilising SC numerical presence in the Assembly. His major political decisions, including his refusal of Fazlul Huq's offer of ministership in 1939, and joining as Law minister in Nazimuddin and Surawardi's governments should be explained in terms of this prudential approach and politico-ideological integrity imbued in his personality.

J.N. Mandal realised that the true source of his power lies with the newly enfranchised scheduled caste-Muslim combination of voters, and always prioritised political accountability towards them. Immediately after acquiring MLA-ship he took initiative to renovate a local school at Agailjhara, named after Namasudra activist Bhegai Halder. In 1940 he assisted the Leftist leaders to organise Mahilara Krishak Sammilan (peasants' gathering at Mahilara) and participated with the Muslim and Namasudra cultivators in the excavation of an irrigation canal. During the devastating Bhola cyclone that wiped out lower Bengal, he made it a priority to reach the affected areas in person at the earliest, even risking his life, to take account of the situation and to ensure the quickest manoeuvring of relief. These are only a few illustrations from the novel reflecting his passion, leadership quality and political commitment.

A staunch anti-communal stand has been highlighted as another significant aspect of Mandal's political disposition. The novel depicts several episodes in his political career where he was at the forefront in mitigating communal riots. His experiences made him aware that what surfaced as 'Hindu-Muslim riot' often involved caste-Hindu ploy of manipulating Namasudras into enmity against the Muslims. He recognised

class affinity among scheduled castes and the Muslims, and this understanding is reflected in his unhesitant declaration that Namasudras should withdraw themselves from getting involved in the Hindu-Muslim riots to protect the caste-Hindus. He was keen to propagate Dalit-Muslim cordiality based on an understanding of their shared social and economic constraints in the Bengali countryside.

In traditional Namasudra worldview, power functioned within the purview of upper-caste Hindu domination that envisioned recognition by the caste-Hindus and inclusion within the fold of the 'bhadrak' as its ultimate objective. J.N. Mandal reversed this conceptual-epistemological framework of power through his politics. He exclaimed that his goal is not to transcend the sudra identity to meet that of the caste-Hindus, but to demand the rightful share in the nation-building process by remaining a sudra, who, irrespective of the position Hindu society grants or denies them, are entitled to enjoy equal political rights as citizens. 'Shudras are not Hindu'—this exclamation in fact implies a different and bolder sudra concept of power that poses a direct challenge to caste-Hindu supremacy. This political disposition contradicts the Harijan project of Gandhi, the most powerful voice within the fold of Indian nationalism. The novel illustrates how Mandal comprehended Gandhi, despite his reverence for the great political leader, as his ultimate opponent. Rather, he embraced Ambedkar's leadership, founding the Bengal branch of The Scheduled Castes Federation.

As a leader forwarding Bengal's Dalit politics, J.N. Mandal needed to address the interface between Dalit identity and nationalist politics. This includes reshaping his perception on the anti-colonial struggle and redefining his position in relation to the multifaceted politics of nationalism. He brought himself out of Dalit's positional indifference about terrorism and radical nationalism. His affinity with the Bose brothers—Sarat and Subhas Bose, and especially his personal friendship with Subhas whom he regarded as a political mentor, brought him close to the liberal trends within Congress politics. He also developed friendship with the Communist leaders. All these substantially broadened his political perspective, though he never got formally affiliated to these parties. He contested for Calcutta Municipal Council Election in 1940. Later, as a Councillor he got involved in the Calcutta scavenger's movement, opening possibility for wider Dalit solidarity with a potential to incorporate non-Bengali and urban sectors within Bengal's scheduled caste politics. His keen interest on international politics, especially during the War years, reflects his intention to expand the horizons of Dalit politics.

Ray makes his audience aware that for J.N. Mandal, a self-made politician conscious of remaining rooted to his background while keen on acquiring power, political consciousness required resolution of contradictory images of power. Mandal hailed from a peripheral sudra community, and while he transcended the Dalit reality of powerlessness by raising demands for rightful share of power and political participation, he never dissociated himself from the world of the people he was representing. His political exclamation that 'sudras are not Hindu' is to be understood as a direct outcome of this ideological integrity. Ray demonstrates how Mandal's life and thought contested the discourse of nationalism and pose a direct challenge to the self-congratulatory nation building processes that allowed an abysmally limited, if

any, space for the Dalits. This straightforwardly anti-Varna Hindu approach, while it became the distinctive aspect in Mandal's political line, experienced very limited approval from the high rank of Bengali Scheduled caste politicians of the time. Neither were his people, the Namasudra and Muslim mass of East Bengal, prepared to grasp this ideological position as a political line. It was Mandal's personal charisma and leadership qualities that appealed to them, but for the majority, the opportunity for exercising political right was too new and required mindful renunciation of the caste system. Mandal presented a unique and promising political opportunity for Bengali scheduled caste politics, being a product of and taking advantage of the possibilities offered since the Communal Award, but the moment was lost during the final years of colonial rule and amidst the Imperial War, as we will see in the next section.

## Denial

'Denial' as the heading for final part of my discussion of the novel, denotes the situations and processes that rendered Bengal's interest forfeited during the closing phase of colonial rule, with the outcome of the cause of Bengal's scheduled caste politics manifoldly overthrown. British War policies devastated Bengal's countryside in unprecedented ways, the 1943 Famine bearing its most disgracing testament. While the inevitability, as war strategy to combat Japanese invasion, of policies such as scorched-earth, denial, and acquisition of boats—a lifeline in East Bengal countryside, is still being questioned; their horrifying consequences are definitive.<sup>5</sup> It caused unprecedented havoc in Bengal's social and political fabric. The author novelized J.N. Mandal's experience with War and Famine-ridden Bengal in several sections, the titles of which are telling: '*Juddhakshetre probesh*' (Entry into the battle-field), '*be-kabul desher tollash*' (In search of the denied land), '*aloukik aaro tallash*' (Some more of the un-worldly/mythical search), and '*loukik kichu protikaar*' (Some worldly remedies). In Debes Ray's novelistic manifestation, for Mandal, it was the time when his most familiar world was transformed into 'unreal/unworldly' (*oloukik*)—

...the world is scraping yourself off from the water that sustains you, along with the crop you cultivate from within that water, the water now must become unidentifiable and devoid of any human touch, and so does the people who belong here with that water—the shudras, once exiled from mainland and now rooted in these waterbodies for thousands of years, —must find themselves uprooted... Jogen was crossing over these denied water-world, in search for these uprooted folks... He was walking through, though his feet were never touching the ground or the water underneath. (Ray, 2010, p. 983)

In inevitable cruelty of the grand imperial War, the government and military were penetrating into the lives of common people with unprecedented alacrity, intervening in their everyday life and economy, and uprooting the majority of them. For people's leaders like J.N. Mandal, it was an acutely exasperating and hapless time when

<sup>5</sup>Recent scholarship provide detailed analysis on Bengal's War experience and consequence of colonial policies (Mukherjee, 2016) (Mukherjee, 2010).

people—both his charges and his strength—were dying and suffering, their known world soon becoming non-existent. He desperately and relentlessly worked for organising relief, utilising the little that could be manoeuvred amidst administrative confusion and chaos of War-years.

The political profile of the subcontinent was also undergoing transformation. At the national level, Gandhi was already a lone figure launching the Quit India movement, calling his fellow countrymen for a final battle against the Empire, and responding to conditions of increasing penury. Irreconcilability of the breach between the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League was more than evident, as exemplified in failure of the Cripps Mission (1942) and the Cabinet Mission (1946), and resulting in Jinnah's declaration of Direct Action Day (August 16, 1946) on the day of the formation of the Constituent Assembly. The post-War British government, on the other hand, was as manipulative as ever to ensure a hasty and less deplorable exit. Narrow self-interest of politicians and power groups raised ugly heads within the environment of intense uncertainty and political turmoil. Bengal's provincial politics was increasingly being sidelined in national politics, a trend that started with marginalisation of Subhas Bose by Congress right-wing elements and Gandhi in 1939. Relation between All India Congress Committee (AICC) and Bengal Provincial Congress Committee (BPCC) was a strained one for long, and by the end of the War, there was no heavy-weight leader from BPCC representing Bengal at the national forum. Communal polarisation already reached its zenith, triggering Great Calcutta Killing (August, 1946), Noakhali riots (October, 1946), and other perpetual massacres. Political underrepresentation, coupled with famine and communal tension, furthered marginalisation of the Dalit cause. J.N. Mandal's politics lost its ground—he was being opposed by a section of Scheduled Caste leaders (including P.R. Thakur) who criticised his proclamation of Dalit self-determination as a distinct social group claiming political right, and instead preferred a reconciliatory position in relation to wider (and more powerful) caste-Hindu society.

Geopolitical marginality of Bengal, the catastrophe induced by the colonial-Imperial War, the Famine, and the unprecedented degree of communal tension—all these conglomerated in the final years of British rule to the result of complete relinquishment of the Scheduled Caste's political autonomy. Mandal vehemently opposed India's Partition (August 1947). He was nominated by Jinnah, a Muslim League representative at 1946 Interim Government, at the cost of disapproval from his own people, both Muslims and Dalits, who by then were too polarised to accept it. Facilitating Ambedkar's electoral win from Bengal for Constituent Assembly was one of Mandal's final successes. The novel bids adieu to this exceptional historical figure at a juncture when he joins Pakistan's cabinet in 1947. Ending words of the novel narrates his journey in Karachi express to join Pakistan ministry. As the train departs, Mandal embarks on yet another uncertain path with the aim of establishing sudra's political identity. Ray writes, "Jogen requires to see himself, a sudra, the single representative of the past thousands of years of vision, that is called India. He is going to Pakistan. To remain truthful to that dreamt homeland... Who else, other than a sudra, would take the responsibility?" The novel does not cover the story of how Mandal had

to escape from Pakistan in 1950, in the face of continued riots and the authority's brutality towards the minorities, and how he had to spend his final years in Calcutta.

## Conclusion

Historical novels undertake the task of re-reading and sometimes un-reading history and through engagement with history, at the same time, it enables readers to reconnect with that past. The final decade of colonial rule had unprecedentedly impacted the lives of the people of the subcontinent. It also cast final shape to the conceptual underpinnings of statehood that would determine relations between the states and people for the nascent independent nations since 1947. In *Barishaler Jogen Mandal*, the author points to the pluralistic nature of political concepts of nation in colonial India. Hegemonizing tendencies of Varna Hindu ideologies were prevalent—sometimes even to the effect of obliterating alternative and resisting versions from the purview of discourse—but not omnipresent. Mandal's political line presents one such alternative that the novel attempts to reinstate in our collective memory. It encourages the readers in a dialogue connecting the reinterpretations of history and our present experiences concerning caste politics and social realities of caste.

The novelistic call for reorientation is founded on the belief in the potential of the novel as a literary genre to represent the totality of the lived world. The past comes alive in the novel through an expert navigation between fact and imagination. The text meticulously uses standard historical data and maintains a striking degree of authenticity in factual details and reconstruction of historical personalities. The author develops character attributes of the historical figures through realistic, lively and humorous conversations. Narrativization, while recreating the ambience, is intertwined with sharp analytical interludes. Throughout the novel, the author reorients our understanding of caste and its relation to power by redefining *sudratva*. The concept of *sudrabhoomi* has been invoked to problematise the conceptual binary that explains Varna Hindu-sudra relationship exclusively in terms of hegemony-subordination. While accepting *sudratva* as a conscious and direct state of powerlessness, the author points to the parallel realities of sudra life—realities that empower sudras through the wisdom they achieve by their labour and survival strategies, their embodied presence and intimate understanding of their habitat.

J.N. Mandal's political philosophy and practise reveal a bold attempt to fight the entrenched social and political forms upper caste superiority. He attacked varna-Hindutva at the very core by proclaiming sudra autonomy. This perpetual call for Dalit self-declaration, as traced in the novel, had its root in Dalit life-realities itself. In this sense novelisation of Mandal is in itself an act of resistance. Ray, in a self-reflective section at the end of the novel, explains how as a twenty-first century author, every day and incessant news of violence and injustice acted as a direct drive in his construal of Mandal. He reminds the reader that episodes of anti-epics are present ever in the histories and heritage of civilisation. He develops the novel and its hero, J.N. Mandal as one such episode of resistance—anti-epic—in the history of South Asia. This novelisation of Mandal, in this sense, is the author's call for his literary audience to decode history and rethink our understanding of past and present structures of power.

## References

- Bandyopadhyay, S. (2004). *Caste, culture and hegemony: Social dominance in colonial Bengal*. New Delhi: SAGE Publications India.
- Chakrabarty, D. (2002). *Habitations of modernity: Essays in the wake of subaltern studies*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Chatterjee, P. (1993). *The nation and its fragments: Colonial and postcolonial histories*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Mukerjee, M. (2010). *Churchill's secret war: The British empire and the ravaging of India during World War II*. New York: Basic Books.
- Mukherjee, J. (2016). *Hungry Bengal: War, famine and the end of empire*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ray, D. (1994). *Upnyaser Natun Dharaner Khonje*. Kolkata: Dey's Publishing.
- Ray, D. (2010). *Barishaler Jogen Mandal*. Kolkata: Dey's Publishing.
- Sanyal, H. (1981). *Social mobility in Bengal*. Calcutta: Papyrus.
- Seal, A. (1971). *The emergence of Indian nationalism: Competition and collaboration in the later nineteenth century*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Sen, D. (2018). *The decline of the caste question: Jogendranath Mandal and the defeat of Dalit politics in Bengal*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.