

Reconstructing Narrative Space, Memory, and Every day Present in Tarashankar Bandopadhyay's The Tale of Hansuli Turn

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Abstract

Village life and community, the sense of belonging to the 'place' they live in, the events of history they observed as an individual and as a community, the thread of nostalgic moments interlace the several generations altogether. The past belongs not to Individuals but to the group who constantly redefined it as means to control the everyday present. Today it is almost impossible to read contents in the field of history that do not mention the phrase "collective memory" or its supplementary equivalent "narrative". Indeed, the twofold manifestation of these phrases is in no way coincidental.

The text chosen is Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay's Hansuli Banker Upakatha, or The Tale of Hansuli Turn. Change of time is inevitable and so is the change in people and their way of life. The "Upokotha" (fables) of Hansuli Bak is a tussle between stagnation and mobility. The author portrays a complex transition in which a marginal caste fragments and mutates under the pressure of local and global forces maintaining a sympathetic outlook to the desires of both older and younger

generations. The use of the 'place', community and the experience in relation to different generation's shifts with the change of narrative point of view from the marginalized aboriginals to landowning caste and even a tree or a city space or a barren island becomes the markers of locality and memory. And nostalgia is the dominant principle that binds together the collective experience and memory of the group.

Key-words: Memory, Place, History, Community, Narrative

Introduction

Village is an umbrella term associated with a whole lot of other phrases like community, society and people with their uniqueness of culture and tradition. And with community come their tradition and rituals, their festivals and celebrations, language and other modes of expression, the economic and social condition, intricated with caste discrimination and how it controls their modes of expression and

everyday life. Despite the volume and intricacy of the social group, the group needs to build and maintain an identity that unites its members. A social group's identity is constructed with narratives and traditions that are fashioned to give its members a sense of community. Collective thought required individuals to physically and spiritually bond together to create a mutual experience which was shared within the community. As Durkheim claimed that the collective effervescence provided the transmission of the past to the present and the stress on shared thought was based upon individual memory and the celebrations triggered those memories. Memory has an operational role, in both the marketing of the development and in the creation of the place and all its associated values. A place where memories of a lifetime are made, it's more than a home; it's a group rich with traditional charm and an eye on the future. Thus 'memory' and 'community' are marked jointly. The rituals, incidents, festivals or celebration bridges the relationship of memory, particularly in its collective form and its ability to create a sense of 'identity' and 'community'.

The text that is chosen for this particular study is *The Tale of the Hansuli Turn* (Bengali: *Hansuli Baker Upokotha*) by Tarashankar Bandopadhyay.

Theme of the Text in Reference

Hansuli Baker Upokotha is a novel by Tarashankar Bandopadhyay. Set in 1941, this novel explores the life in rural Bengal, the realities of the Zamindari system that was responsible for much of the social inequalities in Bengal, and as well as the changes in social perceptions with time. A terrifying sound disturbs the peace of Hansuli Turn, a forest village in Bengal, and the community gashes as to its meaning. Is it portent that the apocalyptic departure of the gods is near or is there a more rational explanation? The Kahars belong to an untouchable "criminal tribe", the inhabitants of Hansuli Turn soon to be epically transformed by the effects of World War II and India's independence movement. Their leading man, Bonwari, advocates the ethics of an older time, but his fragile philosophy proves no match for the overpowering machines of war. As younger villagers led by the rebel Karali look for other meanings and a different way of life, Bonwari and the village elders come to believe the gods have abandoned them.

While the two sections struggle, codes of authority, religion, sex, and society begin to break down, and amid deadly conflict and



natural disaster, Karali seizes his chance to change his people's future. Sympathetic to the desires of both older and younger generations, Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay depicts a difficult transition in which a marginal caste fragments and mutates under the pressure of local and global forces. The novel's handling of the language of this rural society sets it apart from other works of its time, while the village's struggles anticipate the dilemmas of rural development, ecological and economic exploitation, and dalit militancy that would occupy the centre of India's post-Independence politics.

Negotiating the colonial depredations of the 1939--45 war and the oppressions of an agrarian caste system, the Kahars both fear and desire the consequences of a revolutionized society and the loss of their culture within it. Lyrically rendered by one of India's great novelists, this story of one people's plight dramatizes the anxieties of a nation and the resistance of some to further marginalization.

The Original Author and His Times

Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay (1898–1971) is one of the main figures in twentieth-century Bengali literature, the author of

more than fifty novels and hundreds of short stories. Tarashankar was born into a prosperous Bengali Brahmin landowning family in the rural town of Labhpur, Birbhum, Bengal. For most people at Labhpur, life begins and ends with the magic of Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay. They nurture themselves under the nostalgia of a man whose humble being touched the endless chords of world literature and immortalized Bengali folk life and lifestyle.

Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay's *Hansuli Banker Upakatha*, or *The Tale of Hansuli Turn*, tells the story of an India modernized by the forces of war in the mid-twentieth century. The novel was composed across the cusp of India's official concurrence to independent nation-statehood and was in print in various versions between 1946 and 1951. It first appeared in a much shorter version in a special annual Durga festival issue of *Ananda Bazar Patrika* in 1946.

Deconstruction of the Novel and the Relevance of the Study

Hansuli Turn is unusual in at least two respects. First, it tries to represent sympathetically the frightening (and seductive) shapes of the new

from within the imaginative universe and philosophy of the old. Second, it takes as central a set of subaltern protagonists, drawn from the very lowest and most marginalized strata of rural society. It names the shifting and heterogeneous positions that are cut off from the lines of intellectual and social mobility, and institutionalized agency, in colonial and postcolonial society. In *Hansuli Turn*, as in other places, the representation of subalternity turns on the philosophical paradox of its coming to a crisis and exceeding the codes by which it remains subaltern. Rural society in India is extremely differentiated and diverse, and it would be a mistake to assume that all novels about rustic protagonists, peasants and others, are dealing with common types of figures or even with subalterns at all. On the one hand, the spectacular and lengthy comparison between Eastern and Western regions of Bengal at the very opening of the novel appears to be redundant to the plot and constitutes a parenthesis that diverges conspicuously from the momentum of the opening's urgent mystery (4–6). But it places the reader in relation to a sedimented coding of “Bengal” that is not just social, political, and historical but also cultural and literary. On the other hand, the novel is an account of a much more general problem of literary representation: it is an experiment in how to “do” novels in India, of how to make “tale” (*upakatha*) into

“novel” (*upanyas*) across divisions not specifically defined by region.

The novel's main protagonist and focalizer, meaning the character whose “vision” is given words by the narrator, is Bonwari Kahar. Much of the novel is vectored through his thought world, his imaginative universe and philosophy, which, along with the other village elders such as Suchand Kahar, exemplifies the values of the “old” world for the novel. Bonwari is a subaltern figure, though drawn from the upper spaces of subalternity. He is the village headman and protector of its dharma (broadly speaking, ethical and religious principles), to whom responsibility means a complex relationship of loyalty and subordination to the quasi-feudal masters of village and town, and adherence to the prescriptions of gods and forefathers that comprehend any threat to these as a threat to the moral and existential order itself. *Hansuli Turn* represents a space in which pre-colonial temporalities, structures of myth, memory, and ritual, practical arrangements of everyday life, and imaginative patterns are powerfully residual.

However, I must immediately qualify the statement that emphasizes the contrast between new and old in *Hansuli Turn*. The old is not to be taken as referring to some kind of pristine, archaic tradition brought into contact with the novel's key indices of modernity (the forces of war and capital as the machines of development in the twentieth century). The Kahars, the untouchable collective protagonist of the novel, are not traditional in any uncomplicated way. As they are depicted in *Hansuli Turn*, they too are the product of an earlier wave of transformation, the British colonization of India, displaced from an unknown elsewhere and brought to their present location and function by the vicissitudes of colonial capital and indigenous class/caste hierarchy.

As the novel's narrator tells us:

The real meaning can be found in the old papers of the Chaudhury house. All those papers have now almost disappeared, devoured by termites. There are still a few whole bits and pieces in piles of termite-eaten paper. Among them the total statement of revenue accounts for the year 1818–19 can be found—the whole Bansbadi ward was wasteland—there was neither pond nor settlement there. There is mention of about ten huts situated in Jangol village, all were

Sadgop farmers. In the papers of 1842–43 you see—a new land settlement, in the name of the illustrious Mister Jenkins saheb, indigo planter. Whatever wasteland there was at Jangol had almost all been incorporated into this new landholding, along with the entire Bansbadi ward. The place is overrun by brush now, and wild pigs have set up an outpost right there. Once they've taken a land settlement at Bansbadi ward, the sahebs dig a pond there and turn all Bansbadi's wasteland to indigo cultivation. Some had found jobs at the indigo office, patrolling with fight-sticks and keeping watch at the sahebs' gates when needed; for this they'd been given some land in lieu of salary and, in keeping with local custom, had received a title befitting their function as tenants of rent-free land on call twenty-four hours a day—Ostoprohor, or Atpoure.

These lines clearly tell us the change and transformation that this place and many villages like this have witnessed. With the usher of post colonialism rural societies and their people have gone through the rudest face of what has been termed as 'development' and 'modernization'. This story is told and retold by the narrator and within the narratives of the Kahars themselves, and the permutations of these retellings are material for the novel's elaboration of the relation between "tale" (*upakathā*) and "history" (*itihās*). In the text under reference,

The Kahars are thus the collective product of prior waves of internal migration and Diaspora—a class of armed guards and palanquin carriers created by the colonial planters, that is, then transformed into a class of landless sharecroppers for the needs of the indigenous landowners, and finally wage labourers in the small-town wartime industries. On the way, the Kahars also become a “criminal tribe,” a colonial-era category for a large number of rustic groups outlawed by the British, an appellation they are portrayed as struggling to avoid in the novel. The Kahars are therefore thoroughly modern hybrids occupying the broad and shifting territory of untouchability between the autochthonous or aboriginal “tribal” groups of this western region of Bengal, and the caste Hindus and their erstwhile colonial rulers. . Thus this novel also dramatizes the transforming experience and memory of the community and the way their identity shifts with the changing history. As the novel’s development makes clear, while the Kahars *are* both cut off and exploited in various ways, the isolation is a matter of social spaces and boundaries rather than of the figurative geographical circumscription that expresses it. *Hansuli Turn* vividly dramatizes this hybridism through the huge and general trope of reproductive heteronormativity, as the skin tone of the Kahars lightens while they work for the whites and some of their features come to

resemble those of the Bengali landlords once the planters have departed. In spite of all the surrounding codes stipulating caste purity and avoidance of pollution, the Kahars appear as the exception that makes the rule of caste segregation possible. In many other ways, *Hansuli Turn* gives the lie to notions of the intact practices, values, and mind-sets of a fantastic “village India.”

Hansuli Turn dramatizes this stasis and isolation in its opening pages with the motif (to which it often returns) of the circular or oxbow river bend within which the Kahar hamlet sits, as if cut off from the wider world by a physical boundary. As the novel’s development makes clear, while the Kahars *are* both cut off and exploited in various ways, the isolation is a matter of social spaces and boundaries rather than of the figurative geographical circumscription that expresses it. The drama and tragedy of *Hansuli Turn* comes from one of the main protagonists, Karali, a youth whose crisis precisely involves a movement toward a social and intellectual mobility that clashes with the values of the village’s elders and the indigenous landlords. Yet as often as making such obviously historical statements, the novel’s narrator refers to the “ancient” or “primordial” (*ādim*) character of the Kahars, as if they represent some kind of anthropologically interesting survival of the primitive within the

modern world: “In their eyes that primeval epoch’s stare lights up; that’s to say the darkness-piercing forest-animal stare of humans from the age before the discovery of fire!” (87). This conflict of different modes of imagining and representing India’s rural oppressed is one of the most powerful sites of aesthetic and rhetorical tension in *Hansuli Turn*, something that contains and determines the novel rather than being contained and resolved by it. One will recognize that it is a tension shared by much other so-called “primitivist” modernism.

Thus, if the novel exemplifies an attempt by an upper-middle class Brahmin author to represent social and epistemic change in a class and caste emphatically not his own, then it does so in ways that pose provocative questions and render the work difficult for recuperation within postcolonial studies as a novel of “resistance” by the colonized. Beside its modernist primitivism, there is no simple colonizer/colonized, East/ West contrast in this story. *Hansuli Turn* explores the fault lines within the colonized, and thus complicates the postcolonial paradigm. The ebbs and flows of collective and individual fortunes are not static in this world. Whites, Englishmen or “sahebs,” are a sinister offstage presence for most of *Hansuli Turn*. The Kahars live in the ruins of a former indigo plantation. A railway line

(metonymic signifier of the imperial network) runs past the village, and the rhythmic to-and-fro of the train is used as a timepiece by the Kahars to measure out the workday. The reader who has read Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyaya’s *Pather Panchali* (1929), later on adapted in a film by the same name by Satyajit Ray in 1955, will recall that its most famous scene involves the children Apu and Durga running through a field of kash reeds to watch a steam train pass by. This scene of confrontation between impoverished middle-class rustic Brahmin children and the ambiguous forces of imperial “modernity” is displaced in *Hansuli Turn*. Our protagonists are far lower on the social scale than Apu and Durga. Yet the train has been assimilated and in a sense normalized as timekeeper, and the rail line is now a different kind of narrative pointer to an “outside” (of the Kahars’ immediate world and of the text itself). Karali shuttles between village and town, and constantly tries to recruit the young men of his group to take up work in the factories. Yet Karali’s *temporary* and cyclic migration out of the village and back is set against the backdrop of the prior *permanent* migration women are obliged to enter if they take up the same kind of workshop or rail-line employment. These women, named only once in the novel, fleetingly appear and disappear from the narrative along this line:

“So many women left home to work construction on this line—Panchi, Khuki, Bele, Chitto, Nimmla. Khuki and Bele left the locality—with two Muslim stonecutters. Chitto and Panchi went off with a Hindusthani line mechanic. And Nimmla took off with another mechanic. Karali was that Nimmla’s son. The bitch even went off leaving little five-year-old Karali” (89-90).

The novel points to a story of a women’s Diaspora that it leaves untold as it focuses on change coded by male intergenerational struggle. (The predicaments of gendered subalternity are—more or less—occluded in *Hansuli Turn*).

The real equivalent of *Pather Panchali*’s fascinating, monstrous, and mysterious train, sign of some vast and as yet unknown alien structure, is *Hansuli Turn*’s squadrons of military aircraft that fly low over the Kahar hamlet as World War II unfolds. Indices of crisis in several ways, the aircraft subvert and overwrite the now-normalized (clichéd) motif of the steam train of empire. The airbase and airplanes becomes the sign of some offstage imperial and existential catastrophe, rather than of a systematic occupation of new territory; or, as they come insatiably to eat up irreplaceable resources and space toward the novel’s end, they become the signs of a late imperialism driven headlong by crisis.

The change is drawn beginning with Karali’s mode of investigation into the source of the terrifying forest whistling announced in the novel’s first lines. He uses a flashlight to search in the surrounding bamboo groves. The word “torch” (here meaning flashlight), lexicalized into Bengali from (British) English and metonymically associated with Karali, already announces a difference from the rest of the Kahars, as the use of electric light is associated with whites and with the police. At this inaugural point, Karali’s flashlight is “extremely weak”; the transformation is at an early stage. Karali is, in a metaphorical sense, reaching for certain “enlightenment,” linked by the rhetoric of the novel to the rational capabilities of the colonial apparatus, just as his rationalizing explanation of the mysterious forest whistle is at odds with the village elders’ metaphysical one. As the novel ends and the forest is cut down by wartime timber contractors, the intensity of the light penetrating the village’s former gloom completes the illumination brought from the beginning by Karali’s “extremely weak” flashlight.

None of the foregoing argument is to claim that *Hansuli Turn* endorses the mission of colonialism as enlightenment (nor do I endorse



the notion that colonialism and enlightenment are simply one and the same). The novel confronts us with a literary staging of the problem in the form of an unresolved double bind: being touched by the colonial apparatus as both a good and a bad thing for the subaltern. In doing so, it refuses the reader the false comforts of an easy nativism, a sense that the old, quasi-feudal values were better, just as it confronts us with a representation of colonization as the false herald of enlightenment and equality.

Change of time is inevitable and so is the change in people and their way of life. The “Upokotha” (fables) of Hansuli Bak is a tussle between stagnation and mobility. Though this battle have been going on for ages, what the play brought up on stage is the price you pay in the name of progression and the danger of blind faith. World War was a worldly affaire, but its micro and macro level effects differed in virtue. While some fell under the grinding taxes, others lost their morale. To be fair, maybe every war is personal, every war somehow effects the alignment at the dinner table and every war takes away a part of our soul. A war could boast of weaponries of different kind, ranging from bullets to broken twigs, but none of them ever fail to claim lives. Hansuli Baker Upokotha was such a story of content and desire, of eternity and infinity, of nature and mankind. Residents

of Hansuli Turn, The Kahars are members of an untouchable "scandalous clan" shortly to be grandly converted by the consequences of India's independence movement and World War II. Bonwari, their leader, endorses the principles of an older period, but his flimsy beliefs verifies to be no competition for the overshadowing machinery of warfare. Youthful villagers guided by the rebel Karali look for other meanings and a different way of life whereas Bonwari and the village elders come to consider the gods have deserted them. As the two divisions fight, codes of authority, society, religion, sex, culture start to shatter down, and in the middle of lethal clash and natural catastrophe, Karali grasps his prospect to transform his people's future. Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay portrays a complex transition in which a marginal caste fragments and mutates under the pressure of local and global forces maintaining a sympathetic outlook to the desires of both older and younger generations. This archiving of the experience of the lower caste tribe's experience of the Partition can be contextualized by the silence of such voices in nationalist discourses of state formations. This novel then disrupts easily the past and present hegemonic definitions of national identity and creates a space for a more nuanced and contested terrain of agency that canonized narratives of partition do not allow. The novel that I have discussed use their settings as part of



what they aim to say: therefore the politics of places is a good way to enter these narratives of the Partition. The place becomes the context in so far as the narrative seeks to be itself. The way the place, community and the experience in relation to different generations are used by the writer, this point becomes poignantly clear: a tree or a city space or a barren island becomes the markers of locality and memory. In the novel, the way the resistances have been shaped by a national liberation paradigm by foregrounding the impulses of the revolutionary movement. The use of the tropes of community and locality also shifts with the change of the narrative point of view from the low caste marginalised aboriginals to the landowning caste. As the vantage point shifts so does the experience and the memory. Nostalgia is the dominant principle that binds together the collective experience and memory of the group. Two very extreme points of view have been represented through Bonwari and through Karali. One is their headman, Bonwari who upholds the ethics of an older time and then there is Karali, who is a rebel and a man of action who believes in seizing the chance to change the way and meaning of life. Thus, two people symbolize the two poles with the different experience and perspectives and also the dilemma and conflicts present as much as in an individual so also in the social group or in the community too. on the other hand, with its

thick descriptions, the dialects, and the dream metaphor creates a different effect through another use of space: 'The duty of the book is to flesh out the life-world and the past of an expunged place, to construct a diverse thought of people and topography that drives against the impersonal account of nation and the intangible vicinity in our conception.' The realist mode of Bandopadhyay, with its locus on the individual, is also contrasted at times, with his mythical mode of storytelling based on community that absorbs within it the revolutionary praxis.

In this work I have tried to look at the Partition of Bengal not just as a set of historical events but have placed it as 'historical trauma within the problem of identity crisis. Unlike the partition narratives from Punjab where 'the author can find voice only through impersonal narrators, or teller-actors' (13) the stories of violence and trauma in Bengal are not silent about the horror of rioting in Calcutta or Noakhali, nor do they elide over what it means to survive a traumatic event. Rather, painful upon painful details of dead bodies lying through Calcutta's streets or through the bazaars of Noakhali are recollected in languages that are spare and filled with despair. Tarashankar's story, for example, is about survival, but it is also about questions regarding the status of fiction as it arises out of the problem of writing



about violence in the first person voice. Bonwari's experience of riot-tom Hansuli Turn is at once as a reality and, as a trauma. In thematic terms, I see the text as grouped around some broad parameters: witnessing an event, rehabilitation and resettlement, gender and livelihood. However the themes overlap in most cases and the novels particularly cannot be categorized as one and not the other. Each fictional work also points to the differences in recalling or representing that comes through in their dates of composition: a short story written immediately after an event is markedly different from a novel that recalls an event and written over a longer period of time. But there again, the relationship between memory and experience is richly problematic: the methods through which we gain access to our pasts are never simple and linear; all we can hope is to discover newer sources that will enable us to arrive at a nuanced account of the past.

To describe this fiction, Gayatri Spivak has called "transnational literacy" so that the reader can sense this novel's insertion into a Bengali literary milieu. The novel's main protagonist and focalizer, meaning the character whose "vision" is given words by the narrator, is Bonwari Kahar. Much of the novel is vectored through his thought world, his imaginative universe and philosophy, which,

along with the other village elders such as Suchand Kahar, exemplifies the values of the "old" world for the novel. Bonwari is a subaltern figure, though drawn from the upper spaces of subalternity. He is the village headman and protector of its dharma (broadly speaking, ethical and religious principles), to whom responsibility means a complex relationship of loyalty and subordination to the quasi-feudal masters of village and town, and adherence to the prescriptions of gods and forefathers that comprehend any threat to these as a threat to the moral and existential order itself. *Hansuli Turn* represents a space in which precolonial temporalities, structures of myth, memory, and ritual, practical arrangements of everyday life, and imaginative patterns are powerfully residual. The Kahars, the untouchable collective protagonist of the novel, are not traditional in any uncomplicated way. As they are depicted in *Hansuli Turn*, they too are the product of an earlier wave of transformation, the British colonization of India, displaced from an unknown elsewhere and brought to their present location and function by the vicissitudes of colonial capital and indigenous class/caste hierarchy. Hansuli Turn asks us to imagine a world of peasant farmers (Sadgops and Mondols), landlords, landowners, and rural gentry (Ghoshes, Chaudhurys, and unnamed Brahmin gentry) from the vantage point of the landless

sharecropper eking out a living in village or country town. The ebbs and flows of collective and individual fortunes are not static in this world.

Conclusion

Hansuli Turn stages the agonizingly difficult way the forces of colonial modernity can in some sense be understood as emancipatory for India's most marginal people. It is complicity with the very structural violations of war and "modernization" that paradoxically enables Karali to break with the feudal violence that prevails over the Kahars. The novel presents this dilemma as a double bind, particularly as its focalization is so powerfully vectored through the figure of Bonwari, unable to imagine an outside to feudal strictures except in terms of cosmic and moral-existential catastrophe. *Hansuli Turn* represents this process of change through Karali's work and speeches, and also through the outward signs of the body as he undergoes a transvestite makeover from loincloth-clad village boy to uncanny uniform-clad proletarian. The novel depicts the horizons of rustic feudal hierarchy being ruptured by the world of wage labor and British military structure. As the war machine touches the subalternity of Karali, it causes that subalternity to exceed its own bounds, and this overflow can be given the name of "crisis" inasmuch as it enables the signs of a different order to begin to challenge and displace the

signs of the prevailing one. This conflict of different modes of imagining and representing India's rural oppressed is one of the most powerful sites of aesthetic and rhetorical tension in *Hansuli Turn*, something that contains and determines the novel rather than being contained and resolved by it.

Ultimately, this novel leaves the drama open-ended and seeks to suggest that the uncanny words, rhythms, and subnarratives of the rustic tale could be written into the future in a different way. This new story would, for better or worse, break with the dominant representation of the "we" of the public sphere and the "they" of the creolized subaltern. Hence, its closing moments stage the upwardly mobile militant Karali scratching or inscribing a link to "history," but also include the transvestite dancer, Nasubala Kahar, and the crazy balladeer, Pagol Kahar, continuing the story in other forms.

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