

Book Review-1

Birendrakumar Bandopadhyay, *Paaye Paaye Panchali: Rarh Banglar Ekti Gramer Atmakatha*, Kolkata : Deep Prakashan, 2025, pp. 151, Rs. 275

The autobiographical narrative of Shri Birendrakumar Bandopadhyay, an ordinary individual hailing from Balijuri village of Bardhaman district, offers a richly textured and invaluable contribution to the corpus of Bengali literature. Through his candid recollections of childhood, schooling, family traditions and socio-political undercurrents such as the Quit India Movement and the Second World War, Bandopadhyay's chronicle illuminates the lived realities of late colonial Bengal's rural populations during a tumultuous historical epoch. His account foregrounds the quotidian struggles and resilience of a boy growing up amidst poverty. His narrative is marked by an authenticity that captures not only material deprivation but also the emotional comfort and pleasures derived from communitarian life. The evocation of festivals, village rituals, kinship networks and shared labour reveals the cultural fabric sustaining Balijuri's social ethos. This intimate portrayal invariably counters dominant historical discourses that often marginalize or homogenize rural subaltern experiences.

The village of Balijuri emerges not merely as a geographical space but as a deeply affective and socio-cultural landscape where life unfolded in a rhythm of continuity, reciprocity, and shared emotional experience. The serenity of rural life lay in its collective ethos - where joys and sorrows were rarely individualised but rather dispersed across the social fabric of the village. Births, marriages, harvests and festivals were community affairs, celebrated with shared food, folk songs, and collective labour, creating a sense of belonging that transcended individual households. Similarly, illness, death or crop failure brought people together not only in sympathy but in practical acts of solidarity - organizing aid, performing last rites, or offering material and emotional support. The 'everyday' was punctuated by rituals tied to the agrarian calendar, reinforcing the deep interconnectedness between human life, the seasons and the land. This communitarian structure sustained a moral economy rooted in care, obligation, and interdependence. Bandopadhyay's descriptions are rich with images of shared spaces, open courtyards, neighbourhood schooling experiences and a cultural world shaped by storytelling, communal songs, friendly feuds and seasonal festivities. These elements together formed a cohesive village life that provided stability, identity and a sense of rootedness. In contrast to the alienation of urban or institutional life, the village here configures as a space where people were known not by profession or status

alone, but through generations of shared memory, kinship and social participation.

While Birendrakumar Bandopadhyay's autobiography evokes a sense of warmth and solidarity in rural life, it would be a romantic oversimplification to portray the village as an entirely egalitarian or idyllic space. Beneath the surface of communal harmony operated deeply entrenched hierarchies and exclusions, particularly along the lines of caste and gender. Access to land, education, temple spaces, and even sources of water was often mediated by one's position within the social hierarchy, and those belonging to lower castes or economically weaker families were subjected to subtle and overt forms of discrimination. Gender roles, too, were rigidly defined – women were largely confined to the domestic sphere, their mobility and voice constrained by patriarchal norms. These structures were so normalized within the social fabric that they often went unquestioned, even as they silently shaped opportunities, aspirations, and interpersonal dynamics. Bandopadhyay's narrative, though subtle in its critique, offers glimpses of these underlying tensions – moments where inequality is not dramatically foregrounded but is present in the margins of daily life. Thus, while rural life offered emotional security and communal solidarity, it was simultaneously a space of structural limitations, where identity could determine one's dignity, labour and future. The serenity of such a life did not imply the absence of suffering but rather its containment within a network of collective care. It was this shared experience of time, space, and emotion that created the psychic architecture of the rural world – a world which, in the author's memory, stood as a bulwark against both the material insecurity of poverty and the existential uncertainties of colonial modernity. In this sense, Bandopadhyay's village becomes emblematic of a lost ecology, one where life was modest yet meaningful, and where the communal pulse of daily existence left an indelible mark on the author's inner life and historical consciousness. Such a picturesque portrayal of gram bangla, with all tinges of stability and structural limitations, is, in a way, emblematic of post-Tagore era in Bengali literature.

Although primarily a personal memoir, the autobiography subtly incorporates references to wider historical phenomena such as the Quit India Movement, Famine of 1943 and the Second World War. These glimpses underscore the permeability of global and national events into the microcosm of village life. Bandopadhyay's narrative demonstrates how political currents were experienced unevenly yet profoundly, shaping local identities and aspirations. The unique ways of engagement with nationalist struggles reflects the diffusion of political consciousness beyond elite circles. The following song, inspired from a popular tune sung during Bhadu festival best demonstrates how the national event got enmeshed into the psyche of the common villagers –

“পাঁচুটের পাহাড়ে উঠে, দেখ রে কীসের গোল হচ্ছে,
অযোধ্যা আঁধার করে, রাম-সীতা বুনে যেছে,
বন্দে মাতরম।“ (p. 100)

The panchakot upland was the holy site where young men and women assembled at the time of the bhadu festival. As groups of young people headed towards the jails during Quit India Movement, the villagers hailed their sacrificial journey as the one undertaken by Ram-Sita. Such symbolism alludes to the way the dwellers of a distant village internalised a nationwide political campaign and offers a fresh insight highlighting subaltern voice and consciousness. Herein lies the significance of the book as a valuable document for reconstructing history from below. Many other micro experiences narrated down in the book reveals how grand historical events configured in the livelihood or mentality of a common man.

The writing of history has often privileged the grand narratives - empires, wars, revolutions, and the lives of elites. Traditional historiography, dominated by nation-states and political leaders, has been slow to recognise the importance of the everyday, the marginal, and the seemingly ordinary. However, the emergence of micro-history in the latter half of the 20th century has challenged these hegemonic practices. Micro-history reorients the historical gaze from the macro to the micro, from abstract structures to individual experiences, and from the general to the particular. In this methodological framework, the autobiography of a common man as the one under consideration, assumes critical importance. It becomes a potent document not just of personal memory but of lived history - a window into the mentalities, struggles, and social realities that often elude conventional historical sources. The significance of Bandopadhyay's autobiography lies in its capacity to reconstruct history from below. It challenges monolithic historical narratives by centring the perspective of an ordinary individual, thereby providing a nuanced understanding of rural Bengal's socio-cultural fabric during late colonial period. The autobiography exemplifies micro-history's methodological commitment to exploring the interplay between individual agency and structural forces in specific contexts. By documenting everyday experiences, the text reveals the embeddedness of historical processes in personal lives, enriching macro-level analyses of colonialism, nationalism, and social change. Moreover, it foregrounds marginalized voices - rural, economically disadvantaged and culturally distinct - thus contributing to a more inclusive historiography.

In conclusion, Birendrakumar Bandopadhyay's autobiography stands as a significant contribution to the corpus of writings that illuminate the lived realities of colonial Bengal. Far beyond a personal memoir, it functions as a valuable primary source for scholars engaging with subaltern studies, micro-history, and the broader social history of late colonial India. Through the detailed narration of an ordinary life—marked by poverty, communal joy, educational struggle, and subtle encounters with larger historical events—Bandopadhyay offers a narrative that resists abstraction and instead grounds historical processes in the material and emotional world of a rural subject. His account does not privilege the elite, the heroic, or the spectacular, but rather

foregrounds the quiet persistence, moral economy, and cultural resilience of everyday life under colonial rule. What makes this text particularly indispensable is its ability to render visible the intersection of the personal with the political. It opens a crucial window into the mentalities, aspirations, and anxieties of a generation that lived through these epochal changes not as historical agents in the conventional sense, but as individuals negotiating the margins of power, poverty and tradition. Finally, the autobiography serves an important mnemonic function - it preserves a rural world that, in many ways, has vanished under the pressures of modernisation, urbanisation, and neoliberal change. In recovering the textures of village life - its solidarities and hierarchies, its joys and exclusions - the text allows readers not only to understand the past but to reflect critically on the transformations of the present. Thus, Bandopadhyay's work is not merely a document of memory but a living archive that challenges us to listen more closely to the silenced narratives and everyday experiences that constitute the fabric of history.

Ushasi Banerjee

Research Scholar (UGC-JRF)

Department of History, Kalyani University