



Revisiting the Socio-cultural Life of the Bengal Peasants in the Nineteenth Century: A Study of Lal Behari Day's *Govinda Samanta* in Perspective

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Abstract

Lal Behari Day's (1824-94) novel *Govinda Samanta* or *The History of a Bengal Raiyat* (1874) portrays a comprehensive picture of the peasant life in nineteenth century rural Bengal. Day's narrative is an authentic recording of the life of Bardhaman district and its surroundings with its caste-system, rituals, folk-beliefs, superstitions, and many other domestic and social realities. This text captures the life of the *Ugrakshatriyas* or *Aguris* of Bardhaman: their customs, rituals and festivals so vividly that Charles Darwin wrote a letter to the publishers of this novel appreciating Day's descriptive acuity. In its broader spectrum the narrative focuses on the Zamindari system, agrarian laws, indigo plantation and other socio-historical issues of the then Bengal. *Govinda Samanta* narrates the touching tale of the eponymous hero who lived in Kanchanpur and underwent several hardships in his life. Day's wide-ranging knowledge of rural Bengal is evidenced in the detailed description of presently almost forgotten rituals, celebrations, games, food habit and various social practices. Throughout the novel, the author demonstrates the cultural 'difference' or 'otherness' of the Bengalis and thereby tries to establish the richness of the native culture as compared to that of the colonizer. This paper intends to revisit the socio-cultural life of the Bengali peasants in the nineteenth century through Lal Behari Day's 'authentic history' which reveals an intuitive empathy and emotional understanding of the characters, their motives, inclinations and actions. It would further discuss how this text can become an important socio-cultural document for the researchers in history, anthropology, ethnography, literature and other disciplines.

Keywords

19th century rural Bengal, Ugrakshatriyas of Bardhaman, anthropology, ethnography, culture

The nineteenth century Bengal was a site of immense turmoil, waves of anxiety, upheaval and reforms triggered by the contemporary socio-political situation. Several significant conversions and transformations in religion, politics and society took place at that time. The colonized nation which was on the threshold of 'modernization' was torn apart by issues relating to caste, class, gender and religion. The young educated elite Bengalis being motivated by the Western Liberal and Utilitarian thought questioned the orthodox beliefs and detrimental social and religious practices. Reverend Lal Behari Day's (1824-94) novel *Govinda Samanta or The History of a Bengal Raiyat* (1874) primarily captures the peasant life of nineteenth century rural Bengal. But in the context of depiction, it focuses on various significant social, religious, political and cultural issues of the time.

Reverend Lal Behari Day was born in the village of Sonapalashi in Kurhmun area of the present Purba Bardhaman district (about 12 km North-East from Bardhaman town) as Kalagopal Mondol in the *suvarna-banik*¹ community. After primary education in the village school, he went to Calcutta and was admitted to Reverend Alexander Duff's General Assembly Institution. Under Duff's influence he embraced Christianity in 1843. He was also impressed by Derozio and the Young Bengal movement. 'Lal Behari' was his adopted name after his conversion to Christianity. Day was a missionary and minister of the Free Church of Scotland from 1855 to 1867. Later he worked as a Professor of English in Government-administered colleges at Berhampore and Hooghly. He was the editor of the Bengali journal *Arunaday* and the English magazines, *Indian Reformer*, *Friday Review* and *Bengal Magazine*. He was associated with the Bethune Society and Bengal Social Science Association. Apart from his most discussed novel *Govinda Samanta*, Day also wrote a Bengali novel, *Chandramukhir Upakhyan* (1859) and a collection, *Folk Tales of Bengal* (1883) which is an English rendering of Bengali folk tales.

Day's conversion to Christianity was significant in the context of the nineteenth century Bengal Renaissance and some remarkable religious conversions taking place at that time. Alexander Duff in *India and India Missions* (1840) mentions that the 'baptisms' that had taken place in Calcutta in the early 1830s, "though small in number, were in quality of inestimable value" (qtd. in Mukherjee 189). Reputed contemporary figures like Krishna Mohan Banerjea (1813-1885) and Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824-1873) embraced Christianity in the 1840s. Debipada Bhattacharya in his book *Reverend Lal Behari Day o Candramukhir Upakhyan* (2001) comments, "Madhusudan's conversion to Christianity created a huge turmoil in Calcutta's Hindu society" whereas, in the same year, "the poor and fatherless lad Lal Behari Day from the Subarna-banik community converted [...] there was hardly any ripple made in the community. Lal Behari could never forget that in the eyes of the Hindu society he was considered inferior in status" (qtd. in Mukherjee 192-93). These conversions to Christianity were taking place at a time when social reformers in Bengal like Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833) and Pandit Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar

(1820-1891) were struggling hard to initiate several significant social reforms like anti-sati movement, widow remarriage, movement against polygamy to liberate orthodox Hinduism from its detrimental social practices and irrational superstitions. Lal Behari Day's writings which deal with the social customs, religious practices and ritualistic observances should be situated in this context of 'change' and should be interpreted accordingly.

The context of Lal Behari Day's novel *Govinda Samanta* or *The History of a Bengal Raiyat* (1874) is noteworthy. In the second edition of the book, re-titled as *Bengal Peasant Life* (1878), the author mentions that he dedicates the book to "Baboo Joy Kissen Mookerjea, one of the most enlightened zemindars in Bengal." In the Preface to the second edition, Day writes:

Early in the year 1871 Baboo Joy Kissen Mookerjea, of Uttarapara, a zemindar in Bengal, offered a prize of £ 50 for the best novel, to be written either in Bengali or in English, illustrating the "Social and Domestic Life of the Rural Population and Working Classes of Bengal".
(vii)

Most notably, Day's novel won the prize. Day further mentions in the Preface "that the original book, to which the prize was adjudged, wanted the last three chapters; these chapters have now been added, in order to bring down the narrative to the present day" (vii). The author realized that the book does not only tell the life story of a single peasant named Govinda Samanta but it represents an authentic story of every Bengal peasant of that time. That is why he decided to replace the title of the book in the second edition to endow it with a broader perspective.

The novel presents a comprehensive picture of the life of the Bengali peasants in the nineteenth century. Paromita Das in Chapter Six ("Conversion, Ethnicity and the Convert: Lal Behari Day's *Govinda Samanta* or *The History of a Bengal Peasant*") of her thesis *Writing India Writing Self: Beginnings of Indian Writing in English in Nineteenth Century Bengal* observes that published ten years after Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864), commonly regarded as the first novel in Indian Writing in English, Day's *Govinda Samanta* is "the first novel in Indian Writing in English to empathize with the condition of the rural poor" (181). It is also "the first in the corpus of Indian literature in English to deal with subaltern character[s]" (Das 185). Day's novel is a significant socio-cultural document of nineteenth century Bengal. It deals with the caste-system, rituals, superstitions, folk-beliefs, festivals and various social problems of rural Bengal. In the opening chapter of the novel, entitled "Premises What the Reader is to Expect, and What He is not to Expect, in this Authentic History", Day clearly states that "the reader is to expect here a plain and unvarnished tale of a plain peasant, living in this plain country of Bengal" (4).

Day's novel is an encyclopaedic recording of the life and culture of Bengal in the nineteenth century. The setting of the novel is a village named Kanchanpur which was located about six miles to the north-east of the town of Bardhaman. The name

‘Kanchanpur’ bears a reference to the actual Sonapalashi, Day’s place of birth, *kanchan* being the Sanskrit equivalent of *sona-suvarna* and it further refers to the *suvarna-banik* community who lived there (Day also belonged to this community by birth). Though the novel contains autobiographical references, in its wider spectrum it captures “the short and simple annals of the Poor” (Gray’s “Elegy”). The anthropologically rich and precise description of nineteenth century rural life is so impressive in the text that Charles Darwin wrote a letter on 18 April 1881 to the publishers appreciating the novel. In Chapter 3 of the novel Day writes that Kanchanpur “has a population of about fifteen hundred souls, belonging to most of the thirty-six castes into which the Hindus of Bengal are generally divided, though the predominating caste in the village was the *sadgopa*, or the agricultural class” (10). But the eponymous hero belongs to the *ugra-kshatriya* or *aguri* caste whom Day opines, “a class of men abounding chiefly in the Vardhamana district, and noted for their courage, personal strength, and independence” (31-32). As the novel revolves around Govinda’s family, their relatives and neighbours, it becomes an authentic ethnographic study of the *ugra-kshatriya* caste in the locality. In this context, Rochelle Pinto in his essay “*Govinda Samanta*, or, Eluding Ethnography in the Colonial Novel” observes:

Fit subjects of their own story from the perspective of the urban liberal intelligentsia, the Aguri perhaps suitably represents caste-entrenched indigenism. Religious rituals are detailed and deprecated because of the expense incurred in performing them, but eventually become a sign that the peasant, though not upper caste, is not primitive. (122)

The novel graphically describes the ritualistic observances of the peasants of Kanchanpur which in a greater context relates to the rituals of Bengal in the nineteenth century. Thus, rituals like the worship of the goddess *Shasthi*, *atkoudiya*², *ekusiyā*³—the vivid descriptions of which we find in this text have been erased from our so-called ‘modern’ culture today. The elaborate depiction of *annaprasana*⁴, marriage ceremonies, *navanna*⁵, and various *pujas* highlight how much Bengali life was coloured by the observation of these ceremonies and festivals. In this context, Paromita Das further observes: “Throughout the novel, it is evident that the author is clearly trying to explain the cultural “difference” or “otherness”, and thereby perhaps to demonstrate that the Bengali culture, albeit ‘different’ from the culture of the coloniser, is a rich one” (181).

The representation of the superstitions and folk-beliefs of the villagers should be mentioned. At the very outset, Day tells us that it was an invariable custom of the rural people of Bengal never to respond to a call at night till it was repeated three times. The village people used to believe that *Nisi*, that is Night personified, lured and deceived human beings and finally they were drowned in pools and tanks. If a lizard chirped while setting on a journey, the villagers used to consider it an ill omen and waited for some time before starting their journey. Chapter 10 of the book which is

titled “The Five-Faced” deals with the ‘possession’ of the child Govinda by a spirit called *Pencho* which was commonly termed by the villagers, *penchoe paoa*⁶. Later in Chapter 16 (“The Village Ghost”) the author describes the incident how Aduri, Govinda’s aunt was possessed by a ghost and in this context enumerates the ‘different classes’ of Bengali ghosts. He categorizes the ghosts according to religion, class and gender. The Hindu ghosts are sub-categorized as *Brahmadaitya*, *bhuta*, *skandhakata*, *petni* and *sankhchihni* whereas the Muhammadan ghosts are broadly categorized as *Mamdos*. Among these the spirits of departed Brahmins become *Brahmadaityas* whereas the spirits of departed Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras become *bhutas*. *Petnis* and *sankhchihnis* are the female ghosts. This chapter becomes an ethnographic study of ghosts!

We should have a glimpse at the village schools as portrayed by Day. There were two *pathshalas* in the village of Kanchanpur. One was held in the colonnade of the Siva temple where the Brahman *gurumahasaya* used to teach Sanskrit grammar and *slokas* to the sons of Brahmins, Kayasthas and wealthy bankers. The second *pathshala* was held in the yard of the house of the Kayastha pedagogue and was attended chiefly by students belonging to lower castes and poorer classes. The teacher Rama Rupa Sarkara was an expert in mathematical education and zamindari accounts. Govinda’s father Badan admitted his son to the second *pathshala* because he wanted his son to learn zamindari accounts. At that time pupils used to do various menial services for their teachers without any grudge. The pedagogues used to administer several kinds of corporal punishments on the students with the intention to discipline them and make them good human beings. But the economic condition of the teachers was miserable. Though Govinda could not make much progress in his studies for some family mishaps, yet the author’s vivid description of the village schools and the teachers is remarkable. What is noteworthy here is that “[...] utilitarianism informs the critique of education, with the Brahmin-run *pathshala* expressly criticized for embodying a high culture without contemporary utility, while the skills imparted in the Kayastha instructor’s class are seen as more empowering” (Pinto 123-24).

The plough, *hookah*⁷, *gamcha*⁸, *muri*⁹—which are part and parcel of the lives of the Bengali villagers have been so vividly described that even the Western readers would be able to visualize the things while reading the text. The fascination for sweetmeats of the Bengalis has also been illustrated by Day: “As Vardhamana is celebrated for its *ola*, Chandernagore for its *rasagolla*, Mankar for its *kadma*[. . .] so Kanchanpur was famous for its *khaja*, which may truly be said to be the raja (king) of sweetmeats” (156).

To situate the novel to its particular spatio-temporal context, contemporary historical events like the Permanent Settlement (1793), abolition of *sati* by William Bentinck in 1829, the passing of various peasant laws and regulations like Act X of 1859, the epidemic of 1873 which brought an end to Govinda’s life and many other

‘real’ events have been mentioned. All these references position this text as a significant socio-cultural document of the age.

The novel was written at such a time when several peasant revolts arising from the issues of agricultural rent, imposition of illegal tax and overall oppression of the peasantry under the colonial rule occurred in Bengal. The Pabna Tax Revolt of 1873 should be mentioned in this context. In the aftermath of the Permanent Settlement of 1793, the annual land revenue was fixed at a permanent rate. The old zamindari system crumbled down and several zamindars sold their estates. The new zamindars came from the urban, educated, elite class who “turned into prosperous, rent-extracting, absentee landlords, residing mostly in the urban metropolises of Dacca and Calcutta” (Roy 84). This new group of zamindars also formed the Bengali intelligentsia who debated over many issues related to land relations and land tenures, peasant uprisings and production relations in agriculture. Regarding the Bengali intelligentsia of the nineteenth century, Arnab Roy in his essay “*Agriculture and the ‘Literati’ in Colonial Bengal, 1870 to 1940*” observes:

Thus, in terms of their origin, there were two groups of the intelligentsia in nineteenth-century colonial Bengal. The first group came from the stratum of absentee landlords who depended on income from the land. The second group came from the families of dispossessed landlords and former middlemen who took up clerical jobs in the colonial administration. The latter did not depend only on agricultural incomes. (85)

Radhakanta Deb, Prasanna Kumar Tagore and Joykrishna Mukherjee, the patron of Day’s novel *Govinda Samanta*, were representatives of the first generation of the Bengali intelligentsia. The second group consisted of the intermediaries or rural middlemen like *jotedars*, *talukdars* and *pattanidars* created by the colonial government to strengthen their political power in rural Bengal. As Day’s intention was to capture a comprehensive picture of the agricultural class of Bengal, his text portrays both these group of zamindars.

The novel shows how the zamindari system exploited the peasants of Bengal in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Jayachand Raya Chaudhuri, the zamindar of Kanchanpur, “belonged to a class of zamindars who were the greatest curses to their country” (260). This unscrupulous man used to extract money from the poor peasants by hook or by crook and became a terror to his subjects for his tyranny. But as Day wants to present a ‘real’ picture, a ‘true’ view of his contemporary society, a few chapters later; he introduces another zamindar who is a polar opposite to Jayachand. Nava Krishna Banerjea, the young zamindar of Durganagar was a true deliverer to his subjects who always put a strong resistance against all kinds of oppressions to his people. This zamindar who had studied in the Hindoo College of Calcutta and became influenced by the liberal and patriotic ideas of the time strongly opposed the evil acts of Mr Murray, the notorious indigo planter of Durganagar. But

all these resistances proved futile in the colonial regime where the network of the police, zamindars and sahibs destroyed the poor peasantry of Bengal.

Our hero Govinda's life was finally ruined by the vicious agrarian laws like the *pancham*¹⁰ and the *haptam*¹¹. His property was sold to the highest bidder and the rack-rented man further underwent a series of accidents and finally a terrible epidemic claimed his life. What is remarkable in the last chapter of the novel is the role of Mahtap Chand Bahadur, the Maharajah of Burdwan in alleviating the miseries of the peasants during famine. Broken-hearted Govinda, just before his death, went to the Maharajah, "the greatest land-holder in Bengal" who with his "characteristic benevolence" created "work for about two thousand labourers every day, with a view only to give them relief" (376). Periodic occurrence of famine was a striking feature of not only Bengal but several parts of India, the horrible effects of which led to the formation of the Famine Commission in 1880.

Day maintains an unbiased view while critiquing the British government as well as when appreciating the rural culture of Bengal. A comprehensive reading of the text would reveal that Day severely criticizes the colonial rulers for their oppressive measures in indigo plantation and for several harmful laws like *pancham* and *haptam* which ruined the lives of the poor peasants. But at the same time, he appreciates the benevolent acts of the British government like abolition of *sati*, spread of education, passing of Act X of 1859¹² to deliver the poor peasants from coercion and repression etc. On the other hand, he does not blindly eulogize every aspect of Bengali culture. In this context, Paromita Das opines:

In explaining the "cultural differences" Lal Behari's tone is nowhere apologetic. At the same time he does not blindly uphold or applaud everything in Bengali culture. His tone is sharply critical when it comes to the superstitious and fatalistic attitude of the peasants. Overall, however, what is significant is that he reveals an intuitive empathy, an in-depth intellectual as well as emotional understanding of his characters, their motives, motivations and actions. (182-83)

Though Lal Behari Day was educated in Calcutta, was converted to Christianity and associated with missionary work, his outlook to the missionaries who came to Bengal in the nineteenth century was complex and sometimes tinged with irony. In the chapter titled "The Village Market", Day presents "the Rev. Friedrich Kleinknecht, a German clergyman connected with the Church Missionary Society, was out itinerating in the district of Vardhamana, and had, in the course of his evangelistic peregrinations, reached Kanchanpur" (171). For his benevolent nature and affable manners, the Padre Saheb was universally liked by the inhabitants of the village. While reading the gospels to the villagers, the 'earnestness and fluency' of his speech touched the minds of the villagers and they exclaimed — "All that the Padre Saheb is saying is quite true!" (172) But ironically when he "touched on the last clause of the text and spoke of the eternal rest as the gift of the Saviour, he did not seem to

carry along with him the sympathy of his audience” (172). At the end of the preaching session, the villagers were more eager to collect the copies of the Christian tracts translated into Bengali than to realize the religious message contained within.

The text becomes a site of Orientalist discourse. Day’s target readers were the Westerners which is evident in his providing a “Glossary of Indian Terms” as an appendix to the novel. The profusion of epigraphs, allusions and analogies in the text ranging from Homer, Virgil to Shakespeare, Milton, Thomas Gray et al is Day’s strategic attempt to bridge up the cultural gap between the Orient and the Occident. He does not attempt “abrogation or appropriation of language. While sticking to the ‘standard’ English syntactically [...] he uses a large number of Bengali words,” because these words are “utterly untranslatable: they are not just words, but cultural concepts and codes” (Das 215). While describing the physical features and life style of the villagers, Day often counterpoints the pejorative stereotypes formed by the West regarding hygiene and civility of the Indian villagers. While depicting “A Raiyat’s Cottage”, Day says, “This dust-heap, though somewhat hurtful in a sanitary point-of-view, is essentially necessary to our raiyat, as it supplies him with manure for his fields” (31). He further comments, “[...] our Mofussil villages are better supplied in regard to sanitary arrangements than Europeans might suspect (31). While talking about the clothes of the Bengali peasants, Day says — “The *gamchha* is indispensable to every Hindu peasant of Bengal, as he bathes every day in the year” (22) highlighting that the English people do not bathe every day.

The Orientalist stereotyping of the Indian widows as undergoing various kinds of hardships and penance is challenged by Day in his presentation of the several widows in this novel. The portrayal of Rupa and Rupa’s mother, the village midwife, at the very beginning of the novel underscores the fact that though both of them are widows, they enjoy freedom in their lives. They belong to the *bagdi* caste that were marginalized in the-then society, but Day shows that they share a familiar bonding with other families belonging to other castes in their village. Alanga, Govinda’s grandmother, another widow was the “*grihini* or mistress of the household” and her sons “paid her boundless respect, and always agreed to every domestic arrangement she made” (32). Aduri, Govinda’s aunt, who was of flirting nature from the beginning, becomes widow in the course of the novel. She finally becomes a Vaishnavi and unites with Prem-Bhakta Vairagi who used to come to their house for alms when her husband was alive and had undergone several heated exchanges with her husband due to her flirting behaviour with the vairagi. Presentation of this kind of liberalism was possible for Day because his outlook was expanded through Western education and his working as a missionary. He is truly a harbinger of ‘modernism’ in colonial Bengal. Selection of Govinda’s friends from different castes and their easy intercourse also focuses on Day’s liberal outlook. In this context, Rochelle Pinto observes — “Thus the typology of the hero’s friends serves to prove the absence of rank among them, held up in comparison to English society where cross-class

interactions are said to be unlikely” (114). Day further contests the stereotyped image of the timid Bengali through the characters of the protagonist Govinda, his uncle Kalamani and their associates in the *dharmaghat*¹³ and reminds the readers that the first peasant uprisings against the British colonial power took place in Bengal. The peasants’ mispronunciation of the English surnames which transforms ‘Campbell’ to ‘Kambal’¹⁴ and ‘Murray’ to ‘Mari’¹⁵ provides a counter-discourse to British superiority. This can be interpreted from the perspective of Bhabha’s notion of ‘mimicry’.

Though Day left his village in boyhood and was never accepted there for his conversion to Christianity, he could not have detached his umbilical cord from his native village Sonapalashi. Sipra Mukherjee in her essay “Conversion without Commotion” comments:

Kanchanpur, the fictional location for his magnum opus, *Gobinda Samanta*, is obviously the village of Sonapalashi. The village was, in fact, portrayed so close to the reality and in such meticulous detail that sixty years after the publication of the novel, social scientists revisited the village, using the information from the text to make a “comparative statistical study of the changing role of the human factor over time”.
(195)

In the footnotes to this essay Mukherjee informs that Tara Shankar Basu and his associates, Hasim Amir Ali and Jiten Talukdar, visited Sonapalashi in 1931-32. The visit resulted in the essay “Kanchanpur Revisited”. This group of scholars paid another visit to Sonapalashi in 1958 with the patronage of the Indian Statistical Institute.

Lal Behari Day’s *Gobinda Samanta* has become an invaluable document to revisit and re-index the lives, culture and aspirations of the nineteenth century peasants of Bardhaman district to be specific and in a wider context of Bengal. This text anticipates the twentieth century concepts of “history from below” and “new labour history” (Das 205) which focuses on the lives of the lower-class people; their subjugation and alienation. Several ‘subaltern’ characters find their voice in Day’s text. His presentation of realism is so authentic that this text will encourage further research by the anthropologists, social scientists and literary critics in the days to come.

Glossary

1. *Subarna-banik*—the banker caste; traders in gold and precious metal and money-lending
2. *Atkoudiya*--a ceremony celebrated on the eighth day after the birth of an infant in which eight sorts of fried pulse and cowries are used
3. *Ekusiya*—a ceremony celebrated on the twenty-first day after the birth of an infant
4. *Annaprasana*—the first rice giving ceremony of an infant, generally performed when the child is six months old
5. *Navanna*—the festival performed after the new rice is collected from the field
6. *Penchoe paoa*—possession by spirit
7. *Hookah*—a special kind of smoking apparatus
8. *Gamcha*—bathing towel
9. *Muri*—parched rice
10. *Pancham*—Regulation V of 1812 in the Fiscal Code. This regulation empowered the landholders to seize and sell off to the highest bidder the property of a peasant who was a defaulter, or was supposed to be a defaulter.
11. *Haptam*—Regulation VII of 1799 in the Fiscal Code. This regulation empowered the landholders to arrest and to imprison any tenant who was a defaulter, or was supposed to be a defaulter.
12. Act X of 1859—This Act abrogated the regulations of *Pancham* and *Haptam*. This peasant-friendly law declared that any peasant who has occupied land for more than twenty years can never have his rent enhanced. Any enhancement of rent was to be made with a prior notice. It made compulsory for the zamindars to give receipts for the rents they received and any imposition of irregular taxes was declared to be a punishable offence.
13. *Dharmaghat*—strike
14. *Kambal*—blanket
15. *Mari*—flogging, plague

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