

DEBESH RAY'S NOVEL: SEEKING WATER AT THE ROOTS

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Time stands still. Truth has faded. Civilization is plagued by calamity. In this difficult era, we need Debesh Ray's intellectual exploration more than ever—to awaken our minds and internalize his insights. In essence, Debesh Ray aspires to naturalize thought. He seeks to revitalize literature by infusing it with the scent of its roots, making it vibrant and fresh.

Debesh Ray understands that literature is a reflection of life. Therefore, literature must have a real geographical and cultural foundation. It must include the quest for self-identity by those who are deeply connected to it. Literature should engage in a dialogue of mind, intellect, temperament, and emotions. This way, a writer's personal experiences and imagination inevitably intertwine with the political, economic, social, and cultural history of a nation and its people.

When Debesh Ray's novel '*Yayati*' was being serialized in the magazine '*Parichay*' in 1964 (though it was published in book form in 1973), we already knew that Girijamohan's son, Khoka, akin to the mythological Yayati's son Puru, would be cursed. Khoka had realized that he was destined to be a servant of fate. However, the question remains—what fate?

Here, fate represents civilization—the power to control and manipulate society and culture as one pleases. It is the ability to define truth and falsehood according to one's convenience. Fate demands unquestioning submission. As a consequence, honesty, values, and justice erode.

Thus, Khoka contemplates: '*People just have to accept things as they are!*' Isn't this acceptance and adaptation still prevalent today? Do the issues raised by Debesh Ray not resonate in the minds of discerning readers amid today's economic, political, and social crises? They certainly do, and they always will. This is the essence of Debesh Ray's worldview and literary style.

Debesh Ray experiences this stagnation of civilization through his personal encounters, which are, in essence, collective experiences. This is why, at the end of '*Yayati*', we see Khoka—son of Girijamohan and Renu, representing the present—searching for a vast sky to shape a better future. The youth of today wishes to establish a new dominion in its own way. It boldly declares to the decaying past:

"I do not accept your legacy; you must acknowledge mine" (p. 151).

Thus, in literature, 'real truth' transforms into a 'greater truth.'

This effort is what defines Debesh Ray eternally. He does not indulge in fabricated truths. In his search for a new form of the novel, he seeks to rediscover tradition. He wants to find the subjects of his novels from within society itself, shaping them into artistic expressions through a straightforward approach. As a result, the characters in his novels appear before readers just as they are—without adornments, without embellishments.

In his novel '*MafassoliBrityanto*' (1980), the character Charketu shatters the government's pompous claims about development with raw, lived reality. His thunderous words send shivers down our spines: "*Rice and the moon are the same thing; they remain in the sky at midnight*" (p. 27). Perhaps, in the same way, the story of migrant workers walking back to their home states during the COVID-19 pandemic mocked the crumbling economy of so-called developed India. In '*MafassoliBrityanto*', we see that Charketu's uncle, Khetkhetu's six-year-old son Bengu, does not want to wake up from sleep—because '*if he wakes up, he will feel hunger!*'

Similarly, in '*Akasher Niche Manush*' (1981), Prafulla Ray describes the subhuman existence of people forced to live like near-humans: "*The people of Garudiya Taluk in Bihar remain exactly where they were before independence. In independent India, where there is abundant light, endless comfort, and overwhelming prosperity—on the opposite side of it, these people live*" (p. 52). To discerning readers, such realities appear as ruins. In reverse, the harsh truth imposed upon us takes on the form of magical realism for these marginalized people. This ironic recognition mocks Khetkhetu's current reality. When the soul itself is dying of hunger, diseases are no longer just physical—they become social. Was Debesh Ray pointing to these four decades ago? The modern intellect we take such pride

in—how fragile its foundation truly is! His novels seem to point this out yet again, with unmistakable clarity.

Just like Debesh Ray's '*TistapararBrityanto*', where its protagonist, Bagharu, speaks volumes without saying much. His full name:ForesterchandraBagharu Barman. Yet, in this 504-page-long novel, published in 1988; we see him journeying in search of self-identity. A man living on the margins, perhaps even more marginal than others do—because the frameworks of politics, economics, and social structures do not apply to him. He exists beneath the beacon of development, enveloped in darkness.

This novel has no conventional beginning. It is a world we know well—one we see every day but have never truly looked at. Thus, the author forces us to notice it by turning daily occurrences into titles, elevating them to significance, striking at our core. The entire novel unfolds as a saga of self-consuming fire, a series of confessions, resonating like flowing water, stirring the intellect.

Behind Bagharu's smile, we glimpse traces of tears. There is nothing he cannot do—plowing fields, climbing trees, swimming in the Teesta, surveying land—countless skills. With each task, his name keeps changing. However, when he helps an MLA cross the river, the writer leaves him stranded in midstream, announcing the '*end of the initial phase*'. That is, Bagharu has no place in the world of development, civilization, and the elite class. He consciously avoids meetings, politics, economics, and the grandeur and corruption of government systems. In the *exile phase*, leaving the Teesta River behind, he moves toward the jungles by the banks of the Diana River. There, he sees the plantation laborers. At Gayanath's barn, he finds contentment in tending to buffaloes.

Yet, within this life, the novelist seeks a heroic stance—whether in swimming across a river, sleeping on stones, helping a buffalo calf be born, or simply listening to the calls of birds.

Just as the Teesta River contains many rivers within itself, Debesh Ray's novel '*TistapararBrityanto*' holds multiple narratives within a single story. The people living by the Teesta have witnessed floods in 1950 and 1968, just as they have seen the pace of development after the India-China war of 1962 and the turbulent waves of the 1970s. They have also experienced the refugee crisis after 1971. Elections came and went, landlords thrived, and their exploitative policies took precedence. Do the minutes of the Panchayat meetings during the floods of that time, or the political conflicts over vested interests after the Amphan cyclone, not raise questions about our democracy? The storyline and characters of Debesh Ray's novel repeatedly become contemporary in this way.

At the same time, we are reminded of Debesh Ray's other novels — '*ApatatoShantikalyanHoye Ache*', '*ManushKhun Kore Keno*', '*Sahamarana*', '*AtmiyaBrityanto*', '*SamayAsamayerBrityanto*', '*DangarPratibedan*', and '*EktiIchhamrityurPratibedan*'. In almost every novel, he re-examines the truths of the present, society, and history. He aims to awaken our consciousness and foster a genuine interest in the truth. A fearless novelist, he leaves behind this legendary statement:

"Those in India who know how to use pen and ink do not know in which letters to write the stories of India's poorest millions" (p. 491).

Thus, silence becomes the language of Bagharu, of Madari's mother—their language. Later in the novel, we see Bagharu gathering all his essence to stand nearly naked before civilized society at a dance event celebrating the inauguration of the Teesta Barrage. Perhaps through this act of nakedness, he mocks everyone or seeks to find his identity—his place in civilized society. However, whether in the plains or the hills, he finds no place for himself.

Throughout his novels, Debesh Ray speaks of such people and their struggle to 'become'. Just as Bagharu is tied to human civilization, Madari's mother from '*TistapararBrityanto*' is also surviving—has survived and will continue to survive. Her children disperse to various corners of India, representing different faces but connected through the same mother. That is why, at the end of the novel, Bagharu walks away with Madari. In this way, Madari's mother becomes a symbol of India. Therefore, Debesh Ray weaves the story of one life into another, ceaselessly.

Here, the reader is left stunned. However, this is not the desired conclusion—not for us, nor for the novelist. Hence, an appendix is added to the novel, searching for a new dimension of development. It discusses the conditions of colonial society tied to India's development, the capitalist-colonial system, and the control of international capitalism. As a result, the official statistics of development often differ from reality. The root cause lies in the undercurrents of our colonial-feudal socio-economic

structure. Due to colonial rule, adequate investment was never made in agriculture, and industrial raw material production was prioritized for immediate profit. In the post-independence period, to maintain the indicators of development, only the external framework was altered without addressing the deeper systemic issues. Consequently, capitalist class interests remained intact. The development graph rose without changing the structure of social class division, but it benefited only a handful of people in India. Since India is an agrarian country, its economy heavily depends on agricultural production systems. Yet, failure in this sector is stark. Hence, what appears superficially beautiful often hides deep wounds. To expose this harsh reality, Debesh Ray had to write *reports*. He had to create prefaces, present news stories, and depict the narratives of public unrest. To establish credibility, he had to incorporate dialogue based on direct interviews in his storytelling.

In the preface of his novel *'KhorarPratibedan'* (1991), Debesh Ray states:

"India exists for the twenty to thirty crore people who build its economy and the additional ten to fifteen crore who assist them" (p. 13).

Through his deep insight, he reveals the truth that the chariot of civilization, or the wheel of development, moves forward by crushing the ribs of the majority. Debesh Ray deliberately distanced himself from the 'European novel model'— and he succeeded. For him, traditional plot-driven narratives became secondary, while social consciousness took center stage.

The novelist makes it clear in *'KhorarPratibedan'* that even in the post-independence era; colonial mentality continues to act as a catalyst. Though different regions of India have distinct geographical landscapes, the marginalized classes remain trapped in the same systemic confinement. Through this novel, he paints a picture of their struggle. As a pioneering thinker in literature, Debesh Ray introduced a new trajectory in Bengali fiction, enriching it with intellectual depth. Consequently, his approach influenced contemporary and later authors like Bhagirath Mishra, TapanBandyopadhyay, Sadhan Chattopadhyay, and Kinnar Ray. As a result, Bengali fiction has evolved and continues to evolve into a literature that is intellectually profound and deeply rooted in its origins.

Furthermore, we notice that Swami Vivekananda's idea of 'living God' — standing by the common people — is a principle that Debesh Ray has always upheld. Humanity must shine to move forward. That is why he dismantles the saying, *'He who speaks much, speaks many lies'*, and re-discovers the truth.

In Debesh Ray's writing, we witness the mesmerizing glow of humanity—something that will never become outdated. Like a painter, he had a palette full of the colors of life. With these vibrant, evocative hues, this soulful artist painted portraits of people, intellect, and humanity.

References:

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