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RESEARCH ARTICLE



## Exploring Caste, Catastrophe and Civilization in Mallabharman's *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam* (A River Called *Titash*) and its Film Adaptation

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### Abstract

In the criticism of the novel *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam* (1956), Mallabharman's widely read Bengali novel, the life-narratives of the Malos, a Bengali low-caste fisherfolk community, their unique

culture, their indomitable fight to survive economically, their fight to save the Malo culture in the face of all kinds of adversary forces have been discussed to a considerable extent. In the criticism of the Ritwik Ghatak's eponymous 1973 film adaptation of the novel, the major importance has been given to Ghatak's treatment of the struggling life of the Malo community in a rural set up and Ghatak's mastery as a director. Less attention has been given to the caste question which determines the social position of the Malos in various ways. In examining both novel and the film text, this paper shows that whereas how caste operates in the Malo life-world and how the system of caste determines the low-caste Malos' social position vis-à-vis the Brahmins and the Kayasthas, their high-caste counterparts are substantively dealt with in Mallabarman's novel, Ghatak puts more focus on the human catastrophe faced by the Malos both as individual and as a community in his film, and has attempted to document the Malo life-world, as the acclaimed filmmaker Mani Kaul argues, as a civilization. This paper is concerned with this factor of caste, the catastrophe of the Malo community, and the Malo life-world as a civilization.

**Keywords:** Caste, Catastrophe, Civilization, Ghatak, Malo, Mallabarman, Culture, Fisherfolk, Casteism, Media Studies, Film Adaptation, Melodrama, Derivative, Healthcare

At the outset of the novel *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam (A River Called Titash)* Adwaita Mallabarman, the author, describes the unexplored life-stories of the fishing communities with a beautiful simile: 'Although the truth of these stories is hidden, like most truth, it is as tangible as the feel of air' (Mallabarman 1993:22). In a similar vein, it can be argued, while exploring the nature of implicit casteism present in the lives of the fisherfolk communities, borrowing these words of the author that although the truth of casteism is hidden, like most truth, it is as tangible as the feel of air. In the criticism of the novel, the life-stories of the Malos, who are predominantly associated with the occupation of fishing, their distinct culture, their struggle to survive economically, their fight to preserve the Malo culture in the face of all kinds of adversities have been discussed time and again. In the criticism of the Ghatak's eponymous 1973 film adaptation of the novel, much focus has been attributed to Ghatak's portrayal of the plight of the Malo community and Ghatak's artistic genius as a filmmaker. Less attention has been given to the caste question which shapes the fate of the Malos in various ways. In examining both novel and the film, this paper shows that how the fact that the Brahmins and the Kayasthas discriminate the Malos, consider them untouchables is aptly dealt with in the novel by Mallabarman, whereas Ghatak puts more focus on the human catastrophe faced by the Malos both as individual and as a community in his film. And in accordance with Linda

Hutcheon's theorization of adaptation, as she has espoused in *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006), I have treated the texts undertaken for my research as 'adapted text' and 'adaptation'. According to this theory, Hutcheon endows the literary text or the source text and the film based on it with equal importance. Contrary to the traditional scholarship of treating the source text as primary and the adaptation as secondary or derivative, Hutcheon ascribes autonomous status to both the pieces of artistic creation.

Adwaita Mallabarman's *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam* is one of the most widely read novel in Bengali literature. It was published from a publishing house of Kolkata known as Punthihar (literally, house of manuscript) in 1956. Mallabarman, who himself hails from the Malo community, a low-caste fishermen community of Bengal (both West Bengal and Bangladesh), has documented in this novel the unique life-world of Malo community which ultimately collapses. Narrated in an episodic form, the novel documents the major life events, rituals, folk culture characterized by a blend of different belief systems, communal harmony, and above all a community life of which the connecting thread is a small river called Titas. Among these social elements, the system of caste which divides the society into the Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra and thousands of sub-castes, has also found its way in this distinct life-world of the Malos. Whereas the social status of the Malos is largely defined by caste, there are also other forces like capitalism, modernization which ensured the catastrophe of this unique community life. This paper discusses this factor of caste and catastrophe of the Malo community.

### **Caste and the Life-world of the Malo Community**

The fact that Malos remain united in all kinds of adversities and exploitation is the consequence of the high-caste communities' act of isolating them. For a Malo, there is none other than a Malo, as these high-caste communities consider them to be untouchables, thereby not considering them to be fit for being part of the mainstream society. This condition has been well-expressed through Tamasi's father's realization in the following words:

A Malo's first duty, he knows, is to maintain unity in the community, to care for the feelings and interests of other Malos in the neighborhood, because they have only one another. Those other communities, who are they to me? They don't let any Malo in their homes. They consider anything touched by a Malo to be polluted. At their festivals and worship, even the Malos who are invited must themselves get rid of the banana leaves they eat from, because the high-caste status of those others will be polluted if they touch such things. They hold Malos in contempt: Malos don't know how to read and write as they do, nor how to walk as they do dressed in dhoti and wrap and shoes.

But is that supposed to make them unworthy of even being touched? Are Malos not human beings just because they're Malos? (89)

It is the fear of the Malos that along with these discriminatory conducts meted out to them, there is a fair chance of greater humiliation, oppression and exploitation on the basis of caste, and it is this understanding of the Malos about the social hierarchy that keeps them united, and under no circumstance, they are prepared to allow a breach in this unity. That a Malo will never be qualified to be upgraded to the status of a high-caste is aptly elucidated by Dayalchand, one of the notables of the Malo neighborhood, when he puts forward his objection to Tamasi's father's too much mixing with the Kayastha, a high-caste community:

Your hut is near the marketplace. We hear the Kayasthas come to your home to practice table-playing and to eye your daughters. Think of this—your mixing with the Kayasthas will not confer on you the rank of a Kayastha. You will always be just a Malo. Even if you seat them on thrones when they visit you, they'll give you a broken old plank to sit on when you visit them. Even if you serve them tobacco in a silver hookah, they'll hand you only a detached clay top, not a hookah they themselves use. No, what you're doing is not right. (89-90)

Kadir's son remembers how his father would face discrimination when they would visit some Brahmin and Kayastha households to sell milk. Whereas the Brahmin patriarchs would sit in chairs, his father was given some 'dusty old plank' to sit on. While they themselves hold some 'smooth polished hookas', they would offer some 'cheap coconut-shell thing' to his father. Kadir, a simple man, would not mind because it was ingrained in his mind that his low class could not match the high status of the Brahmins and the Kayasthas. Mallabarman categorizes these Brahmins and Kayasthas as 'borolok' ('rich' in the literal sense of the term). These 'boroloks' treat the Muslim farmers same way as they do the lower caste fishermen. These 'boroloks' are rich both in terms of class and caste. And it is from the same kind of treatment meted out to the Muslim farmers that makes Kadir find a friend in a Malo fisherman. In the hierarchical social order the simple farmers like Kadir is convinced that they could be angry in getting humiliated from these 'boroloks', but it is unbearable to get insulted by a man of equal status. As he says, "You can be angry at an insult from rich men but not at an insult from your equal. It just cuts through your heart with a knife of pain" (141).

Casteism is also reflected in the head carpenter's song in which there is a mention of a Buruj who is Brahmin by caste. His song narrates the tale of this thirsty Buruj who is in search of water as he is exhausted from the strain of walking. Noticing a clean and tidy home he becomes dead sure that it is a home of a Brahmin. He has a stereotypical notion that only the Brahmin can have such clean and tidy home. He approaches the householder in the response

of which a maiden comes out to quench his thirst. After drinking the water, he asks the maiden about her caste identity. In reply to this enquiry, the maiden answers that she belongs to a peasant-gardener caste. Hearing this ‘undesirable’ answer, Buruj realizes that he has lost his caste; “Buruj cries, he flings himself on the ground and he cries, for he’s lost his caste in a gardener’s home” (210). After realizing that he has lost his caste, Buruj stops his journey, does not go back home, and decides to stay in the very home where he has lost his caste, and asks his companions to inform his parents about his act of losing caste.

When Romu heard this story of a Brahmin’s losing of his caste from the head carpenter, he feels sorry for the Brahmin, and simultaneously a question arises in his mind that how can a thirsty person lose his caste after drinking a glass of water to quench his thirst. It is a question to which the carpenter has no answer. This story is also reminiscent of the famous story of Chandalika in which a thirsty Buddhist Bhikshu drinks water from an untouchable girl. When the girl apprehends that she might go to hell because of this act the Buddha Bhikshu convinces her that this is in no way a sinful act, that all human beings are equal. The two different endings of the stories which are similar in nature perhaps best indicate the fundamental difference between Brahmanism the core of which is formed of caste inequality, and Buddhism which is founded upon the principle of equality. It is also notable in this context that how Romu’s conception of people’s caste status has been constructed. As Mallabarman describes:

He has never seen a Brahman, but from what he has heard, he concludes they must be above ordinary people. He has heard they chant mantras and have finished reading many thick books. And gardeners! All they’re asked to do is plant banana trees in a Hindu home for a wedding, not really a prestigious job. In such a gardener’s home, so learned a man loses his caste. Losing his Brahmanhood, he now lives in the gardener’s home as a gardener. Will he ever chant mantras at weddings or memorize thick books? From now on, he’ll only plant some banana trees in people’s homes at weddings. Doing such an insignificant task, he won’t get any attention anymore. (210)

It is the social discourse fraught with the Brahmanical ideologies that shapes Romu’s caste consciousness. The concepts of Romu about the Brahman and a gardener clearly indicate how casteism operates in Malo society. Mohan’s mother’s words inform their commonly perceived notion regarding the Brahmins and Kayasthas:

They’re Brahmins and Kayasthas, they’re educated, they know better than Malos. Malos things on credit from their shops, hand them a deed of mortgage for a loan of cash when they go on jiyal fishing. They lend money for their weddings too. Most Malos of the village are in their control. How can Malos ignore what they say—their words seem to Malos like Brahmin’s script. (224)

It is explicit that the Malos hold a very high regards for the Brahmins and Kayasthas. The Brahmins and the Kayasthas, the outsiders, both in terms of communal relationship and regional affiliation, gradually impose their value systems on the Malos. Their hegemonic influence on the Malos tears the Malo's social fabric apart, as is described by Mallabarman in these words:

Ramprasad of Jatrabari is subdued after his attempt to make widows' remarriage acceptable in the Malo community. The Chakravarty priest of the village persuaded Malos, by quoting from his priests' handbook, that getting a widow remarried was bound to take a person to hell. They listened to the Brahman pandit and ignored Ramprasad. Now he does not have as much influence in the Malo community. Dayalchand used to speak up with courage. He plays the role of a sage in those others' jatra performances, and by taking their jatra show to the town, they gave him the chance to get gold and silver medals from the rich. Now he too shifts in their favor. He will not speak up for the right thing as he used to. (225)

### **Basanti and the Assertion of a Dalit Woman**

Contrary to the stereotypical representation of women from the lower castes in literature, the portrayal of Basanti, a Malo woman, is assertive in *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam*. She challenges the societal norms which are always in persistent attempt to suppress her desires, her needs. She intimidates her parents of doing socially unacceptable act, i.e., even eloping with a man if her last refuge, after losing all the happiness of life, at least is not taken into consideration. She was in a stage of her life in which she had nothing to lose. Under such circumstances, she did not remain voiceless. In Ananta and Ananta's mother she had found a cause to survive. She was assertive to such an extent that she could do anything to protect her last refuge, i.e., her relationship with Ananta and Ananta's mother. Basanti is not a woman who is prepared to be the subject of all kinds of victimization. All the misfortunes occurred in her life prior to her becoming a matured woman. In her mature age she has questioned her parents' decision of marrying her off at a stage of her life when she was not in a position to decide whether she should consent to marriage or not. In her matured age, she intends to have the autonomy over her body. Basanti the assertive voice manages to persuade her mother to give consent to her wish to give a *sari* to Ananta's mother. In his authorial intrusion, Mallabarman states, "Inside Subla's wife lives a rebellious woman" (127). Ananta's mother also breaks away from the confines of social custom when she ventures to take care of a young madman she is not supposed to be related with. Ananta's mother soaps and scrubs the madman's body in the ghat slope in broad daylight, and in so doing she remains indifferent to

the dominant social gaze. This act of transgressing the social norm has been aptly described by the author in his unique storytelling manner:

Ananta's mother gets down to work, pushing aside the barriers of modesty and social custom. She steps out of her home, goes by herself to the Ayurvedic kaviraj to get herbal remedies for the wounds. She goes to his hut and washes his wounds with hot water and soap before applying the medication. At first, he hits her too, hits her a lot as soon as she comes near. Finally, he surrenders, exhausted. People notice a beautiful woman nursing with care and compassion a wounded wild animal. No one makes any adverse remark...Ananta's mother one day asks the madman's mother to help her take him to the slope of the river to give him a good bath. Together they soap him and scrub him and make him splash in the water. In broad daylight! Men and women, all the villagers who come to the ghat slope look at her doing this. But she is oblivious to their gaze. (129-130)

Basanti was not ready to give up to the cultural imperialism thrust on the Malos by the 'outsider' Brahmans and Kayasthas. She had a strong sense of belonging to the Malo neighborhood, society and culture. That is why she asserts to Mohan's mother, "Listen, Mohan's mother, I'm a daughter of this village, I was married in this village. I'm not one to be afraid of marketplace men" (129-130). When she is reminded of her feminine identity as an obstacle to continue the fight, she asserts, "I can do anything. If nothing else, I can set fire to the village and burn it down" (129-130). Basanti was a woman who wanted to live all her life with human dignity. As she states, "it's better to die with honor, sister, than to live in humiliation" (129-130). When Mohan was going to lose all the hope to stand against the challenge of cultural imperialism, Basanti in her characteristic tone encourages Mohan by saying that not all will leave the battle. The strength in Subla's wife's voice startles everyone:

Dayalchand left, Krishnachandra left. But don't you see, Mohan, you haven't left? You're here, Sadhu's and Madhu's father is here. Of the six times twenty families three times twenty may have left. But we still have three times twenty families, and we'll survive. We won't let ourselves drift helplessly into wrong channels. With the help of those who stay with us, we'll fight to the end. We're not going to accept defeat from those who brought harm to the Malo neighborhood, those who split this betel nut in two. If there's going to be a jatra rehearsal in Kalobaran merchant's house tonight, then you too hold a singing session in your home. Let it be a test today. (235)

### **Ritwik Ghatak's *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam* as a Document of a Civilization**

Ritwik Ghatak's film adaptation *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam* (A River Called Titas) of Adwaita Mallabarman's eponymous novel was released on 27 July 1973. The film is joint

venture of India and Bangladesh. The film starts with showing a drying river basin, which is a metaphor of the life-condition of the Malo community as well as the connective tissue of numerous interconnected episodes of the film. The river Titas is at the centre of that orbit upon which rotates the Malos' livelihood and life-world. At the same time, the filmmaker introduces the Malo's life-world with a song, roughly translating "I fear I see the Ganga waters rise to fill the blue sky/ I fear I see the boats aground on the dry river bed," (Lower 2011) the song which Ghatak has employed figuratively to anticipate the impending fate of this lower caste community, i.e., the Malos' ways of living. The film is about the life-world of this particular Malo community, a low-caste in the hierarchical Hindu social order, traditionally engaged with fishing, who live at the bank of a not-so-famous river Titas, situated in Brahmanbaria (now in Bangladesh) of undivided Bengal. Then the camera spots Basanti, a girl considered young enough to be married off, who appears to be excited and at a playful mood on the eve of the auspicious *Maghmandala Brata*, a traditional ritual in which a young Malo girl undergoes fast or 'brata' in order to be blessed with a desirable husband. This ritual is observed in the month of Magh of Bengali calendar. The festival is celebrated with the accompaniment of traditional instruments like 'Dhol' and 'Kasi'. The festival comes to an end when the young Malo girl makes a 'Chouaris', an embellished paper boat, float on the Titas river, praying for her desire of having a perfect match to be fulfilled. The ritual has a counterpart in the Hindu ritualistic tradition of 'Shivaratri', in which the young girls undertake fast and pour water on the 'Shivalinga' and pray for having a husband like the mythic god Lord Shiva. Basanti is seen to inform her mother about how Kishor and Subal, two young Malo lads fight for capturing the Chouari. Basanti is betrothed to Kishor. Then the film shows the journey of Kishore and Subal along with the old, experienced boatman Tilakchand to a distant village. There Kishor meets Rajar Jhi, the local Malo girl, and eventually is married to her. After the *Basar Ratri*, the night in which the newly married couple is supposed to undergo sexual union for the first time, Kishor, Subal, and Tilakchand along with the new bride, they start their return journey. Apprehending the impending danger of getting robbed, they undertake all the care to protect themselves, especially the new bride, who is more vulnerable in this situation. They hide the new bride in an underground space of the boat which is covered by some wooden plates. But every cautionary attempt of theirs goes in vain as some dacoits succeed in kidnapping the new bride at midnight when the other three fall asleep. It is too late when they get awoken as they find the new bride missing. The sudden shock of the unfortunate incident drives Kishor mad. The film next moves to showing Kishor's wife Rajar Jhi, who happened to manage an escape from the clutches of the dacoits by jumping into the river and later got rescued by some fishermen of another village on the bank of the Titas river, with their son



Ananta. Within a single frame Ghatak shows on the one hand, how Kishor's parents struggle to bathe the madman Kishor at the bathing spot, while simultaneously Rajar Jhi along with her son Ananta, arrives at the same bathing spot in quest of an unknown future. Both of them are not in a position to recognize each other as Rajar Jhi did not see her husband's face closely earlier, and Kishor lost his mental equilibrium. In Kishor's village Rajar Jhi meets Basanti, who is now known to the villagers as 'Subalar bou', Subala's wife. It is because of Basanti that Rajar Jhi manages to secure a shelter in the unknown village. The conversation between them reveals that Basanti was eventually married to Subal, who died on the very next day of their 'Bou-bhat' or reception ceremony. Some events which amount to transforming the course of lives of the central characters like rescue of Rajar Jhi by the fishermen of other villages, Basanti's marriage with Kishore's friend Subal, Subal's untimely death in a boat mishap is informed to the audience 'retroactively', because, as put forward by the film critic Adrian Martin:

Ghatak was fond of using great leap forwards, ellipses in time, to shape his stories. The powerful, overarching rhymes—such as the words that the young Basanti hears at the start of the film about the “last drop” of the Titas, “without which our soul cannot depart,” words that return to her in the final scene—are more crucial than plodding through every detail of the action. In fact, Ghatak's stated aim was to heighten the devices of melodrama—the outrageous developments (such as Basanti and Rajar Jhi becoming friends, completely unaware of each other's past), the agonizing coincidences (Rajar falling for the mad Kishore, again unaware of who he really is, and hoping to replace his “lost soul mate”)—and bend them in the direction of Brecht's epic theater. Everything in melodrama that removed events from the conscious will and power of the characters—that delivered them over to the infernal cycles of chance or fate—had a potential political significance for Ghatak; he was interested in forces larger than the individual consciousness—forces that are, at the same time, graspable only through these human intermediaries, these long-suffering victims of history. (Martin)

That Ghatak focused more on the 'forces larger than the individual consciousness' can be attested by Ghatak's characteristic use of frame in which—as pointed out by the film critic Parichay Patra—'the humans occupy only a fraction of the frame while an azure canopy of the sky, Titas and the boats on a distant horizon form the mise-en-scene, as if they are straight out of a Dovzhenko' (Patra 2017). In Ghatak's oeuvre these 'forces larger' are translated in the forms of the Partition, modern capitalist economy which become instrumental in shaping the fate of his characters, but he does not envisage 'caste' or 'jat' as a potential larger force in determining the fate of the characters, an element which is not absent in Mallabarman's

narrative. This difference between Mallabharman and Ghatak in ascribing importance to the caste question might come from their different intellectual orientation, which in turn, has largely been shaped by their different caste location. While Mallabharman himself hailed from the Malo community, and his consciousness was largely shaped by the Malo life-world, Ghatak, an upper caste, was politically inclined to the Marxist thoughts from a very early age. He was not only an informed Marxist who had an in-depth knowledge about the trajectory of the Marxist-Socialist doctrines, as is well demonstrated in his critically acclaimed film *Jukti, Tokko o Goppo (Reason, Debate and Story)*, but also was highly influenced by the theatre artists like Brecht, who had a Marxist inclination, in making his films.

In accordance with the melodramatic treatment of the plot, Ghatak uses, as pointed out by the renowned film critic Adrian Martin, familiar cultural archetypes of the ‘suffering mother’, ‘the wise (or crazy) old man of the village’, ‘the local gossips’, ‘the blushing’, ‘the virginal bride’ to reach the Indian audience. (Martin 2013) In describing the form of the film, Martin states that ‘the film is, in with Ghatak’s Brechtian orientation, a broken, deliberately disjointed melodrama, arranged in two starkly distinct halves, and gives itself the freedom to hop from one character’s story thread to another’s—an uncommon technique in world cinema of the time’ (Martin 2013). Contrary to this argument, Mani Kaul, the renowned filmmaker of the new wave cinema in India, argues,

In *Titas*, Ghatak says something quite wonderful—a civilization never dies. And if there is a paddy field on the dry bed of the river *Titas*, another civilization will be born. So, for Ghatak, civilization is eternal. And that’s what people in India call ‘parampara’, it is stronger than tradition. They’re saying the same thing, a river can dry up and go under the earth, but it’ll suddenly spring up somewhere in a kind of a trickle and then suddenly become a river again. So for Ghatak, it’s like making a film on a civilization. You cannot identify the theme of *Titas*. When you want to say, “what is this film about?” It’s impossible, it’s so difficult. If you talk about one thing then you just sort of reduce the complexity of that work. So some people have looked at *Titas*, especially some Western critics and this has been their kind of objection to Ghatak, that he’s melodramatic. To my mind he’s not melodramatic at all, I feel he is actually using this melodrama only as a medium. (Kabir 2016)

Rather than labeling the form of Ghatak’s *Titas* as melodramatic, Kaul argues that the film is in epic form. Elaborating on the idea of epic form, Kaul succinctly points out the elements of epic form present in *Titas*. As he argues,

The epic form is...that the narrative is usually very thin, very spread out and at every stage that it develops, it tries to have wider perspectives. Not just concerning the

characters but also about nature, history or ideas. These are not just a description of society, but visions of epochs that have gone by. So it cannot be just a simple movement, a narrative moving forward, but as the story is narrated, it must also embrace and spread out. In the case of *Titas*, this includes the shots of boats, the rain, nature, the archetypes of mother. In the case of *Titas*, the form of Mother is Bhagvati, even the main character is referred to as Bhagvati by the fishermen when they bring her back to her husband's village. When that dramatic form is not just unfolding but also spreading out, the form obviously becomes more difficult to follow. (Kabir 2016)

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