

Understanding the conditions of coal coolies as represented in Bengali literature: A study of selected Bangla short stories

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Abstract:

In colloquial Bangla, coolie/*kamin* refers to any labourer who carries 'baggage'. However, in the colonial period it was used in a derogatory manner by the British to refer to any indentured labourer. The coolie system emerged in the 19th century and later the coolies were exploited in every possible way as substitutes of African slaves. Tea, coal, and jute were the three primary industries that employed the maximum number of coolies. Coal mines in the Eastern India employed many indentured labourers. This paper takes into consideration the literary depiction of coal coolie in the colonial and postcolonial period in selected Bangla short stories by Sailajananda Mukhopadhyay, Ghanashyam Choudhury and Anish Deb in order to construct an Indian historical narrative from the perspective of the coolies—the labourers—the main work force of the mines. Coal mines used to employ a large number of labourers from various parts of India; they would migrate from various locations to the colliery areas and when settled there would create a multicultural space there. This labour force consisted of mainly Adivasis and people belonging to the lower castes and they were oppressed not only by the colonizers, but by the upper caste/class Indians as well. This paper analyses the socio-politico-cultural conditions of the coolies and others associated with the coal mines as well as the general social conditions of the towns and cities surrounding the mines as depicted in the stories. It also seeks to understand how the category of coolie literature gets intertwined with the genre of Bangla short stories to create a genre of literature that is essentially a product of the collieries.

Keywords: Coolie, Coal mine, Bangla literature, Short story, Migration, Colonial period.

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“I am black because I come from the earth's inside

Take my word for jewel in your open light.” (Lorde)

These lines from American poet, Audrey Lorde’s poem “Coal” depicts the beauty behind the world’s ultimate energy source that runs the modern civilization. We cannot live without coal, yet we do not try or rather do not know how to improve the conditions of the people who has kept this industry alive. The merchants, businessmen, politicians, mile-men, officers etc. are important, but the engineers and workers and other labourers who goes inside the womb of mother earth to provide better life for earth’s other children are the most neglected lot of all.

The coal industry has been of uttermost significance in the development of Indian economy starting from the British Raj until this period. It has generated revenues, created remarkable changes in the socio-politico history of India and has helped India in becoming a developing nation. However, all these achievements are attributed to the imperial rulers, wealthy businessmen, powerful politicians, or others, but what about the coolies; the indentured labourers and other forms of labourers working inside the dark navel of the earth. Not only they are not acknowledged, but they are ignored in every possible manner. The backbone of the coal industry has been the coal coolies/ kamins¹ and their life has been steeped into the darkness of the coal whereas the spotlight is snatched from them by powerful ministers and businessmen like Dwarakanath Tagore or the Adani’s.

The term coolie was used in a derogatory manner, and the indentured labourers were referred to as coolies. These coolies were an alternative to the system of slavery that was abolished in the 19th century (starting from the 1830s). The women coolies were referred to as kamins (especially in the coal mine context, however I have used the term coolie as a gender-neutral term in this paper while referring to labourers pertaining to both genders). Coal along with other commodities like tea and jute employed most of the indentured labourers in the British period. Therefore, the literary representation of coal coolie becomes very important in the context of the literatures of India. As the coal mines situated in the Eastern part of India mainly employed the coolies, therefore, this paper seeks to explore the

way the coal mining industry developed in India and specifically in Bengal of undivided British India. This paper will address this literary representation of coal coolie in the colonial and post-colonial period by analysing these following Bangla short stories- “Koila Kuthi” by Sailajananda Mukhopadhyay; “Sobuj Ruidas”, and “Marad” from the volume *Khadan Samagra* by Ghanshyam Choudhury; and “Bonboniya” by Anish Deb. This paper will deal with the condition of coal mine labourers -the coolies as represented in various short stories in Bangla literature as in Bengal the first colliery of South Asia was opened, and mining was born inside the womb of Bengal’s coal pits. Nineteenth century saw the development of coal industry in India and its underlying causations.

The timeline of the history of India’s energy politics can be almost neatly divided into two halves. The first half began when coal deposits were discovered by British geologists along the right bank of Damodar River in Bengal almost at the same time as similar discoveries were made elsewhere in Europe at the crack of the Industrial Revolution. It would be another fifty years when the mineral would begin to be heavily exploited in India and a lively flourishing history of entrepreneurship would grow up around Damodar and the river it fed its water to, the Hooghly near Calcutta, the second city of the British Empire.

The entrepreneurship was led by Dwarakanath Tagore, the grandfather of Rabindranath Tagore. The elder Tagore positioned himself neatly in the East Asian opium triangle that the British built. The opium was manufactured at Ghazipur in Uttar Pradesh, transported by Ganga to the ships from Calcutta from where it was shipped to China. The cargo was opium, the fuel was coal and Tagore ran the largest coal business in the country. It came asunder as the company fell through the crack of insufficient finance and interests of the adventurers in the East India Company who were keen to cut themselves a share of the lucrative trade. As the opium trade fizzled out, the demand for coal slumped.

Decades later, as the theatre turned to West Asia, interest in coal revived. In the late nineteenth century, Britain and Russia began a fight to control the oil wells of Asia, including Persia. The Indian colony of Britain stepped in to play a crucial supporting hand in this game. The viceroy in India, Lord Curzon, raced to build a pan-Indian

network of railways to transport troops and supplies to the possible war fields of Asia. The railways of needed coal to run and so begun the second phase of interest in India's energy game. (Bhattacharjee 4-5)

This is the concise history of coal mining in India. Subhomoy Bhattacharjee's pathbreaking book, *India's Coal Story*, provide behind the scenes facts of one of India's biggest industry that not only employed millions and caused them ultimate destruction, but also, coal, being one of the largest economically profitable industry, caused migrations of thousands and their displacement from various parts of India (mainly the central Indian provinces) to the Eastern India coal fields. Even in post-independent India, the first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru believed that India would gain prosperity by producing steel that "would be smelted by domestically sourced coal mined in government-run coal mines" (Bhattacharjee 5). Nevertheless, both in pre-independent and post-independent India, coal has been linked to power and profit. The most important part of this industry- its miners were however, neglected then and are neglected now. Their life has been the same- for them only the rulers changed, the rule did not.

During the colonial period, there was a great influx of migrant labourers in the colliery areas of Eastern India. Most of these migrants came in search for better future opportunities and the migrants were mainly the Adivasis and the people from the suppressed castes and they would migrate to reduce their oppression. In reality, their oppression would increase a thousand-fold when they would come to work for in the collieries. As mentioned earlier, to have cheap labourers and basically a substitute for slavery, the British introduced indentureship and this system of bonded labour paved the way for capitalism to thrive in the British Empire. In the beginning, the British bought experienced coal miners from Europe. Later,

Rupert William Jones, one of the early British entrepreneurs to invest in coal mining in Bengal, was the first to employ local adivasi and lower caste labour around the middle of nineteenth century. Peterson reported in his District Gazetteer of Burdwan in 1910, that two-thirds of the total workforce in the mining industry was „locally born“. Of the different local adivasi and lower caste groups, the Bauris were the first to bring their women into the collieries. Their contribution to the early development

of Bengal coal mining industry was quite significant. The Bauris henceforth, came to be known as “traditional coal cutters” though their traditional occupation had been agriculture related. The Santhals, Kols, Koras and Bhuiyas also joined the mining workforce along with their women. Other low caste categories such as Beldars, Mullahs and Jolahas worked in mines with their women. Upper caste women usually stayed away from the dirty, heavy work in the collieries. Women of different local castes and communities worked in varying proportion in the collieries. By the 1930s, women miners were employed in a variety of operations in collieries. (Banerjee 3-4)

The Adivasis were exploited by both the British as well as the Indian coal mine owners. They were paid very lower wages of five to seven rupees. It was cheap labour for the miners. The labourers even did not know they could protest, and the concept of collective awareness was missing among them. This was taken as a huge opportunity for the coal mine owners to exploit them further.

It was in the 1890s that the government for the first time, set up a committee to look into the various problems of the coal industry in India. Accordingly, an Inspector of Mines on the line of the English collieries was appointed, for the first time. The turn of the century however, saw some government initiative that led to the passing of a number of mining legislations starting with the Indian Mines Act 1901. (Banerjee 6)

Moreover, all these changes did not improve the living or working conditions of the labourers. In turn they were torn between a penchant for their homeland, their roots, their culture, and their eagerness to earn a better living for themselves and their family. A multicultural space was formed when the migrant labourers interacted with the locals. Their language was a result of transactions among various communities and a common language was born among the colliery people to communicate among themselves.

Coal mining was essentially a colonial institution and the lack of proper infrastructure and economic development caused hindrance in the growth of development of coal mining and the labour conditions were terrible. The short stories “Koila Kuthi” by Sailajananda Mukhopadhyay; “Sobuj Ruidas” and “Marad” from the volume *Khadan Samagra* by Ghanshyam Choudhury; and “Bonboniya” by Anish Deb will further bring out the life of the coal coolies from the colonial period till the post-independent period of India. These stories

are set in both colonial and post-colonial India and essentially reflects the reality of the labourer's life. Their portrayal in the genre of short stories; a genre that portrays realism and in the Indian context it was adapted from the west in its modern form and reflects the Indian sensibilities in a way that leaves the reader question more. Furthermore, it is a genre that is very much in a dialogue with the readers. Hence, rendering the lives of coal coolies in short stories in Bangla literature helps to reach not only a wider audience of people, but it also essentially targets the intended audience for the short story-the educated, urban intelligentsia. Even in the contemporary times when the genre has a more wide and diverse reach, it is important for people not related to the collieries to understand and comprehend the condition of the mines and its labourers. Even the people who are in a way related to the colliery in a hierarchical position than the labourers and engineers who faces death and destruction every day, these stories can act as their conscience. In the context of Bangla literature, the genre of short story was present embedded in charit², jatakas³, fairy tales etc. Nevertheless, in this paper we will deal with stories that very much took their form from the modern European short story genre. Furthermore, this paper will also explore the presence of indigenous elements in these stories, if not in form, then maybe in content.

There has been no process of evolution in the history of short story in Bengali literature. It would be valid to say instead that short story made its appearance rather suddenly in the literary firmament of Bengal. However, the magazines of Bengal (weekly, fortnightly and monthly) played an eminent role in the promotion and encouragement of short stories. . .The magazines encouraged (and do encourage today also) short stories mainly because of space economy, and for the sake of introducing a variety in the content. Interestingly, except for Bankim Chandra, all the well known authors and writers of Bengali novels and fictions have also written short stories. And the magazines (Patrika) have been their vehicles of expression initially. (Bose 49)

Even Sailajanada's renowned short story "Koilkuthi" was initially published in the famous periodical, *Basumati* in the year 1922. This immortal short story efficiently depicted the life struggles of the coal coolies in literature. In the history of Bangla literature, this story will always be present as a gem that depicted the struggles of the coal coolies.

Sailajananda was one of the stalwarts of Bangla literature in the post Rabindranath Tagore period. He was a contemporary of the eminent poet, Kazi Nazrul Islam. Sadly, a gem like Sailajananda is not given the status due to him. We remember his contemporaries more than we celebrate this writer who was able to write about the subaltern coolies from below; he was able to live among them and reflect this stance in his writings not from a hierarchical stance, but from their perspective; the perspective of the coal coolies.

Kallol era was a period in Bangla literature of the 1930's that deconstructed the Tagorean notions of literature. This modernist movement in literature wanted to break the shackles of stagnancy in Bangla and wanted to be more inclusive in content and form. Political consciousness and a form of progressivism was embedded among the Kallol writers and this literary movement/period started with the journal by the same name, *Kallol* that was founded by Gokulchandra Nag in 1923. The most prominent writers of this period were- Budhhadev Bose, Premendra Mitra, Jibanananda Das, Sudhindranath Dutta, Manish Ghatak, Sailajananda Mukhopadhyay, etc. Initially Sailajananda was a part of *Kallol*, but he went on later to open another journal named *Kali Kalam*. However, after few years he again joined the *Kallol* group. The Kallol writers wanted to reflect the harsh realities of life in their texts and this was also a reaction to the disappointment people faced post World War I. Sailajananda's texts first took the Bangla readers to the coal mine areas of Asansol, Raniganj etc. and made the readers look at how life is lived by the coal coolies. In his writings we see how he moves away from cultural chauvinism and revealed that even the nameless, faceless coolies can be their own protagonist of their own story. Sailajananda himself had to face a very tough poverty-stricken life after he faced some setbacks. Therefore, he could understand a life without money or luxury and a life where the necessities are met seldom. After his marriage, with the help of his father-in-law, Sailajananda himself opened a coal depot in the Jorjonaki colliery area. That is how he came in touch with the coolies and the coolies were portrayed both in his first and last texts- "Koilkuthi" and *Koilkuthir Desh*.

"Koila Kuthi" is essentially about the essential workers who are working day and night for us. This short story was republished in the volume dedicated to labourers- *Sromojibi Manusher Golpo*. It is indeed a short story about the labourers -labourers of the coal mines. One of the first of its kind, this pioneering text first brought to the Bangla readers the real, horrific situation of life of the coal coolies. Sailajananda was not yet involved with the

Bangla film industry when this short story was published yet his cinematic qualities of capturing details and close ups unmasks here as well. The story is about the couple- Bilasi and Nanku, yet it is more about the lives of the coolies. These couple and their turmoil represent the troubles of the coolies in a whole. They work in the Jorjonaki colliery and this short story is a result of Sailajananda's witnessing of the way the coolies lived, laughed, and loved. The small domestic quarrels between Nanku and Bilasi, their jealousy when the either of them interacted to any other person of the opposite gender or their romantic liaisons are beautifully painted against the harsh reality of the coal mines. Bilasi is a Bauri, whereas Nanku, a Santhal. These two people from two different Adivasi communities had a happy conjugal life. They came from Jharia and was living in Raniganj and later shifted to Jorjonaki. This is a pattern of migration that was very common among coolies of the coal mines. Moving from one coal mines to another, they would come far away from their roots. Their problems started when they moved to Jorjonaki when Nanku started getting close to another coolie woman named Mainu and this gradually created rift in the life of this happily married couple. This short story also reveals the drinking culture of the coolies. The coolies used to get drunk mostly on cheap, country liquor to gain mental as well as physical strength to carry on their daily herculean tasks. This problem further destroyed many relationships among the coolies. The day Nanku betrayed his wife Bilasi, he initially went to drink tari, a type of country liquor, with his friends, but he never came back to his wife. Bilasi waited for the whole night all alone in her hut. The news she got the next day shocked her beyond her imagination; she could not believe her own ears when people told her how her beloved had run away with another woman. A woman faces multiple layers of oppression in her life and when she is a coolie, her layers of oppression just increase. When Nanku left Bilasi for another woman and in disguise, it not only broke her heart but her pride as well. He took away her identity with him. She was left with no choice but to live with Romona who have always been one of her admirers. Romona proposed her marriage, but she refused to marry him. Marriage has hurt her once and in vengeance she started living with Romona while her heart yearned only for her Nanku. Marrying more than one person was common among the coolies and especially if one's partner has left them. There was no official documentation of marriage, hence, it was easy for a coolie to leave his/her partner and neglect their responsibilities.

Later, when Bilasi got the news of Nanku's arrival in their colliery and his death inside one of the coal pits, it made her run towards the coal pit. She took Romona with her by giving excuses and pretending to marry him if he helps her this last time. Her heart was craving for Nanku and in hurry she jumped off the lift and fell on her husband and he died instantly. He was taking his last breath and Bilasi's fatal jump ended his life. Guilt, regret, pain, love and many more emotions enveloped Bilasi's heart and the eagerness for dying along with her lover inside the dark, coal pit made her furious. She started behaving crazily and instead of coming up with her husband's body, she went around with Nanku's body from one side of the mine to another. Her frenzied and maniacal behaviour has been compared with the god of Sanatan Dharma's i.e., Shiva's⁴ behaviour after his beloved wife Sati⁵ died. Like grief-stricken and angry Mahadeva⁶, Bilasi too in a rage wanted to die in any way possible and lastly her wish came true when she saw a place in the faint moonlight coming through one of the holes. There she went with her husband's body and intentionally started pulling chunks of coal that finally took away her life. Here, there is another reference to the custom of Sati that many Indian women went through. Like a Sati woman, Bilasi too died on her husband's funeral pyre; here the funeral pyre is the coal pit. On the other hand, analysing it from a rational viewpoint, it becomes apparent how hazardous the circumstances of the mines were and death could easily come inside the mines. Loose coal chunks, hot water, fire etc. were enough to kill human beings. Nanku also died due to one of these reasons. Death inside the coal mines were common happenings and nobody really cared about the death of the coolies; they were simply treated as collateral damage. There were no precautions or measures taken to ensure the safety of people working underground and years of unplanned mining created major faults inside the coal mines. The Bagdigi mine disaster, the Chasnala mine disaster of the recent times are proof of improper mining that is still happening in various parts of the country.

In this short story, Sailajananda has also mentioned and described the cultural life of the Adivasis working as coolies. From describing about the Santhali songs Bilasi sings to the instruments they use and the type of dance they performed are described in detail. We get a glimpse inside the coolie's life. Consequently, when Bilasi sings about her beloved living her for another woman. Her pain can be felt through these words- "Kon sanjhe tui gechis chole amar piyari/ami je tar kichui jani nalo/kichui jani na"- In which evening did you leave my

lover/ I do not know anything/ I do not know (Mukhopadhyay 119). These words reflect Bilasi's pain and throw light on the use of the fusion language by the coolies. It is not the modern standardized languages of India, but a language very special to the coal mine area. Through these songs and performances, the coolies cease to exist just as hardworking labourers, but their aesthetics, their way of loving and living comes to the forefront. In this way the readers can relate with these characters because even these coolies cry when their lovers leave them, or sing and dance when they are thrilled, or buy something when they get their wages. They are not much different from the readers living outside the world of the colliery; they too are humans.

Ghanashyam Choudhury was born in Kolkata, but he grew up in Guptipara of Hooghly district. Like Sailajananda, even Ghanashyam started his writing career with working for periodicals. Along with writing novels and short stories, he also worked as an editor of *Udit*. As a journalist, he wrote for children as well. He wrote various genres like science fiction, detective stories and so on. His famous novel *Abogahon* won the Mollobhum award and it was an outright political novel. His two volume of stories, *Khadan* and *Khadaner Pore*, depicts the life of the coal miners and others related to the coal mines. His stories revolve around life in the colliery areas of West Bengal and minutely depicts the reality behind life inside and around the coal mines. Ghanashyam himself wrote in the introduction of *Khadan Samagra* that he went over and over to collieries and stayed with people of that area to feel their pain and happiness; to know what their life was really like. He lived with the labourers and went deep inside the dark earth to get a taste of what it was really to be a part of the coal mining community. Both Sailajananda and Ghanashyam were not coal mine labourers themselves, but then they lived within the community and got a first-hand experience of the lives of the coal miners. Apparently belonging from a different 'class' they could move away from cultural prejudice and portray the coal miners in literature; it has been rarely done in Bangla literature. *Khadan Samagra* contains stories from both the volumes *Khadan* and *Khadaner Pore* and some other stories related to coal mines. The stories in this aforementioned volume are mostly based on real life incidents. *Khadan Samagra* stands out as it is entirely dedicated to the people of the coal mines, the coolies of coal. All the stories of this book are not of the colonial period, but the common thread that binds them is the condition of people related to the coal mines and their depiction of the plight of the coal

coolies. Ghanashyam even mentions Sailajananda's work as not only the first texts in Bangla to deal with coal mines and the miners, but also as the first milestone in Bangla literature to deal with the marginalized people of the collieries. According to Ghanashyam, the coal mining communities represents in microcosm the macrocosmic pluricultural diversity of India. The multilingual, multicultural India can be seen here, and this little slice of the nation can help us in understanding the diversity of the country.

Ghanashyam has been a journalist and his journalistic research and writing skills are reflected in his stories like "Shefalider Kotha", "Sobuj Ruidas", "Marad", and "Roti Bauri" from the volume *Khadan Samagra*. His language is simple and through a lucid writing he has tried to portray realistically what life is for the coolies working down inside the coal pits. The oppressed and discriminated labourers working in the coal mines are the protagonists of his stories. The short story "Sobuj Ruidas" starts with a splendid description of the Eastern Indian plateau regions and the variety of flora encompassing the region. Sobuj Ruidas, the protagonist, is a coal mine labourer. Like his father, he too has been following the tradition of working in coal mines. Mostly, the coal mine labourers would stick in working on the coal mines for generations due to lack of educational opportunities. Sobuj Ruidas is one example among thousands of coolies who have been facing oppression since decades. The simple songs of the coal mine areas are mentioned in this short story. There is the mention of the main river Damodar that flows through the colliery regions of Asansol, Raniganj etc. Damodar provides impetus to the coolies of the region and the culture of the place has grown around it. Ruidas sings, "Tui munshya dube mor ga/ Damudorer jole re bhai/ damudorer jole"-You mister drown and die in Damodar's water/ Hey in Damodar's water/ In Damodar's water (Choudhury 28). These lines refer to a woman asking her husband to drown himself in the Damodar when he refused to feed her. The pain of the woman comes out in her harsh words. The language is very much distinct from any contemporary standard modern India language. Even in the short story, "Bonboniya", discussed later in this paper, the language hybridity and difference remain same. The central character Bonboniya speaks a very different language that is neither Hindi nor Bangla, but a language that has the essence of both and culture of the Adivasis and in short it is a language that belongs essentially to the coal mines.

Sobuj Ruidas and his acquaintances talk about the closing down of several coal mines in the Raniganj area. This story is set in post-independent India and refers to the closing down of operations in many government-based coal mines. This led to loss in jobs and that followed more deterioration along with poverty in the life of the already grief-stricken coolies. The closing down of Eastern Coalfield Limited's¹⁰ coal mines destroyed many families. Closing of coal mines due to underground mine fires have become very common in India. Even now places like Jharia coal mines are burning day and night and evacuation of people have been going on for years. Years of implementing unscientific mining processes along with natural disasters have increased this problem. Coming back to the short story, one such fire took away Ruidas's job. However, his sensible wife, Sarathi, made him realise that they could earn money by singing tusu, bhadu or baul songs. The genres of various forms of Bangla folk music well-suited Ruidas's voice that he inherited from his father. The short story ends with the husband-wife duo singing together one such folk songs. Choudhury's story ends with a positive tone that there is still hope left for the coolies and this short story makes us believe as well that there is a life beyond the coal mines for these sufferers.

In another story, named, "Marad", the story starts in the same tone as "Sobuj Ruidas". The mention of the landscape along with the dancing and singing of the coolies are mentioned in the beginning. Their simple way of life includes a lot of drinking, singing, and dancing. These are the simple pleasures of their life that helps them survive in the rough environment of coal mines. The protagonist of this short story, Dilip Bauri, is a dumper operator of the Gourangdi open cast coal mine. His happy conjugal life is mentioned with his new bride, Sandhya. However, their happiness is short lived when Dilip dies of a terrible accident that happened when the dumper was not working properly and he was unable to drive the dumper from the lower level of the open cast coal mine to the upper level of the colliery. To save other labourers from a terrible accident, Dilip, turned his vehicle towards the steep slope and was crushed under forty-five tonnes of coal. That day the weather also turned very wild and as if it was saying, "Na na na !amonti hobar na"-No No No! This is not supposed to happen (Choudhury 108). The death of an innocent soul like Dilip Bauri has made the weather gone crazy and it blew the dust of black diamond all over the place. The news of Dilip's death shocked his young bride, Sandhya, and she ran wildly like Bilasi ran for her Nanku (in Sailajananda's "Koilakuthi"). Nonetheless, the other coolies and their

families tried to console this young woman by saying how she should be proud of her husband for saving so many lives. They called him, *marad*, a man; the very masculine sense of a patriarchal term that has been used to glorify his death. An innocent man lost his life while saving hundreds, but for the other coolies it became a celebration of masculinity.

Our third writer, Anish Deb, is a versatile writer and he has written books on ghost stories, detective stories and many other genres as well. A gold medallist of the University of Calcutta, Anish is also working as a professor at the same university. Some of his famous books are- *Agun Ronger Bullet*, *Bhootnather Diary*, *Panchti Rohosyo Uponyas*, and he has edited pathbreaking series like *Sotoborsher Sera Rohosyo Uponyas (Volume 1,2,3)*, *Rokto Fota Fota* etc. The story “Sob Bhuture” by Sailajananda Mukhopadhyay has been taken from Anish Deb’s edited volume named- *Anish Deb: Shera 101 Bhoutik Aloukik*. “Sob Bhuture” is not just a short story that falls into the horror genre but then again reveals the hardcore reality of coal mine labourers. Furthermore, it is a short story that employs the trope of the ghost to reveal the stark realism of the coal mines and the labour conditions that have not changed even now. Anish started his career by writing short stories for the pulp magazine *Masik Rohosyo Potrika*. Anish has a penchant for the horror story genre and after writing over hundreds of horror stories himself, he started editing this volume and it contains some of the greatest horror stories of Bangla literature like already mentioned above- Sailajananda’s “Sob Bhuture”, and other stories like, Rabindranath Tagore’s “Nishithe”, Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay’s “Hashi”, Jogodishchandra Gupta’s “Sobar Seshe Gaya”, Satyajit Ray’s “Khogom”, Sayyad Mustafa Siraj’s “Chhkkamiyar Tomtom”, Premendra Mitra’s “Jongolbarir Bourani” and many more. There are one hundred and one short stories in this volume and among them eighteen stories were unpublished before. This astonishing volume reveals Anish’s extraordinary abilities in compiling the best of best short stories.

The short story “Bonboniya” has been taken from Anish Deb’s *Anish Deb: Anisher Shera 101*, an anthology containing the best short stories by Anish. First published in 2015, this anthology has been re-published two more times. Other than short stories, there are thirteen novelettes in this collection. This anthology contains short stories and novelettes that span forty years of Anish’s writing career and hence his growth as a writer is revealed in this anthology. The story “Bonboniya” is not about coal mine labourers. This story is not about the coolies themselves, but about the social condition of the colliery area; the plight and

troubles even the officers as well the coolies face; it is about the criminal activities that goes on in the colliery area. The narrator of this short story belongs to a middle-class family; his father works in the accounts department of Coal India. Their troubles started when they changed residence closer to his father's workplace and local goons forced his father to pay money to them and they called it the purchase tax. These goons made their life miserable when the family settled in sahebpara, named after the saheb or the Englishman who used to live there. Clearly this is a post-independent short story and this story meticulously describes the torture of goons and mafias faced by the people living or working for the coal mines. Both the upper class/caste and the labourers belonging to the lower caste/class or Adivasi labourers used to face the torture incriminated upon them by a rising class of goons who would commit any kind of crime to have their own way. However, with the coming of one small boy of ten to twelve-year-old, named Bonboniya, the lives of these people started changing. Bonboniya lived in the slums where the coolies of the coal mines used to live. Being an orphan, he was staying with a coolie who used to beat him a lot. The narrator's father brought him at their house as a young servant and Bonboniya proved to be a good one. Apparently, it seems that Bonboniya's fate was going on in the right direction, but it is unfortunate that for a human being the best he/she can get is being someone's servant. The life of the coolies and their children and everyone associated with them did not change with independence. Even now they live a life devoid of proper meals, education, and all other necessities.

Bonboniya's plastic flute and headband made him look like the god of the Sanatan Dharma, Krishna. Krishna's image as a flute playing teenager has been compared with Bonboniya. At one instance, when the goons attacked the narrator's family, Bonboniya used his power and started moving round in circles and made the goons leave the narrator's house premises. Like Krishna he was swirling with a mysterious force. Bonboniya even did not understand where his powers came from. His extraordinary powers have been compared with Krishna and this reflects the writer's perspective that even an Adivasi boy can be Krishna, the god. One does not need to confirm to a particular religion or community but must have qualities that makes them a god. The image of Bonboniya playing his flute on a full moon night inside the narrator's garden confirms the latter's perspective. The last time the narrator saw Bonboniya, he punished the six goons who used to harass everyone and without lifting a

finger, in a miraculous and supernatural way, this young lad was able to make the others bleed or scared or get hit by a bullet. When the men tried to fire bullet or cut Bonboniya's head with a sword; nothing happened; Bonboniya stood there playing his flute like Krishna. After this chaotic and miraculous experiences, Bonboniya took leave of the narrator in the open marketplace with bewildered people watching the happenings and examined how Krishna comes in a human form when sins fill our earth, and he comes to save humans from troubles. Just like Krishna⁷ says in the Itihasa *Mahabharata*,

Paritranya Sadhunam

Vinasaya Ca Duskrtam

Dharma-Samsthapanarthaya

Sambhavami Yuge Yuge (Mukundananda).

Similarly, the name Bonboniya refers to Krishna and his disk-shaped weapon, the Sudarshan Chakra. Apparently, when something moves in a circle with a force it is referred with the adjective 'bon-bon'. The name Bonboniya comes from this word. This short story echoes Anish's belief of the holy and evil dichotomy among human beings and how humans are punished if they have committed deed, by the omnipotent and omnipresent power. The trope of Krishna has been used by Anish to ponder upon the evils that goes on in the colliery towns and villages, Nonetheless, the turning point in this short story is the fact that this god is none other than a coolie boy- not an upper caste/class older male figure. This deconstruction makes this short story a remarkable piece of Bangla literature.

Colonization displaced the Adivasis and other communities from their rural settlement and tossed them into the dark naval of the earth. The social fabric of the coal mining areas changed with the newer forms of settlements and created an entirely different community of the coolies. These coolies and the literature written about them forms an entire genre of coolie literature. In Bangla, there have been many genres that have intertwined with this coolie genre to create an entirely different category called coolie literature. This paper only focused on the four short stories by three different writers to bring out the primary issues that can be found in coolie literature. There are innumerable number of short stories on the coal coolies and they bring out similar issues through different characters, settings, and situations.

These stories are similar, yet they are different in many ways. This paper has tried to analyse each short story to reveal the innermost reality that the writer has portrayed. This paper also reveals how the upper caste/class writer viewed the coolies and their perspective can be well-understood from these abovementioned short stories. As Rabindranath Tagore said about Sailajananda Mukhopadhyay, that the latter was able to write about the coolies because he has been one with them unlike Tagore himself who have just looked at them from above. This is true in case of both Ghanashyam Chowdhury and Anish Deb. These three have tried to write the literature of the coolies from below, from the margin. They have tried to blend in with the coolies to create these masterpieces. Hence, these stories give us an overview of the genre of coal coolie literature. The inclusion of coolies in literature by these writers paves the way for the coolie genre to thrive in a society where literary chauvinism is the order of the day. Mining is not just a huge industry that makes money for the capitalists like Adani or as it used to do in the olden days for businessman like Dwarakanath Tagore, but it is more about these coolies-the backbone and pillars of the mining industry. And short stories are a great medium to reflect these people and reveal to the world their reality.

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¹ Coolie/ Kamin: The term coolie means someone who carries baggage; a slave or a labourer who is equivalent to a slave. The indentured labourers were bonded labourers and the system was created by the colonizers to replace slavery. They needed cheap labour and a skilled workforce. The women coolies were termed as kamins.

² Charit- A narrative genre of India. Mostly it is about a character's life story.

³ Jataka- A body of literary texts that deals with the many births of Gautam Buddha.

⁴ Shiva- The god of destruction in Sanatan Dharma.

⁵ Sati- First wife of shiva who was later reborn as the goddess Parvati. Sati as a custom refers to the inhuman custom of women burning themselves in the funeral pyre of their husbands.

⁶ Mahadev- Another name of the god Shiva.

⁷ Krishna- One of the most important characters of Mahabharata, the composer of the Sanatan Dharma's major text, Gita and a major god in the Sanatan Dharma.