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Indigenous People, Environmental Issues and a Reinterpretation of the Indian Epic Tradition in the Bengali Short Story *A Bird's Mother* (*Pākhir Mā*) by Sunil Gangopadhyay

ABSTRACT: This paper deals with the Bengali short story *A Bird's Mother* (*Pākhir Mā*) by Sunil Gangopadhyay (1934–2012). First published in 1964, the story must have been inspired by the recent mass attacks on the indigenous Lodha ethnic group in the Midnapore district of West Bengal and P. K. Bhowmick's seminal book *The Lodhas of West Bengal: A Socio-Economic Study* (1963), as well as news about the degradation of Midnapore's sal forests and the declining numbers of Siberian cranes wintering in India. Combining social and environmental concerns, the story shows how complex interactions between wildlife, indigenous people and agricultural communities can lead to conflict and aggression. The paper analyses the story in detail, focusing on the strategies used by the author to explain attitudes towards indigenous people in rural India. The paper also suggests that the story may be read as a modern reinterpretation of the *krauñca-vadha* episode from the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

KEYWORDS: Sunil Gangopadhyay, modern Bengali literature, *Rāmāyaṇa*, Lodhas, Siberian cranes

1. Introduction

This paper deals with the short story *A Bird's Mother* (*Pākhir Mā*), first published in 1964, and authored by one of the masters of modern Bengali literature, Sunil Gangopadhyay (Sunīl Gaṅgopādhyāẏ, 1934–2012).

The story unfolds in an unnamed but easily identifiable rural area in the Bengali-speaking region of India. The village where most of the events take place is inhabited by an agricultural community of Bengalis and some Santals. A number of Lodhas[1] live in the neighbouring village, so we are most likely in Midnapore (Medinīpur), or more precisely in what is now called West Midnapore (Paścim Medinīpur) or Jhargram (Jhāṛgrām),[2] as these two districts constitute the parts of West Bengal where the Lodha people are most numerous.

The villages are surrounded by paddy fields; there is a river nearby, and a sal (*Shorea robusta*)[3] forest, which is currently in bad shape due to ruthless exploitation. This also suggests West Midnapore or Jhargram, as both are famous for sal forests and infamous for the forests' mismanagement and degradation before 1971, when the conservation efforts began. Later in the story, when one of the characters visits the Kanak-Durgā Mandir or the famous Kanak Durga Temple in the village of Chilkigarh (Cilkigaṛ), and when a doctor from Chilkigarh is summoned to another character, the present-day district of Jhargram is confirmed as the location.

The time of the described events is not clearly stated, but presumably the story unfolds itself around the year in which *Pākhir Mā* was published. However, we are explicitly told that the narrative begins in

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1 A minor indigenous ethnic group of India, living mainly in the states of West Bengal and Odisha. One of India's Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTG). For more information, see Bhowmick 1963. See also Bhowmick 1981; Devi 1983; Panda and Guha 2013; Ramakrishnan and Sahoo 2024.

2 In 2002, the Midnapore district of West Bengal was divided into West Midnapore and East Midnapore (Pūrba Medinīpur). In 2017, after bifurcation from West Midnapore, the district of Jhargram was formed.

3 A valuable timber tree native to South Asia.

the month of *aghrāṇ* (*agrahāyaṇ*), in November/December, two weeks after the winter rice (*āman*) harvest.

The main characters are four members of a Bengali family: the father Jagadīś, his wife Maṅgalā, their adolescent daughter Kamalā and her younger cousin Nāṛu, the son of her paternal aunt.

Jagadīś is disabled: he was born with one leg unnaturally thin, so he cannot walk properly. However, he has other strengths. Wealthy by village standards, intelligent and well-read, he is in complete control of his family, land and finances. He is respected throughout the surrounding area for his wisdom. He spends his days sitting in the courtyard of his home, reading newspapers, magazines and books that he orders by post, and keeping a close eye on everything. He has a rifle, the author adds; he had used it once and killed a rabid dog with a single shot.

2. The analysis of the plot

A. Duluṁ and the other Lodhas

Right at the beginning of the story we find that Jagadīś's family home has some regular visitors. The first of those is not entirely unexpected but not welcome. He is a Lodha boy who arrives without an invitation and stands silently outside the fence:

> The boy does not talk much. Hugging the papaya tree outside the fence, he scrapes the ground with the big toe of his right foot. He wears a *dhuti* tucked tightly between his legs. His otherwise naked black body shines brightly like oil. He has no beard or moustache. His shaggy hair is tied back with a red headband, behind which he has tucked a vulture's feather. He cannot be more than twenty-two or twenty-three years old.[4]

[4] *cheleṭā biśeṣ kathā bale nā. beṛār bāirer pẽpe gāchṭā jaṛiẏe dhare ḍān pāẏer buṛo āṅul diẏe māṭi khõṛe. ekṭā āṭ hāt dhuti mālkõcā mere parā. khāli gā beś tel cakcake kālo. mukhe dāṛi-gõph nei, māthāẏ jhā̃kṛā cul. sei cule lāl paṭṭi bā̃dhā, tāte ābār gũjeche śakuner pālak. baẏes bāiś teiśer beśi nā* (Gaṅgopādhyāẏ 1964: 77). All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

The family knows this young man: his name is Ḍuluṁ; he lives in a neighbouring village, but they often see him wandering around in their fields. Two weeks earlier, Maṅgalā had paid him a little to cut down an old tree in their garden as fuel was needed to parboil the newly harvested rice. Ḍuluṁ worked hard, so Maṅgalā fed him some parched rice (*muṛi*) with a few raw chillies—and what a comical sight it was. He ate voraciously, with both hands,[5] munching on the chillies like a parakeet.

Jagadīś was displeased with all this. According to him, one should never allow any Lodhas into one's house. Once they see what is inside, who knows when they will come back and steal everything. If there is ever a need to hire someone to do some work in the household, a member of a Santal family they know is usually called. The Santals may get angry if Jagadīś's family starts giving work to Lodhas from another village.

Ḍuluṁ does indeed come back, again and again, but he does not steal anything. He just stands outside the fence in silence, waiting hopefully for some paid work or food. The rice harvest is over, so they have no more work for him, but Maṅgalā feeds him some parched rice each time he appears.

The situation now repeats itself. Jagadīś simply wants to get rid of the unwanted visitor, but Maṅgalā, as usual, braving her husband's displeasure, tells Kamalā to give Ḍuluṁ some *muṛi*. Kamalā does not like to treat a strong and capable young man like a beggar; she is also a little afraid of Ḍuluṁ—his eyes reveal suppressed anger, she thinks, and he has a sharp hatchet in his hand. Anyway, she prepares a generous portion of parched rice, not forgetting to add some onions and raw chillies, and offers the whole thing to the boy. This time, when Ḍuluṁ sees the amount of food, he does not eat it all at once, but wraps it in his *dhuti* and leaves.

Later that day, they see him from a distance in the fields. At first sight, his behaviour seems rather strange:

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[5] Unlike most Indians, who eat only with their right hand. The left hand is considered unclean and is reserved for other activities.

> Every now and then he lifts the hatchet in his hand and jumps; he stumbles and falls to the ground. Just like the dance of a shadow puppet.[6]

When asked, Jagadīś explains, to Kamalā's shock and disgust, that the boy is hunting rats. After a rice harvest, the fields swarm with rodents and the Lodha people eat them, although the rats are not easy to catch.

At other times of the year, Jagadīś continues, since they do not know how to cultivate the land and are not able to hold down any other steady job, the Lodhas have to make do with whatever they can find in the forest, be it rabbit meat or mushrooms and wild fruits.

One of the sources of information and inspiration for Gangopadhyay in writing his short story was probably the well-known book *The Lodhas of West Bengal: A Socio-Economic Study*, published a year earlier (1963), a pioneering study of the Lodha people by Prabodh Kumar Bhowmick (1926–2003), an eminent Indian anthropologist and professor at the University of Calcutta.

Thus, *A Bird's Mother* is a fairly faithful depiction of the socio-economic situation of the Lodhas of Midnapore at the time of its publication. This pre-agricultural, landless group of semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers, who were totally dependent on the forest for their livelihood, were forced to look for other means of making a living and engaged in criminal activities as their natural environment deteriorated; this led to confrontations with local agricultural communities.

The attitude of the local communities towards the Lodha people is made clear early on in *Pākhir Mā*, mainly through the words and thoughts of the characters. Kamalā is evidently fascinated by the strong, young Lodha man and curious about his way of life; however, some of his habitual behaviour causes her amusement, fear, and, at times, disgust. Jagadīś's feelings towards the Lodhas, on the other hand, are entirely negative: in conversations with his wife and daughter, he reveals his contempt, suspicion and dislike. The early part of

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[6] *mājhe mājhe se hāter ṭaṅgiṭā tule lāphācche, humṛi kheẏe paṛche māṭite. ṭhik yena ekṭā chāẏā putuler nāc* (Gaṅgopādhyāẏ 1964: 81).

the story clearly shows the marginalization of the Lodha people by the local agricultural communities and their stigmatization as criminals.

B. Siberian cranes?

In the middle of the night, a group of very different guests shows up at Jagadīś's home. Unlike the earlier one, these visitors are eagerly awaited and greeted with an almost euphoric joy:

> The courtyard is bathed in moonlight, there is no storm or rain, and yet the sound of swooshing can be heard overhead. Spreading their long wings, huge birds, one after another, circle above the house a few times, then suddenly dive into the air and sit in the *śirīṣ* trees. One after another![7]

A large flock of pure white cranes (*sāras*), it turns out, spends the winter in the village every year. Each time, they roost nowhere else but in the two *śirīṣ* (*Albizia lebbeck*) trees in Jagadīś's garden.

Did Gangopadhyay have any particular species of birds in mind when writing his short story? Another source of inspiration for him might have been the alarming news regarding the Siberian cranes (*Leucogeranus leucogeranus*), a critically endangered species whose so-called central population nested in western Siberia and wintered in northern India in the ever-decreasing numbers until 2002, when it was last sighted there.[8]

Indeed, the plumage of these strikingly beautiful migratory birds is almost entirely snow-white, except for their black primaries. The description of the cranes visiting Jagadīś and his family home corre-

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[7] *jyotsnāẏ dhuẏe yācche uṭhon, jhaṛ-bṛṣṭi kichu nei tabu śõ śõ śabda hacche māthār opare. lambā ḍānā mele biśāl ākārer ek ekṭā pākhi bāṛiṭār opar du'ek cakkar ghure tārpar jhup kare ese basche śirīṣ gāche. ekṭār par ekṭā!* (Gaṅgopādhyāẏ 1964: 84).

[8] This population is now probably extinct, primarily due to hunting and habitat degradation. For more information on the Siberian cranes, see Johnsgard 1983 and *Siberian Crane* on the website of the International Crane Foundation: https://web.archive.org/web/20111107105903/http://www.savingcranes.org/siberian-crane.html.

sponds almost perfectly to the appearance and habitual behaviour of this species, with two exceptions:

Firstly, at the time of the publication of *Pākhir Mā*, the Siberian cranes used only one wintering site in India, namely Bharatpur in Rajasthan; as far as we know, they never wintered in West Bengal. However, earlier Indian records suggest a wider winter distribution of these birds in the past, extending south to Nagpur and east to Bihar (Johnsgard 1983: 133). Thus, perhaps we can forgive the author for taking poetic license and placing them in Midnapore.

Secondly, neither the Siberian cranes nor any other cranes roost in trees. Either Gangopadhyay was simply mistaken, or perhaps, while keeping these particular birds in mind, he never intended the white cranes of his story to be a one-hundred-percent faithful representation of this species, and instead made them a symbol of all the beautiful and vulnerable wildlife.

The specific name of the cranes is nowhere mentioned by the author, which is understandable anyway, since the villagers, even the well-read Jagadīś, simply do not know it. They also have no idea where the birds migrate from. Some say they come from Australia, while others say they come from Sweden. Jagadīś has ordered a Bengali book on migratory birds from Calcutta but he is still confused. City people visit the village from time to time to watch the rare cranes, but they use only their English names and are unable to explain anything in Bengali.

None of this really matters to Jagadīś's family. They are enchanted by the beauty of the birds; they treat them as their guests, showing them reverence and affection. On their arrival, Maṅgalā ceremoniously offers them some rice, although they do not eat it, while Kamalā blows a conch.

C. Conflict and aggression

No one in the village kills the cranes, even among the Santals, who call them 'sahib birds' (*sāheb pākhi*). However, they are all worried about what the Lodhas might do. These originally nomadic people, although more or less settled now, still behave at times like the wild forest

dwellers they once were. They roam the fields and eat everything they come across, be it pigeons, pigs, rats or snakes. They would certainly kill and eat a crane—from each of these huge birds they could get at least four or five kilograms of meat. The Santals catch several Lodha men and give them a warning. They must be kept in check by fear.

A new routine is soon established: at night, the cranes roost in the trees in Jagadīś's garden; during the day, they feed along the riverbank, watched with great enthusiasm by Kamalā and Nāṛu. However, Kamalā realizes with disgust that these beautiful, pure white birds also eat rats.

> A big rat was running around in fear for its life, ten or twelve cranes had surrounded it and they were trying to peck it to death. The rat was not able to escape, in a matter of minutes there was no trace of it left![9]

They take some of Duluṁ's food for themselves—Kamalā observes, surprised by her own bizarre thought.

Duluṁ also watches the cranes. There is now a white feather behind his red headband. Quite unexpectedly, we briefly see the situation from his point of view. He is lying in ambush in the thicket of *kāś* grass (*Saccharum spontaneum*) on the riverbank. He is aware of the dangers of killing one of the birds, but his stomach is burning with hunger and he cannot think clearly. Frightened but excited, after many unsuccessful attempts, he manages to knock down a juvenile crane with a slingshot and then cuts off its head with his hatchet, the whole scene described in all the gory details:

> The bird was limping. Although it tried to take to the air, it was unable to fly high. Every now and then it cried out. Duluṁ suddenly jumped and instantly dealt a blow to the bird's neck with his hatchet. Blood gushed out and poured over Duluṁ's body, but the bird was not yet dead. It tried to descend into the river. Duluṁ came up again, grabbed the bird by its

[9] *ekṭā masta dheṛe ĩdur prāṇ bhaẏe chuṭche edik odik, daś bāroṭā sāras tāke ghire dhare ṭhokrābār ceṣṭā karche. ĩdurṭā pālāte pārla nā, miniṭ khāneker madhyei ekebāre niścihna!* (Gaṅgopādhyāẏ 1964: 89).

> legs and began to strike it with his hatchet without restraint. […] The bird Duluṁ caught was almost a baby. It could not fight for long. Duluṁ cut off its head. The eyes of the bird were still.[10]

Duluṁ runs off with his prey. There will be a feast at his house tonight, he thinks happily.

Unknown to him, Nāṛu is a witness to the scene. Kamalā forbids her cousin to tell Jagadīś, but the truth cannot be withheld for long. Throughout the night there is an extraordinary commotion among the cranes in the *śirīṣ* trees. One of them—perhaps the mother of the dead bird?—begins to call out constantly in a particularly mournful voice, as if crying. The cranes usually stay in the village until the end of the month of *māgh*, in mid-February. This time, however, they leave after mere fifteen days, and then Nāṛu reveals everything to his uncle.

Jagadīś is overwhelmed with grief and the whole village is outraged. While Jagadīś seemingly lies down and does nothing, nearly five hundred people attack the Lodha settlement after dark. Predictably, Duluṁ is killed:

> First he was knocked to the ground with a crowbar blow. Just like the young crane, he tried to crawl away, but he could not—a hatchet hit him in the neck.[11]

Three more Lodha men are killed and 27 injured. The police arrive two and a half days later.

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[10] *pākhiṭā khõṛācche, oṛār ceṣṭā kareo uṭhte pārche nā ũcute, kākiẏe kākiẏe uṭhche. ḍuluṁ jhẽpiẏe paṛei ṭāṅgi diẏe ek kop basālo pākhiṭār galāẏ. phinki diẏe rakta ese paṛla ḍuluṁ-er gāẏe, kintu pākhiṭā ekhano mareni, nadīte neme paṛār ceṣṭā karche, ḍuluṁ ābār giẏe pā cepe dharlo, elopāthāṛi ṭāṅgi cālāte lāglo. […] ḍuluṁ yetāke dhareche, seṭā prāẏ bācchāi. beśikṣaṇ se yujhte pārla nā. muṇḍuṭā ālādā kare pheleche ḍuluṁ, pākhiṭār cokh duṭo sthir* (Gaṅgopādhyāẏ 1964: 90).

[11] *prathame ekṭā śābaler bāṛi kheẏe se chiṭke paṛlo maṭite, bāccā sārasṭār matani se hyẽcoṛ pyẽcoṛ kare pālābār ceṣṭā karlo, pārlo nā, ekṭā ṭāṅgir kop paṛlo tār ghāṛe* (Gaṅgopādhyāẏ 1964: 96).

Jagadīś is not involved in the case. He is disabled, he did not take part in the assault, he did not even lend his rifle to anyone; apparently, he was lying in his yard all the time. The police inspector visits him in his house and stays for tea. Ten Santals are arrested but they are quickly released on bail. It is unclear when the trial will take place; it seems that everything is over.

Gangopadhyay's story of the Lodha massacre is evidently based on the actual events that took place around the time of its publication. Mass attacks on the Lodhas did happen in Midnapore in 1958 and 1961. Unfortunately, several similar incidents occurred in the following years, the last one in 1989 (Bhowmick 1981: 6; Devi 1983: 947; Ramakrishnan and Sahoo 2024: 153–156). "Lodha killing is a regular feature in West Bengal", wrote Mahasweta Devi (1926–2016), an eminent Bengali writer and social activist who fought for the rights of the indigenous people of India (Devi 1983: 947).

D. Epilogue

The story has a short but important epilogue. Like the opening part, it mentions Jagadīś's guests twice.

It is now the beginning of winter. The first set of visitors, the cranes, as we know, has left unusually early. Their next arrival is eagerly awaited, but they will probably never return, fears Jagadīś. This reflects the real state of affairs: at the time of the publication of *Pākhir Mā*, the number of Siberian cranes wintering in Bharatpur continued to decline. Jagadīś's family, however, understandably associates this with the previous events. They do not feel guilty. We have done nothing wrong, says Maṅgalā. And yet Jagadīś wakes up in the middle of the night, as if he has heard the bird's mother crying. Kamalā screams and flails her arms and legs in her sleep.

The external situation is not good either. The forest continues to be cut down and there are no animals in it. The river has dried up. Rice prices have skyrocketed and vegetables are not growing.

In the midst of all this, another visitor arrives, this time completely unexpected, even to the readers. A decrepit old woman in a torn sari

appears under the papaya tree outside the fence, and asks for some parched rice. As it turns out, she is Dulum̐'s mother.

3. Dulum̐ and the other Lodhas vs. Siberian cranes

Of particular interest in Gangopadhyay's short story seem to be the strategies employed by the author to portray Dulum̐ and the other Lodhas.

On the one hand, they are constantly conceived metaphorically, in terms of cranes or birds in general. Dulum̐'s association with birds is made clear at the very beginning of *Pākhir Mā*. He has a vulture's feather tucked behind his headband, which he later replaces with a white crane's feather, and he munches on raw chillies like a parakeet. Later in the story, it seems to be suggested that his silhouette, with a sharp hatchet in hand, resembles that of a crane or other large bird with a sharp beak.

The way of life of the Lodha people is also described here as similar to the habitual behaviour of cranes: although they are now settled, the Lodhas used to be semi-nomadic like migratory birds; both the Lodhas and cranes are omnivorous (they even eat rats) and spend their days foraging in the fields.

The text also explicitly compares Dulum̐'s death to that of the young crane he killed. Finally, this conceptualization of Dulum̐ and other Lodhas is confirmed in the epilogue, when his mother appears; surely, the title of the story, *A Bird's Mother*, refers not only to the female crane mourning the death of her young but to the old Lodha woman as well.

On the other hand, Dulum̐ and the Lodha people in general are also repeatedly contrasted with the cranes in the story. Most conspicuously, as is pointed out again and again, the cranes' plumage is snow-white and Dulum̐'s body is shiny black. Although Jagadīś and his family do not know the name of the birds or where they come from, they treat them as their own and welcome them into their garden. On the other hand, the family knows Dulum̐'s name and the place where he lives very well, but except for one occasion, they do not let him in and keep him outside

the fence. The cranes are considered to be pure and beautiful; they are held in affection and reverence. The Lodhas are regarded as strange, laughable, and dangerous at the same time; they are ridiculed and feared.

By employing these two opposing strategies in his short story, the author is able to show more clearly the attitude of the Bengali and Santal villagers towards the Lodhas. The agricultural community depicted here dehumanizes the landless indigenous people, placing them on the same level as wild animals, and even at that level treats them as 'others'. The conflict between the two groups, which has evidently been brewing for a long time, is thus projected onto another plane. Since the Lodhas compete with the cranes for food and also hunt the birds, aggression against them can be justified as acting in the righteous cause of protecting the threatened creatures. The story exposes the hypocrisy of a society that readily offers protection to the endangered wildlife but marginalizes equally vulnerable indigenous people.

4. *Pākhir Mā* as a reinterpretation of the *krauñca-vadha* episode from the *Rāmāyaṇa*

Arguably, Gangopadhyay's short story can also be read as a modern reinterpretation of an episode from the Indian epic tradition, namely the famous *krauñca-vadha* episode narrated in *sarga* 2 of the *Bālakāṇḍa* of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. As is well known, the great sage Vālmīki, while walking in the forest near the Tamasā river, encounters a mating pair of *krauñca* birds, which are most convincingly identified as sarus cranes (*Antigone antigone*).[12] Suddenly, the male is struck down by a *niṣāda*[13] hunter, and the female starts mourning her partner's death:

[12] For the identification of the *krauñca* birds in the *krauñca-vadha* episode, see Vaudeville 1963: 329–331, Leslie 1998 and Dave 2005: 314 and 316. For more information on the sarus cranes, see Ali 1943: 332.

[13] "The *Niṣāda*s […] wild non-Aryan tribes of hunters, fishermen and robbers. It seems that the word is a general term for non-Aryan tribes, rather than the name of a particular one" (Vaudeville 1963: 332). "Niṣāda, originally the proper name of a tribe, came also to be used as a generic term for any non-aryan tribesman and

> Seeing him struck down and writhing on the ground, his body covered with blood, his mate uttered a piteous cry.[14]

Hearing this, Vālmīki is filled with compassion and curses the hunter:

> Since, Niṣāda, you killed one of this pair of *krauñca*s, distracted at the height of passion, you shall not live for very long.[15]

While the *krauñca-vadha* episode and *Pākhir Mā* are very different in their specifics, I would argue that the key events of both stories are quite similar:

– a bird, presumably a crane (an adult male sarus crane / a juvenile Siberian crane of an unknown gender), is killed by an indigenous hunter (a *niṣāda* / a Lodha) on a riverbank, and the killing is described in gory details;

– a female crane (the mate of the dead bird / the dead bird's mother) mourns the death of her partner / her child by uttering piteous cries;

– a person higher in the social hierarchy (a venerable great sage / a respectable leader of a Bengali agricultural community) is filled with grief and punishes the killer (curses him, possibly with an early death / probably incites the village mob to kill him).

However, Gangopadhyay not only transposes the traditional Indian epic story of the killing of a crane by an indigenous hunter into a different context with a contemporary setting, but also ingeniously reinterprets it by introducing the perspective of the killer.

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as such is frequently used to refer to a hunter or fisherman. […] It is uncertain whether or not the word is used in a restricted or generic sense in this passage, but the term clearly has a pejorative connotation" (Goldman 2007: 280–281).

14 *taṁ śoṇitaparītāṅgaṁ veṣṭamānaṁ mahītale /*
bhāryā tu nihataṁ dṛṣṭvā rurāva karuṇāṁ giram // R 1.2.11
Tr. Goldman 2007: 127.

15 *mā niṣāda pratiṣṭhāṁ tvam agamaḥ śāśvatīḥ samāḥ /*
yat krauñcamithunād ekam avadhīḥ kāmamohitam // R 1.2.14
Tr. Goldman 2007: 127. "The curse has been interpreted in a variety of ways depending on the meaning given to the term *pratiṣṭhā*: an early death, eternal ill fame or the life of a perpetual nomad" (Leslie 1998: 479).

We do not learn much about the *niṣāda* in the *Rāmāyaṇa* episode; he is, however, unequivocally condemned. The narrator, recounting the killing scene, describes him as "filled with malice and intent on mischief" (*pāpaniścayaḥ* […] *vairanilayo*, R 1.2.10, tr. Goldman 2007: 127). Later, the sage Vālmīki recalls:

> That wicked man, his mind possessed by malice, did a terrible thing in killing such a sweet-voiced bird for no reason.[16]

In *Pākhir Mā*, on the other hand, the Lodha boy Duluṁ does not act without a reason or out of sheer malice. His motivation is made perfectly clear to the reader. Throughout the story, as noted and explained above, the author emphasizes the critical economic situation of the Lodhas. He also presents the crucial scene of the killing of the juvenile crane from Duluṁ's point of view. The reader is thus given a glimpse of the Lodha boy's feelings: the hunger tearing at his guts and the desperate need to find food for his family that forces him to ignore the possible dire consequences of killing one of the birds loved and revered by the Bengali and Santal villagers.

Moreover, the reader is compassionately reminded that like the slain Siberian crane, Duluṁ too had a family that was supported by him during his lifetime and is now mourning his death, a fact highlighted in the story's epilogue through the brief introduction of the figure of the Lodha's old mother begging for food.

5. Conclusions

The Bengali short story *A Bird's Mother* (*Pākhir Mā*) by Sunil Gangopadhyay, first published in 1964, must have been inspired by the recent mass attacks on the indigenous Lodha ethnic group in the Midnapore

[16] *pāpātmanā kṛtaṁ kaṣṭaṁ vairagrahaṇabuddhinā /*
yas tādṛśaṁ cāruravaṁ krauñcaṁ hanyād akāraṇāt // R 1.2.27.
Tr. Goldman 2007: 128.

district of West Bengal and P. K. Bhowmick's well-known seminal book *The Lodhas of West Bengal: A Socio-Economic Study* (1963), as well as the alarming news about the degradation of Midnapore's sal forests and the dwindling numbers of Siberian cranes wintering in India. Combining social and environmental concerns, the story shows how complex interactions between wildlife, indigenous people and agricultural communities can lead to conflict and aggression.

The striking similarities between the key events of *Pākhir Mā* and the famous *krauñca-vadha* episode narrated in the *Bālakāṇḍa* of the *Rāmāyaṇa* make it possible to read *A Bird's Mother* as a modern reinterpretation of the traditional Indian epic story of the killing of a crane by an indigenous hunter, in which the author additionally introduces the perspective of the killer. Obviously, this makes this shocking cautionary tale, the general message of which is unfortunately still relevant today, more memorable, especially for the Indian reader.

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