



The Biopolitics of the Slow Body: Disability, Labour, and Spectacle in Pradipta Bhattacharyya's *Nadharer Bhela*

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“The Body is the biopolitical reality” (Michel Foucault)

Abstract: Pradipta Bhattacharyya's *Nadharer Bhela: The Slow Man and his Raft* (2025) serves as an ontological exploration of hyper-velocity, productivist biopolitics, and geosocial apparatuses that regulate the human form in late capitalism. Drawing on Michel Foucault's observations on biopolitics and how capitalism calculates and extracts value from physical bodies, the film centres on Nadhar, a mobility-impaired, pathologically slow man whose sluggish movement unsettles the efficiency mandate of the labour economy. The film explores how physical utility and power define the boundary between a valued citizen and a structurally marginalised person. After the death of her mother, Nadhar's inability to work in a tea stall marks him a misfit for productive labour. His joining an itinerant village circus group indicates his transformation from a domestic burden to a commodified and exotic spectacle for visual consumption. The present paper intends to study *Nadharer Bhela* within the framework of Crip Theory, Marxist political economy, and Guy Debord's Spectacle to question what Foucault calls the “disciplinary gaze” that transforms corporeal impairment into performative labour. With the juxtaposition of rural precarity and the *Manasamangal* myth focusing on Behula's liminal journey in a raft along with the dead body of her husband, the film depicts the non-normative body both as a location for systemic violence and complete existential opacity. The Great Bengal Circus, where Nadhar has been subsumed as a grotesque item for visual pleasure, functions as the representative of body politics, depicting how non-conforming



bodies fail to meet the demands of the neoliberal metrics of velocity and are subsequently controlled and managed as a spectacle. Nadhar's pathological sluggishness denies the teleological pattern of the modern extraction economy, converting passive sufferance into a subversive critique of the visual economy of consumption, thereby refusing the temporal regime of efficiency. The present study aims at reading *Nadharer Bhela*, which critiques what Robert McRuer conceptualises as compulsory able-bodiedness, privileging the capable bodies for continuous productivity, while rendering the impaired disposable. It also purports to underscore that identity is an opaque, unstable and political construction, continuously interceded and conciliated at the convergence of physical capacity, disabled corporeality, and the exploitative violence of gaze.

Keywords: Body Politics, Biopolitics, Spectacle, Non-normative, disabled corporeality

Introduction

“The regime of speed dictates which bodies are rendered functional and which are discarded as structurally obsolete”- *Social Acceleration* 182

Harmut Rosa's observation on the relation between velocity and the late capitalist discourse underlines what Paul Virilio points out as the “dromological control: a regulation of bodily movement, acceleration, and deceleration.” (67) In fact, the regime of speed, according to Rosa, is not a contingent feature of the late capitalist social system, but a regulated mechanism controlled by the discourses of biopolitics. In modern times, the politics of speed no longer remains a somatic index of displacement, but operates as the most fundamental ontological requirement. Within this rationale and imperative of the market economy of productivity, the human body is evaluated exclusively in terms of its mechanical efficacy, compatibility with high-velocity extraction, and the capacity to produce profitably. The viability and the recognition of the body as a subject worthy of being an able citizen depend upon its power of acceleration. Contrarily, a slow, stuttering, or hesitating body is marked as defective, socially extraneous, and economically disposable. This mechanics of modern power demanding profit-yielding bodies is



what Michel Foucault highlights as biopolitics. He writes, “[T]he biopolitical imperium requires a body that is not merely docile, but accelerated—a somatic instrument synchronized with the temporal demands of capitalist extraction.” (*The History of Sexuality* 139) He further observes that “for capitalist society, it was biopolitics, the biological, the somatic, the corporeal that mattered more than anything else.” (“The Birth of Social Medicine” 137) Foucault’s study clearly points to the political control of marking an able body in terms of its capacity to remain attuned to the dynamism of capitalist production. Precisely, society’s claim over an individual identity is exercised through its control over his corporeal existence, positing a utilitarian logic that determines social worth in relation to physical ability and power. Pradipta Bhattacharyya’s film *Nadharer Bhela* (The Slow Man and His Raft) approaches this normative matrix of the subjection of the corporeal identity by the regime of velocity through the depiction of its central character, Nadhar. A middle aged man from rural Bengal, Nadhar’s physiological tempo is so languid and sluggish that he is repeatedly compared to the slow dwelling mammal, sloth. Set in the precarious rural setting of Nadia, the story of Nadhar goes in tandem with the subsumption of the place by the modern capitalist economy. Nadhar’s languid existence appears as a crisis to his family and community because of his inability to participate in the production process of the social economy. He can neither work to earn a living, nor can he take up the family responsibilities, which eventually make him a misfit to the basic utilitarian pattern of survival.

The present paper intends to argue that the film *Nadharer Bhela* presents the character Nadhar and his non-normative body not as a tool for melodramatic expression, but as a powerful site that persistently critiques the productivist regime of biopolitics. Looking through the lens of Crip Theory, Marxist reading of the politics of Commodification, and Debord’s theory of the spectacle, the study aims at exploring how the film places the idea of the body at the intersecting point of identity, power, and resistance. By tracing the trajectory of Nadhar from the affectionate care and love of his mother within a domestic setup to his incorporation into the exploitative apparatus of “the Great Bengal Circus,” the narrative of the film reflects how the logic of the market-oriented capitalist economy absorbs, appropriates and processes a non-normative body to extract utility out of it. Therefore, a body that is unable to be a part of the production economy is



exploited by the capitalist economy for extraction of value from visual pleasure. Another interesting dimension that the film adds to the representation of the biopolitical appropriation of the body is the weaving of the myth of *Manasamangal*. As a foundational cultural text of Bengal, the myth of Manasa brings forth the precarity of the human condition and existence. Bhattacharyya builds a dialogue between this classical myth and the precarity of its characters fighting against the divine order with the socio-economic precarity of the members of the circus party. Metaphorically, Nadhar's body becomes analogous to Behula's raft that she used to take the dead body of her husband to the gods for divine intervention against Manasa's revenge. Like the raft, Nadhar's body is precarious, vulnerable, yet moving. Nadhar's repeated request for drifting away in a raft does not merely romanticise his inability to cope up with the social pace, but also lends a mythical angle to interpret his corporeal inability that refuses to tune up with the accelerated functions of the society (read: circus party). This "dromological" intransigence of the slow body also exposes the structural insensibility and cruelty of a utilitarian world that considers corporeal sluggishness disposable.

From Bodily Difference to Social Abjection: Pathology of Slowness:-

The film depicts Nadhar's body through a vocabulary of deficiency. His slowness appears to be his shortcoming that socially categorises him as physically impaired. Thus, his body is politically classified with his languid movement and his inability to conform to the rhythms of social life. Precisely, Nadhar's social identity is constructed with his physical inability. This brings in Foucault's idea of biopolitics and Alison Kafer's formulation of "crip time." Foucault's "The Birth of Social Medicine" focuses on the political implications of the corporeal and biological aspects of human existence. Biopolitics refers to the medico-juridical and economic apparatuses that measure and regulate human bodies to optimise economic efficiency. This eventually builds a social hierarchy that classifies physical bodies in terms of health, physical ability, and mental capacity. Nadhar's body and its innate languidness appear to disrupt this biopolitical regulation. His physical condition is not just an acute medical problem, but a persistent deviation from social chronology demanding a normative physiological timetable. Nadhar's slowness posits him outside this temporal norm established on the



standardized routine of labour, production, and the sequential progression of social life. Nadhar's denial of this normative time also posits him on what Alison Kafer understands as "crip time," realigning the temporal expectations of the society. Kafer defines "crip time" as the "flex time not just expanded but exploded; it requires re-imagining our notions of what can and should happen in time" (27). Therefore, "crip time" adjusts the social clock to match the bodies that are socially marked as disabled. Seen through the lens of "crip time", Nadhar's languidness questions the pathologisation of the slow bodies by the systems built around non-disabled bodies. It subsequently posits an alternative mode of being beyond the standardised ideas of movement. The deeper problem lies not in Nadhar's physiological sluggishness, but the mismatch between his pace and the normative social timetable. The village and its inhabitants follow the social timetable where a particular speed and effort is required for agricultural works as well as domestic chores. Nadhar's body disturbs these temporal expectations.

Nadhar's physiological sluggishness brings into focus the distinction between the ideas of disability and impairment. His slowness is embodied and physiological, but the social interpretation of his slowness is brought out of the social expectation that eventually marks Nadhar as a disabled identity. Rosemarie Garland-Thompson calls this the cultural construction of disability. In *Extraordinary Bodies* (1997), she observes disability as "a culturally fabricated narrative of the body, quietly sanctioned by the power relations that define who is normal and who is deviant." (6) Her observation clearly mentions the power relations inherent in the social processes that render meanings to certain bodies. Nadhar's languidness captured through the lingering movement of the camera not only claims an adjustment of visual expectations from the audience, but also depicts the frustration of the villagers, who are bound by the social timetable. Nadhar's inability to meet the demands of the social production process makes him a deadly burden, an economically useless identity consuming resources without contributing to the production process. Nadhar's neighbours in his village initially had no way to communicate with him, which at times made them hostile or indifferent to him. His mother was the sole buffer, who, with her relentless physical labour, managed to secure basic sustenance. To protect her son from the hostile environment, as well as to connect her socially disabled son with the social

mainstream, she improvises a clever social manoeuvre of repackaging and transforming Nadhar's sluggishness as a divine phenomenon of sacred stillness. She performs a daily ritual within the courtyard of her house, presenting Nadhar as an incarnation of the social deity. The performance underlines the ambivalence within the subaltern body politics. The sacralisation of his slowness immediately saves him from social rejection by turning his incapacity into divine stillness and disengagement, along with a collection of modest surplus. Thus the body that is useless in terms of social expectations becomes an instrument when the villagers find cultural meanings in his inactivity. This transformation of the inactive body within the domestic space is also transactional, a desperate strategy of an impoverished mother to sustain her family. The domestic space where the performance is staged eventually becomes a theatre of social negotiation. The most interesting point in this whole performance is Nadhar's almost muttering protests in a demure voice. He tries to prevent this divine masquerade of using him as scared figure that undermines his sense of self-respect.

The performance of the divine incarnation of Nadhar by her mother resembles the circus arena of "The Great Bengal Circus", where Nadhar is absorbed after the death of his mother. With her absence, the fragile domestic economy collapses, and Nadhar is stripped of his divine shield. His appointment in a tea stall fails because of his slowness, and eventually takes him to the circus arena, where his languid movement is no longer seen as a sacred disengagement, but a complete economic failure. Interestingly, both the sacred performance at the domestic setup and the performance at the circus are organised spectacle of the disabled body, but whereas the domestic performance was primarily survival oriented, the circus organises the spectacle for profit.

"The Great Bengal Circus": Commodification, and the Spectacle of the Disabled Body:-

The absorption and appropriation of Nadhar's slow body in the circus group is not only a turning point in his life, but a shift from the domestic care and concern for a burden to a public spectacle of commodification. Debord observes spectacle as the "capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image." (24) The viability of any image depends upon the value it exerts upon appearance. Nadhar's absorption into the circus transforms him into a spectacle by



detaching his body from the rural utilitarian economy to a culturally marked slow body for visual consumption. Rosemarie Garland-Thompson argues that freak shows not only display unusual bodies, but builds a relationship between the spectator and the displayed subject. “The Great Bengal Circus” is likened to those freak shows that transform the performer into a displayable spectacle, who confirms the normality of the viewers by highlighting the extraordinariness of it. The audience in the circus is entertained watching Nadhar, who is different from them. This eventually makes the circus ring a spatial apparatus of alterity that produces a visual hierarchy where the subject remains within the ring, while the spectators consume the difference of the spectacle.

The spectacle as an image of difference is also stripped off its history, social conditions, and cultural locations, thereby reduced to a recognisable commodity. The viewers of the circus have no personal connection with Nadhar. Neither are they aware of his poverty, his helplessness, or compulsions. Ultimately, the circus compresses Nadhar into a single bodily trait that makes the audience laugh, recognising their ability and identifying their difference from the displayed subject. This also establishes the relational superiority of the spectators, who are not only entertained, but also contribute to the ideological process of defining an able and a disabled body. The physiological difference depicted within the ring also becomes a social pedagogy that teaches the viewers what a normal body is. Nadhar’s physiology unsettles this pedagogy with his refusal to do away with his slowness. He challenges the acknowledged assumption that able-bodiedness is the normative standard. Thus, he is not a failure, but an alternative idea to the standard velocity of the social process and the category of usefulness that ultimately appears to be arbitrary.

The Raft of Nadhar: Shared Precarity and the Political Resistance:-

“The Great Bengal Circus” has been depicted in the film as a site where various forms of commodification happen. While Nadhar is transformed into a commodity through the temporal difference, the female performers are commodified as visual subjects of sexual consumption. The value of the dancer, Rupa, is in her sex appeal, and Shyama, performing the role of Behula, is the cultural asset. Haradhan, the manager, has a physical relationship with both of them. Therefore,



the professional space within the circus exploits bodies that can exert value. The visual sex appeal of the female performers and the disability of Nadhar belong to the same paradigm. Precisely, the capitalist economy reduces an individual into bodily utility, so that they can satisfy the hetero-patriarchal capitalist desires. The character Shyama acquires an intermediate location between the cultural heritage and the capitalist economy of consumption. She performs the role of Behula in a short dramatic excerpt from the *Manasamangal pala*¹ that is staged as a part of the circus show. This coexistence of the sacred and the commercial also brings into focus the politics of commodification and the capitalist economy of extraction that packages and presents the cultural and literary tradition of Bengal for a rural circus, so that the spectators can culturally connect with the show. But the film depicts the steady decline of the audience's attention for the episode. Rather, they wait for the pop show of Rupa. This inevitably marks the decadence within the rural cultural set-up, invaded by the capitalist economy of entertainment, which upholds anything that has speed. Therefore, the lilting cadence of the Behula episode becomes less attractive than the appealing dance show of Rupa.

The failure of Shyama as an actor converges with the inability of Nadhar for their shared precarious condition of two commodified objects. This ultimately brings the two characters closer. But Nadhar's way of looking at Shyama is markedly different from any other man because of his slowness. The accelerated logic of sexual consumption and possession of the female body was absent in Nadhar's desire for Shyama. Thus, Nadhar's male body offers a different form of masculinity that attracts the female desire, but is nonconforming to the dominant male ideology prevailing within the circus. Shyama was the cynosure to all male eyes, but she was attracted to Nadhar and his sluggishness. The murder of the circus manager by Nadhar can be read both as revenge against the persistent humiliation as well as a masculine intervention to save the woman in distress. This underlines a new definition of masculine identity that can form a bonding with the female body differently. Nadhar's unhurried presence within the world of acceleration is not only a form of resistance, but also a way of establishing the capacities of the slow body within the dominant logic of velocity.



The title of the film indicates one of the important symbolic structures of the film. The *Bhela* or the raft directly connects the narrative with the myth of the *Manasamangal*, particularly with the episode of Behula, who refuses to accept the untimely death of her husband, Lakhindar, and embarks on a journey on a fragile raft with the dead body of her husband for divine justice. Behula's perilous journey to heaven in a raft symbolizes the devotion, endurance, and resistance, which eventually connects it with the precarity and the struggle of the members within the circus party. Shyama plays the role of Behula, which the audience rejects for something more sexually appealing. Shyama's struggle to remain relevant in the circus show aligns her precarity with that of Behula in the myth, where she has to satisfy the gods to get back the life of her husband. The connection between the myth and the reality adds a meta-theatrical dimension to the performance, where the journey becomes a form of resistance. Interestingly, though Shyama plays the role of Behula in the show, it is Nadhar who is more structurally connected to the character of Behula. His repeated request to set him on a journey in a raft parallels Behula's journey. Behula has a liminal position between life and death, certainty and the unknown, human existence and divine control. Similarly, Nadhar is located in a midspace between categories. He is alive, but not economically valid; he belongs to a community, yet cannot contribute to it, and most importantly, he exists, but it is only visible as a spectacle. Nadhar's body, in turn, becomes the raft or the *Bhela* that cannot move through the water at its own motorised pace, but drifts along with the river, symbolising endurance. Nadhar, throughout his journey, never tries to become an able-bodied individual, resisting the pathological ideology of cure.

The positioning of the film within the mythological framework of *Manasamangal* transports the idea of disability from a purely pathological and social understanding to the philosophical dimension of persistence and endurance. It does not romanticise disability by ignoring the social exclusion, exploitation, and poverty associated with it. But it questions whether suffering is the only lexis to understand a non-normative body. Thus, the slowness of Nadhar appears as a temporal sabotage that challenges the biopolitical assumption of managing, regulating, assessing, and incorporating a body into social mechanisms. It also becomes a spectacle, a commodity for visual entertainment. The film converges both these concepts to



understand Nadhar's body. At the outset, the languid body of Nadhar is assessed through the social parameters of the productive capacity that eventually mark him as disabled. Later, the disabled body is turned into a spectacle to invest his impairment in the entertainment economy. This transmutation of the managed body into a consumable image of physical difference can be termed as spectacular biopolitics that has a currency in recent visual culture. Contemporary capitalism acquires value from attention. Therefore, any identity, body, emotion, cultural practice, or lifestyle that can extract value and earn attention becomes a spectacle, a displayable item. Nadhar's difference is immediately visible. But it only becomes valuable when it starts attracting attention. The religious masquerade performed by his mother with this difference was a domestic effort to add some extra income. That was protected with care and concern. But the circus explicitly establishes the economic ideology of converting the visible difference into revenue without an iota of love, care, or concern. Debord's spectacle prompts us to see this transformation as a change in the relationship between the spectacle and the spectator. Nadhar no longer remains a disabled person with a difference, but a spectacle, whose social identity rests on how the spectators like to look at him. Here, the very act of looking is reorganised in terms of economic exchanges. What Garland –Thompson finds in the freak shows becomes relevant in analysing this politics of looking. The different body does not exist separately from the cultural gaze. Rather, the physiological difference becomes extraordinary because of the social ideology regulating and managing the visibility of the different body in a particular pattern. Thus, like Nadhar's disability that has been produced within the cultural framework, his identity as a spectacle is constructed according to the demands of the visual economy of desire.

The slow and languid body of Nadhar does not make him a passive receptor of the pressures of the velocity regime. Throughout the film, he politically resists the economy of commodification through his silence. His slow body is quiet, visible without autonomy, but eloquent through inaction. There is no loud declaration of challenge, but an embodied resistance. He challenges the system that claims a herd identity, a pattern of sameness. Nadhar's resistance against the politics of patterning can be studied along with Edouard Glissant's concept of opacity that critiques the claim of complete transparency of the marginalised subject by the dominant



ideologies. In *Poetics of Relation* (1997), Glissant uses the word *comprendre* to indicate the Western understanding that demands a complete explanation of the subject, so that it can reduce them into a pattern. He writes, “In order to understand and thus accept you, I must measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with my grounds to make comparisons.” (189-190) Glissant’s idea of opacity critiques this tendency of measuring the solidity of the subject with the right of the latter to remain unquantifiable. Nadhar’s physiological traits, his slowness, are continuously demanded for explanation by the village society, or the circus party that wants to decode and understand the logical reasons behind his sluggishness. The village finds him strange; the labour economy calls him unproductive, the circus recognises him as spectacle, and the audience calls him entertaining. But none of these could explain him completely. The film retains this enigma till the end. Nadhar exercises his resistance by maintaining this opacity. His refusal to explain his condition to the able-bodied society does not underscore his inability to interact with the norm, but a denial of offering a legible justification to it. It questions what Robert McRuer identifies as “compulsory able-bodiedness” that produces the idea of disability. Nadhar’s slow body substantiates McRuer’s claim that “Able-bodiedness, like heterosexuality, is a system that presents itself as natural, universal, and non-negotiable, while simultaneously depending on the continuous marking and exclusion of non-conforming bodies to sustain its dominance.” (2) His denial of conforming to the accepted system changes the perspective to look at slowness. Instead of asking why Nadhar cannot accelerate with the social time table, he asks the viewers why acceleration has been made compulsory. The film does not suggest a solution to Nadhar’s slowness, but his journey in a slow raft underlines his resistance to the politics of velocity.

Conclusion:

Nadharer Bhela is a film focusing on human values. It critiques how body, identity, and power converge in the making of socially able and viable identity. Through the depiction of an extraordinarily slow man, the narrative critiques the social assumption that acceleration is life, speed has the power to produce, and ability is counted entirely on strength. Nadhar’s journey from an impaired son of a struggling mother through his absorption in an itinerant circus as a



spectacle to a drifting traveller in a raft not only depicts him as a symbol of precarious endurance, but a slow and silent figure with irreducible presence, who denies being a part of the frantic pace of modern civilisation.

End Note:

1. A *pala* in Bengali, Assamese, or Odia literary and cultural tradition is a structured segment or episode from a folk legend, myth, or an epic. The *palas* are generally performed at night. *Manasamangalpala* refers to one such performance selected from the broader corpus of the *Manasamanga*, one of the primary texts of the Bengali *Mangal Kavya* tradition. It was composed between the 15th and 18th centuries by various poets. The most notable of them were Vijay Gupta, Bipradas Pipilai, and Ketakadas Kshemananda.

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