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## Translation of 'Profiles in Faith'

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I n d u s C l a s s i c s

Sarat Chandra Chatterjee

# Profiles in Faith



Translated by  
Monish R. Chatterjee

*PROFILES IN FAITH*  
*Three Women*

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## Translator's Preface

This project was begun in New York, and completed in India during a sabbatical year away from Binghamton University, State University of New York. Technical interactions aside, this year provided me the opportunity to rediscover India with all her fascinating complexities. I am grateful to Binghamton University, and the Department of Electrical Engineering in particular, for the support and encouragement extended by them which made the previous year of rediscovery possible. The year was special for another notable event at the personal level: my wife Joy had a baby boy, Wrik Gairik, who arrived in the holy and historical city of Allahabad during the Ardh Kumbh festival. The wonderful care and loving hospitality provided by Joy's parents, and their many fine neighbours (among whom, I must mention the Sur family, the Mukherjee family, and Mrs. Prama Banerjee) helped the newborn safely ride out the stormy initial weeks of his life. To them, and the others not mentioned by name simply because of space limitations, I offer my heartfelt gratitude. Finally, I wish to acknowledge the cooperation, encouragement and assistance provided by the staff and my editor at HarperCollins, without whose enthusiastic support this endeavour to honour a great literary figure and humanist might have remained unfulfilled.

## Introduction

### I. Sarat Chandra

Sarat Chandra Chatterjee (1876-1938) may be considered one of the three most significant figures of the literary component of the Bengal Renaissance, the other two being Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838-1894) and Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). As much as Bankim Chandra is identified with the new age in the Bengali novel, and the development of serious vernacular journalism, and Rabindranath with modern/classical movements in Bengali poetry and music, alongwith novel ideas in methods of education and teaching, Sarat Chandra, as a novelist and storyteller, perfected the art of narration and critical analyses of a variety of contemporaneous social and political issues, combining with consummate skill and great effectiveness, both urban and rural scenarios within Bengal. Born in a period of great social and political unrest in India, and in close proximity to the greatest flowering of modern Bengali culture, Sarat Chandra evolved a literary style which was at once filled with sympathy for the underdog and the downtrodden, and unequivocal condemnation of all forms of hypocrisy and exploitation. Sarat Chandra's writings have been characterized by their ability to speak directly from the heart, through simple yet elegant imagery, and an exceedingly realistic style of prose which evokes identification with the higher and lower facets of human character. Since Sarat Chandra the creator was



more concerned with the compelling issues of his time, including the feudal zamindari system, the status of women in the Indian society and family, the various reform movements in Bengal and India and their inherent strengths and self-contradictions, and the repressions and freedom efforts in colonial India, he is sometimes perceived as more of a "period" writer, whose relevance in a changed world is minuscule. However, one must realize that the very discussion of whether a classic is relevant or otherwise is moot, the same way that one cannot question the timeliness of Dickens simply because the London or Europe of the early nineteenth century no longer exists. In this context, one may also draw a parallel with George Bernard Shaw, whose biting satire and condemnation of phony social etiquettes and deceptions in a world ravaged by war and violence, seem to have become extinct from the public memory less than a hundred years later. There is perhaps one distinction: Shaw was primarily a playwright, and it is possible that the Shavian form of drama is less resonant with the present times, and the wit and humour in particular, which might have evoked immediate audience response in the playwright's lifetime, may well be lost upon a generation far removed. Since drama is, as a rule, more dependent on atmosphere and audience identification, its effectiveness may lose some lustre with time, especially when it carries any pointed social or philosophical message pertinent to a specific time. In this respect, Sarat Chandra the novelist and the storyteller, is closer to Dickens, Twain and Maupassant. Like Dickens, Sarat Chandra's prose is essentially shorn of graphic landscapes and physical scenery; it concentrates a great deal more on the human characters which inhabit his stories, and in presenting the bizarre, the complex or the sublime in them, he uses rather uncomplicated prose which stands out on the

strength of its beauty and grace. *Grihadaha*, *Charitrahin*, *Dena Powna*, *Palli Samaj*, all abound in complex interactions between vastly divergent characters. Like Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, whose growth from childhood to adulthood is brilliantly chronicled in the *Adventures*, Sarat Chandra created *Srikanta*, whose life in the remote villages and communities of Bengal is traced with starkness, compassion, and penetrating vision. The one principal difference with *Huckleberry* is the preponderance of social and moral outcasts, including prostitutes, snake-charmers, fortune-tellers and the like, with whom *Srikanta* interacts intimately under almost bizarre circumstances. Even though *Huckleberry*, too, passes through complex human experiences, in terms of *adult*, *socially taboo* themes and characterizations, Sarat Chandra's *Srikanta* surpasses him. The women in *Srikanta* are especially fascinating, almost unique in Bengali, and possibly world literature. Few characters in literature are as compelling, colourful and complex as *Abhaya* and *Rajlakshmi*.

An assessment of Sarat Chandra's place in world literature, even in his own lifetime, is found in Gopal Chandra Roy's *Introduction to the 1989 Reflect Publication* (Calcutta) edition of the *Collected Works* in Bengali. As Roy (who has also written a biography of Sarat Chandra in Bengali) points out, Sarat Chandra's works have been translated extensively in practically all the languages of India (to this the current translator wishes to add that a large number of his stories have similarly been made into films in a variety of languages). More interestingly, it appears that his writings have been translated so widely and frequently in some languages that ordinary readers in those languages sometimes believe that Sarat Chandra originally wrote them in *their* language, and that they were later translated into Bengali. In 1975, at the All India Banga Sahitya Sammelan's Sarat Centennial Celebrations in Bhagalpur, N. Alexandrava of the Soviet



Consulate in Calcutta wrote in her *Soviete Sarat Sahitya*, "... Sarat Chandra is very well-known in the Soviet Union. The Russian translations of Sarat Chandra's writings are particularly popular there. ..."

In 1926, *Prabasi's* (a prestigious Bengali journal) editor Ramananda Chattopadhyay was invited by the League of Nations to a conference in Geneva. At that time, the great French philosopher/author Romain Rolland lived in a place not far from Geneva. One day Ramananda Babu went there to visit Rolland. Recalling his meeting with Rolland, Ramananda Babu wrote later, "... We learned that Rolland had read an Italian translation of an English version of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Srikanta*. He commented that Sarat Chandra was a novelist of the first order."

Two of Sarat Chandra's early publications, *Bindur Chhele and Other Stories*, and *Mejdidi* consisted of three stories each. Neither contained any of his famous novels; yet, *The Times Literary Supplement* of July 11, 1918 carried an excerpt from a European critic, who wrote an enthusiastic review simply on the basis of those two slender volumes. The excerpt read in part, "...a certain European critic has written in the *Black Woods Magazine* (that) a new sun has risen recently in the sky of Bengali literature. He can be compared to Maupassant ...The kind of dexterity and talent he has shown in the portrayal of women, and in his adroit analysis of the psychology of children, is extremely rare not only in Bengali literature but also any literature in the world."

One principal merit in Sarat Chandra's writing is his exceptional control and precision. There is practically nothing superfluous or irrelevant in his writing. He was constantly watchful about exactly how much needed to be said and how much needed to be discarded in a piece of writing. He would tell his disciples, "When writing, it is much more difficult not to write than write. This is what I would call restraint in writing. One must make sure that the matter t



be expressed does not get carried a few steps too far due to emotional fervour. It is better to stay a few steps behind."

There can be no denying that he, for the first time, took Bengali literature, especially the novel and the short story, to a vast and varied terrain, and created an immense readership. However, as with other great authors, his writing had its limitations. No doubt, he shook the psyche of his readers, and pulled at their heartstrings; however, he did not entirely rip apart the rigid edifices of society. At times, he could not rise above Hindu conservatism. Even though he was clearly critical of social prejudices, hypocrisy, and exploitation, he frequently sought solutions within a Hindu framework. Also, as mentioned earlier, his writing is characterized by economy of prose. Even though this does not rob it of richness or sensitivity, it lacks somewhat the power or grandeur of Bankim Chandra, or the mellifluous lyricism of Tagore. Likewise, as a writer, Sarat Chandra is not as intimate with nature as Bibhuti Bhushan Bandyopadhyay, or as starkly realistic about the bottom strata of society as Manik Bandyopadhyay. Another possible flaw could be that in his novels the female characters are considerably more developed than the male. This bias towards the robustness of the women, sometimes takes away from a holistic and well-rounded development of both genders in his stories.

From an early age, Sarat Chandra lived variously the lives of a runaway from home, a member of a theatrical and musical troupe, a clerk with pathetic wages, a tea-stall owner, and a frequent visitor to brothels (he most likely did so to learn more about women in society, especially those in roles which were considered socially taboo, of whose plights, shortcomings, nobility and magnanimity, he remained a tireless literary spokesman. These experiences helped him create such classic prostitute characters as Bijli and Chandramukhi.). In fact, he captured the soul of womanhood so profoundly, that even Tagore immortalized his power in his

poem *Sadharan Meye* with the lines,

“I beg at your feet, write a story, Sarat Babu. The story of an ordinary girl.”

## II. The Profiles

The principal women in the three works selected here are representative of Sarat Chandra's preference for strong women: strong in character, endurance, and personal faith. *Datta's* Bijaya, *Nishkriti's* Shaila, *Darpa Churna's* Bimala, for the most part, share the common virtue of self-confidence, the last two especially brimming with unshakable faith in their convictions. Bijaya is a bit of an exception, since she is seen to waver and vacillate at times; however, this is because she lacks guidance, and is unsure at times of her feelings and decisions. It would not be fair, however, to interpret her indecisiveness as a weakness of character; at those times when she has clearly and unambiguously perceived a situation, she has taken a firm and bold stand, despite being a lone woman pitted against powerful, conniving men. All in all, all three women portrayed in these works are especially courageous; their scrupulous defence of fairness and justice is inspiring, regardless of whether one favours tradition or modernity, women's liberation or their roles as homemakers.

*Datta* appeared in *Bharat Varsha* between 1917 and 1918. It underscores some of the hypocrisies and contradictions inherent in the Brahmo movement as perceived by the author (even though some critics maintain that characters such as Rashbehari are essentially spiteful and conniving humans, and it is the villainy and cruelty of such characters in society, and not their religious faiths, that Sarat Chandra wished to portray). The gross and subtle conflicts between Hinduism and the Brahmo Samaj have been brought under scrutiny to a lesser extent in *Datta* and a much greater extent



in *Grihadaha*. In *Navayuger Bangla* Bipin Chandra Pal wrote, "It was the Brahmo Samaj which first attempted to establish the principle of individual freedom, which influenced the newly Western-educated Bengali society at all levels of life. ...This struggle for the freedom of the individual took its most complete form under the leadership of Keshab Chandra (Sen).... In November of 1866, gathering a band of young Brahmos together, Keshab Chandra established the Indian (Sadharan) Brahmo Samaj. It was this Samaj which engaged itself in building the ideal of freedom among educated Bengalis. ...To build one's character in harmony with one's belief and faith, and to introduce a measure of unity, affinity and discipline in the relationship between members of the Samaj and one's own family — these were the true goals of *Dharma* according to the Samaj. The main connecting thread of this all-encompassing *Dharma* was the principle of Truth and Freedom. That which one felt as the Truth via one's own reasoning, was to be followed even at the risk of one's life. In this, one ought not to accept the authority of any book, or the dictates of organized priestcraft or traditional society — acceding to any of these would violate the *Dharma*. This scrupulous defense of Truth became the fundamental *mantra* of Keshab Chandra's new Brahmo Samaj. It effectively became the *mantra* of freedom. For this reason, many illuminated Bengalis and Indians became strongly devoted to the Brahmo Samaj, even if they did not actively convert to it, or follow its techniques of *sadhana*. In this manner, most educated individuals were inspired by Brahmo thinking. ...Keshab Chandra had taken the struggle beyond the Samaj itself. Even though he did not openly campaign for national freedom, he did nevertheless enhance the feeling of national pride. First and foremost, his extraordinary erudition and eloquence helped eliminate feelings of inferiority among his countrymen. Even senior administrators of the nation would become mesmerized by



his wisdom and persuasiveness. These developments raised the sense of national pride amongst educated Bengalis."

Of course, such "greatness" associated with Keshab Chandra is not reflected in Sarat Chandra's writings. In *Datta*, he does acknowledge Keshab's influence and writes, "... it swept away the three country boys." These three boys were bosom friends. Of them, Banamali and Jagadish were no longer alive. In the novel, we find only the Brahmo Rashbehari. Unfortunately, none of the glorious legacy of Keshab can be found in Rashbehari's behaviour or his words. Instead, it is the sly and devious side of his character that Sarat Chandra has highlighted. The Brahmos believed "Practise what you believe as the Truth." In the conduct of Rashbehari and Bilash Behari, this instruction has been almost ridiculed. According to one critic, it's possible that Sarat Chandra believed a great deal more in "caste predilection." Even if one embraces a new faith, one cannot shake off one's inherited psychic culture. Thus, reproaching his son Bilash Behari for his rude and uncouth behaviour Rashbehari says, "After all, it's not for nothing that Hindoos call us *chhotaloks* (low-castes; plebeians). So what if we are Brahmos, or whatever else — we still are *kaivartas*! If you were the son of a *brahmin* or a *kayastha*, you would have learned decency, and had the common sense to know what is or isn't good for you." It is clear from this that certainly back in those days, only *brahmins* and *kayasthas* were considered *bhadraloks* (educated middle-class). Perhaps this is why Sarat Chandra has painted such a stark difference in taste and refinement between Narendra and Bilash Behari. Moreover, he has often scorned such Brahmo precepts as "Truth, Righteousness, Discrimination." Even though he has created young Brahmo men with generosity, benevolence and sympathy for the poor and downtrodden in *Parinita*, *Grihadaha* and elsewhere, he could not, ultimately, accept the Brahmos whole-heartedly (S.M.Mitra, *Sarat Sahitye Samu*

*Chetana*, Granthalaya, Calcutta, 1981).

In his biography, *Sarat Chandra* (Ashok Prakashan, Calcutta, 1987), author Rishi Das asserts that Sarat Chandra did not intend to portray Brahmos *per se* negatively in *Datta* and *Grihadaha*. Since he was interested in the psycho-social behaviour of men and women with freedom of movement, and the freedom to socialize, it became easier for him to select such "liberated" and progressive characters from the Brahmoo Samaj. Such characters could not be found in (generally) conservative Hindu society. However, what makes Rashbehari and Bilash Behari such self-oriented, scheming and boorish characters is their inherent lack of sensitivity and charity; the flaws in their characters have little to do with their professed faith, Brahmoo or otherwise. As Das correctly mentions, the devious machinations of Rashbehari and Bilash Behari have their parallel in Hindu society as well. Similarly, the woman with two admirers in *Grihadaha* is only incidentally Brahmoo; such women may be found in all faiths. Unfortunately, even though Sarat Chandra also created noble Brahmoo characters such as Girin in *Parinita*, and Dayal in *Datta*, many Brahmos were deeply upset with him, and practically declared *jihad* against him. Later in his book, Das notes further that many of his Brahmoo antagonists believed Sarat Chandra was campaigning against Brahmos under the auspices of Hindu society; others believed he knew too little about Brahmoo women to create realistic characters out of them. Refuting this argument, Das argues that since extremely independent-minded women were rare in Hindu society in his time, Sarat Chandra merely forged such characters out of the Brahmoo fold in order to prevent them from becoming too unrealistic. It is moot whether Achala and Bijaya are Brahmoo or Hindu; what matters is if they are worthy literary creations. In this respect, few will argue that they continue to be fascinating and lively characters in the world of Bengali literature.



Brahmos could not live honourably in traditional village societies in the mid to late nineteenth century. Brahmo girls would not get married early like their Hindu counterparts. They would receive education. Their behaviour was naturally independent. But none of these would find any resonance in rural life. Hence, when Rashbehari and Banamali married into Brahmo families, and came to live in their villages accompanied by enlightened wives, it created a sensation around the villages. "A wife who does not draw a veil over her face; goes out in the street wearing stockings and shoes..." This was really a spectacle, a *tamasha* for the village folk. People came from five neighbouring villages to watch the spectacle. It is very nearly impossible to live in a village under such circumstances. Banamali was the zamindar of Krishnapur. Deciding that he shouldn't depend on the zamindari alone, he moved with his wife to Calcutta and started a business. Rashbehari, however, could not afford such a move with his limited resources and income. He therefore, had to swallow his pride and go on living in the village like an *ekghare*.

This act of ostracizing families as *ekghare* or *pariah* was highly prevalent in village societies in those days. Village elders would sever access to barbers and washermen, and treat individuals or families as *ekghare* if their conduct was considered to be contrary to the accepted norms and customs of the village; such treatment, therefore, was not restricted only to Brahmos. Even Jagadish Mukhujje's son Narendra had to be *ekghare* on account of having gone to England. Sarat Chandra himself had to suffer similar humiliation in his personal life.

Of the three friends, Jagadish alone was Hindu. His father was a brahmin pandit, who earned his living conducting religious ceremonies and social functions such as marriages and the sacred thread investiture. Jagadish alone obtained a degree in law, and moved to Allahabad to begin



a legal practice. Following his wife's death, unfortunately, he gradually came to be regarded as a good-for-nothing gambler, drunk, and derelict. His son Naren was a doctor living in Burma. When his father died tragically, he returned to his native village.

The story in this novel revolves around these three families. Within the families, too, there are only a few members. Bijaya has virtually no relative except for a distant paternal aunt who appears during her marriage. Rashbehari's family consists only of father and son. There is no mention made of Bilash Behari's mother. Naren, too, is the lone member of his family. This foursome permeates almost the entire novel, but for the Brahma Reverend Dayal Babu and his family, and the staff and servants associated with Bijaya's zamindari.

The central dilemma in the novel is the proposed marriage between the only daughter and the only son, respectively, of Brahma friends Banamali and Rashbehari. Banamali's daughter and Rashbehari's son attempt to achieve a noble revenge for the banishment from his own village suffered by Banamali, by returning to the same village and establishing a Brahma temple there. Nothing is mentioned, however, of what plans were made to teach the *Dharma* to the illiterate villagers. We only learn that old Dayal Babu moves his family to Naren's ancestral home, confiscated by Bijaya's estate (through the connivance of Rashbehari and his son) on charges of indebtedness, so that the temple might be erected there. Dayal Babu is an eccentric Brahma Reverend indeed — despite his religious affiliation, he arranges for the marriage of Brahma Bijaya with Hindu Naren according to Hindu custom by a Brahmin priest. There is virtually no reference to the Brahma philosophy in the novel other than Rashbehari's periodic obeisance to the Lotus Feet of the Formless Absolute. Interestingly, Brahma Banamali had covertly indicated to his daughter

from his deathbed that he had made a promise to Hindu Jagadish regarding the latter's son Naren. Despite the fact that Hindu conservatism had once uprooted him from his village, Banamali nevertheless showed a distinct preference for Narendra whom he wished to sponsor as a student such that he would make a worthy groom for his daughter. As revealed later in the novel, Banamali made this promise to Jagadish via more than one personal letter written to him. How he made such a promise despite being a Brahmo is a mystery. The novel unfolds the chain of psychological and circumstantial events that culminate in Banamali's wish being ultimately fulfilled. Like *Grihadaha's* Achala, Bijaya has been unable to reach any firm decision in the matter of her marriage. She was attracted to Naren, yet time after time she declared her endorsement of the marriage proposal to Bilash. In fact, as late as the day before her marriage to Naren took place, she had even signed the papers necessary to legally register a Brahmo marriage. To sign implies approval. Yet, the very next day, arriving at Dayal's to keep a lunch invitation, she went straight to the bride's seat without the slightest protest. She did raise a question about the Hindu marriage ceremony once, but thereafter remained stiff as wood without another word. Both Achala and Bijaya were faced with a common dilemma: whether to comply with the wishes of the Samaj on the one hand, or of their heart on the other. Bijaya finally chose love over duty. Thus, righteousness prevailed over mere ritual faith. Truth triumphed over convention.

Sarat Chandra was fond of village life. Despite the superstitions, spitefulness, factional squabbles, and interminable court cases associated with village life, he was drawn to the tranquillity and beauty he found in it. In *Palli Samaj* and *Panditmashay* he has repeatedly stressed that educated young men must return to the villages and help reform and advance village society. After all, the true Bengal or India



resided in her villages. Certainly back in Sarat Chandra's time, most city people were connected to the village one way or the other. Thus, even though she was born and reared in the city, Bijaya liked the village life alien to her. Even her father, once forced to flee his village with his wife, nurtured a yearning for the village he had left behind. In one eloquent passage, he lies in his easy chair and wistfully tells Bijaya how back in his village a "Hazra House" never obscured the sunset from his view. How the ripples atop the brook that flowed past their garden would glisten like gold in the slanted rays of the sun, and how the sun-god could not bear to say goodbye to the village, lingering as long as possible over field after distant field. The father's passion for the village had been transmitted to the daughter.

It was common for zamindars not to live in the village with their *ryots* (peasants who rent the land from the zamindar for farming) or subjects. Therefore, most villagers were used to not having the zamindar live with them. There existed an exploiter versus exploited relationship between a zamindar and his subjects. Therefore, a zamindar was nothing but a nuisance to the villagers. Sarat Chandra has portrayed the zamindar-subject relationship skillfully and succinctly. Most zamindars in his works are generous and kind-hearted. Sarat Chandra maintained that most of the time the estate managers, and not the zamindars themselves, were the real villains. Thus, manager Rashbehari is a scoundrel. The villagers were greatly traumatized by his tyrannical administration. To make matters worse, it turned out that the managers would intensify their despotism whenever the zamindar announced a visit. Therefore, the villagers of Krishnapur could not accept whole-heartedly the arrival of the zamindar's daughter Bijaya to live with them. Instead, they became apprehensive about manager Rashbehari's renewed harassment. In bazaars and public grounds, they gathered to discuss the implications of this disturbance.



Their concern was not without reason. We find ample evidence of this in *Dena Powna*. It was customary for subjects to please or appease the zamindar upon his arrival with tributes and gifts. Here, too, the ancestral *Durga Puja* celebrations of neighbour Purna Ganguly were ordered terminated in order that they might not disturb the peace of zamindar Bijaya. Narendra was ejected from his parental home on account of his father's indebtedness. Even the old and trusted servants in Bijaya's estate were kept in constant panic and dread of Rashbehari's oppression.

English education had instilled a sense of individuality amongst the men and women of India. In his novels, Sarat Chandra has often held this individuality and power of personality in high esteem. Such salutation of individuality was tantamount to revolt against conventional society. Sarat Chandra was a great advocate of such rebellion against the establishment. Thus, Bijaya was finally able to free herself from the clutches of the wily manager Rashbehari. In *Datta*, Sarat Chandra has also made a statement about education in the villages. Once, it was the zamindar who patronized education, usually accessible to the middle class. Following the permanent settlement, that practice declined, and little was available beyond whatever was permitted by the British administration. Obviously, it would not be in the best interest of the colonial rulers to impart extensive education to the natives, since keeping them ignorant made it easier to continue their exploitation and subjugation. Naren, who was well educated, learned to equate education with national emancipation. Hence, despite his foreign medical degree, he forsook medical practice and started a school in an open field in his village instead. In this school, students were not only taught the alphabet, but were also trained to become better cultivators by learning about advanced methods of farming. True education lies in useful application of knowledge: Naren committed himself to that task.

The first part of *Nishkriti* appeared in the *Vaishakh 1914* issue of *Yamuna*. Its original title was *Gharbhanga* (Home Wrecking). In 1917, it was published in its entirety in the *Bhadra*, *Kartik*, and *Paush* issues of *Bharat Varsha*. In July 1917, it was published as a book. Later, Dilip Kumar Roy translated it into English under the title *Deliverance*. The translation was revised by Sri Aurobindo with an introduction by Rabindranath Tagore. The present translator has not seen any extant copy of this work; given the list of illustrious names associated with it, it is safe to assume that copies must be still available, even though the title itself is, in all likelihood, out of print.

When Sarat Chandra had published *Bardidi* anonymously in *Bharati*, Tagore had hailed it as a fine piece of writing, regardless of the identity of its author. By writing an introduction to the English version of *Nishkriti*, he acknowledged Sarat Chandra as a powerful writer.

When capitalism via colonial rule began taking root in India, many of the feudal values started to crumble. One feudal institution which suffered such erosion was the joint family. When money and personal interests become paramount, human (and humane) sentiments begin to recede. It becomes impossible to pause and think about compassion, sympathy or service to others. Greed is contagious. Nayantara is avaricious, selfish, and distrustful. Thus, since *Chhotabou* (Shaila) was in possession of the keys to the safe, she automatically assumed that Shaila must have embezzled a lot of money over the years. She repeatedly provoked Siddheshwari with such allegations. Eventually, the virus of her mistrust was transmitted to Siddheshwari. The story of the lawyer Naren (as reported by Nayantara as a ploy to further poison Siddheshwari's mind against Shaila) graphically illustrates the horrifying nature of greed as a passion. Despite being his own brother, Naren the lawyer advances money to his elder brother as a loan shark, then buys the



hapless elder's portion of the parental home through auction. Nanda Mittir, the elder brother, who once sacrificed everything in order to help raise younger brother Naren, now goes around weeping and begging in the streets. Harish was not satisfied driving his idle cousin Ramesh out of their joint family home in Calcutta; he went a step further by initiating a legal case against Ramesh in order to deprive him of any inheritance from their country estate. Ramesh's primary offence is his poverty. Since he does not have any income, he does not have a right to live. In a capital-oriented society, money is the yardstick of justice. The eldest brother Girish was a successful lawyer. He earned as much as twenty five thousand rupees per year (an impressive figure for those times). He acquired considerable wealth and real estate; however, his practical acumen as revealed in this novella is laughably puerile. He was terribly absent-minded; he habitually heard something else when spoken to; he made promises but almost never delivered. None of this was deliberate; he has been portrayed as a venerable, hard-working, noble and detached head of the household. He has a heart of gold, but severely lacks any practical or common sense. In this respect, Girish, though lovable, is not a realistic character. Yet, it was this absent-minded man who delivered the Chatterjee joint family from certain annihilation. Sarat Chandra has solved a complex practical problem using an unrealistic, impractical character. Unfortunately, the solution itself is perhaps too idealistic; social erosion is generally far more grisly and tragic. The brothers Harish and Girish were both lawyers, yet there was a vast difference in their nature. Harish was selfish and covetous (and Nayantara was his ideal, perhaps leading partner); there was no mercy in his heart for the penniless. Girish, on the other hand, was utterly unselfish; he was wealthy, yet kept almost no track of his fortune. He scolded Ramesh for squandering away four thousand rupees in a failed business venture, then offered



him eight thousand more. Generosity and kindness were his main traits.

Shailaja's character is typical of Sarat Chandra's women. She worked relentlessly, and said very little. What little she said, could not ever be shaken. She had a keen sense of self-respect. She valued her faith with all her heart. Her heart broke but her mouth remained shut. She quietly endured all kinds of insults and torment, even though she would not capitulate to any wrong or injustice. She did not have the means, but she had plenty of heart. She bore the brunt of the tirades against her unemployed husband. Yet she had no complaint against him. In fact, any disregard for her husband was unbearable to her. She worked extra hard as if to try and make up for her husband's non-productivity.

As mentioned, Nayantara was the perfect wife for her husband. So was Siddheshwari. Though not as forgetful as Girish, Siddheshwari was not equal to being the lady in charge of a large household. She personally loved Shaila more dearly than her own daughter. She felt completely secure placing Shaila in charge of everything. As it was, there used to be no want, no lack of peace in her household. The troubles began with the arrival of her *Mejaja* Nayantara. Having lived abroad, this woman had acquired a bit of pseudo-westernization. She would not let her sons out without western outfits. Her unrestricted indulgence had turned her son Atul into a rude and self-centred brat. Her abrasive, pompous personality was completely at odds with the simple and harmonious lifestyle of the Chatterjee household. Naturally, she could not stomach the leadership of Shaila, wife of a good-for-nothing distant cousin. Her relentless instigation soon splintered the household. She had a keen eye for money and her own self-interest. She was blind to her son's serious shortcomings, yet was acutely jealous of Shaila. According to S.M.Mitra (*Sarat Sahitye Samaj Chetana*), this conflict underscores the difference between a feudal and a

capitalist value system. In a capital-oriented society, money defines or controls all relationships. Therefore, for the wife of a penniless, jobless husband to rule a household was anathema to Nayantara. This story has some similarities with *Bindur Chhele*. In the latter, a family started to be fragmented because of the machinations of Elokeshi and her son; in *Nishkriti*, Nayantara and her son achieved the same. *Nishkriti*, however, is more complex. The conflict in *Bindur Chhele* is precipitated by emotional turmoil; in *Nishkriti*, there is a great deal more selfishness and greed for money and assets. In *Bindur Chhele*, the broken family had healed again, but in *Nishkriti*, except for its deliverance from complete destruction through Girish's intervention, the Chatterjee family was otherwise permanently fragmented. In fact, having failed to throw Ramesh and his family out of the country home, Harish and Nayantara were immeasurably enraged by Girish's "mindlessness".

Shaila, though poor, was in no way a lesser human than anyone. She was the youngest amongst the elders, both in age and position, yet she had an abundance of intelligence. "In keeping accounts, writing letters, talking to people, keeping an alert watch on everything during illness or bereavement, disciplining everyone when needed, cooking meals and maintaining the interior decoration of a place, she had virtually no peer." Siddheshwari would often claim that had Shaila been a man, she would have been a judge. This is a statement both of Shaila's extraordinary abilities, and also the lack of opportunities even women of merit had for pursuing higher education or a career not too long ago. Sarat Chandra's own sympathy is clearly towards Shaila. As we shall see in *Darpa Churna* as well, Sarat Chandra preferred truthful, conscientious, idealistic, traditional women to selfish, aggressive, uncaring, modern ones.

*Darpa Churna* first appeared in the *Magh* 1914 issue of *Bharat Varsha*. In this short story, Sarat Chandra has painted



an unflattering portrait of extremist forms of the doctrine of Women's Liberation and Women's Rights. It is amazing to note how close he came to predicting some of the critical conflicts that might (and do, so many years and so much "progress" later) arise from pursuing gender equality in society at all costs. From this perspective, this story and Sarat Chandra's message have an uncanny relevance to modern times. In several of his novels, Sarat Chandra has demonstrated his disdain for ultra-modern, anglicized or westernized women, such as Nayantara, Sarojini, and Indumati. Sarat Chandra maintains that women accept leadership of men in society, but find their own power through the instrument of love. In this respect, he is clearly very traditional and old-fashioned. S.M.Mitra (*Sarat Sahitye Samaj Chetana*) argues that true love can develop only between equals. Unless both men and women have a degree of economic freedom and self-reliance, there cannot exist genuine love between them. Traditional, feudal relationships between men and women are often no different from that between master and slave. Thus, talking about her husband, Bimala tells Indumati, "He is Master — I am no more than a slave. If *he* should throw me out, who will stop him?" Indumati, who is educated and a daughter of affluent parents, is an ardent believer in personal freedom. She cannot imagine a husband to be a Mughal *badshah* (emperor), and a wife nothing but a slave. She is a partner, an associate in mutual actions — not a slave. Therefore, she tells Bimala, "You know, *Thakurji*, this is exactly how women in our country have surrendered themselves to men, and turned into lowly play-things. If you do not wrest your own honour, would anyone hand it to you on a platter, *Thakurji*?" Indumati loathes the fall-at-your-feet kind of love which tramples one's self-respect underfoot. This sense of self-respect is actually very relevant and realistic in contemporary times. She may well be considered a forerunner of modern feminism and the



Women's Movement. By portraying Indumati in a negative light, Sarat Chandra has once again demonstrated his Hindu conservatism. He has held up Bimala's love as ideal. It is true, that self-respect cannot be simply a license to belligerence and selfishness. A couple must have mutual understanding and sympathy. It is not acceptable that simply because her husband is financially handicapped, a wife should constantly badger him, and not be a partner in his struggle, his triumphs and failures. Placed next to Bimala's ideal of selfless service and love, Indu's independent spirit appears petty and mean. Sarat Chandra has defined Indu's ultra independent spirit and feminism as *darpa* or vanity. Even as traditional society crumbled around him owing to myriad corruptive forces and decaying practices and beliefs, Sarat Chandra could not disregard the mutual respect, trust, discipline and sweetness which made up medieval social and familial values. While he strongly opposed superstitions, rigidity, and oppression in traditional society, he attempted to find a balance between these contradictory forces.

### III. The Legacy

Even though in some of his earliest writings, Sarat Chandra was inevitably influenced by Bankim Chandra, he has acknowledged frequently that Rabindranath was his literary *guru*. The biographer Rishi Das has provided an interesting study of the formative period of Sarat Chandra's writing career. In his book, *Sarat Chandra*, he mentions that in 1931, Sarat Chandra wrote in a letter to Amal Home, "...He has no greater admirer than me — no one has accepted him as a *guru* more than I have — no one has studied and imitated his writing style more than I have. I cannot speak about his poetry, but no one has read his novels and stories more than I have, his *Chokher Bali*, his *Gora*, his *Galpa Guchchha*. That many people read me today, and praise my writing — it's all

due to him."

As Das points out, Rabindranath was yet to produce any of his seminal works at the time Sarat Chandra began his preparatory writing career in 1901. Only his *Bouthakurani's Haat* (1882) and *Rajarshi* (1885) had appeared in print before that year. He had, however, already published at least fifty short stories before 1901 — included among these were such famous stories as *Postmaster*, *Khokababur Pratyabartan*, *Kshudhita Pashan*, *Sampatti Samarpan*, *Yajnyeshwarer Yajnya*, and others. The genre of the psychological novel in Bengali literature, of which Sarat Chandra later became a renowned exponent, had then barely taken root in Rabindranath's mind. Rabindranath's *Nashta Neer* and *Chokher Bali*, two novels considered to be the forerunners of a new age in modern Bengali fiction, appeared respectively in 1901 and 1902. Meanwhile, Sarat Chandra had already finished several of his early novels, including *Chandranath*, *Bardidi*, *Abhimaan*, *Anupamar Prem*, and *Shubhada*. In all likelihood, he had also written a part of *Charitrahin* by then; if this is the case, it may be concluded that while Rabindranath was ushering in a new age in Bengali fiction, Sarat Chandra was also capturing its spirit quite independently.

No doubt, in the early phase of his career, Sarat Chandra was not influenced by Rabindranath's novels as much as he was later. By the time *Nashta Neer* and *Chokher Bali* appeared, he had already eked out a place for himself in the world of Bengali literature. Rabindranath's short stories, however, had inspired him in this phase; of all his writings prior to 1901, only *Shubhada* was long enough to be considered a novel. The rest closely paralleled Rabindranath's short and long fiction both in length and format. In reality, though, Rabindranath was only a rising sun in Bengal's literary sky when Sarat Chandra began his career in the field of letters. Already around 1886, when Sarat Chandra was a schoolboy, Bankim Chandra was the unrivalled sovereign of Bengali



prose and fiction. Despite being temperamentally opposed to Bankim as a writer, Sarat Chandra in his early phase as a novelist was influenced by the hypnotic power of the great literary genius. Passages from his novel *Shubhada*, his essay *Kshudrer Gourab*, and his short story *Bojha* from the early period attest to this influence. Later, however, he made a radical departure from Bankim's literary style. Nevertheless, no matter how often he declared Rabindranath as his literary *guru*, he was indisputably influenced by Bankim Chandra early in his career. Furthermore, being an insatiable reader, he gathered material and ideas from writers outside Bengal and India as well.

His intrinsic understanding of the plight and suffering of the women of Bengal, which found expression in his novels and stories, also moved Sarat Chandra to write several essays on women's issues. Of these, *Narir Mulya*, which appeared between April and September 1913 in *Jamuna*, received great acclaim. This remarkable essay is evidence of Sarat Chandra's deep knowledge and awareness of social history. Using a variety of information and logic, he proves irrefutably that male-dominated society has exploited and oppressed women in all ages, in every region of the world. Ahead of his time, Sarat Chandra was thus a powerful advocate of women's rights (but not necessarily of gender equality; he recognized some of the fundamental differences between men and women as functioning members of society, and believed in some of the traditional roles ascribed to them).

It is true that Sarat Chandra did not recognize chastity as the sole or greatest measure of a woman's identity; he did not, however, refute the immense power of the concept of chastity or *Sati Dharma* in society. In fact, he was an ardent believer in the potency and value of the morally uplifting *Satitva* principle, as reflected in the loving, self-effacing, virtuous and strong character of the ideal traditional woman. His abiding faith in the power of virtuous and noble



womanhood prompted him not to unite any of his widows (with the exception of Anupama in *Anupama's Prem*) with her lover. In *Biraj Bou*, he declared the triumph of *Sati Dharma*; in *Parinita*, he brought Lalita and Shekhar to a sweet union; in *Swami*, he dragged the conceited Soudamini to Ghanashyam's, and in *Darpa Churna*, the arrogant Indu to Naren's feet. The same power is also manifested in *Dena Powna*. The supreme sacrifice of the virtuous Alaka for her lascivious, promiscuous, alcoholic and tyrannical zamindar husband Jivananda marked not only the victory of her *Sati Dharma*; it also transformed a beast in human form into a human being. Overall, Sarat Chandra believed that Truth is relative; it may vary according to a specific circumstance. Depending on the situations, Truth can even contradict itself. It was in this regard that Sarat Chandra often disagreed with Mahatma Gandhi's perception of Truth as Absolute, and the resulting actions taken by him during the freedom movement. Sarat Chandra was strongly opposed to the abrupt withdrawal of the non-cooperation movement after the Chouri Choura incident; he did not believe in the power of the *charkha* as a means to winning freedom (he once apparently said to Gandhi in jest, "Freedom is won by fighters, not by spiders."); even though he admired Gandhi's non-violence and *satyagraha*, he was also a strong supporter of militant, revolutionary organizations (like Chittaranjan Das and Subhas Chandra Bose, he was a member of the Indian National Congress for a long time, serving as its Howrah district president for some time). His *Pather Dabi* was apparently inspired by the life of Hemchandra Ghosh, supreme revolutionary leader of the Bengal Volunteers. He understood that Gandhi's Truth was different from that of Jatin Das and Surya Sen. But this did not make the one Truth lesser than the other. Likewise, in his novels, we find that to Lalita, Alaka and Soudamini, *Sati Dharma* was as true as it was untrue to Parvati, Kiranmayee and Achala. Yet,

sympathetic and reverential as he was to Lalita and her kind, he did not deprive Parvati and the others of his heartfelt affection. To Sarat Chandra, the greatest Truth was to accept the variability of Truth itself.

At the end of World War I, literature in Europe became overly obsessed with sex and eroticism due in part to Freudian influence. The waves of that influence soon reached the minds of a group of young and aspiring writers of Bengal at a time when Sarat Chandra was at the peak of his literary eminence. This group started producing sex-oriented poems and stories, passing them off as "modern" literature. This created quite a furore in literary circles. Even Rabindranath expressed his disapproval of their activities in an essay *Sahityer Matra* (The Limits of Literature). Sarat Chandra was not as vocal in his opposition to these peddlers of smut, however, he did not endorse the blatant use of sex in literature under the pretext of realism and modernity. In *Shes Prasna*, he attempted to create what he considered truly modern writing.

As mentioned before, Sarat Chandra regarded Rabindranath as his literary *guru*; despite occasional differences, and even a spell of serious misunderstanding, Rabindranath, too, acknowledged Sarat Chandra's genius, and his awareness of and familiarity with, humanity and the human heart. He had great affection for Sarat Chandra, who was fifteen years younger. In his introduction to Dilip Roy's English translation of *Nishkriti*, Rabindranath paid tribute to Sarat Chandra with the words:

"The latest of the leaders who through this path of liberation, has guided Bengali novels nearer to the spirit of modern world literature is Sarat Chandra Chatterjee. He has imparted a new power to our language, and in his stories has shed the light of a fresh vision upon the too familiar region of Bengal's heart revealing the living significance of the obscure trifles in people's personality. He has achieved



the best reward of a novelist; he has completely won the hearts of Bengali readers."

During the period of misunderstanding alluded to earlier, Sarat Chandra had gone as far as siding with the so-called "modern" writers to attack Rabindranath. Later, however, he realized Rabindranath's far-sightedness and wisdom about the subject, and felt embarrassed and penitent about his own petty charges against the savant. Subsequently, their relationship became one of mutual respect and affection. In 1931, at a public reception accorded to Rabindranath on his 70th birthday in Calcutta, Sarat Chandra wrote a stirring citation in his honour which read in part,

*"Kabiguru*, looking at you, our amazement knows no limit. ...The beauty and life-giving essence of the soul, its riches and its benevolence, have found complete expression in your creations, and inspired the world. ...We have extended our palms and received much from the world, yet by your hands, we have also given it much in return. O Universal Poet, on this auspicious day, we bow to you in silent humility. We bow again and again to the glorious manifestation of beauty and grace in you."

Rabindranath, too, sent Sarat Chandra his blessings on many occasions, publicly and privately. On the occasion of Sarat Chandra's 56th birthday celebrations in 1932, Rabindranath cautioned Sarat Chandra in a congratulatory statement which was read at a civic reception, that the nation could expect a great deal more from him in the years to come; a civic reception, despite its intentions, was an irrefutable declaration of peace and gratitude reserved by the public for those who have reached the end of their road. On the same occasion, in a letter to Sarat Chandra, Rabindranath wrote, "...You have won the hearts of the people with the gifts of your genius; you have access to the



deepest reaches of the nation's soul. Your writing has extracted deeper sounds from the heartstrings of Bengal through laughter and tears. Where the hallowed seat of the eternal lies within the temple of her mind, the soothing light of the lamp of your creations shall shed the warm glow of permanence to Bengal's literature — comforted by this knowledge, from the Western door of my journey's end, I offer you my salutations and take my leave."

On the 7th of October, 1937, at a civic reception in honor of Sarat Chandra on his 61st birthday, Rabindranath read out perhaps his most effusive tribute of all:

"... The astronomer explores the limitless sky in search of newer worlds, composed of radiations of varying proportions, revolving in exotic orbits at various speeds. Sarat Chandra's vision has dived inside the mystery of the Bengali heart. He has revealed therefrom wondrous processes of creation occurring through happiness and sorrow, union and separation, in which the people of Bengal have discovered their true identity. We find the proof of that in their boundless joy. (In reading him) the kind of joy they have experienced from the bottom of their hearts, has rarely been elicited by the works of any other writer. Others have received a profusion of compliments, but never such unstinting acceptance in the hearts of the people. This adulation is not the flash of amazement — it's unabashed love. The ease with which he has achieved this, makes him worthy of our envy. On this day, if I could tell him that he is entirely my own discovery — I would feel a special pride. But, the truth is that he has never waited to receive a signed certificate of recognition. His victory is spontaneously hailed today in Bengal's homes. Not merely in literature, but in the theater, in films, in other areas of art, Bengalis today are eager to associate with him. He

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has touched the nerve centre of the Bengali pathos with the compassion of his words."

This loving and affectionate acknowledgment from Rabindranath moved Sarat Chandra deeply; returning home, he told the renowned poet Kalidas Roy, "Kalidas, today I am truly blessed."

Less than four months later, on 16th January 1938, "This most beloved of modern writers" (to quote Rabindranath) breathed his last in Calcutta, leaving countless admiring men and women in tears of heart-wrenching grief at this untimely and irreplaceable bereavement. Sixty years later, countless Bengalis (and quite possibly other Indians) remember this *Marami* (close to the heart) and *Daradi* (compassionate) novelist with admiration and love.

Monish Ranjan Chatterjee