



OVERWHELMING PRESENCE OF 'CALCUTTA' AND ITS CONSEQUENT SOCIO-POLITICAL EFFECT IN SARADINDU BANDYOPADHAY'S 'BYOMKESH BAKSHI STORIES'

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Abstract

This paper seeks to reiterate the very presence of 'Calcutta' and the rise of Englishness among the newly educated Indians through the detective lens of Saradindu Bandyopadhyay. The paper emphasizes on the new face of Calcutta as a city, particularly concerning the rise of cocaine, crimes, mess bars, babu culture through the characters in Saradindu Bandyopadhyay's "Picture Imperfect and other stories". The paper, would analyze the iconoclastic attempt of introducing an Indian version of detective fiction by Bandyopadhyay. The translated version of "Picture Imperfect and other stories" by Sreejata Guha, has been studied closely for developing this paper with major focus on "The Inquisitor", the first story in the series. The paper also shows how Calcutta here as a whole, plays a crucial role in developing a hero as such. A key inquiry within this paper is how culture is 'formed', how values are 'created', and how both are regulated by elements such as power and social institutions. The research also seeks to establish how these socio-cultural factors direct and influence the author's representation of the characters, their moral choices, and demeanor.

Keywords: - Saradindu, Byomkesh, Calcutta, Cocaine, Crime, Mess Bars, Babuculture, Mysteries, Intellect, Power Institutions

INTRODUCTION:-

Saradindu Bandyopadhyay (30 March 1899 – 22 September 1970) was an Indian Bengali-language writer. He was actively involved with Bengali cinema as well as Bollywood. The creator of the Bengali detective Byomkesh Bakshi, Saradindu composed stories of a wide array of varieties including: novels, short stories, crime and detective stories, plays and screenplays. He wrote historical fiction like *Kaler Mandira*, *Gourmollar* (initially named as *Mouri Nodir Teere*), *Tumi Sandhyar Megh*, *Tungabhadrar Teere*, *Chuya-Chandan*, *Maru O Sangha* (later made into a Hindi film named *Trishagni*), *Sadashib* series and stories of the unnatural with the recurring character *Baroda*. Besides, he composed many songs and poems.

Byomkesh Bakshi is an Indian-Bengali fictional detective created by Saradindu Bandyopadhyay. Referring to himself as a "truth-seeker" or *Satyanweshi* in the stories, Bakshi is known for his proficiency with observation, logical reasoning, and forensic science which he uses to solve complicated cases, usually murders, occurring in Calcutta. According to chronological order, Byomkesh Bakshi appeared for the first time in the story "Pother Kanta" — a story where Byomkesh shows that an assumption based on pure and simple logic is unbreakable and when we break down what is known in law as circumstantial evidence, there is nothing but logical assumptions. However his proper introduction is given in his third story, "Satyanweshi" — a story of murder dealing with illegal trafficking of cocaine. He appears in alias — under the pseudonym of Atul Chandra Mitra. It is here that Byomkesh meets Ajit Bandyopadhyay, a writer, who would become a constant companion of him and it is Ajit who narrates the Byomkesh stories.

What the contemporary readers observe in the writings of Satyajit Ray's "Feluda series", as a prominent genre which we call as **detective fiction**, is something we owe heavily on Saradindu Bandyopadhyay. Bandyopadhyay started writing long before Satyajit Ray, his Byomkesh Bakshi mysteries pointed the onset of a new age in Bengali popular fiction. Set in the early 20s Calcutta, these stories featuring the astute investigator and his chronicler friend Ajit are still as gripping and delightful as when they first appeared.

Saradindu Bandyopadhyay's most well known fictional character Byomkesh Bakshi first appeared as a character in the story *Satyanweshi (The Inquisitor)*. The story is set in 1932 in the Chinabazar area of Kolkata where a 'non-government detective' Byomkesh Bakshi, owing to the permission from the police commissioner, starts living in a mess in that area under the pseudonym of Atul Chandra Mitra to probe a series of murders. The cosmos to which Byomkesh

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belonged was peopled with skillfully portrayed characters and framed by an intelligently captured pre-independence urban milieu, is mesmerizing because of its contemporary flavor. In the first story, Byomkesh works undercover to expose an organized crime ring trafficking in drugs. In the ‘Gramophone Pin Mystery’, he must put his razor-sharp intellect to good use to unearth the pattern behind a series of bizarre roadside murders. In ‘Calamity Strikes’, the Inquisitor is called upon to probe the strange and sudden death of a girl in a neighbour’s kitchen. In the next story, he has to lock horns with an old enemy who has vowed to kill him with an innocuous but deadly weapon. And, in ‘Picture Imperfect’, Byomkesh unravels a complex mystery involving a stolen group photograph, an amorous couple, and an apparently unnecessary murder.

Novelist Sharadindu Bandopadhyay created fictional detective Byomkesh Bakshi in exciting geo-political times, in Calcutta, then an interesting global city. Sharadindu styled Byomkesh as a dilettante, an amateur sleuth, perhaps fashioned loosely on Dorothy Sayers’s creation Lord Peter Wimsey. But, more than a detective, he is a *satyanweshi* (truth-seeker) and pursues leads, clues and hunches with dogged determination, without regard for remuneration or recompense. His reward is solving the crime and apprehending the guilty; and earning a bit of fame (or perhaps notoriety) in the process is always welcome.

Byomkesh is astute, well-read and able to connect multiple dots. He untangles a sordid skein of seemingly disparate events—the murder and mysterious return of an opium smuggling kingpin, a disrupted Calcutta-Shanghai opium supply chain, crepuscular Chinese denizens moving in the shadows of legendary Turret Bazaar, the disappearance and murder of an innovative Bengali chemist, a coquettish Bengali-Burmese seductress floating ethereally in a silk-brocade cheongsam, the furtive goings-ons at a Japanese dentist’s clinic, the deathly pall of bombings hanging over a fetid Calcutta skyline, a British police commissioner concerned with a missing opium consignment.

In his books and stories on Byomkesh, Saradindu was able to depict Calcutta as a modern city, where education, commerce, arts, literature, culture and religion thrived together. The Calcutta of 1942 — as represented by either Saradindu in his stories is doubly likeable because of the stark contrast with present-day conditions. Today’s charged atmosphere of bigotry stands in sharp relief to that nonchalant air of tolerance, that comfortable sense of cosmopolitanism that has long been eroded by the steady flight of citizens, its culture of wide scholarship replaced by rote learning. Calcutta Port—renamed Kolkata Port Trust in recent years—is now encumbered by

tonnes of silt brought in by the river from upstream and plays host to only lighter and smaller vessels. Saradindu's rendering of Calcutta as a global city will, sadly, remain encapsulated only in memories. That's probably true of many other Indian cities.

Near the end of the nineteenth century, it was realized that cocaine was being used in certain parts of the States of Bengal and Bihar for its euphoric effects. The earliest record of its use came from a small town named Bhagalpur in Bihar State. The story is related of a rich landowner who contracted the habit accidentally after using cocaine to relieve dental pain. So extraordinary were the effects produced that not only did he become habituated to its use, but he passed on the habit to many others. In course of time, it was observed that cocaine was being secretly sold by certain agencies to people who were taking it in prepared betel leaf (pan). A class of pedlars had sprung up who were selling the drug not only to grown-up people but also to teenage schoolboys. It was usually sold in packets or "lifafas" (envelopes) of a half grain each. In this way the habit spread to large towns like Calcutta and other big cities.

When the habitual use of cocaine began at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, restrictions on the import, sale and use of this drug were not strictly enforced. The excise authorities soon realized the seriousness of the situation, and regulations were brought into force to ensure strict control of the import and sale of cocaine. The sale of the

alkaloid to the general public was forbidden, and even the sale by licensed druggists and chemists to medical practitioners and dentists was strictly controlled. No one was allowed to possess coca leaf, alkaloids of coca, or any preparations made from them, or preparations containing ecgonin or any substance chemically allied to cocaine or having similar physiological effects, except under a special licence. The possession of these drugs under licence was also strictly controlled. This led to the illegal trade of Cocaine in Calcutta, and eventually resulted in heinous crimes like murders. The very first story in the series, "The Inquisitor" portrays a world that depicts the dystopian side of Calcutta, hypnotized by drug smugglers and drug addicts. Not only gangsters but many reputed personalities used to be involved in this and their respectable positions in the society acted as a foil to their crimes.

One such fictional personality was Anukul Babu of "The Inquisitor". This man is portrayed as a homeopathy practitioner by profession, he was respectable, old and helpful individual in nature. "The landlord Anukul Babu occupied the rooms on the ground floor. A

homeopath by profession, he was a simple, amiable man. Possibly he was a bachelor too since there was no family in the house. He looked after the daily needs of the tenants and also supervised the meals. He did it all with such finesse that there was no scope for complaints—once the sum of twenty-five rupees was deposited in his hands on the first of the month, one could be assured of every comfort for the next thirty days.” (Sreejata Guha, 2)

Another important factor, that is highlighted in the story is, the rampant growth of mess baris in the 1930s Calcutta. Mess serves as a crucial background in the entire story. Being the crime setting itself, the mess of Anukul Babu takes us back to the then contemporary mushrooming of mess in Calcutta.

Messbari is an urban Bengali coinage. It is born off the mess, the name for the area where military personnel socialise, eat and live together. (*Bari* in Bengali means **home**.) By the mid-19th century messbaris started mushrooming across the north and central parts of Calcutta. In his memoirs, writer Upendranath Ganguly has touched upon his nephew, writer Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay’s short stay in a Bowbazar mess. Many believe that this stay inspired him to write the novel, *Charitraheen*, in which the protagonist is a mess boarder who falls in love with a domestic help. Writer Saradindu Bandopadhyay’s fictional creation, detective Byomkesh Bakshi, also started out from a mess on Harrison Road, now Mahatma Gandhi Road. Saradindu himself used to stay in the attic (the Bengali word for it is *chilekotha*) of a mess at 66, Harrison Road.

One of the major factors resulting in the mushrooming of mess baris in Calcutta during 1930s is the growing population concentrated in the big cities like Calcutta. The need for a better opportunity in the lives of youngsters, particularly the male population of West Bengal led them to come to the city of Calcutta eventually. The rented houses these youngster took as their living place came to be called as ‘mess baris’. The story of

Byomkesh Bakshi starts with such a mess, owned by Anukul Babu, the respectable homeopath. The mess baris saw of major changes in the smuggling and crime world like nothing else did.

Characterized by ‘gentle’ characteristics and western education, the rise of Bhadrakol in the 19th century reflected changes in the nature of Bengali identity and subjectivity. The colonial experience led to the concern of the Bengali elite to define for themselves a social class that would delineate their nobility and shape a new code of ‘acceptance’. The “Babu” were associated with this new class of Bengalis eager to adopt western manners and learn that they formed the bulk of the workforce needed in the cosmopolitan enclave of Calcutta. There have been several

attempts by scholars to define this very abstruse social category. Some view them as all those who are no *chotlok*,/ *hoi polloi*, while others understand them as 'de facto social group, which held a common position along some continuum of the economy, enjoyed a style of life in common and was conscious of its existence as a class organized to further its ends'. The prototype Babu was one whose attire was a variety of English and Indian, claiming to be taught English and flaunting his status in society. Bandyopadhyay's 'Byomkesh Bakshi' belonged to this babu category of men.

In the beginning of the stories, Byomkesh Bakshi is described as "a man of twenty-three or twenty-four years of age who looked well educated." Byomkesh is a Hindu and wears mostly a white shirt/kurta with a white dhoti, occasionally draping a shawl. He does not live in luxury but possesses numerous books. He travels frequently, and does not own a gun and does not consider himself to be an "expensive helper". He habitually smokes and drinks tea with milk. He is fluent in Bengali, Hindi, and English. Byomkesh does not like being called a detective, and thinks the word 'investigator' even worse. Thus, he fashions a new name for himself which he inscribes on a brass plate in front of his house. The plaque read "Byomkesh Bakshi: Satyanweshi" (The Inquisitor).

Unlike other lead characters in similar detective fictional stories, Byomkesh Bakshi marries, ages, and also contemplates material things such as buying a car. Later, he also decides to buy land in Keyatala in South Kolkata and shifts to his new home. Byomkesh meets Satyabati, his future wife and the accused Sukumar's sister, in 'Arthamanartham'. The story 'Adim Ripu' provides some information about Byomkesh's early childhood. His father Mahadev Bakshi was a mathematics teacher at a school and practised Sankhya philosophy at home while his mother was the daughter of a Vaishnavite. When Byomkesh was seventeen years old, his parents died of tuberculosis. Later, Byomkesh passed University with scholarship. During the Second World War and after India's independence, Byomkesh, Satyabati and Ajit live in the mess house of Harrison Road. Byomkesh gradually ages through the series, and has a son called Khoka (Little Boy) in the series.

Byomkesh was created from the 1930s onwards, whereas Feluda can be placed around the 1970s. Byomkesh was not given to personal physical adventure. Satyajit Ray's Feluda was tall, physically robust, a bit adept at martial arts and prone to going off on adventurous journeys across the country in the course of solving a riddle. There is some violence in Feluda stories but

none in the Byomkesh ones. That is why maybe the latter is considered more cerebral, armchair-bound so to speak, and thinking out his solutions without playing a personal role in nabbing the culprit. If Feluda is Tintin, Byomkesh is closer to Asterix. Some of the differences between the two characters can be traced to their creators. Bandyopadhyay was solely into writing, whereas Ray was into a whole lot of other things and took to writing detective stories when his son was growing up. Feluda stories can be accessed by people of all ages, whereas Byomkesh will not attract that many teenagers. Women do not feature in Feluda's life, whereas Byomkesh fell in love and got married. Both the authors created their heroes in their own images. Byomkesh was very middle class, travelling by bus. Feluda was half a notch higher socially and in his lifestyle. He travelled by taxi a lot and shopped in New Market. Sukumar Sen, linguist and writer, describes Byomkesh as a Bengali young man of the 1930s who was educated, intelligent, sympathetic, had strong powers of observation, was reserved in his speech. There was nothing in him which set him apart from other young men of his time except his intellect and seriousness. He did not have a job, did not work for a fee but certainly looked for praise, fame and self- satisfaction. The stamp of the times is ultimately there in attire. When Byomkesh (1930s man) was going out to meet Satyabati during their courtship he was wearing silk. And thus, through these tiny modulations, he skillfully represents the Babu culture prevalent at the time in Calcutta.

Unlike Sherlock Holmes, Byomkesh Bakshi is not withdrawn and self-centred. He is not a scientist, violinist or an addict. He is a typical Bengali gentleman of the 1930s - educated, intelligent, shrewd, reserved and sympathetic. Apart from his razor sharp intellect and skilled observation techniques, he has got no other quality to distinguish himself from the average Bengali youths. That's why, Bakshi as an amateur Bengali detective and is most successfully conceived.

The physician Anukul's boarding house, where Bakshi and Bandyopadhyay are first introduced, is inhabited by practising Bengalis. Ashwini, Ghanashyam and two unnamed "middle aged" single gentlemen exhibit a very Bengali addiction to betel leaves and desire to be "employed in regular jobs". The boarding house, called 'mess' in India, is managed by a Bengali gentleman who is a homeopath, a profession common to the educated pre-independence and early post-independence Indian Bengalis. Anukul's hybridity is exhibited in his penchant for European, particularly German drugs that he imports in cases bearing American stamps . Ajit Bandyopadhyay stresses that "the doctor never use[s]...Indian- made drugs." Used to gadgets

imported to the colonies from England, he fixes the British-made Yale latch locks to different doors of his boarding house. The much hyped Englishness among the newly educated Bengali masses was quite proficiently portrayed by Saradindu Bandyopadhyay in his stories.

Another area of focus, that looms large in the stories is the way all the pre- independence power institutions worked. The corruption prevalent in the power structures as well as the inefficacy of the people involved within the system is what Saradindu Bandyopadhyay's concerns the most about. The pre-independence era peaked in hybridity of cultures as well as power structures. Curtain raising attempts were made by Bandyopadhyay almost in every other story to show these stark realities of the then system deliberately. The failure of police everytime to crack any case of crime, may it be, smuggling, or theft, or murder, and the ultimate involvement of Byomkesh Bakshi in it. Every little yet thoughtful attempt of Bandyopadhyay takes his readers a bit closer to analyze how hollow the power structure has grown to be. Thus readers can find multiple instances of power failure and corruption within the stories itself.

In light of the police investigation into Chowdhury's death, the author depicts the intelligence of the Bengali detective and symbolically makes him dominate the imperial forces when he precisely and confidently points out that the window of Chowdhury's room is "the cause for...[Chowdhury's]...murder. By waging a conversation with the police inspector during which he vindicates his own observations and logic as being infallible, Bakshi asserts his superiority to the colonial forces while the inspector is compelled to state, "I see you are an intelligent man...". It is significant that the inquisitor avoids answering to or reacting at the inspector's invitation to join the imperial poUce forces, thus expressing his subaltern resentment at the imperial domination of India. Contrarily, Ramdhani Singh, who handcuffs Bakshi, embodies the author's satiric portrayal of the Indians that collaborated with the imperial forces.

"The Inquisitor" presents the Indian executive and judiciary which had changed themselves in accordance with the conventions of the British colonizers. Ajit Bandyopadhyay's reference to "C.I.D" or Criminal Investigation Department indicates a branch of Calcutta Police that was founded in 1868 primarily to suppress the Indian armed nationalists rather than apprehending general criminals. The poUce inspector's procedure of interrogating the residents of Anukul's boarding house and his manner of asking them to identify Bakshi as "Atul Chandra Mitra" before arresting him on the charge of murdering Chowdhury, indicate the conventions for interrogation

and arrest promulgated by the British colonizers in India. The author satirizes the colonial executive and judiciary in India by demonstrating fallibility of such conventions when the police inspector erroneously arrests Bakshi. On the other hand, Ajit Bandyopadhyay's observation that locating a lawyer in Calcutta is not difficult might be interpreted as his reference to the arbitrariness of the British administration and judiciary that forced Indians in British India to frequently consult advocates to avoid detention and harassment. When, after returning from the police station, Byomkesh Bakshi says, "The English have a saying about a 'bad penny' - my situation is something similar; even the police tossed me right back" (20), he is not only being ironical about the erratic functioning of colonial police forces but also exhibits his acquaintance with the imperial customs and conventions, thus demonstrating his Occidental knowledge and, in extension, his hybridity. The homeopath's post-detention statement, "There is a legal system in the country and I have plenty of money too" (23) is also a part of Saradindu Bandyopadhyay's depiction of the corruption and partiality of the British judicial system in India (23).

CONCLUSION :-

The point of view of Saradindu Bandyopadhyay behind raising a character like Byomkesh Bakshi is certainly not just to provide the Indian readers a detective who would stand out as a model hero. Infact, Bandyopadhyay in the long run wanted a man with whom every pre-independent Indian would relate to. His motto has always been multidimensional. At one hand, he wanted an uncommon yet very common hero; and on the same time wanted to show the crude realities of Calcutta as a major city in the country. The rapid growth of the city as power hub is paradoxically juxtaposed with the increasing crime rates. The over populated interiors of mess bars not only show the struggle for better opportunities among the men of the country but also shows the hollowness of the morals of the city as a better place of living. The repetitive failure of men in institutional power and the two sides of the coin when it comes to western education were too a part of the major concerns of Bandyopadhyay. Hence, along with raising a detective, full of flesh and blood, Bandyopadhyay has meticulously represented Calcutta from rags to riches in his detective stories. "The Inquisitor" being the prima facie of this unique attempt showcases these details in such a manner which would construct a concrete idea of the background scenario in the mind of readers. Thus, making this entire series a wholesome attempt to decode Calcutta. In conclusion, Bandyopadhyay's "Picture Imperfect and other stories" provides an enthralling portrayal of Calcutta, serving as a microcosm of its social, political and cultural facets.

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