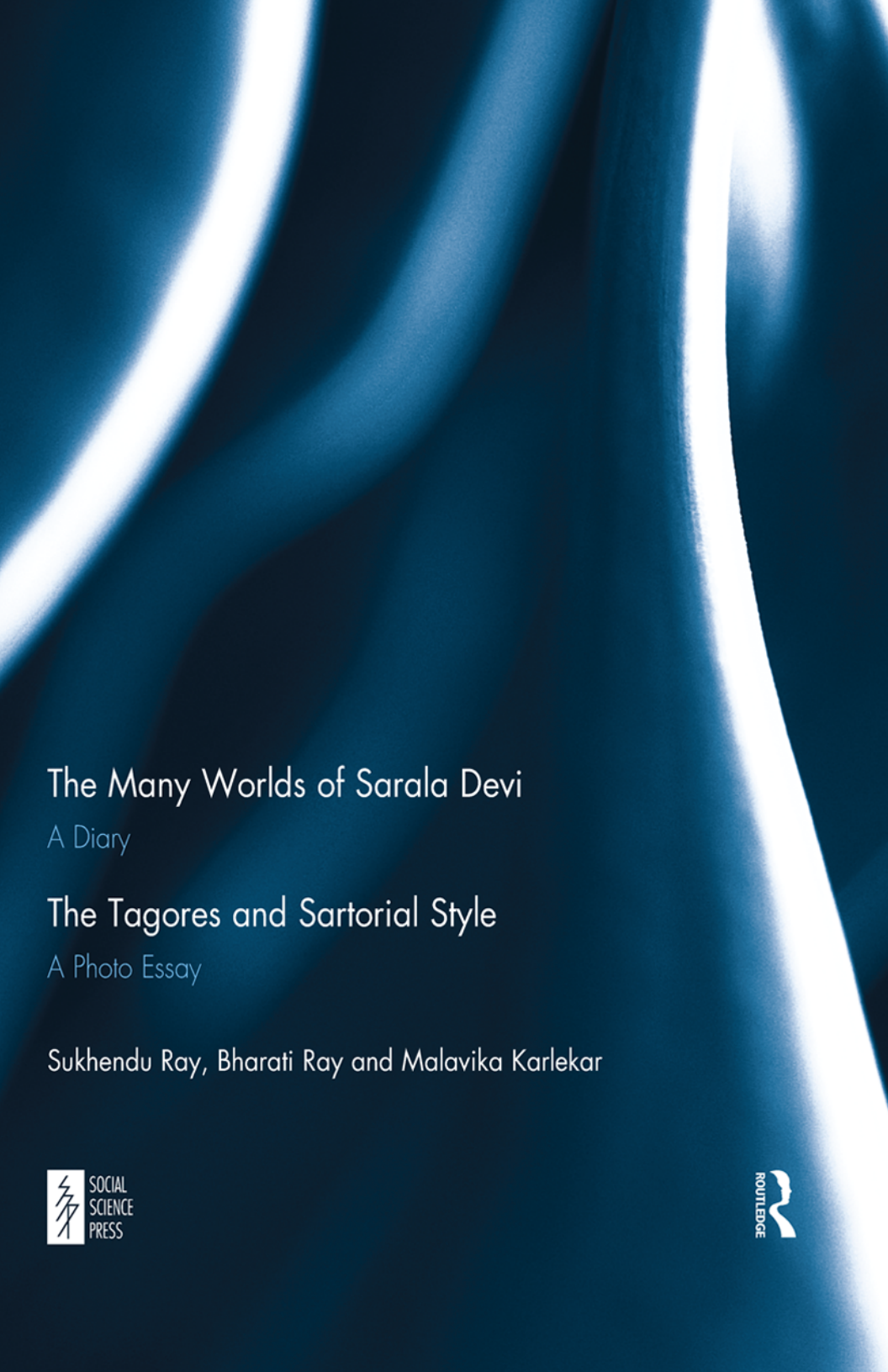
The Many Worlds of Sarala Devi
A Diary
The Tagores and Sartorial Style
A Photo Essay
Sukhendu Ray, Bharati Ray and Malavika Karlekar
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&
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The Many Worlds of Sarala Devi

A Diary

Translated from the Bengali *Jeevaner Jharapata*

Sukhendu Ray

With an Introduction by **Bharati Ray**

&

The Tagores and Sartorial Styles

A Photo Essay

Malavika Karlekar

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Introduction

• *Bharati Ray*

Can autobiographies be considered history? If literature be regarded as a form of history[1] then Sarala Devi Chaudhurani's autobiography, *Jeevaner Jharapata*, can claim to be an important part of Bengal's social history of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Society is an umbrella term that includes every aspect of civil life which is free from direct control by the State. Society includes all the ingredients that go into making it—art, culture, values, manners, customs, religion, myths, memory, food, dress, health, education, gender, family and even politics and economy. The way we live defines our society. In this sense, the society of the Hindu-Brahmo upper class and the upper middle-class way of life is mirrored in fascinating detail in this volume.

I have argued elsewhere that in a sense all of us are historians—practising or not—of our times. We register in our minds the facts of our lives and circumstances, contemporary society and polity,

[1] This is true of novels also. To quote Murasaki Shikibu of Japan, 'Without it what should we know of how people lived in the past? ... For history books ... show us only one small corner of life; whereas these diaries and romances ... contain the most minute information about all sorts of people's private affairs'. Cited in Sharon Sievers, 'Women in China, Japan and Korea', in Barbara N. Ramusack and Sharon Sievers (eds.) *Women of Asia,* Bloomingdon and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999, pp. 178–9.

and make our own observations. Only a handful of us put down in writing what our memory holds.[2] Since events are seen through the looking glass of one individual and often inscribed without any verification, memoirs should be examined critically. But then, all accounts, even if verified or analysed, are basically subjective. Established hard-core history, narrative or theory, also needs careful investigation. Seen in this light, autobiographies do not stand outside history. They represent contemporary history from the authors' standpoint.

To give but one or two examples, historian Udaya Kumar in a recent article has dealt with the relation between the discourse of social reform in Kerala and certain forms of autobiographical articulation in Malayalam. These reform initiatives, taken primarily between the 1880s and the 1930s (roughly the same period during which Sarala Devi lived and worked), involved a reformulation of the ideas of caste and community and the autobiographies themselves were written by active participants in these efforts. Beginning with a discussion of some of the earliest autobiographies in Malayalam, e.g. by Yacob Rama Varma Thampuran and Vaikkom Pachu Moothathu, Udaya Kumar moves on to analyse the self-narratives of V. T. Bhattathiripad and Kanippayyur Sankaran Nambudiripad, C. V. Kunjuraman and C. Kesavan and, in the process, gives insights on how autobiographies, if scrutinized with care, represent vivid contemporary history.[3] In Bengal, the autobiographies of men like Akshay C. Sarkar, Nabin Chandra Sen, Chandranath Basu and Shivnath Shastri highlight contemporary social structures, customs and behaviour patterns, and to a great extent, fill in the gap in narratives culled from archival and other sources.

Historian Tanika Sarkar in her recent publication on the autobiography by Rasasundari Devi (b.1809), *Amar Jiban* (1868), shows how this earliest autobiography written by a woman in the nineteenth century is, at once, 'a very early text of modernity' and underlines the lives and activities of women in rural Bengal.[4] Indeed, women's autobiographies are increasingly being regarded

[2] See 'Introduction,' in Bharati Ray, ed. *Different Types of History,* New Delhi, Pearson Longman, 2009.

[3] See Udaya Kumar, 'Subjects of New Lives: Reform, Self-Making and the Discourse of Autobiography in Kerala', in Bharati Ray ed. op.cit.

[4] Tanika Sarkar, *Words to Remember: Rasasundari Devi, Amar Jiban, A Modern Autobiography*, New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1999.

as highlighting many vital aspects of social history missing in official records and papers. Seen from this perspective, *Jeevaner Jharapata* is an important autobiography authored by a woman.

THE CONTEXT

Sarala was born at her mother's family home at Jorasanko, Calcutta, in 1872. In order to contextualize her, we have to recall the age as well as the family she was born in. She belonged to the Hindu-Brahmo community, which played a leading role in the nineteenth century reform movement in Bengal, and was related to the Tagores of Jorasanko, unquestionably the most illustrious family in contemporary Bengal. Her mother Swarnakumari Devi (b.1855), a renowned author, was the daughter of Maharshi Debendranath Tagore and the elder sister of Rabindranath Tagore.

Much has been written on the nineteenth-century social reform movement in Bengal.[5] For our purpose we need to mention two developments that spanned the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. First, the period saw a fabulous outburst of cultural activity, in art, literature, music, and indeed, in all spheres of Bengali social life. Rammohun Roy was one of the pioneers, and a galaxy of great men like Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and Swami Vivekananda appeared one by one.. The Tagore family, as will be mentioned later, occupied a unique place in the cultural efflorescence of the time.[6] Second, social reforms, especially in favour of women, were introduced. For instance, sati was abolished, and education for women was introduced after a gap of many centuries. The tremendous impact of education in women's lives, and indeed on the whole society, was quite beyond the reformers' imagination.

While social reform progressed, nationalism grew and Bengal witnessed the Swadeshi movement that burgeoned forth as a protest against Lord Curzon's partition of Bengal in 1905. Bengal took the pride of place in India both in inaugurating the anti-

[5] For reform movement, see David Kopf, *The Brahmo Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Mind* Princeton, 1977; Charles Heimsath, *Indian Nationalism and Hindu Social Reform,* Princeton University Press, 1964; Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Europe Reconsidered,* New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1988.

[6] See Prashanta Kumar Pal, *Rabi Jiboni* (Life of Rabindranath), Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, 5 vols, 1397 *BS*/1990 CE.

colonial movement and in producing political leaders of the first order.[7] Sarala was privileged in being an integral part of both the cultural and the political stirrings. Her father Janakinath Ghosal was a staunch supporter of the early Indian National Congress and her mother Swarnakumari Devi became one of the first women delegates to the organization. Her family home, Jorasanko, had become as much a centre of creative culture as of emerging nationalism. Swarnakumari moved out of Jorasanko, a joint-family household, after her marriage, only to return when her husband went abroad for his studies.

JOINT FAMILY

Any attempt at an analysis of the history of family patterns in Bengal must reject a unilinear interpretation, and take into account the complexities and contradictions that prevailed in Bengali social life. Through the processes of integration and disintegration, the joint family became an established institution by the latter part of the eighteenth century in Bengali society. Family annals contained in district histories and biographies of nineteenth century personalities establish this fact.[8] The typical Bengali middle class home came to be occupied by a joint family.[9]

The joint family structure was not a monolithic one. The number of members depended on how many people a particular family accommodated. Besides the three biological generations, a household would often accommodate, in terms of the relationship to the *karta*,

[7] Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903–1908*, Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1973. For a succinct account of the political movements, see Sekhar Bandopayopadhyay, *From Plassey to Partition,* New Delhi: Oriental Longman, 2004, pp. 251–62, 284–321.

[8] There are many such biographical records. To name only a few, see the autobiographies of Kartikeya Chandra Roy, Girischandra Vidyaratna, Rajnarain Basu, Sharadasundari Devi and Jadavchandra Chattopadhyay, in Naresh Jana et al. (eds.) *Atmakatha*, 3 volumes, Calcutta: Ananya Prakashan, 1981–94; Swarnakumari Devi, 'Sekela Katha' (Tales of Old Days), in *Bharati,* Gyanadanandini Devi, in *Puratani,* Bipin Pal, *Autobiography*.

[9] The term joint family has been interpreted in various ways by different scholars. Here we take it as the Bengali concept of *ekannavarti* (sharing the same kitchen). Roughly, it denotes a household where at least two generations of agnatically related married males form a commensual unit, accept the controlling authority of the eldest male or *karta* and abide by a set of mutual rights and duties.

widowed aunts, grand aunts, siblings, siblings' children, cousins, their children, widowed daughters-in-law of siblings or cousins, distant relations, and sometimes even friends or acquaintances in need of a home. Listen to Hemalata Tagore (b. 1873) married to Dwipendranath Tagore, nephew of Rabindranath Tagore, describe the Tagore household at Jorasanko:

After my marriage, I entered our house at Jorasanko. It is an understatement to say that it was a huge family. My fathers-in-law (i.e. father-in-law and his brothers) were seven in number, aunts-in-law (sisters of father-in-law) were four. All of the aunts' husbands were *ghar-jamais* (lived-in-sons-in-law). Maharshi (i.e. Debendranath Tagore) had sixteen servants... In his household, there were altogether 116 people. All were ekannavarti. Nobody could dream of separation.[10]

Sarala, too, tells us in her autobiography that Jorasanko was:

...a place of great magnificence, every corner teeming with people, humming with endless activities. The sons and daughters of my maternal grandfather had their separate quarters where they lived with their respective families... A dozen Brahmin cooks were kept busy since early morning in the central kitchen cooking for the entire family and other residents. Cooked rice would be piled high almost touching the ceiling on one end of the huge kitchen.

In this joint household Maharshi was the karta. Usually, the Maharshi's children with their children participated in various celebrations, and performances. Sarala recalls:

[10] Hemlata Tagore, 'Purano Katha' (Stories of Olden Days), in Abhijit Sen and Abhijit Bhattacharya (eds.) *Sekele Katha: Shatak Suchanay Meyeder Smritikatha* (Stories At the Turn of the Century: Memoirs of Women), Kolkata, Naya Udyog, 1997, pp. 191, 196. Sarat Chandra Chatterjee (b. 1876) in *Nishkriti*, a popular household novel, graphically depicts a middle class joint family: 'The Chatujyes of Bhowanipore belonged to a joint family. Two brothers, Girish and Harish, and their younger cousin, Ramesh, lived together. Girish and Harish, both became advocates, made plenty of money, built a house' and acquired huge property. Girish's widowed, elderly mother, his wife Siddheswari, Harish and his wife Nayantara, Ramesh and his wife Shailaja lived together along with four sons and one daughter of Girish, one son of Harish and two sons of Ramesh. Girish, the eldest brother, was the karta, and Siddheswari was the ginni. Girish and Harish earned the money, and cousin Ramesh, a spendthrift irresponsible young man, earned nothing but wasted his brothers' money on futile business ventures. Yet for all practical purposes, his wife Shailaja, the most efficient among the three sisters-in-law, controlled the household, as well as the children.

Counting the children of my many aunts and uncles, we cousins formed quite a large contingent. Understandably, there were age-wise groupings among the children. My elder sister Hironmoyee's group was just above ours, but even though my elder brother Jyotsna's group consisted entirely of boys, we were on friendly terms with them...without inhibition, we often used to engage ourselves in fights with the boys in my brother's group.[11]

Hironmoyee Devi (b.1870), the elder daughter of Swarnakumari, also recalls a joyous childhood in the company of cousins. The children used to organize their own dramas:

...without telling any of the elders... They all acclaimed our acting as well as the stage decorations... On the drop scene was painted the face of uncle Rabindranath surrounded by a garland. Each flower was the face of a child actor. [12]

Clearly such rich environment, not available to a child from a middle-class family, greatly enriched the Jorasanko children.

A few words about the Jorasanko family may not be out of place here, because the Tagores left an indelible stamp on the social and cultural history of Bengal. Indeed, few Bengalis could claim to have contributed as much to the cultural efflorescence of Bengal as the Tagores did. Dwarakanath Tagore was a pioneer industrialist. His son Debendranath was the leading Brahmo figure after Rammohun Roy. Almost all of Debendranath's sons rose to fame. The eldest Dwijendranath was a philosopher, author, nationalist, and a patron of *Hindu Mela*;[13] the second, Satyendranath, was the first Indian member of the Indian Civil Service, and a champion of women moving out of the confinement of their homes;[14] the third son, Hemendranath, was a businessman; and the fourth, Jyotirindranath, was a man of many talents, a writer, musician, industrialist and nationalist. However, outshining all brothers, reigning over the Indian cultural domain of that era, was Rabindranath, a Nobel

[11] Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, 'Amar Balyajibon' (My Childhood), *Bharati, Baishakh* 1312 *BS,* CE 1905.

[12] Hironmoyee Devi, 'Kaifayat' (An Apology), *Bharati, Baishakh*, 1323 *BS*, CE 1918.

[13] Under the patronage of the Tagores and some others, Hindu Mela functioned from 1867–80, held annual exhibitions to display indigenous products, and sought to shape a nationalist entity.

[14] Satyendranath's letters to his wife bear testimony to this. See Indira Devi Chaudhurani, *Puratani*, Calcutta: Indian Associated Publishing Company, 1957.

laureate in literature, creator of a new genre of music, Rabindra Sangeet, an excellent painter, and an ardent nationalist. His nephew Abanindranath was a most celebrated painter. Thakurbari, as the Tagore family home at Jorasanko was known, became then the meeting point of many a brilliant contemporary mind.

The women of the Tagore family also made history.[15] Debendranath's wife Sarada Devi was literate and fond of reading books. Their daughter Saudamini, went to Bethune School at the age of five, and became one of the earliest Bengali upper class girls to go for formal education. Debendranath's daughter Swarnakumari was a celebrated author, daughter-in-law of Gyanadanandini, one of the most 'modern' women of her time, went to live with her husband first in Bombay,[16] and later in England, innovated the 'modern' style of wearing saree[17] and started a children's magazine. Another daughter-in-law, Kadambari Devi, used to ride on horseback in especially tailored clothes and was a highly talented actress participating in family plays. She was a source of inspiration to the young Rabindranath.[18] It was among such extraordinarily gifted men and women, that Sarala had the fortune of growing up. No wonder, she could have the best of education and opportunities freshly opened to women.

EDUCATION

Sarala's autobiography throws interesting light on the contemporary system of women's education.[19] It is known that despite strong

[15] For a sketch of their lives, see Chitra Deb, *Thakurbarir Andarmahal*, Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, 1993.

[16] On her return from Bombay, she publicly alighted from a carriage at the family home, moving the family retainers to tears. Swarnakumari recalls that the scene of shame and sorrow at Jorasanko was beyond description. Swarnakumari Devi, 'Sekele Katha', *Bharati*, *Chaitra*,1322 *BS*, 1915 CE.

[17] A Bengali woman used to wear only a saree. No undergarment was worn. The clothing was comfortable for the hot climate in Bengal, but not suitable for going out. For the significance of sartorial reform, see Himani Bannerji, 'The Discourse on Shame *(lajja*) and Clothing of the Bhadramahila' in Bharati Ray, ed. *From the Seams of History: Essays on Indian Women*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995.

[18] There are many references to Kadambari Devi in the innumerable writings on Rabindranath. One of the latest is Uma Das Gupta, *The Oxford India Tagore*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 25–64.

[19] Meredith Borthwick, *Changing Role,* pp. 60–108 is a good history of women's education in Bengal in the nineteenth century. For a short summary,

resistance from the orthodox,[20] women's education had made steady advance since the nineteenth century. Initially zenana education had been launched,[21] but Bethune School was founded in 1849; its Collegiate department was started in 1880.[22] So while mother Swarnakumari had been taught at home, daughter Sarala entered Bethune School. It was, at the time, the centre of learning for the girls from 'progressive' families. Hindu reformers like Madanmohan Tarkalankar and Brahmo leaders like Rajnarayan Bose, Shivanath Shastri and Durgamohan Das sent their daughters to Bethune School. Rajnarayan's daughter, Lajjabati (b.1874) became a poet and essayist and Shivanath Shasri's daughter, Hemalata (b. 1868) later founded Maharani Girls' School in Darjeeling. Kamini Ray (b.1865), the latter-day celebrated poet, Abala Bose (b. 1864), daughter of Durgamohan Das became renowned as a committed educationist and the founder of Nari Shiksha Samiti and Kumudini Khastagir (b. 1865), who later became the principal of Bethune College, were all Sarala's contemporaries. These were the privileged first generation of women who received formal institutional education. They met, became friends and enriched one another. After finishing school, where Sarala made name as a bright student, she proceeded to graduate from Bethune College with honours in

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see 'Introduction', Bharati Ray, *Sekaler Narishiksha: Bamabodhini Patrika,* Calcutta: Calcutta University Press, 1994, pp. 19–34. Aparna Basu, 'History deals with the History of Women's Education at the All-India Level' in Karuna Chanana ed. *Socialisation, Education and Women: Explorations in Gender Identity*, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1988, looks at the question from women's perspective.

[20] See Shivanath Shastri, *Ramtanu Lahiri O Tatkalin Bangasamaj,* Calcutta. The popular perception of assertive women found the most powerful representations in Kalighat *patachitra* representing the visual satire on educated women, especially the English-educated *babu's* abject surrender to his 'modern' wife and neglect to his mother.

[21] In most families, women were taught at home by their male relations, and in some, they were educated by women teachers or 'Vaisnavis', women belonging to the Vaisnava Hindu religious sect. For instance, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain was taught by her elder brother, and Kailasbasini Devi by her husband.

[22] Author Lila Majumdar describes amusingly the happiness—and self awareness—of her cousins, who could make it to Bethune College. 'Almost all the college going girls were at Bethune College. All of them knotted their hair in a big bun, wore colourful *sarees* from Dhaka, a gold chain round their necks, gold bangles of a particular design then popular, and gold earrings of almost uniform style. They would occasionally flare up for no apparent reason, or they would be highly amused again for no reason; they would needlessly run up and down the stairs with a song on their lips equally for no reason at all.'

English in 1890, only a few years after Kadambini Ganguly and Chandramukhi Basu had graduated in 1883.[23]

Although most reformers were supportive of female education, bitter debate raged over the issue and extent of their education.[24] Few were inclined to consider the related theme of the development of a woman's individuality. On the other hand, fearful that too much education would make women westernized, promote disruptive individualism, and foster disrespect of tradition, they preferred different syllabi for men and women. Men were encouraged to take up science, and women, to opt for humanities. As a result, Sarala was denied her chosen field of study—science. The amusing anecdotes related in *Jharapata* reveal her frustration as well as that of many like her.

The implications of education for different sectors of society have been analyzed in recent debates.[25] One point is clear, however. Notwithstanding the patriarchal bias in the entire educational framework, education brought to many women awareness of gender inequality, and a realization that the value of education lay not merely in equipping themselves with domestic skills as advised by social reformers,[26] but in the cultivation of the mind and in the promotion of an all-round personhood. These new ideas found outlet in various arenas.

MARRIAGE

Sarala's autobiography throws interesting light on the prevalent system of marriage and, in the process, on the relationship between

[23] Kadambini Ganguly (b. 1861) and Chandramukhi Basu (b. 1860) were the two first women graduates under Calcutta University. Kadambini Ganguly became a physician, while Chandramukhi secured her Master's and became the first principal of Bethune College.

[24] For a summary of the debate, see Bharati Ray, 'Introduction' in *Sekaler Narishiksha*, pp. 29–34.

[25] See, for example, Andre Béteille, 'The Reproduction of Inequality: Occupation, Caste and Family', in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 25:1, 1991; D. Drury, *The Iron Schoolmaster: Education, Employment and the Family in India*, Berkeley, 1992. The force of education in maintaining the dominant belief systems and its divisive are recognized today.

[26] Of the didactic literature for women, mention may be made of: Bhudev Mukhopadhyay, *Paribarik Prasanga* (On Family Matters, 1884), Girija Prasanna Roy Chowdhury, *Grihalakshmi* (The Lakshmi of the Home, Calcutta, 1887) and Jay Krishna Mitra, *Ramanir Kartavya* (Duties of a Woman, Calcutta, 1890).

the Hindus and Brahmos. On a visit to Krishnanagar to inaugurate the establishment of the Brahmo Samaj, Debendranath met the young Janakinath and was immediately attracted to this young, handsome and well-educated son of a local zamindar of Nadia. Debendranath chose him as the husband for his favourite daughter Swarnakumari. His eldest daughter Saudamini had been married according to the Hindu rites, but since the marriage of his second daughter Sukumari, all the sons-in-law were initiated into the Brahmo faith, and made to reside in their in-laws' home. Janakinath refused to oblige Debendranath. To him, there was no fundamental contradiction between the Hindu and Brahmo beliefs, and so, no need for initiation into the Brahmo faith. Nor would he live in his wife's home. Debendranath had to yield to his wishes.

This marriage drove a wedge between Janakinath and his father. A Hindu, Janakinath's father would not accept as his daughter-in-law, the daughter of Brahmo Debendranath. In fact, he was so upset that he not only refused to recognize this marriage but also disinherited Janakinath. This incident is a pointer to the deep antipathy that the traditional Hindus had for the Brahmos. Amiya P. Sen in his well-researched study analyses the complex relationship between the two communities during the period.[27] Perhaps it was the 'deviations in rituals and customs' which more than the differences in religious interpretations that drove a wedge between the two. Most importantly, the Brahmo Marriage Bill brought into sharp focus the issue of community identity. A separate Marriage Act for Brahmos was obviously seen as a permanent weaning away of the Brahmos from the parental Hindu society. Swarnakumari's marriage took place in 1867, at the height of the Marriage Bill controversy that raged animated between 1865–72, when the Bill became an Act.[28] Little wonder that Janakinath's father refused to approve of the Hindu-Brahmo marriage. Fortunately, the breach was later healed, and the father condescended to occasionally visit his son's home, to the delight of his grandchildren.

Sarala's autobiography sheds illuminating light on another crucial aspect of the institution of marriage. Since the mid-

[27] Amiya P. Sen, *Hindu Revivalism in Bengal, 1872–1905,* Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 23–48.

[28] According to the Act III of 1872, the contracting parties were to formally declare that they did not profess the Hindu faith. It permitted separation and divorce, a positive threat to traditional gender relations in Hindu society.

nineteenth century, a few 'choice' marriages (marrying by one's own choice rather than having an arranged marriage) had begun to take place in Bengal,[29] but they became more frequent during the freedom movement.[30] Yet, whether a family was Hindu or Brahmo, labelled 'conservative' or 'progressive', the custom of traditional marriage arranged by parents within the caste group was favoured. The case in point is that of Sarala herself. Sarala's autobiography describes how she was compelled to marry Rambhuj Dutta Chaudhuri. In the crucial matter of marriage, she had to bow to her parents' wishes. It is known from related literature that Sarala had a number of suitors; she had a particularly close relationship with Prabhat Mukhopadhyay, an eminent author,[31] who was persuaded by his mother to go abroad and study law. Swarnakumari became concerned that her daughter was going to bring bad name to the family and forced the marriage upon her. The question that must be asked is: was it right for Swarnakumari to marry off her brilliant daughter to an elderly widower and pack her off to the Punjab, thus putting an end to a career full of promise? One wonders why Sarala yielded to the pressure. Sarala does not fully explain. She only tells us that her 'hands and feet were tied'—there was no space for any movement. Perhaps daughters had not learned as yet to make their own decisions regarding their marriage. The institution

[29] It first appeared among the Brahmos. In 1881, noted journalist Krishna Kumar Mitra, married Lilabati, daughter of the Brahmo reformer Rajnarain Bose. Nirmala Majumdar met the latter day eminent doctor Nilratan Sircar, at a Brahmo gathering. They were married in 1897. See Meredith Borthwick, 'The *Bhadramahila* and the Changing Conjugal Relations in Bengal, 1850–1900', in M. Allen and S.N. Mukherjee (eds.*) Women in India and Nepal*, Canberra, 1982, p. 117. Such marriages brought severe censure. Jogendra Chandra Basu made courtship an object of satire in his novel *Radhanath*, serialized in the periodical *Janmabhumi*, December-January 1890–91, March-April 1891, June-July 1891 and October-November 1891. See also Amritalal Basu, *Bibaha Bibhrat Prahasan* (1894) and *Babu (*1894), Bhuban Mohan Sarkar, *Daktar Babu* (1875) and Rakhaldas Bhattacharya, *Suruchir Dhwaja* (1886).

[30] The marriage of Shanti Das with Humayun Kabir, the bride a Hindu, and the bridegroom a Muslim, created a stir throughout Bengal. Sucheta Majumdar married J.B. Kripalani and Aruna Ganguly married Asaf Ali. Caste distinctions as well as religious differences melted away under the banner of a common struggle against a foreign enemy.

[31] Sukumar Sen calls him 'the best known short story writer after Tagore'. Sukumar Sen, *History of Bengali Literature,* New Delhi: Sahitya Academi, 1960, p. 326.

of marriage in India obstinately clung to tradition; it would need another fifty years to be transformed in a major way.

MOTHERHOOD

It is acknowledged that mothers traditionally had held a place of honour in Indian culture. However, glorification of motherhood as an article of faith emerged in India around the middle of the nineteenth century, as the nationalist movement and nationalist ideology began to take shape.[32] Women were assigned a specific and crucial role in rearing a special breed of men, patriotic, brave and nationalistic.[33] In middle-class families, mothers were repeatedly advised to be 'good' mothers, to look after their children and be their 'moral guide' and 'first teacher'. To quote a contemporary journal:

> A child emulates the mother in everything she does. The way she moves, the way she speaks, the manner in which she conducts herself, the child quietly observes. The inner feelings of the mother, as expressed in her words and deeds, the child internalizes.[34]

However, the heavy responsibility of properly rearing a child seems to have been assigned to middle-class mothers only. Mothers from aristocratic families do not seem to have been burdened by it, however patriotic they might have been. A convention in affluent homes was that newborn children were nursed not by mothers, but by professional wet-nurses. Immediately after birth, the child was separated from the mother and was handed over to the custody of a wet nurse and a maidservant. Maidservant's arms replaced the mother's, and the child had little or no connection with the mother, thereafter. This aristocratic convention was followed at Jorasanko. Sarala complains in *Jharapata:*

> We had no conception of what a mother's love could be, for no mother ever kissed us or fondled us affectionately. Our aunts, my mother's sisters,

[32] 'In India,' said Vivekananda, 'the mother is the centre of the family and our highest ideal. She is to us the representative of God, as God is the mother of the Universe.' *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda,* Mayavati Memorial Edition, 1962, vol. 2, pp. 506–7.

[33] See Indira Chowdhury, *The Frail Hero and Virile History: Gender and Politics of Culture in Colonial India,* Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998.

[34] *BBP, Falgun-Chaitra*, 1313 *BS*/1906 AD, cited in Bharati Ray, 'Introduction', *Nari O Parivar*, p. 11.

were of the same mould, believed to be an inherited trait of indifference from their mother. Such, apparently, was the patriarchal canon of the daughters of rich aristocratic families. It was not so with the wives of their sons; they came from not so elevated backgrounds and arrived with plebian hearts. Their relation with their children was distinctly more intimate.

And she continues:

Lack of any assuaging gesture from my mother when I broke my teeth after a fall did not surprise me because that was not expected.

A reader of *Jharapata* would share the sadness of this second and neglected daughter of Swarnakumari. However, Sarala's was not a case out of the ordinary in the Tagore household. Rabindranath was equally neglected by his mother.

We were under the control of the servants... I wonder why we were so cruelly treated by servants... The true reason was that our entire burden was placed on them.[35]

In this context, one cannot but recall Isaac Newton's childhood. His mother left him when he was barely three. It seems then, despite the prescriptive literature of the time, that nurturing by mothers is not a requisite for the shaping of a brilliant child.

GAINFUL EMPLOYMENT

Gainful employment, denied to middle-class women for centuries, was simultaneously an effect of, and an impetus for, reshaping women's lives and thoughts in Bengal. In the nineteenth century, a few women, like Kadambini Ganguly and Kamini Ray (b. 1864), had taken up paid jobs and a handful had worked as teachers for zenana education. In the early twentieth century, indigent women, especially widows, were advised to work, but from within the home. Krishnabhabini Das wrote a series of articles detailing paying jobs that could be performed at home, while Hemantakumari Chaudhury urged needy middle-class women to take up nursing.[36]

[35] 'Jibansmriti', in *Rabindra Rachanavali,* vol. X, Govt of West Bengal, 1368 BS, pp. 9, 15.

[36] See Krishnabhabini Das's articles entitled 'Striloker Kaj ´(Women's Work) in *Bamabodhini Patrika,* 1911 and Hemantakumari's piece on nursing in the journal *Antahpur*, August 1900.

Though written by women, these were echoes of men's voices. Only one woman dared to sing a different tune; as early as 1905, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (b.1880)[37] demanded the right to work for women:

> Why should we not have access to gainful employment? What do we lack? Are we not able-bodied, and endowed with intelligence? In fact, why should we not employ the labour and energy that we expend on domestic chores in our husbands' homes to run our own enterprises?[38]

Sarala made an attempt to chart a course different from that of other members of her family. She took up a paid job in Maharani School in Mysore, to get a feel of gainful employment, and to earn a living. However, she soon gave it up. It is believed that the reason for this was a threat of molestation;[39] *Jharapata is* silent on the point. However, we get a glimpse of the social attitude towards women's work outside the home from Chitra Deb's well-researched volume *Antahpurer Atmakatha* (An Autobiography of the Women's Quarter). She cites the sharp criticism of Sarala's attempt at paid employment by contemporary press. The magazine *Bangabasi* asked:

> What was the need for women from such families to travel alone to distant places to take up a job? Surely they are not wanting in food and comforts. Why create problems for one self?[40]

Sarala was content only to experiment. She did not exhibit any concern—as Rokeya of her generation did or the *Kallol*[41] group of

[37] Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, a brilliant author, thinker and educationist, was born in Rangpur, now in Bangladesh. Denied formal education by her father, she was taught by her brother secretly during the night. She wrote a number of articles and books, sharply criticized Muslim men for keeping women subservient, and at once scolded women for ignorance and inspired them to be educated. She founded a school in Calcutta which still survives and has grown. She is an inspiration to the women's movement in present day Bangladesh as well as in India. For details, see Bharati Ray, *Early Feminists of Colonial India: Sarala Devi Chaudhurani and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain,* New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2002.

[38] Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, 'Strijatir Abanati' reprinted in Abdul Qadir, ed. *Begum Rokeya Rachanavali*, Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1993, p. 21.

[39] Sunil Ganguly hints at this in his popular novel *Pratham Alo*.

[40] See Chitra Deb, *Antahpurer Atmakatha*, Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, 1984, p. 165.

[41] It was a journal that represented the 'new thinking' in Bengal. Gokul Nag, Buddhadeb Bose, Premendra Kumar Mitra, Achintya Sen Gupta, and a few other courageous authors belonged to the *avant garde*.

women began to articulate from the 1930s—for establishing women's right to gainful employment. However, in an essay published in the journal *Bharati*, Sarala justified her endeavour:

> To know oneself one must be away from the cloying atmosphere of one's home. I came to realize this when I was away and living on my own in Mysore. ... No longer am I restless like a caged bird, for I have seen the outside world and come to understand myself.[42]

Can this be taken as foreshadowing the desire of the next generation of educated women?

WOMEN'S LITERARY ACTIVITIES

Unlike paid employment outside the home, there was no frowning on women's engagement with literary activities. Writing was a gentlewomanly occupation; one could write at home; and it was not difficult to attend to domestic duties even for a serious author. For women of the time the opportunity to write and publish was of great import. First, it fulfilled their creative urge and, in the process, gave them public recognition. Second, most women's writings were read by women. Women wrote for women and shared ideas with women. Third, literature is a genre of communication which permits littérateurs to articulate ideas which one cannot express, or translate into action in real life. It offers, therefore, a hot bed for planting and germinating new, even radical, thoughts.

Of the women authors during the era, the most notable were Swarnakumari Devi—the earliest successful woman author—and Sarala Devi, her daughter. Saratkumari Chaudhurani (b. 1864)—better known as Lahorini—Krishnabhamini Das (b. 1864), who travelled to England in an unusual venture those days; Anurupa Devi (b. 1882) who became famous as the Queen of Literature and Nirupama Devi (b. 1883), a writer of great charm. Then there were women poets: Kamini Ray and Priyambada Devi (b. 1871), Girindramohini Dasi (b. 1858) and Mankumari Bose (b. 1861). Sailabala Ghosejaya (b. 1893) and Ambujasundari Dasgupta (b. 1870) were the other notable writers. They mostly published novels, essays and poems.

It is interesting to ask at this point: what did the first generation of women write about? Obviously, they all came from the middle

[42] Sarala Devi, 'Janmaswar', in *Bharati, Jaishtha*, 1323 *BS,* 1916 CE.

class, and the majority of them, at the receiving end of male patronage, internalized male concepts of womanhood and echoed male views, emphasizing the nurturing role of women and the basic differences between men's and women's roles. Their writings declared almost unanimously that women should be able to read and write, learn household skills, aspire to become competent housewives and good mothers and be patient and self-sacrificing. Most of the compositions by reputed female authors such as Anurupa Devi and Nirupama Devi put across the presiding point of view and cast women in sexually defined roles. Anurupa's novel *Ma,* a bestseller, was a celebration of motherhood, and Nirupama's popular work, *Annapurna's Mandir* lauded self-sacrifice. Perhaps because they wielded powerful pens and also because they were proponents of the predominant philosophy that their works gained wide acclaim. However, some resistant voices appeared, at the end of the nineteenth century and gained stronger force in the twentieth.[43] A few women started asking questions challenging the male-oriented values. Sailabala was one of them, as was Kamini Ray.

Muslim women had also taken up the pen. Eclipsing others by far was Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, who published the collection of outstanding articles, *Motichoor,* in 1904 and the widely read *Sultana's Dream* in 1908. Her novel *Padmarag* (1924) is an excellent piece of literature that describes her ideas and idylls. Nawab Faizunnessa Chaudhurani (b. 1847), who began to write even before Rokeya, published *Rupjalal*, partly written in prose and partly in verse, in 1876. Azizunnessa, Khairunnessa (b. 1870) and Shamsunahar Mahmud (b. 1908) were the other known names. Shamsunahar's *Rokeya Jiboni* (Life of Rokeya) was perhaps her best work.

Another category of literature, women's journals edited by women, came on the scene 1900 onwards.[44] *Antahpur* (1898) edited by Banalata Devi (b. 1880)*, Bharatamahila* (1905), edited by Sarajubala Dutta, *Suprabhat* (1907*)* edited by Kumudini Mitra (b. 1882)*,* followed one another in quick succession. In these journals, ordinary housewives, or first generation women learners, expressed themselves. Only occasionally well-known writers, such as Mankumari Basu, Swarnaprabha Basu, Krishnabhabini Das, and Shailabala Ghoshjaya

[43] To hear some of them, see Bharati Ray, 'Introduction' in *Naari O Parivar*.

[44] In the nineteenth century a few journals, edited by men, and targeting female readers, were published in Bengal, the most important of these being *Bamabodhini Patrika*.