

AN ANALYSIS OF *THE SCATTERED LEAVES OF MY LIFE: AN INDIAN NATIONALIST REMEMBERS* BY SARALADEBI CHAUDHURANI

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyse Saraladebi Chaudhurani's autobiography *The Scattered Leaves of My Life: An Indian Nationalist Remembers (Jibaner Jharapata)*. Saraladebi's autobiography provides an insight into the contemporary education system, condition of women and their education, prevalent system of marriage, social and cultural trends and the concept and form of nationalism in Bengal. It provides a view of the large affluent family of Bengal, the Tagores and Saraladebi's life being a part of it. It studies how Saraladebi transforms into a strong, rebellious and independent woman and how she tried to arouse Nationalism in Bengal.

Keywords: Saraladebi, Bengal, Tagores, Jibaner.

The Scattered Leaves of My Life: An Indian Nationalist Remembers (Jibaner Jharapata) is an enthralling piece of work composed by Saraladebi Chaudhurani, the first woman nationalist of India. Saraladebi was born at her mother's house, one of the renowned Tagore branch at Jorasanko. The Bengal, in which Saraladebi was born into and lived, was undergoing significant changes, especially in terms of elite relations with the British colonial presence and changing nature of cultural nationalism (Banerjee xvii).

Saraladebi's mother Swarnakumari was a well acclaimed writer and editor of the journal *Bharati* published by Tagores. She was the daughter of Debendranath Tagore and the elder sister of Rabindranath Tagore. As Bharati Ray also approaches, "Although married at an early age (1867), Swarnakumari was not illiterate at the time of marriage, as it was the custom in her family to impart education to the daughters primarily through the help of 'Vaishnavis', who were women belonging to the Vaisnava Hindu religious sect" (3). She was the president of

Theosophical society. Later she founded Sakhi Samiti for the betterment of women education and providing aid to helpless women in society.

Saraladebi's father, Janakinath Ghosal, who was the son of a landowning family in Krishnanagar, was a leader of the Indian National Congress. He was the man of principles who refused to live in his father-in-law's house as was custom in Tagore family at Jorasanko. Saraladebi's entire life was dedicated to political activities in Bengal. Bharati Ray also acknowledges in the introduction in *The Many Worlds of Sarala Devi: A Diary & the Tagores and Sartorial Style: A Photo Essay* written by Sukhendu Ray, that we come to Politics, which was the primary interest in Sarala's life and the central theme of *Jharapata* (19).

Saraladebi's autobiography provides an important account of Bengal's social and political history of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. It is a phenomenal work that provides an insight into the world that was under transition. The reform movement also known as Bengal renaissance was flourishing at its height. The book throws light on the social reforms, condition of women, education system, Bengali culture, Nationalism and contribution of Tagores, especially Tagore women, in shaping the politics of Bengal.

Almost all the Tagore women were well distinguished in one or the other field and set examples for women of the nation. Bharati Ray observes:

The women of the Tagore family proved to be the vanguards of women's 'progress' and education. Apart from Swarnakumari Devi, who has already been mentioned, there was a galaxy of brilliant women. Debendranath's wife, Sarala Devi, knew how to read and write, and was often found reading a book during her spare time. Their daughter, Saudamini Devi (1847-1920) was admitted at the age of five to Bethune School (founded in 1849), and was one of the earliest Bengali upper middle class girls to go to school. Swarnakumari Devi was, however, the most famous of Debendranath's daughters (5).

Tagores contributed immensely in women emancipation and set examples by providing education to their wives and daughters. Debendranath Tagore's daughter-in-law and Satyendranath's wife, Gyanadanandini, is regarded as the first modern woman of Tagore family.

She introduced new dress styles in Tagore house. She taught a new way of wearing saree, to the women of Tagore house at Jorasanko. This solved a big problem of women of elite families of dressing for public appearances.

Saraladebi always longed for her parent's attention, love and care which was what every child wants. Saraladebi says that Neglect and strict discipline rather than parental warmth or affection marked her upbringing (Banerjee 7). She writes:

After we were born, we had no relationship with our mother. She seemed like a distant royal figure, who at times kindly allows us to come near her. Ayahs and maids brought us up. We never knew a mother's caresses. She never hugged or

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kissed us. Her sisters were all like this. We were told that they had inherited this detached 'patrician' behaviour from their own mother. Their brothers' wives, though, all of whom tended to come from less aristocratic families, along with their 'plebian' ways brought warmth and affection into the Tagore household (Banerjee 5).

Saraladebi's autobiography focuses on the liberty of women. There were certain domains in which women couldn't enjoy equal liberty as men. Women were prohibited to learn music. No women used to sing except for Tagore women who sung only on Maghotsav and that too in a sombre and dignified manner.

Saraladebi was very close to Rabindranath Tagore who was a great writer, painter, philosopher, musician and much more. It was Rabindrantah who encouraged Saraladebi to learn music and improve her skills. It is a lesser known fact that Rabindranath Tagore gave music to only the first two lines of the famous song *Bande Mataram* written by Bankimchandra chatterjee and rest was completed by Saraladebi.

It was very uncommon for women to do paid jobs outside their homes. When Saraladebi revolted and succeed in getting paid job far from her house, she was the object of criticism in everyone's viewpoint. She was attacked by an unknown person. This incident made her return home and she writes how everyone criticized her decision.

Unlike paid employments outside the home, there was no frowning on women's engagement with literary activities (Ray 15). Since women could write from home and it didn't affect their household work also, it was considered the noblest occupation for women. Furthermore it gained them name and fame.

Saraladebi found that there was a need to arouse nationalism and remove effeminacy in the heart of young Bengalis. She started an Akhara in the compound of her house. To inspire and to arose heroism she started celebrating the the days in the name of Bengali patriots who fought for freedom of india in the past. She started Birashtami Utsav, Pratapaditya Utsav and Udayaditya Utsav simultaneously. She tried to strengthen Hindu-Muslim unity.

Saraladebi captured a true account of Bengal during social and cultural reformation and provides a description of contemporary society from the point of view of a woman nationalist. Concluding, it's an amazing and valuable piece of work contributed to Bengali literature.

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