

Nationalist Women Poets in Colonial Bengal

Tapan Chattopadhyay

[Editorial Note: The author in this paper presents a narrative of patriotic, and nationalistic consciousness conceived by the women poets of colonial Bengal. D.A.]

Abstract: *Bengal from time immemorial has produced courageous and spontaneous female poets. The emergence of nationalistic consciousness in the post-1857 era has created an intellectual literati class in which women played crucial roles. The social consciousness evident from the writings of Birajmohini Dasi, Urmila Devi, Kamini Roy, Begum Rokeya or Sufia Kamal has created a progressive environment during the colonial period. The present paper seeks to revisit the contribution of such writers and explains how the poetic efforts of these colonial-era poets have enriched Bengali poetry in future.*

Keywords: *women poets, poetic expression of patriotism, rise of social consciousness, post-partition poetry.*

Past Heritage

The anti-British revolt of 1857 not only ignited and inspired India's future political aspirations and movements, it also strongly influenced the thinking of Bengal's women poets, who were incidentally sizeable in number unlike in other provinces and vied for attention with their male counterparts since the Middle Ages. Much before the colonial rule, the theme and treatment of their poetry were strangely bold, uninhibited, and original – more so, in fact, than the male poets. In this context one recalls the boldness of Padmavati, the spouse of the poet Jayadeva (c.1170–c.1245) of *Gitagovinda* fame

¹. Not only did she help her husband compose the famous couplet in *Gitagovinda* with her surreptitious addition: *Dehi padapallavamudaram*, but she saved the honour of their patron king, Lakhsman Sen of Nabadwip, by defeating the challenger-singer Buran Mishra in her husband's absence (Pragyanananda 1948: 58). Her prowess as an exponent of the ragas and poetry was well known to the celebrated maestro, Jalaluddin Tabrez (Pragyanananda 1948: 58).

Later too, the women poets of Bengal kept up this spirit of boldness and independence, undaunted by prevalent political and social considerations. The first acknowledged Bengali female poet, Rammani or Rami 'Rajakini' (first half of the fourteenth century), was herself a revolutionary in the sense that she had dared to openly express her love in her poems for the strikingly handsome Brahmin bard, Chandidas, son of Durgadas Bagchi of Nanoor in Birbhum, in spite of being a 'lowly-born' washer-woman, and had her love finally accepted

¹ According to Suniti Kumar Chatterji, *Gitagovinda* songs were originally written in Western Apabhhransa as written in the East or in Old Bengali. See his *The Origin and Development of the Bengali Language*, Volume One, Rupa & Co, Calcutta, 1985, pp. 125-126.

by the elite of the caste-ridden society. Even Chaitanya (1486-1534) was fond of Chandidas's poems which gave a stamp of approval to their poetry and love (Chakrabarti 2004: 20). Rami's daring was well rewarded when a number of ballads were written subsequently on her love for Chandidas.

Her cudgel was later taken by Chandravati (b. 1550), daughter of the poet Dwija Bansidas (sixteenth/ seventeenth century), of Patwari village in now Kishoreganj district of Bangladesh (Gupta 1930: 38). She attained so much eminence during her lifetime and afterwards that her poems became a household property in rural Bengali and were included in the famous *Mymensingha Gitika*, a collection of folk ballads of Mymensingh in East Bengal (now Bangladesh) in 1923². Even her Ramayanic renderings were bold and contained warnings against political and social oppressors. Two gifted poets of the succeeding period - Anandamayee (1752-1772) of Japsa, Dhaka, and Kaminisundari Devi (who wrote also under the pseudonym of 'Dwijatanaya') of Sibpur, Howrah - were her torch-bearers; the latter's play, *Urvashi* (1866), was the first of its kind in Bengali literature (Chakrabarti 2004: 32). Four years later, in April 1870, Mokshadayini Devi (b.1848), sister of Womesh Chunder Bonnerjee, the first president of the Indian National Congress, brought out from Kidderpore, Kolkata, the first women's magazine in Bengal, *Bangamahila*, (Chakrabarti 2004: 51) and heralded the new age of women's intellectual emancipation.

The revolt of 1857 was basically a reaction to the usurpation of the rights and privileges of the Indian upper classes by the British in a changed political power-equation. It was also an expression of fear and discontent of the Indians for the usurpers' reformist zeal for dispensing with traditional values and institutions. By the early 1850s, many British officials were nursing plans finally to abolish the Mughal court, and to impose not just British laws and technology on India, but also Christianity (Dalrymple 2006: 10).

Nationalist Consciousness

However, there was an inevitable backlash that found expression in Indian politics and poetry; more so in Bengal, which was culturally the most advanced during the relevant time. The euphoria of resentment for the withdrawal of various privileges by the British government led to the formation of a basically upper-class organization styled as the Indian Association of Bengal in 1876 under the leadership of a noted orator in English, Surendranath Banerjea (knighted in 1921). It held many meetings, sprouted many patriotic ideas, and captured the city's imagination, including that of the female folk. The

² *Maimansingha Gitika*, also known as *Mymensingh Gitika*, was edited by Dr. Dinesh Chandra Sen (1866-1939) and published by the University of Calcutta in 1923, along with another similar publication named *Purbabangagitika*. The folk ballads were collected from the region by Chandra Kumar De (1889-1946), a local enthusiast and a biographer of Chandravati's life, and Dinesh Chandra Sen, professor of the University of Calcutta. The ballads were published in English as *Eastern Bengal Ballads*. Needless to say, these ballads are important milestones of Bengali poetry.

organization sponsored the Indian National Conference (1883, 1885), which merged with the Indian National Congress when it was formed in 1885 (Chattopadhyay 2013: 317).

The initiative of forming the Congress was taken by an off-beat, retired British bureaucrat, Allan Octavian Hume (1829-1912), whose basic idea was to help the government by bringing the like-minded English-educated Indian gentry on a common platform to discuss Indian problems and ventilate their grievances for possible redress. The outfit was basically meant to be a safety-valve for the government, though it later turned otherwise in the hand of Indian patriots. Hume was greatly helped in forming and running this organization by his personal assistant, Janakinath Ghosal, deputy magistrate³.

Janakinath, a suburban zamindar, had other credentials. He was the son-in-law of Debendranath Tagore, Rabindranath's father. His wife, Swarnakumari Devi (1855-1932), was a self-taught scholar, a popular socialite among the city's elite women, and a nationally known poet. Her house was visited by the big personages of the day including Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, founder of the Theosophical Society (1875), Colonel Henry Steel Olcott, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Chittaranjan Das, the maharaja of Gwalior, and even the young Mohandas Gandhi.

A number of nationalist outfits came into being during this period including 'Sanjibani Sabha' and also 'Hindu Mela' inaugurated by Rajnarayan Bose (1826-1899). The political and cultural atmosphere was full of excitement and has been beautifully portrayed by Tagore in his memoir, *Jibansmriti* ('Life's Remembrances') (Tagore 1968: 77-82). Politics in those days was of course more talk than action; and Bengal's women did not lag behind in this, although they rarely ventured out in public, till Janakinath's daughter, Sarala Ghosal (1872-1945), Devi Chaudhurani, the stormy petrel of Bengal's politics and poetry, broke the barrier and came to the adverse notice of the government. Others also came forward to show their spirit in politics and evinced their revolutionary mettle in poetry and thus helped create a unique tradition for Bengal's later women poets.

Early Patriotic Expressions

The poet who first decidedly expressed her patriotic feelings in colonial Bengal is little known in the history of Bengali literature: Rakhmani Gupta, born perhaps in 1850, whose book of poem, *Kabitamala*, was published in 1865. The poet gave her identity as 'kono sadbangshiya kulabadhu'. Jogendranath Gupta has not even mentioned her in his book titled *Banger Mahila Kavi* ('Women Poets of Bengal'), first published in 1930.

Her poem *Bharatvarsher Bartaman Abastha* ('Present Condition of India'), which is included in the book, contains the following passionate lines: *'Ha ha mato punyabhumi*

³ Kanak Mukhopadhyay's article captioned 'Unabingsha Shatabdir Sanskritik Nabajagaran o Swanakumari Devi' in *Bangiya Nabajagaraner Agrapathik*, Paschimbanga Ganatantrik Lekhak Sangha, Kolkata District Committee, Kolkata, 2007, p. 377. This fact has been mentioned in Saraladevi Chaudhurani's autobiography *Jibaner Jharapata*, Dey's Publishing, Kolkata, 2009, pp. 190-191.

janani amar / Dekhiye tomar dasa kari hahakar/ Bartaman bhab tabo korite barnan/ Akulito hoy mon, jhare dunayan/ ... Ar ki purber moto pabe tumi maan ('O my mother, Sacred Land! My heart breaks seeing your plight. Tears fill my both eyes in describing your condition.....Will you get back your past honour ever?') (Chakrabarti 2004: 57)

The next woman poet who wrote patriotic poems was Swarnakumari Devi (1855-1932), mentioned earlier. She was the fourth daughter of Sarada and Debendranath Tagore and was Rabindranath's fourth eldest sister. From her daughter Sarala Devi Chaudhurani's account, it is known that she built a niche around herself in a portion of the Tagore house at Jorasanko and rarely mixed with other female inmates. Even her own children had little access to her (Chaudhurani 2009: 17). All through the day she busied herself with reading, writing, and editing the family periodical, *Bharati*, which was first edited by her eldest brother, Dwijendranath Tagore (1840-1926), in 1877 and put in her charge in 1884.

Swarnakumari edited *Bharati* with rare acumen till 1894, after which her daughters, Hiranmayee and Sarala, took over charge till 1897. Rabindranath too lent his hand to editing the magazine for a year in 1898 and then handed over the responsibility to Sarala who converted it into a nationalist journal and continued to edit it till 1907 before re-locating herself in the Punjab. Consequently, Swarnakumari had to take over its reins again (1908-1914). Since the beginning of her career as editor, Swarnakumari had created a literary group around this magazine known as the 'Bharati Gosthi', which was patronized by the contemporary women poets such as Prasannamayee Devi (1856-1939), Girindramohini Dasi (1858-1924), Nistarini Devi, Leelavati Devi and Amodini Ghosh (Chakrabarti 2004: 65). In this way she became the path-setter for the future literary groups like the 'Kollol' and the 'Krittibas'.

The *Bharati* combined analytical discussions on literature, science, geography, theory of knowledge, current affairs, local history and theatre, along with progressive political articles. When Sarala succeeded her mother for a time as its editor, the magazine became a vehicle of nationalist ideas. In 1889, Swarnakumari composed her famous nationalist song: '*Ek sutre ganthiachhi sahasra jiban / Jiban marane rabe shapath bandhan. / Bharat matar tare snapinu e pran, / sakkhi punya tarabari, sakkhi bhagaban. / Pran khule anandete gao jayagaan, / Sahay achhen dharma ar kare bhoy*' (Mukhopadhyay 2007: 376). ('We have kneaded thousand lives with one string / This bond of oath shall remain in life and in death. / We shall sacrifice this life for Mother India, / The witness to this shall be our sacred sword, and God. / So, rejoice and sing our victory to your heart's content, / Dharma is with us, so whom should we fear?').

Her song, written sixteen years earlier, echoes in Rabindranath's famous song '*Ek sutre ganthiachhi sahasrati mon*' ('We have kneaded hundred minds with one string') that was sung by thousands of people during the anti-partition movement in Bengal in 1905. Pratima Devi (1893-1969), wife of Rathindranath Tagore, has given a beautiful pen-picture of the excitement of those days in the Tagore household in her memoir, *Smritichitra* ('Memory-picture') (Devi 2007: 41-44). Apart from patriotic songs, Swarnakumari wrote a short

story, 'Mutiny', in the backdrop of the 1857 uprising that was published in *Bharati* in 1910 and then included in her collection of short stories titled *Malati o Galpogucchho* ('Malati and A Bunch of Other Tales') in the same year.

A year younger to Swarnakumari, Prasannamayee Devi (b 1857) also came from an enlightened family and cherished nationalist ideas. She belonged to the well-known zamindar family of Haripur village in Pabna district of now Bangladesh. Her father, Durgadas Chaudhuri, was a deputy magistrate (Chakrabarti 2004: 75). One of her brothers, Pramatha Chaudhuri (known more by his pseudonym 'Birbal'), became famous for his Bengali prose style and also as the husband of Indira Devi Chaudhurani, daughter of Satyendranath Tagore, first Indian ICS, and Jnanadanandini Devi, who devised the dressing style and sundry other styles for Bengali women along with Maharani Suniti Devi of Cooch Behar.

Prasannamayee became an important author in her time and her writings came to be published in other magazines of repute such as *Bharatvarsha*, *Manasi o Marmavani*, *Matrimandir*, and so on (Chakrabarti 2004: 76). Her first book of poems titled *Adha-Adha-Bhasini* ('Baby Talk') was published in 1870 by G.P. Ray & Co. Printers, containing only twelve pages. Her second publication, *Banalata* ('Wild Creeper'), published in 1880, made her an established poet. Many poems of Prasannamayee in this and other books contain strong nationalist fervour. Her autobiography, *Purba Katha* ('Past Account'), which was published by Subarnarekha, Kolkata, in 1917 is available now on internet, is useful for knowing about her times.

Her daughter was the famous novelist, Priyamvada Devi (1871-1935). So, it was really a close literary circle. The 1857 uprising had made a deep impression too on Prasannamayee. She wrote a historical novel, *Ashoka*, in its backdrop, apart from a robustly patriotic poem 'Veernari Lakshmi Bai' which was included in *Banalata*. A few lines of the poem are: '*Ranabeshe matta sati nachichhe samare re nachichhe samare / Bimukto kuntalbhar, / Mukhe shabda mar mar, / Tikhna tarabari oi shobhitechhe kare re, / Shobhitechhe kare! / Atulito rooprashi, / Sharater paurnamasi, / Rabi chhabi parakashi koritechhe ran re, / Koritechhe ran*' (Gupta 2013: 64) (The unblemished lady dressed as a warrior is dancing in battle / Her hair is blowing in the wind / Her battle cry is "Kill", "Devastate", / A sharp-edged sword is dazzling in her hand! / Her celestial beauty, like that of the full moon, / Is shedding light like the sun while engaged in battle'). In another poem in *Banalata* she wrote: '*Hai, sei to sakol, / Purbo gauraber sthal, / Ai to Bharatbhumi priyo nikan; / Ai sei punya sthan shobhar sadan*' ('Alas, these are the places of the past glory / These are India's dear abodes; / These are sacred places, abodes of beauty') (Chakrabarti 2004: 77).

The poet could feel the pain of an enslaved nation even in the flow of the river Jamuna (Gupta 2013: 65). In 'Jahnvi Saikate' ('On the Shore of the Ganges') included in her book of poems, *Niharika* (1883), she wrote: '*Diptiman saubhagyer se din otit/ Khunjile Jamuna prane/ Milibena bartamane, / Bharater itihas Aarjer gorima, / Bilupto smritir chhabi Janhavi-Jamuna./ Andhar saikat bhumi, bhagana shmashan, / Deepmala nirbapito, /*

Hahakare parinito / Snigdha samiran, shudhu akul krandane/ Pratidhvani teere teere jage ratridine' (Gupta 2013: 65) (The day of bright fortune is over/ In the soul of the Jamuna / One won't get now/ The history of India, the glory of the Aryans, / Only their memories are etched in the Ganges and the Jamuna./ The shore is dark, devastated, and desolate, / Lights are all gone, / Everywhere has become sorrowful / Only the cool breeze keeps vigil on the shores in relentless tears'). There was a stamp of the celebrated poet, Hemchandra Bandyopadhyay (1838-1903), on her patriotic poems.

In this context, mention may be made of Birajmohini Dasi (b.1858) whose personal particulars are still unknown. Perhaps she came from the plebeian background. Her book of poems titled *Kavitahar* ('Garland of Poems') was published in 1876 and contain twenty-three poems dedicated to her son. Her poems poignantly reflect the ills of the society: the condition of Bengali women (*Bangaramanir Duhkshavarnan*, 'Description of Sorrow of Bengali Women'), the plight of the widows (*Bidhabaganer Kleshvarnana*, 'Description of Distress of Widows'), life of sorrow (*Timirachchhanna Rajani*, 'Night Enveloped in Darkness') etc. Her poems cannot be said to be of high merit, but they deserve mention for reflecting social awareness and patriotic élan.

Her poem titled *Bharater Prati* ('To India'), which is included in *Kavitahar*, has expressed her patriotic sentiments: 'O Ma! Ratnagarve! Bharat-janani / Veer prasabini swarup kao-o. / Prabhat-shashangka samo prabhaheena, / Hoiya ekhon keno ma rao-o./.....Tanr priyo karjo sadhite jatane, / Shikhao tomar santangane. / Tabe pade pade taribe bipade / Pabe swadhinata harano dhane' (Chakrabarti 2004: 82) (O, Mother India! Womb of Jewels! / Who have given birth to the brave, express yourself / Why do you remain now / Lusterless like the moon at morn? / To achieve God's dear work with care / Teach your children / Only then they can overcome danger at every step / Then only will they get back independence, their lost treasure.)

Post-Partition Poetry

A number of poets enriched Bengali poetry after Birajmohini, but they did not write patriotic poems. Among them were Michael Madhusudan Dutt's niece, Mankumari Basu (1863-1943), of *Rat din Jhamjham*, *Ratdin tuptup* fame, Binodini Dasi (1863-1941), Niradmohini Devi (1864-1954) and Suniti Devi (1864-1932). The anti-partition movement created an unprecedented wave of resentment and anger against the British not only in Bengal but all over India, but strangely no one among them gave expression to the nationalist sentiments before Kamini Roy (1864-1933) of Barisal, East Bengal (now Bangladesh). She is one of the greatest poets of Bengali literature and her poems are now part of the school syllabus in both West Bengal and Bangladesh. Incidentally she was the first to use her surname among the women Bengali poets.

Kamini Roy's father, Chandicharan Sen, a leading Brahmo, was a sub-judge and an author of historical novels. Her husband, Kedarnath Roy, was a statutory civilian officer of the British government. He was an admirer of his wife's poetry before marriage and so gave her unstinted cooperation in her creative work. Roy was indeed an avant-garde feminist

activist. In her essay captioned *The Fruit of the Tree of Knowledge*, she wrote: “The male desire to rule is the primary, if not the only, stumbling block to women’s enlightenment....They are extremely suspicious of women’s emancipation. Why? The same old fear – ‘Lest they become like us’⁴.”

In 1921, she was one of the leaders, along with Kumudini Mitra (Basu) and Mrinalini Sen, of the Bangiya Nari Samaj, an organization founded to fight for women’s suffrage (The Bengal Legislative Council granted limited suffrage to women in 1925). In 1922-1923, she was a member of the Female Labour Enquiry Commission; and in 1932-1933, she became vice-president of the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad (Sen Gupta and Basu 1976: 75).

India’s subjugation to an alien country pained her immensely. Her anguish found poignant expression in her poem *Matripuja* (‘Worship of Mother’). The poem contains these memorable lines: ‘*Jeidin o charane dali dinu e jiban, / Hasi ashru seidin koriachhi bisarjan. / Hasibar kandibar abasar nahi ar, / Dukhini Janam bhumi,- Ma amar, Ma amar./.....Moribo tomari kaje, banchibo tomari tare, / Nahile bishadmoy e jiban keba dhare? / Jatadin na ghuchibe tomar kalanka-bhar, / Thak pran, jak pran,- Ma amar, Ma amar*’ (‘The day I gifted my life at your feet / I gave up my laughter and my tears. / I have no time now for laughter and tears, / My Motherland is distressed, my Mother is chagrined. /..... I shall die for your work, I shall live only for you, / Why else should I hold this sad life? / So long the burden of your shame is not removed, / I shall not care whether I live or die, o my Mother!’).

Many of her poetic lines like ‘*Sakoler tare sakale amra, / Protyeke amra parer tare*’ (‘We are all for us, ourselves/ Everyone is for everyone else’), ‘*Parer karone swartha diya bali / E jiban mon sakali dao, / Tar moto sukh kothao ki achhe? / Apanar katha bhuliya jao*’ (‘Sacrificing your self-interest for others’ cause / Give up everything, your this life and your soul, / Is there any happiness comparable to this sacrifice? / Forget about yourself’) and ‘*Pachhe loke kichhu bale*’ (‘Lest people should say something’), etc. have become part of everyday vocabulary. It can indeed be said that no other poet in Bengal, whether male or female, has exhibited patriotic sentiments in poetry so forcefully and so touchingly like Kamini Roy. Bengal’s revolutionaries and other freedom-fighters were inspired by her poems.

When Kamini Roy was in her prime, Binoykumari Dhar (b. 1872), eldest sister of Manmohan Ghosh, regularly contributed poems to the magazines like *Sahitya*, *Dasi*, *Bharati* and *Pradip*. She wrote a patriotic poem ‘Bharat Vandana’ (‘Hymn to India’) in *Purbachal* edited by the poet Jatindramohan Bagchi on 15 August 1947 (Gupta 2013: 157) when India was conferred the dominion status, prior to attaining independence. However,

⁴ This essay has been included in *Talking of Power – Early Writings of Bengali Women from the Mid-Nineteenth Century to the Beginning of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Malini Bhattacharya and Abhijit Sen, Bhatkal & Sen, Kolkata, 2003.

the most celebrated female activist of the day who was born in the same year and wrote revolutionary poems, among other things, was Sarala Devi Ghosal, already mentioned. In 1904, she opened an academy of physical culture at Ballygunge, Kolkata, with the direct political object of training up the youth for fighting for freedom for the first time in Bengal⁵.

A New Thrust

The Bengali patriotic poetry got a new thrust and direction after Sarala Devi took charge of editing *Bharati*. Apart from being an aggressive go-getter and organizer, she was a gifted musician and helped Tagore in composing music for the national anthem, *Bande Mataram*. (Chaudhurani 2009: 40) At 29, she conducted the orchestra having 58 singers for the opening song composed by her at the Calcutta Congress session in 1901, which was attended by Gandhi (Gandhi 2007: 214). In fact, she used *Bande Mataram* as a political slogan for the first time during a procession taken out by the Suhrid Samiti in Mymensingh, East Bengal, in 1904 (Chaudhurani 2009: 53). The training syllabus of her academy was later discovered by the police among the documents of the Dacca Anushilan Samiti⁶.

The revolutionary leaders like Jatindranath Banerjee, Chittaranjan Das and Bal Gangadhar Tilak maintained contact with her, as did Swami Vivekananda and Sister Nivedita, who wanted her to completely devote herself to educating and uplifting Indian women (Chaudhurani 2009: 149-50). Sarala was reported to have protected the dreaded revolutionary, Amritlal Hazra, alias Sasanka, of the Rajabazar bomb conspiracy (1913) fame on one occasion. Her activities were closely monitored by the Intelligence Branch, Bengal. Subsequently she came close to Gandhi (who once thought of having ‘spiritual marriage’ with her) (Gandhi 2007:215), and gave up her revolutionary urges. However, she was a nationalist all through her life.

Sarala’s poems are not small in number; but they are scattered in different magazines and have not been compiled in a book, although she has prose works such as *Nababarsheer Swapna*, *Shivratri Pujo* and *Jibaner Jharapata*. Some of her poems are of high merit. In *Ahitagnika* (‘Purified by Celestial Fire’) she has expressed dilemma of a woman who has decided to sacrifice her life for her country. The first stanza of the poem is like this: “*Sarbadev sakhkhi kori e ki broto korile grahan! / Path je durgam, e karan? / Sutibra dibas ar sudirgha sharbari, / Aprakampya chitte sarba bhoy parihari, / Paribe ki jete? Tumi biklabbachana! / Ashruabilochana!*” (Chakrabarti 2004: 145) (‘With all the gods as

⁵ F.C. Daly, Deputy Inspector General, SD, Bengal, *Note on the Growth of the Revolutionary Movement in Bengal*, dated 7 August 1911, reproduced in *Terrorism in Bengal – A Collection of Documents on Terrorist Activities from 1905 to 1939*, Volume I, ed. Amiya K. Samanta, Government of West Bengal, Calcutta, 1995, p. 8. Also see *Militant Nationalism in India 1876-1947*, ed. Amitabha Mukherjee, Institute of Historical Studies, Calcutta, 1995, p. 68.

⁶ F.C. Daly, Deputy Inspector General, SD, Bengal, *Note on the Growth of the Revolutionary Movement in Bengal*, dated 7 August 1911, reproduced in *Terrorism in Bengal – A Collection of Documents on Terrorist Activities from 1905 to 1939*, Volume I, p. 7.

witnesses, what a vow have you taken! / The path is so difficult to traverse, why did you do so? / The day will be so scorching and the night so long, / With un-trembling heart, forsaking all fear / Will you be able to go on? So incoherent you are/ So full of tears!). A number of her songs such as *Hey Sundar Basanta Barek Phirao* ('O, Beautiful Spring! Give Back For A While'), *Otit Gaurav Kahini Mamo Vani* ('Past Tale of Glory is My Message') and *Bandi Tomay Bharat-Janani* ('I Worship Thee Mother India') etc. express her patriotic fervour.

In this connection, mention may be made of Suramasundari Ghosh (b.1873), daughter of Umesh Chandra Bose, of Malkhannagar, Dhaka, and wife of Nishikanta Ghosh, a reputed lawyer and a minor poet. Her books of poem – *Sangini* (1901) and *Ranjini* (1902) – drew some notice in those days. Her *Banga-Janani* ('Mother Bengal') is a patriotic poem. Another poet who deserves mention is Mrinalini Sen of Bhagalpur, Bihar, who had her second marriage with Nirmal Chandra Sen, second son of Keshab Chandra Sen. Her career is interesting in the sense that she wrote a number of articles against Catherine Mayo's *Mother India* and acquainted Mohandas Gandhi with the intricacies of the Bengali language during his stay in London. Her books of verse – *Pratiddhani* (1894), *Nirjharini* (1895), *Kollolini*, and *Monoveena* (1899) – contain her deep love for her motherland. Among Indian women, she was the first to undertake a solo flight and became a member of the Indian Institute of Aeronautics and Electronics (1955).

Like many of the above poets, Kusumkumari Das (1882-1948), is almost unknown today, although two lines of her poem *Adarsha Chele: Amader deshe habe sei chele kabe, / Kathay na baro hoye Kaje baro habe* ('When will there be such a son in our land, / Who will be big in achievement rather than in talk') are often recited by the Bengali-speaking people. The last four lines of the poem are also well known: *Krishaker shishu kimba rajar kumar / Sabari royechhe kaj e biswa majhar, / Haate prane khato sabe shakti karo dan. / Tomra manush hole desher kalyan.*" (Whether the son of a peasant or that of a king / Everyone has work to do on earth, / Toil you all with hand and heart, contribute your strength. / If you become worthy human beings, it will help the country'). Kusumkumari had another credential: she was the mother of the poet Jibanananda Das.

Another poet, Urmila Devi (1883-1956), who published a collection of poems, *Pushpahaar* ('Garland of Flowers'), took part in the Civil Disobedience Movement in 1921, founded the women's social organization 'Nari Karmamandir' and wrote short biographies of Sarojini Naidu and Gandhi. A short-lived poet, Pankajini Basu (1884-1900), who lived only for about seventeen years, wrote a few inspiring patriotic poems. Her poems, some of which were translated in English by the celebrated polyglot and litterateur, Harinath De, contained jibes against pseudo-patriots, as in the present poem: *Lamphajhampa, hankahanki, / Deshoddhare dakadaki / Sabhay koriya, dhoke Shrigal-guhay! / Bangalir chele tora ke dekhibi aay!* (Chakrabarti 2004: 193) ('Leaping and jumping, yelling and shouting / Exhorting people to come forward and free the country/ In an open meeting, the

Jackal comes back to the den of his home! / O, you Bengali boys! come here and see him now.’).

At quite another level, a woman activist of very great ability defied her conservative socio-religious milieu and made a mark not only as reformer but also as an author of poetry and prose in both Bengali and English. Rokeya Khatun (1880-1932) of Pairaband village, Rangpur, East Bengal (now Bangladesh), who is commonly known as Begum Rokeya but wrote under the name of ‘Mrs. R.S. Hossain’, is widely regarded as the pioneer of women’s liberation in South Asia⁷. Rokeya wrote a number of books such as *Matichur*, *Padmaraag*, *Sultaner Swapna*, *Abarodh-kahini* and so on and contributed articles, stories, and poems to various magazines (Gupta 2013: 276). While she wrote her prose works always with a purpose, in poetry she expressed her inner soul, including her love for her country, although strangely she did not publish any book of poems, just like Sarala Devi. Some of her patriotic and lyrical poems are still very readable and touching.

Rokeya Hossain founded the Anjuman-e-Khwateen-e-Islam (Islamic Women’s Association) in 1916 to fight for education and upliftment of Muslim women. Earlier, in 1911, she had established the Sakhawat Memorial Girls’ High School in Kolkata. In recognition of her contributions in the field of female education and social justice, the Bangladesh Government observes ‘Rokeya Day’ every year on her death anniversary on 9 December and confers ‘Begum Rokeya Padak’ on individual women for their exceptional achievement.

Later Poets

In contrast, Leela Devi (1894-1943), daughter of Ranendramohan Tagore, is entirely lyrical. She was married to the artist Aryakumar Chaudhuri, son of Sir Ashtosh Chaudhuri, and published only one book of poems titled *Kishalaya* (‘New Leaves’) in 1921 that contains three types of writing - introspective, devotional, and patriotic (Gupta 2013: 288). On the other hand, Jyotirmayee Devi (1894-1988) wielded her pen like a sword and was seriously engaged in writing all her life. The collection of her works has recently been published in five volumes. Her father, Abinash Chandra Sen, was dewan of Jaipur. She was married to Kiran Chandra Sen of Guptiara, Hooghly, but lost her husband at the age of twenty-five and came back to live with her parents. She wrote a number of books in prose. Her book of poems titled *Chakrabal* (‘Horizon’) contains her burning love for freedom. Poems like *Hawai* (‘Wind-Borne’) and *Mukhosher Dam* (‘Value of Mask’) unmask leaders who masquerade as patriots.

The poet of *Ghasphul* (‘Flower of Grass’), a collection of poems published (1989) at the fag-end of her life, Bina Dey (1906-1999), daughter of Gagan Chandra Roy and Mandakini

⁷ <https://theprint.in/features/rokeya-sakhawat-hossain-a-pioneer-of-womens-education-who-strove-for-a-feminist-utopia/561895/>

Roy of the family of Raja Rammohan Roy ⁸, made her presence felt as an activist-poet quite early in life. Her long poem *Aahvan* ('Call'), written on the occasion of Gandhi's Salt Movement (1930), was distributed to the students' hostels in Kolkata and created a deep impact. Lines 36-41 of the poem deserve a quote: '*Esho bhai dale dale / Shashoner jantro bhagna kori / Chhinna kori dasatva shrinkhale. / Karo pusta, karo drira / Rhriddha karo jatiyo bahini. / Hey tarun muktir senani!*' (Chakrabarti 2004: 248) (Come, brothers, in hordes / Breaking the machine of control / Tearing away the shackles of slavery. / Fill in the ranks, make them strong / Enrich our national army').

Her poem, *Bandi Bandhur Prati* ('To My Friend in Prison'), written on the occasion of the arrest of her friend Bina Das (1911-1986) for attempting to assassinate Stanley Jackson, the then governor of Bengal, expresses her deep commitment to the national struggle. Lines 13-16 of the poem are: '*Dukkhkho mithya, mithya kanna / Mithya hahakar. / Satya shudhu – manusher chira-abhisar / Ananto alor pane. / Jibaner muktipathe*' (Chakrabarti 2004: 247-48) ('Sorrowing is futile, futile is shedding tears/ Futile is desolation. / True alone is man's desire for striving / To move towards endless light. / To be on the path of freedom'). Her poem *Pataka Bandana* ('Worship of National Flag') written on 15 August 1947 was probably published in the *Ananda Bazar Patrika* (Dey 2012: 290). Bina was married to Sharadindu Chattopadhyay of the Maluti zamindar family in Birbhum at the age of twelve. Her husband was a well-known Congress leader and died of cholera while engaged in social work when Bina was only sixteen. Much later she married the famous artist Mukul Dey and settled in Santiniketan. Bina's younger sister, Baruna (1909-2007), wife of Phanindranath Chattopadhyay of Pindira (later, Guptipara), who has been mentioned in her memoir *Hariye Jawa Din* ('Days That Are No More'), also wrote patriotic poetry. Another poet who can be mentioned in this context is Rajlakhsmi Devi, who lived outside Bengal. Her patriotic poem titled *Mahasadhak* (1945/1946) was published in the literary weekly, *Desh* (Chakrabarti 2004: 267)

A poet of different range and verve of the period was Sufia Kamal (1911-1999), who was born to a zamindar family of Shaestabad in Barisal district of now Bangladesh. Though brought up in a conservative milieu, she became a multi-lingual person, knowing Bengali, Hindi, English, Urdu, Arabic, Kurdish and Persian. In 1918 she came in contact with Begum Rokeya in Kolkata and was deeply influenced by her. In 1925 she met Gandhi, took to wearing simple khadi dress, and became a member of 'Matri Mangal', an organization dedicated to women's welfare. She published a short story on the life of a soldier's wife titled *Sainik Badhu*. She edited *Sultana*, the first women's weekly in erstwhile East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, along with Jahanara Arzoo, apart from the women's weekly, *Begum*, with Noorjahan Begum (Chakrabarti 2004: 251).

⁸ The biographical note on Bina Dey in *Samsad Bangali Charitabhidhan* (Samsad Dictionary of Bengali Personalities), Volume II, ed. Anjali Basu, Sahitya Samsad, Kolkata, 2004, p. 230. See also Bina Dey's autobiography, *Hariye Jawa Din* ('Days That Are No More'), ed. Anjali Bandyopadhyay, Papyrus, Kolkata, 2012, pp. 250-251.

Her first poem, *Basanti* ('Vernal'), was written in 1926. Since then, she published a dozen volumes of poetry. As a revolutionary poet she drew attention after the publication of *Sanjher Maya* ('The Eventide Spell') in 1938 where she castigated the wrongs committed by European imperialists in Africa. The poems were appreciated by Kazi Nazrul Islam and Rabindranath Tagore. Sufia Kamal was not an arm-chair poet and intellectual. During the communal holocaust in Kolkata in 1946, she set up a shelter for the riot victims at Lady Brabourne College. Again, she took part in the Bangladesh liberation movement in 1971; and two of her daughters joined the Mukti Bahini. Also, she set up the first hospital for the Bangladeshi freedom-fighters at Agartala in Tripura. For her patriotic fervour and literary merit, she is considered to be one of major poets of the Bengali language.

In summing up, it can be said that the poetic efforts of these colonial-era poets have enriched Bengali poetry. The women poets of today are so totally liberated in their thought and expression and their output is of such a high order - on par with that of their male and female counterparts anywhere in the globe - because of the poetic strivings of these elder poets. The social consciousness of Birajmohini Dasi, Urmila Devi, Kamini Roy, Begum Rokeya or Sufia Kamal and their ilk has found fruition in the present writings of poets like Sulekha Sanyal, Mahasweta Devi and Taslima Nasrin. Similarly have Bani Roy, Hena Haldar, Kabita Singha, Sadhana Mukhopadhyay, Manjulika Dash, Bijoya Mukhopadhyay, Nabanita Deb Sen and a host of other poets explored their inner self in such an intricate manner in delectable poetry on the foundations built by their illustrious ancestors.

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