

**REVISITING AND RELOCATING TAGORE'S ROLE AS
A BENGALI INTELLECTUAL IN THE CONTEXT OF
POSTCOLONIAL ARCHIVISATION**

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The question of the subaltern subject formation haunted the grand narrative of the Postcolonial archive, from the very beginning of the Postcolonial discourse. While discussing the genealogy of subaltern identity, in a recent interview, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak professed that subaltern could speak. But, what she meant in her seminal essay “Can the Subaltern Speak,” was that the elite class did not allow the subaltern to complete their speech act, which never really permitted subject formation of the concerned class. Hence, Subaltern was left far from being heard.¹ Texts such as *Thakurmar Jhuli* by Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, was a part of the grand project which aimed formation and preservation of Bengali and Nationalist identity. This figure of *Thakurmā*, can be equated with a Derridean Absence in the entire text, whose voice, speech act and private space were supplemented and violated by the Archons of newly formed Swadeshi Literature. In spite of being the stalwart figure of Modernity, Rabindranath Tagore could not entrust an “educated *Bhadramahilā* to perform the sacred task of retelling the *Rupkatha*. Although, Tagore emphatically praised Dakshinaranjan for engraving (or burying — the literal translation of the word *Putiyāchilēm*, which Tagore used) Grandmother’s spoken words to those of printed letters, “no scene of speaking” of *Thakurmā* could arise in the discursive domain.² The lacuna of her speech erupts and therefore, disrupts the semantics of the narrative with the untranslatable utterances such as “Haun Maun Khaun,” simultaneously also destabilizing the archeion of Bengali intellectuals. This article, by no means attempts to defame Tagore and his unmatched contribution, rather tries to analyse Tagore by his own standardization of “*Sthāna-kāla-pātrabīcāra*” to contextualise him, in order to point out the microscopic yet salient gaps in his own pioneering vision.

The construction of the ‘other’ necessitates the annihilation of subjectivity of the subaltern. The lacuna of the voice of the gendered subaltern or marginalized figure from the literary compendium left no space for the nationalists, except the deliberate misrecognition of *Thakurmā*. In order to fulfil the gigantic ambitious project of identifying the *Lōkāyata* (or *deśāja*) peripheral characters, nationalist writers required

much time to trace, the carefully constructed historiography of the Subaltern. They concurrently had to fasten the paradoxes of time-knot or *samaygranthi*, which left India dwelling with multiple centuries at the same time. To use Marx's terminology, the unresolved question, thus, so far deals with the problem of leaving out the 'stagism', before corresponding to universal suffrage and political modernity. By provincializing Europe and assimilating Western liberal concepts such as 'nation,' 'history,' 'civilization,' Indian elite intelligentsia aspired to proclaim the national heritage without even possessing sufficient recognitive relationship with the marginalized. To justify the need of significant depiction, the quest for recognition resulted into a hurried or sometimes completely fabricated romantic imaginary portrayal of the 'other.' One can, for once, view this as an evidence for the semantic and structural differences to those of the hastily constructed subaltern voices before and after the nationalist project of conjoining the dots of history had begun. To trace the genealogy of *thākurmā*, Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar could only refer to his personal nostalgic acquaintance with his grandmothers rather than employing a minute systematic investigation. Furthermore, even an invasion into the private space of the very human *thākurmā*, for this historical project of archivisation seems to be absent.

Bengali modernity tried to "assimilate modern thoughts and modern arts into her inner life without any loss of what she had long possessed" (Sarkar 348). Tagore, despite his enormously critical and radical endeavours, towards bringing equality in the truest sense, failed to acknowledge and appreciate newer ideas of anglicized feminism. Tagore held onto the very idea that, "Women are the oldest in human civilization" (R. Tagore, Kalantar 353) and "women belong to the bygone period" (R. Tagore, Kalantar 353) for a considerable amount of time. An instance of such event can be found in his vehement opposition of an essay by Krishnabhamini devi, titled 'Educated Women' in *Samayika sahitya samalocana*. It can be further elucidated by quoting a few lines from the aforementioned essay: "Nature has made a lady housewife with special duties and corresponding instincts" (R. Tagore, Sāmayika Sāhitya Samālōcanā 638) and "Earning money by entering man's work is not a woman's job" (R. Tagore, Sāmayika Sāhitya Samālōcanā 639).

The Poet confessed, "The large amount of irrationality that is found in women is not a sign of stupidity." Undoubtedly, when it comes to the question of rewriting the requisite cultural and philosophical history of India, Tagore trusted Khitimohan Sen. If we connect with the former sense of trust, although Tagore claimed to have ascertained the

responsibility of collecting and retelling the Tales of *thakurmā* to an educated lady, he couldn't entrust her entirely, unfortunately. According to Abanindranath Tagore, it was Mrinalini Devi, the poet's wife, as she "gathered many folk-fairy tales." Abanindranath writes, "Aunt used to write these down in an exercise book, in which there were many good fairytales. It was from that exercise book of hers from which my story *Kheerer Putul* was taken." (A. Tagore, Abanindra Rachanabali 21) History didn't account for his forgotten notebook as an archive, because it was not made part of any scholarly compendium for failing to flair erudite. Tagore, perhaps, simply failed to evade the episteme or hegemony of Bengali Modernity. Soudamini Devi, elder sister of our beloved poet, though not a prolific writer, as Swarnakumari Devi, could write decent prose and poetic pieces, as many of them got published in contemporary reputed periodicals such as *Tattvobodhini Patrika* and *Bamabodhini*. Soon after Maharshi Debendranath Tagore deceased, Soudamini wrote *Pritismriti*, in memoriam of her father, which has been subjected to as much critical examination and revision by none other than Tagore himself. As a result of which, the text lost its currency and finally, when it was published it bore the poet's name. This classical example of palimpsest definitely did not obtain much attention until recent feminist intervention.

Unequivocally, when it comes to the question of the archival task of cultural preservation, Tagore's contribution is among the most phenomenal. Tagore himself assembled and edited almost eighty one vernacular rhymes in different dialects. But, Tagore failed to attribute modernity and agency to the impoverished villagers, who remained as a part of his nostalgia vividly manifested in many contemporary essays, starting from Bhudeb Mukhopaddhay to Dakhsinaranjan Mitra Majumdar. Tagore writes in *Palligrāme*, "I started to contemplate about the ignorant, illiterate peasants, whom in theory I despise as unsophisticated barbarians, but in reality, embrace them as my own relatives" (R. Tagore, Panchabhut 43). With hindsight, borrowed from Gramsci's term, Tagore was indeed a 'permanent persuader' of Modernism, yet, he could not do away with his own reservations. This ongoing process of abstraction left permanent gaps in the field of recording multitudinous voices in the archive. Also, this essay must address the birth of the new reader, which was essentially male and urbanised in contemporary Bengal. Moreover, it is not very astonishing that the countless essays which were being written were only to evoke nationalist consciousness (or sentiment) in the mindset of these gentle and formally educated new readers (*shantipriyo shanto chele*). In the preface of *Loksahitya*, Tagore explains his purpose, "for the some time now, I have been trying to collect all the feminine folk-verses (*meyeli chora*) that

are commonly known in Bengali language as lullaby for boys (*chelebbulano*)” (R. Tagore, Loko Sahitya 6). In the foreword of another collection named *Meyeli brata* by Aghornath Chattopadhyay, Tagore corresponds,

By virtue of an affectionate inclination towards the *antahpur*—the nectar-vessel [*sudhābhāṅḍār*] of the society—I had decided to collect these legends, nurtured since the beginning of time in the gentle hearts and honeyed voices of our mothers, grandmothers, wives, daughters, and sisters. (Chattopadhyay ii)

As soon as he went on to elaborate the process of collecting these verses, we can witness a massive dearth of conversation (*Kathōpakathan*) with any *Antahpurabāsinī*, while collecting these verses. Tagore depends solely on his memory. “It is impossible for me to detach my childhood memory from the taste that I derive from these rhymes,” (R. Tagore, Loko Sahitya 6) and hesitated as he senses, “How will that affectionate, sweet and simple voice, emanate from a man's pen?” (R. Tagore, Loko Sahitya 9) Tagore worries, “all these ignorant house wives are being subjected to some kind of oppression when they compare these unpolished feminine verses with that of *Ātāghānt bāndhā sādhubhāsaṣā*, (structured pure form of chaste language) as if the bride of the house is being dragged to the altar and cross-examined” (R. Tagore, Loko Sahitya 10). The same praxis of *ghor* and *bābir* allegory pervaded through every documentation of the early twentieth-century Bengal.

The major axis of my theoretical interpretation is based on Derrida's notion of archive, which contradicts the Foucauldian conception scintillatingly. To Foucault, Archive is “the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events” (Foucault 129). Whereas, Derrida traces back the etymology of the word ‘Archive’ in his seminal book *Archive Fever*. To him,

‘Archive’ is not solely a discursive domain or a field of law, rather a place, a home (Greek word *arke* means domicile, address) where the interpretation and categorization of the knowledge supervene. “There where men and gods command, there where the authority, social order are exercised in this place from which order is given” (Derrida 9).

To supplement, the archons are the interpreters and they are responsible to account for/ testify the documents. To contextualize with Bengali Modernity, liability and authority of texts and documentation were strictly reserved with the exclusive Bengali Intelligentsia and the newly formed class referred with formal English education. In *Archive Fever*, Derrida discusses the “Archival Violence” which took place at the

home of the *Arkbons*, suffusing all the archives while structuring the ideology for the body politics. This essay, by no means, attempts to demean the mammoth role of Dinesh Chandra Sen, Keshav Chandra Sen or Rabindranath Tagore. It is rather an effort to measure the silences along the road, as Spivak says, “attempting to recover a (sexually) subaltern subject [...] lost in an Institutional textuality at the archaic origin” (Spivak 303). Despite all the endeavours which were made to educate the women of the society, literature and the historical documents of 19th Century fail to take account of and testify the female voices, independent of the male authority. “The Nationalist discourse we have heard so far is a discourse about women; women do not speak here” (Chatterjee 257). Among the innumerable examples, Rassundari Devi's autobiography *Amāra jīban*, the first Autobiography written by a woman in India and the first ever, in Bengali language, serves as an evidence to support my argument. Jyotirindranath Tagore wrote a “preface” for the second edition of Rassundari Devi's autobiography along with Dinesh Chandra Sen. She was praised for being an “ideal, pious and religious Indian lady,” whose work stood as an exemplary piece of art and reiterates the ideology of classical Hinduism, recounting how women eliminated their urges of material and physical longing. But on the contrary, the book stands as an account for a series of heart wrenching experiences which she endures through her lifetime. In her own words, she refers to herself as “the caged bird who has been denied freedom and liberation” (*Piñjarēte pākhibandī jālēbandī min*) (Rassundari Devi 21). Perhaps all the major figures of Bengal Renaissance, in one way or the other, have been involved in their exercise of silencing a gendered subaltern subject, knowingly or unknowingly. Tagore in the same manner, only paid attention to “how they spoke, and less frequently through accounts of what they said” (Visweswaran 90).

Tagore indeed made sincere attempt to reconstruct the consciousness of a defeated nation. In *Sāmañyika sāhitya samālōchanā*, while critiquing the role of Sahitya Parishad, poet writes, “its purpose should be deciphering the ancient scriptures and to interpret the meaning of the obsolete old words. One should also keep an eye on the collection of folklore, proverb, and Kabigāna of popular poets such as Haruthakur, Ram Basu” (Tagore, *Sāmañyika Sāhitya Samālōchanā* 656). Tagore understood the grave significance of the vernacular languages, dialects, rural practices and rituals, which were elemental in weaving the new cultural consciousness, which was predominantly composed and guarded by the agents of Bengali Intellectuals. However, the discursive paradigmatic shift in the domain of knowledge introduced the idea of judgement and comparison (*Bibēcanā* and *Tulanā*). A reasonable, new *Bhadralōk* or sophisticated man, capable of distinguishing between

imagination (*Kalpanā*) and rationality, declared these folktales as obsolete and uncivilized yet passionately used them to form the political rhetoric with much national and Bengali pride. Our present view and analogy of the Bengali intellectual class are not only erroneous but anachronistic too. Collectivity of the Bengali community and the identity was cleverly formed by gerrymandering and fragmented identities, at this certain point of historical juncture. Indisputably, nationalism did play a major role in this venture of collecting folk verses, since Grimms' fairy tales published in 1812, made it fashionable and popular to construct national identity around these narratives in Germany and Italy. Swadeshi Movement played a catalytic role in this literary movement of Bengal. In his introduction to *thākurmār Jhuli* (1907), Tagore cries, "Is there anything more Swadeshi than this *thākurmār jhuli*?" (Majumdar 6) The Poet laments, "But alas, in recent times, even this bag full of sweets has come already manufactured from the factories of Manchester. Nowadays, fairy tales from the west have become almost the sole recourse of our boys... But, where are our princesses, our magical speaking-bird" (Majumdar 6) Abanindranath not only wrote *Kbeerer Putul*, but also illustrated *Bengal Fairy Tales* by F. B. Bradley-Birtin in 1920. Following the lead of Tagore, who thought *Swadeshi Sahitya* would function as 'the live umbilical cord,' one can find series of such anthologies alike, which include Jogendranath Sarkar's *Princess Lass' Rhymes* (1899, 1902) and Mahesh Chunder Dutt's *Folklore in Bengal* (1893), Ram Satya Mukherjee's *Indian Folk Lore* (1904), Dinesh Chandra Sen's two crucial book *Folk literature of Bengal* (1920), and two noteworthy volumes of *The Legends of Bengal* (1930) by Charu Chandra Guha, an associate of Gandhi.

This essay, thus, so far tried to crack the integument of this project of modernization which, nonetheless, failed to bring justice to the question of dreadful "epistemic violence" done to the subaltern voices up to the contemporary times. Since, we are left with no vestiges of these private accounts, "the impossibility of fully recovering the experience of the enslaved and the emancipated" (Hartman 10) leaves us with no recourse of resuscitation but the idea of 'Critical Fabulation', a tool to 'narrate a certain impossibility' (Hartman and Wilderson 184). Bhuvanewari Devi, as in Spivak's seminal essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" chose to hang herself while she was on her menstruation to serve it as an answer to the noxious questions which were raised about her character. But her statement couldn't make any archival impact since, it runs "the risk of reinforcing the authority of these documents" even if we "try to use them for contrary purposes" (Hartman 10). So, the question Mitra Majumdar posed, "who took the painting brush? *lāl tuktuke sōnārhātē kēniyēbētuli*" (Majumdar 11), left us unanswered since Tagore revealed no name and little or no space was left for the *thākuramā*

to speak. It urges for more critical attention as Hartman questions “if it is no longer sufficient to expose the scandal, then how might it be possible to generate a different set of descriptions from this archive?” (Hartman 7)

Notes:

1. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “!EXCLUSIVA! Entrevista a Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (part 1).” YouTube. Uploaded by Uchile Indigena, 23 Nov. 2016. Youtube www.youtube.com/watch?v=L_OX2y4vuMs&t=49s
2. See Tagore's introduction to *Thākurmār Jhuli. Hirak Jayanti Sanskaran*, by Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar (Calcutta: Mitra & Ghosh, 1994), pp.10

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