

Difficult Subjects: Conceptualising the Politics of Women's Lifewritings

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Abstract: The paper seeks to enquire about a significant gap and absence in 19th and early 20th century literary history. While lifewritings as a genre was becoming increasingly popular among newly literate women, there is often a silence about the histories and life narratives of many recalcitrant, difficult subjects. Peculiarly and perhaps paradoxically, some of these subjects-often women- were well-known in their lifetime, but have later been relegated to anonymity and neglect.

This paper focuses on the autobiographical narrative of Sarala Debi Chaudhurani's (1872-1945) "Jibaner Jharapata," which could be translated to "Life's Scattered/ Fallen Leaves". As Rabindranath Tagore's niece, she aspired to India's freedom, and believed that the key to India's freedom and progress lay in developing a physical culture. She propounded the invention of traditions which propagated and put forward a culture of 'muscular nationalism'. In the course of her work, she came into conflict with Tagore whose ideas of nationalism were in stark contrast.

This paper glances at her ideological divide with Tagore, her interaction with Gandhi and wonders why her autobiography has been neglected for the better part of a century. Is it because her right wing views sat oddly with secular historians? Or is it because she was a difficult, recalcitrant subject whose story-and life narrative did not 'fit' in either with dominant trends in historiography or existing paradigms of women's autobiography?

Keywords: Women's Lifewritings, Jibaner Jharapata, Sarala Debi Chaudhurani, Sakhi Samiti

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Sarala Debi Chaudhurani was the daughter of Tagore's sister Swarnakumari Debi, a novelist and writer and J.N. Ghoshal who held important positions of the Congress party in the 1890s and in the first decade of the 20th century. Among the first beneficiaries of reformist activity that transformed Bengali and Indian women's lives of the upper and middle classes in the latter part of the 19th century, Sarala was academically bright and musically inclined. In her autobiography, she recounts the many musical notes that she shared with Tagore, and her many contributions to his music. Hardly a decade younger than Tagore, she was influenced by some of her uncles and aunts, as her formative years were spent in Jorashanko, the Tagore family house. Hungry for affection, she remembers any sign of affection that came her way. Some of her early memories are of the affection she received from unexpected quarters, for instance, her redoubtable and stubborn paternal grandfather. Of her mother, she recalls that she was handed over to a maid early in life, since her mother was preoccupied with her vocation of writing. She wistfully recalls the feeling of early neglect, brought on by a feeling of lack of nurture, as well as a feeling of being overlooked since she was the youngest child of her parents. However, growing up in the Tagore family house, she and her older siblings imbibed the rich cultural life of the Tagores. There are residual memories of several kinds, including memories of newly invented rituals like birthday parties (Chapter 8), instituted as a result of western influences. In her memoir, *Jibaner Jharapata*, (The Scattered Leaves of my Life) she remembers how the birthdays of her cousins, Suren and Bibi, the children of Satyendranath Tagore (India's first ICS officer and

the poet's second brother) and Gyanadanandini, his wife, were celebrated in a ritual popularized in the west and instituted by their mother in India, a practice that soon gained popularity among elite Indians.

Even as she recounts these early memories, including her younger sister's death after a fatal fall down a curving staircase, Sarala Debi's autobiography also traces her academic career. She studied at Bethune School and college (started around 1851 by John Drinkwater Bethune). She authored a book called 'Ahitagnika' for school students to generate awareness concerning the freedom struggle and launched an underground revolutionary group. Interested in Science much before it was included in the curriculum, she was the only woman student to study Science and Physics and had to be escorted by her brothers at the Science Association. She attended the classes of the noted physician Mahendralal Sarkar. Thereafter, she completed her graduation with Honours in English Literature at the age of 18 in 1890, becoming the highest scoring woman student to do so. For this achievement, she received the 'Padmini Swarnapadak', a gold medal awarded to the highest scoring student. At the age of 23, she stood fast in her decision to travel to Mysore to take up a job as an Assistant Superintendent of the Maharani Girls School. According to Uma Chakravarti, Sarala Debi's own description of her motives was a desire for independence, the desire "to escape and flee the cage or prison of home and establish her right to an independent livelihood." (Kumar, 1993:40)) Her attempt at independence was cut short rather suddenly by the invasion of her room by an intruder. As a result, Sarala was forced to capitulate to her mother's demand to return to the family home at Calcutta. In Calcutta she was not only involved with the cultural life of the city like many other members of the educated elite, but also extended the sphere of her writings to writing for 'Bharati', the women's journal run by her mother and later, her sister, Hiranmoyee Debi. She also devoted herself to her music and to musical composition. Some of her musical exchanges, adventures and improvisations with Tagore are detailed in her autobiography. Her most seminal contribution to music was her setting to music the latter stanzas of Bankim's 'Bande Mataram' (trans. 'Hail Mother/land) which became the national song. In the Benaras session of the Congress in 1905, Gokhale requested Sarala to sing the song .

Sarala also started extending her sphere of interests and activities in the first decade of the 20th century. She focused particularly on improving the condition of women and challenging several existing gender stereotypes after returning from Mysore. First and foremost, she espoused political views which were hardly in consonance –rather radically dissonant- with that of Tagore and others. She started helping her mother with the work of the 'Sakhi Samiti' and the 'Mahila Shilpamela's' (ladies crafts fairs) and taking over the running and editing of "Bharati." By the late 1890s, she was an active participant in the nationalist movement and had come under the influence of Aurobindo Ghosh, whose idea of revolutionary terrorism resonated with her, putting her at odds with many of her family members. Stirred by his polemic against constitutional paths to independence, she threw herself into the activity of mobilizing young

men to revolt against British imperialism.(Kumar,1993:40) She was obviously a believer in the agitprop values of rites and symbols: when her calls for a cohesive group resulted in the formation of “Antaranga Dal”, she made all the members pledge their devotion and willingness to sacrifice themselves for the cause of independence, by making them lay their hand on the map of India(ibid) Moreover, she tied a ‘rakhi’ around their wrists as a token of the vow.

A proud and self-respecting person, Sarala was probably conscious of the slur/aspersion of effeminacy that the British had cast on the Bengali character. She felt the humiliation and indignity too keenly to accept such descriptions and attributions quietly. Her belief in developing a physical culture and strengthening the national character made her invoke certain traditions , re-invent rituals in order to paint a glorious version of India’s past. In doing so, she encouraged celebrations of “Birashtami”(to celebrate martial prowess, bravery and courage)and invoked and revived the braveheart Pratapditya, a landlord with questionable antecedents since he was also a parricide(guilty of killing his father).In elevating such a figure to a status of a nationalist war-hero, she elicited mixed responses. In 1903, she added his name to a list of mythic and historical figures, starting a ‘Birashtami brata’(ritual vow)which coincided with the second day of the Durga Puja celebrations, at which a vow was taken to commemorate bygone heroes.

Her ideas, however, appealed to the imagination of youth groups who started to celebrate Birashtami festivals and ‘Pratapditya’bratas(ritual vows).In 1904, the Mymensingh Suhrid Samiti’ started to take the ritual vows in 1904. (Chaudhurani, p51) In 1905, Sarala Debi presided over this collective performance of nationalism and as the historian Sumit Sarkar points out, “an attempt was made for the first time to use the words ‘Bande mataram’as a national call”.(Sarkar,1973:470-1)

Sarala’s actions shocked the orthodox sections of Bengali society and she was criticized for her initiative which was seen as unbecoming of a respectable woman. An article in ‘Rangalay’ in September 1903 described her actions as being “unworthy of a Hindu woman.” It went on to contrast her unfavorably with the wives and mothers of heroes in Sanskrit texts, complaining that the modern girl could only be satisfied by playing the hero herself.(Kumar,1993:40) By all accounts, reformists also would have questioned her revivalist approach, since it would have been at odds with their reformist programmes and agendas.

She continued with her political activism by starting the Bharat Mahila Mahamandal(1909), in Lahore, after her marriage. She was particularly enthused/motivated by the concept of uplifting the nation through encouraging the growth of a physical culture. A statement that resonates with her is the idea of national character and she quotes lines from the ‘Educationist’ :

Physical weakness is a crime-against yourself and those who depend on you. Weaklings are despised and a weakling nation is doomed. The decline of ancient Greece and Rome which fell rapidly from the pinnacle of supreme civilization was due to physical neglect and abuse of the inflexible laws of nature. A physically weak nation is drained out mentally, its feet are on the downward path and it will end upon the scrap-heap if it does not act before it is too late." She also quotes a proverb which pronounces that the *"battles of England are fought and won in the fields of Eton"*. ((Chapter 18,129) Her interest in and involvement with the politics of the freedom movement which had intensified in the 1890s continued till the early 1930s and she threw herself into the task of political mobilization and encouraging the growth of a physical culture in Bengal and later in the Punjab, where her work focused on the upliftment of women. Right from her childhood Sarala demonstrates a proclivity towards revivalist Hinduism or 'Sanatan Dharma'. Revivalism was of course part of the discourse of nation-building, of subjectivity and identity-construction in late 19th century, as evidenced in the teachings of Ramakrishna Paramahansa, and Swami Vivekananda, and in the writings of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. This revivalism is both a response and reaction, a backlash, to Reformist movements like the Brahmo Samaj. Revivalism became, in one sense, the discursive other of reform and it is an ideological tension that informs Sarala Debi's autobiography.

Sarala Debi's autobiography conveys her resentment against the "modern" practice of outsourcing of all parenting and nurturing tasks to others. Her tone and stance in this context, is reminiscent of Bankim's nostalgic tone in 'Bongodorshon' in writings like "Prachina o Nobina(1874)." (The Traditional Woman versus the New Woman) In another work "Samya" he had seemingly adopted J.S. Mill's ideas about equality between men and women, but withdrew them. This ambivalence about the 'new'-or the modern woman finds expression in several novels as well as his other writings. In his essay "Prachina o Nobina", he favours the traditional woman who pays due respect to the household gods, respects her elders and cares for and nurtures everyone. The nobina or new woman, by contrast, is focused only on herself and her pleasures. Reading novels is her favourite pastime. Considering the popularity of Bankim's novels among women, some of these biases seem almost paradoxical, if not ironical.

Rabindranath Tagore, among others, strongly objected to Sarala's invoking of the figure of a parricide as a martial hero. Such a figure could act as a dangerous precedent since it would seem to encourage untrammelled and uncontrolled aggression and blur moral boundaries and ethical codes. This blunting of all moral and ethical codes and boundaries, the danger lurking in a militant and violent nationalism is represented by Tagore in his novel, *Ghare Baire (The Home and the World)* was written as a warning against extremism and militant nationalism. In the novel, the conflict between a rational civic and humanitarian nationalism which eschews violence is embodied by the idealized figure of Nikhil and the primordial reactionary chauvinistic version of nationalism which endorses violence by his 'friend', Sandip. Unscrupulous and self-serving, Sandip manages to dazzle his friend's impressionable wife,

Bimala, whose affection he then misuses to drive a wedge between the couple and then proceeds to extract money from her to fund his terrorist activities. In fact, Tagore's novel and his essays on 'Nationalism' could be viewed as his response, an extended debate and dialogue with an ideological viewpoint, diametrically different from his own, which was represented by his niece.

The increasing rift and estrangement between the two-Rabindranath and Sarala- might explain the wistfulness and occasionally melancholic and autumnal tone of *Jibaner Jharapata*, which stops short of discussing the second segment of Sarala Debi's life. Instead she ends the autobiography with her marriage in 1905, at the age of 33, with Rambhuj Datta Chaudhury, a politically active twice-widowed landlord from Punjab who was active in the Arya Samaj. This marriage too took place at her mother's behest and as a result, she acceded to her family's wishes, albeit reluctantly, after considerable persuasion. After her marriage, Sarala Debi moved to Lahore.

Section 2

The very opening description of Sarala Debi Chaudhurani's autobiography is premised on an idiom of loss, the loss of papers, of letters-and the effort backing it-in Punjab's political conflagration in 1919 and in the 1920s. At a time, when some of her acts of rebellion put her on the wrong side of British law and authority, her existence was conflict-ridden, to say the least. There is a point when she talks about how all her papers were burnt by a well-wisher in order to prevent them from falling into the hands of the authorities. This was done in her absence and without her permission or knowledge and although the intention was to 'save' her from jeopardy, the outcome was the destruction of her precious treasure-trove. These include her epistolary exchanges with Bankim, the Cambridge poet Manmohan Ghosh and others. Here, she likens her existence to that of a general whose every trace is obliterated once he has visited a place. He leaves a trail of fire. (Chapter 7, p51)

For an autobiography which is a record of a productive and well-lived life, such a note seems dissonant and out of place. The metaphor of loss appears in the text on several occasions: on the loss of her infant sister, on the loss of her independence during her stint at Mysore after an intruder breaks into her home and eventually the loss of independence when she agrees to a marriage to a twice-widowed, political leader called Rambhuj Dutta Chaudhuri. She however continued to lead a politically active life and it was in her house that Gandhi resided when he visited Lahore.

Jibaner Jharapata is not the only source of Sarala's life story, of course. Her presence in Rajmohan Gandhi's biography as Gandhi's "spiritual wife", because he saw in her a woman who possessed a combination of education and emotional strength. To Gandhi, she was a woman

whose love for the nation was equally strong although along different trajectories and followed different lines of development. His ideology eschewed violence, he would seem to embrace it or acknowledge it as necessary. Where the faintest agreement may have been there is in the belief in the importance of political action and mobilization. Actions and modes of agency might be different, but both of them presumably believed in the importance of individual views and viewpoints. A “merger with her might bring him closer to winning all of India to satyagraha” comments Rajmohan Gandhi in his definitive biography. (Gandhi, 2006:230) Martin Green, who had researched this relationship felt that: “He (Gandhi) and she (Sarala) together would certainly have made an extraordinary political combination” (ibid)

How then do we read her neglect, the relegation of her autobiography to silence? Given the events of the times she lived through, her location and extraordinary circumstances, the influence she wielded in her lifetime through her political activism, this silence is surprising. Is it orchestrated by a discomfort with her revivalist, rabid right wing views? Or is it that her story sits uncomfortably with the usual books on women in the national movement? Wherein lies the discomfort or discomfiture with her story—her version of nationalism or the fact that she was somehow viewed with hostility by people close to Kasturba who saw Sarala Debi as the other woman in Gandhi’s life?

Again, to identify her as Tagore’s niece only would be dismissive and diminishing her own considerable achievements as a political activist. Yet, stories and narratives by/about women who were related with great men like Gandhi and Tagore have had their lives and stories archived, narrated and circulated. Indira Debi, Maitreyee Debi, Madeleine Slade, Sister Nivedita and Manu Gandhi are all figures whose life events were irradiated by their contact with the ‘great men’ and a unique significance attached to their life stories. They become subjects or architects of ancillary life narratives which serve to focalise the lives of great religious/political/cultural figures. Whether in her own right or, given the unique nature of her relationship and linkage with both Tagore and Gandhi, one cannot help but speculate that the relative neglect and silence shrouding Sarala’s life and activities has more to it than meets the eye. Reading through her life narrative does elicit some surprise. So how can we theorise or explore this absence, neglect and silence? The autobiography does describe her contact with Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (Chapters 6 and 7) and the interaction with Swami Vivekananda, detailing her close relationship with him and the mutual respect with which they regarded each other. He recognized her fiery spirit and her proselytizing zeal and invited her to help him with his endeavours, what he saw as the spiritual task of nation-building.

A lot of the existing literature on women’s political participation makes the point that many women, albeit educated and from prominent families held political views that were in line with the political views held by the men in their families—be it fathers, husbands or sons. Thus while narrating the activities of the Theosophical society in Calcutta, their meetings set up and

organized by her mother, Sarala mentions that a lot of women held political views which emanated from the views of their male relatives. Many of the women joining these meetings, she narrates, were wives of men who were active in it. (62)

Coming in close contact with two towering personalities like Tagore and Gandhi, it is astonishing that Sarala's life and life writing eschewed their ideas and that her cultural imaginary was shaped on entirely different lines. She was fueled by the need to project a glorious-sometimes imaginary-past to reaffirm her faith in the country. Her version of the nation and nationalism seems to lean towards a primordial nationalism-one based on ties of ethnicity, religious conviction-akin to the blood, guts and gore that we witness in Sandip's speeches in "*The Home and the World*" and not the civic one.

Wherein lies the discomfort or discomfiture with her story-is it her version of nationalism? Or has she somehow fallen between the cracks of differing ideological viewpoints? It is tempting to chart her life –and life narrative in terms of her conflict with Tagore or proximity to Gandhi. But reading her narrative relationally-in terms of Gandhi's attraction to her is to fall into another trap, where the rubric of relationality determine the person's contribution to worth or his/her historical significance.

One of the issues and thematic concerns that we can glean from Sarala's life and life writing is the accommodation of Sarala Debi's aspirations to freedom and self-assertion within the boundaries of Hindu revivalism and right wing nationalistic ideologies. The harking back to a glorious past, the narrative of a wounded culture and hurt masculinities which was in need of rescuing, were all themes that had been fictionalized by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee in his novels. In his novel *Anandamath*, he gives us a mythified and romanticized picture of Bengal's past.(for a full discussion, see Malhotra,2018:197) Elsewhere, in his historical fiction, we get a romanticized version of India's past as well. Some of his female characters like Debi Chaudhurani and Shanti are radicalized version of the ideal Hindu woman and wife, who seem to step outside the fold of domesticity when the situation demands and yet step back into it when the crisis blows over. Sarala's own story seems to have followed such a trajectory. Her marriage was turbulent, to say the least and sometime in 1923, she left Lahore and her husband to stay in an ashram, moving back when her husband fell seriously ill. She stayed with him and nursed him till his death in late 1923. Their only son, Dipak had been sent to stay at Gandhi's Sabarmati Ashram and he later married into Gandhiji's family.

According to Radha Kumar in *The History of Doing*, there are parallels between some of Bankim's female protagonists and Sarala Debi: both their bids for personal independence get subsumed into the national independence. It was a coincidence that Sarala, after her marriage, came to be called Sarala Debi Chaudhurani, like Bankim's protagonist in his novel. Also, Bankim's reinterpretation of concepts like 'Dharma' give women like Sarala a space/scope to

acquire a traditional sanction for their revolutionary activities. This is evident in chapter seven, on Bankim and Tagore, when she thinks about the message of the Bhagavad Gita and its apparent justification for violence.

Autobiographies are marked by a dual time frame: simply put, a ‘then’ and ‘now’. Thus even the first part, the description of early childhood, is often from a specific political and ideological vantage point and from an adult perspective. Right from the beginning of *Jibaner Jharapata*, we observe that Sarala Debi’s view of some newly instituted Brahmo ideas is skeptical and interrogative. Deeply influenced by the west and Christianity, Brahmo reformist impulses were also seen as a challenge and counterpoint to Hindu tradition. Brahmo ideas were also seen as a product of modernity. Sarala is critical of modern ‘womanhood’, which discourages hands on mothering and the forming of affective bonds with children, and delegates the work and emotional labour of mothering entirely to maids and wet-nurses.

The other fascinating aspect of the story is her independent political views. Coming in close contact with two of the greatest men of her age-Tagore and Gandhi-it is a revelation that her right wing leanings are diametrically opposite to their views. On her radically independent political leanings is premised the question of whether there are emancipatory and liberatory spaces provided to Hindu women within right wing movements, a question on which the jury is still out(Butalia and Sarkar, 1995) Exploring the question of women’s emancipation within the ambit of the Hindu right is a series of essays edited by Sarkar and Butalia, one is aware of the tension between cultural nationalism and the discourse of human rights. The discourse of the Hindu right, according to Tanika Sarkar (Sarkar and Butalia:1995, Sarkar, 1999:163))and others, eschews the language of gender equality to focus on women’s role and function within a larger male-dominated context. Also the composite identity that emerges is that of the Hindu woman, who stands in for and represents the ‘Indian’ woman. In its choice of images of female empowerment, it often names the Shakti goddesses like ‘Durga’ and ‘Kali’, references that are exclusionary. As Flavia Agnes, the feminist lawyer and activist lawyer pointed out in a landmark speech, the women’s movement in India, for all its secular pretensions, was normatively Hindu in a nation of diverse religious allegiances and persuasions.(qtd in Ray,2003:7)

To an extent, Indian feminism in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, somewhat akin to 19th and early 20th century nationalism, faces competing pressures from religious ideologies, historical discourses, and contemporary narratives as it seeks prototypes for and spaces in the postcolonial feminine(Malhotra,2018:198) The Hindu right’s political mobilization of women in the 1990s reveals the complexities involved in this project. Whether it is the search for an indigenous idiom of nationalism in early 20th century or an indigenous feminism in early 21st, the attempt remains exclusionary, conservative and mired in controversy. Sarala Debi’s version of nationalism can be described as muscular nationalism, wherein lies our discomfort with it. Histories- and herstories have shown up nationalism as a Janus-faced entity,

multilayered and palimpsestic. In its present day manifestations and alliances, it appears to be as much of a threat as it appeared to be a promise to Sarala Debi. Perhaps the last word lies with Nikhil, the idealized mouthpiece of Tagore in *The Home and the World*, who is skeptical about the spirit of ‘Bande Mataram’: *I am willing to serve my country, but my worship I reserve for Right which is far greater than my country. To worship my country as a God is to bring a curse upon it.*”(Tagore, 2016:221)

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