

## **An Acquaintance with an Indologist cum Litterateur Sukumari Bhattacharya: Her Creative Works and Philosophy**

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### **Abstract**

This paper intends to focus on the creative works and humanitarian philosophy of an indologist and a vast Sanskrit scholar of Bengal namely Sukumari Bhattacharya. With her distinguishably non-pareil scholastic use of myth and re-interpretation of mythology shows a new way of thinking in academia intellegentia among the forthcoming generations. Like the western scholars in the field of culture and society, she perhaps juxtaposes mythology and cultural anthropology in the truest sense. An inquisitive scholar for whole life, Sukumari Bhattacharya shines her name being a path-breaking educationist and a social activist simulteneously. She devoted her life for the sake of the women and their education. She believed that a woman could liberate herself from the terrain of patriarchy if they would gain the power of voice and authority through education. Sukumari Bhattacharya stands out to be a glaring representation of brave womanhood in the late 19th century India.

**Keywords** - Humanitarian, Indologist, Mythology, Anthropology, Educationist

### **Introduction**

At the very outset while beginning to talk about Sukumari Bhattacharya, one of the great woman personalities not only of India but also this country and the world, this paper contributor is in debt to a famous quote of Romila Thapar, a distinguished Indian historian who said, "Sukumari Bhattacharya was among the foremost Indologists of her times, introducing as some of them did new perspectives on Indian mythology that she elaborated in her work. I would like to draw on her study entitled, *The Indian Theogony*, which I regard as a fine representation of the new work. Her knowledge of both Indian and European mythology enabled her to do comparative studies. She had trained in both English Literature and in Sanskrit. For her, comparative mythology did not stop with juxtaposition of myths from various cultures, showing some similarities and some differences. She took two steps

further. One was to describe the context in which a myth occurred and how it was related to its context. The context was the crucible from which the myth was born. This meant a much deeper study of how a myth took the form that it did. The other was to see whether a myth was modified over time and if so then in what way. In a comparative study therefore it meant looking at the contexts of both or more societies and ascertaining whether the context differed in various societies under study or whether a similar context gave rise to similar myths. In the comparative study of Indo-European languages and their mythologies some of the gods are similar but occasionally they behave differently from one society to another. This becomes an important aspect of comparative studies. Where there are similarities these have been explained in various ways. Some have argued that there was a diffusion of ideas that accounts for similarities in myths, others maintain that where the social and economic context is similar the narratives are likely to be similar too. Yet others would argue that there is collective unconscious that conditions are the creation of myths. Whatever the explanation there is a link between mythology and the study of society. Many scholars have worked on Indo-European and comparative mythology such as Stig Wikender, Mircea Eliade and Claude Levi-Strauss. Sukumari Bhattacharya used the work of the last two scholars in her own analyses of ancient Indian myths. Myths have been described as, projections of the vital experiences of a society, or else more generally as the social assumptions of a society. Others would argue that they are just sheer fantasy, stories of an altogether other world, and this fantasy world is necessary as a balancing factor to social reality. Myths generally draw upon gods and humans although the levels can either be kept distinct or merge. The gods are sometimes exemplars for human society but can also be viewed as acting in a manner that is not appropriate for human society. In the latter case such actions are meant to emphasize the boundaries of human behavior. The other aspect of the study of mythology that Sukumari Bhattacharya brings out to great effect is that myths are not static. They too have a life of their own and some myths change over time although retaining some basic features. She shows how the deities and stories from Vedic sources begin to change in the later section of *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* and even more so in the *Puranas*. Some older deities change their personality and some new deities are introduced. The older Vedic deities are distinctly subsidiary or gradually fade away. Mitra, Varuna, Agni and Indra give way to the two dominant deities, Vishnu and Shiva. The new deities represent two fundamental principles. After Brahma creates, it is Vishnu that preserves the creation and Shiva that is associated with its destruction. Sukumari Bhattacharya suggests that this duality is contradictory but is also an aspect of beliefs and practices of Vaishnavism and Shaivism. The Vedic yajna/sacrifice, as the major form of worship is replaced by puja and by the worship of images in temples. The latter is conducted by one or two priests and not the sixteen required for the

Vedic sacrificial ritual. The prayers and hymns are different. Social attitudes begin to change and where shudras and women were earlier excluded from the sacrificial ritual they are now accommodated a little more easily – but of course not altogether as we know that some temples and sects excluded the lower castes and women, who had a hard time trying to assert their presence. The new form of religion gives much greater importance to female deities and Durga, and Lakshmi are central to the pantheon. This saw the start of a new form of Hinduism. Sukumari Bhattacharya refers to it as the Hinduism that we know and practice, other scholars have preferred to call it Puranic Hinduism, as different from the earlier Vedic Brahmanism. The concept of bhakti or devotion to a deity becomes important, some degree of non-violence is espoused and there is also the central doctrine of karma and samsara that becomes an important feature of belief and worship. The questions that remain with us are many. Sukumari Bhattacharya raised some, and by implication encouraged the raising of others. Was Puranic Hinduism a resurgence of non-Vedic deities and worship, which somehow got hidden in the importance we have given to Vedic worship? Does it reflect the impact of the Shramanic religions – Buddhism and Jainism, as would be suggested by the new emphasis on ahimsa/non-violence. Was there also a revival of folk religion – the worship of sacred spaces, of trees and varieties of spirits - in which the mother goddesses were so significant and this would also take us back to the Harappan religion about which we know so little as yet. The Indian Theogony is a work that is very informative on deities and myths from Vedic times and continues the theme up to the time of the Puranas. But more than that it does what good scholarship should always do – it encourages us to ask questions. In finding answers to these questions our knowledge about the subject moves forward."(1)

Sukumari Bhattacharya was born on 12th July, 1921 in her maternal uncle's abode. Her father was Sarashi kumar Dutta and mother was Shantabala Debi. Sukumari was the descendant to relatives of Michael Madhusudan Dutt. Her grandfather, having been dissatisfied with the irrationality of religious practices of the Hindu community, came to Calcutta and converted himself to Christianity then on.(2). She had her earlier education at Christ Church School and St. Margaret School respectively in Calcutta. She did good result in Sanskrit from Victoria College, but she could not be entitled herself to the prestigious Presidency College because the women had no permission to enter at the premise of Presidency College in those days. In spite of her remarkable marks at the graduation level of education, she had been deprived of getting 'ishan scholarship' due to her religion's conversation to Christianity because it was the written direction of the donor Ishan Chandra Ghosh that no one save the orthodox Hindu would be entitled to have the scholarship. So, this lady became the hapless fellow from two perspectives, i.e. gendered discrimination and narrow-minded religious

dogma. Under such circumstances, Sukumari took her pen to write against the segregation on basis of dogmatic religion and racial unrestness and also gender inequalities. Sukumari analysed the *Vedas*, *Puranas*, *Upanishads* and the great epics with her keenness thought of observant eyes and sharpened rational intellect. Interestingly, she showed with aptness in narrative style how the higher castes or the so-called privileged class use and abuse those religious and sacred books in order to cherish their hidden motifs of creating segregation and differentiation between religions and the patriarchy took tactics to forcibly bemoan the women by ruling over them. Another memorable turn for the academia intelligentsia when the readers find her to be plunging underneath the deepest root of social history and her perception of woman-consciousness throughout the writings of women history and other religious books. Unquestionably, she poised the rhythm of social revolution to some extent among the budding minds of young generation and influenced them not to be the run of the mills, rather the conveyer of upraising rational thought with scientific ideology. Such a pedantic and historian-educationist-litterateur, Sukumari hammered against our sacred religious books which dehumanized and abused womenfolk from the time immemorial and she always emphasised on the issues of liberating the mind-set of women to survive and to do better at the backdrop of patriarchal norms, rules and traditions. To her, women must have to break the glass-ceiling of conceiving themselves either as the demon-dasher world-mother or as benevolent meek the worshipper or 'shadikha' Radha and they must have to raise their voice for attaining human rights. The women should never represent themselves as the puppet of hyperbolic imagination, rather she believed that the women should strongly be grounded to the stern soil of reality and they should gain the power to be liberated from the patriarchy-structured religion. She spoke that no healthy society could be build up unless or until there is space for the woman's freedom of thought, freedom of speech and her own willingness. Staying tuned to Sukumari, the writer Samiran Mazumder in his *Manab Samaje Dharma* (Religion in Human Society) stated that the woman has been given the farthest corner in the patriarchy-structured religion and religion just think only for the men about their liberation.(3). Sukumari poignantly took her sensitive stand on the man-woman relationship and the present the sexual connotation between a man and a woman in reality by the time when it was the toughest job to delineate with such issues especially for a woman educationist-litterateur. She has given her consent to prioritize a woman's desire and her opinion for selection of conjugal life-partner and child-bearing by a woman herself. Such modern thought being a woman of the middle 19th Century is comparatively distinct.

This versatile writer and her writings on issues of women created a new renaissance within the conventional frame of consciousness among the bengalees. 'Puranas', history and women- as whole and holisticity enriched her writings. In her noteworthy book, *Women and Society in Ancient*

India (1994), she has beautifully projected the real scenario of women in relation to socio-political situation of India. Again in her Bangla book *Vivaha Prosonge* (1996), she has raised the question of existing stern patriarchal beliefs and its domination on women. She has poised her views on liberation of women in terms of selection of male-partner for marriage. She has moved further by emphasizing the fact that a woman should have to be given the extreme freedom for choosing the male-life partner in successive times for happy conjugal life and the best marital bondage. Such a path-breaking modern thought reminds us of the western radical feminists and the two prominent feminist figures, namely Mary Woflstonecraft and Virginia Woolf who were the forerunners of the reformation of social system. That span of time when the renaissance of 19th century in Bengal began with full-fledged form, Pandit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and Raja Ram Mohan Roy along with some British social thinkers set out their vigorous social reformation campaign against injustice and superstition and spearheaded to establish and spread education for women and liberation for them by setting up schools and educational institutions for the women. In the second phase of 19th century in literature, Bankimchandra in his two novels namely, *Bisbriksha* and *Krishnakanter uil* did not fully support the freedom of women and the widow-marriage. And Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan could not speak so far against blindfolded dogmatic religious custom and creed, though he was in favour of women education and he uphold many arrears of women education and social scenario in his book, *All Religion and Society* which was composed in 1942. Hence, it can easily be traced out that the frontline men social thinker, litterateur and social activists of the then course of time told about women education and liberation but, they had little care for fighting spirit of women and feminist movement in a row. In this respect, the philosophy of Sukumari and the world view of Taslima Nasreen are akin to each other. Both these women of entirely two different generations upheave the pitiable condition of women and seek for a private space for celebrating ownself on behalf of the women. Whereas Sukumari shows the man-woman relationship on dual-conjugal bondage, Taslima presents that relationship entirely upon woman's individual own self and willingness. Sukumari thinks that the deepest desire of possibly every human life is a concrete lively conjugal relationship between a man and a woman which springs out from empathetical psyche.(4). She defamed the black conspiracy of those religious books which used to locate the women being the weaker section of nature. In 1970, her magnum opus namely, *The Indian Theogony* was published from Cambridge University Press in which by uplifting the birth-theory and legacy of gods, she raptured in the religious-core minds of the Indian people. That book rationally discussed everything and tried to make every Indian see through the peephole of scientific reasoning with rationale intellect. So many significant books Sukumari wrote her fellows like, *Legends of Devi* (1995), *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit*

## The Creative Launcher

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*Literature* (1992), *Myths : Vedic, Buddhist and Brahamical, History of Classical Sanskrit Literature* (1993), *Literature in the Vedic Age* (Two Volumes; 1984 & 1986) and the thought-provoking writings in Bangla language like '*Prachin Bharat : Samaj O Sahitya*'(1988), *The Sanghitas* (1984), *The Gita : Its Why and How* (2013), '*Manthan*', '*Oposanskriti*'. In almost her every writings, Sukumari sought for the reality and practicality behind the mythical facade of depiction and characterization of gods and goddesses and she tried to dig out the ultimate truth through her in depth study and analysis of *Vedas*, *Puranas* and other epics. She was a born atheist and she did not believe in universal fatalism. Such an indomitable woman of sheer rationality and social activist, Sukumari was always distrusted with vague imagination coupled with the concept of fate and so once in a discussion with Professor Pratap Bandhopadhyaya, she deliberately mentioned the name of her book namely, *Fatalism in Ancient India* (1995) and told her indebtedness to it being its power as the source of mental strength.(5). She was considered to be one of the leading figures to constantly fight against communalism and religious fanaticism and she expressed many scathing issues related to segregation and division of the Hindu community in her Bangla script book namely, '*Hindu Samprodayikata*'.

Sukumari began her career as professor in Lady Brabone College for ten years in the first phase of her work-life and then she, having been invited by Buddhadev Basu, joined in the Department of Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University. Later she held the chair of professorship in the Department of Sanskrit, Jadavpur University. Such a vast versatile academic career was hers. The intellectual wanderings in almost every fields of education sharpened her thoughts more and more. Her unyielding attitude towards social conservatism, the voice of protest tinselled with pedanticism, atheisticism and her bringing up in Christian surroundings created a lot of debate in the social atmosphere where she had to deal with day in and day out. Sukumari's generosity, truthfulness to own self, a rationalized and determined mind-set, fellow-feeling and humanism cut across the narrow boundaries of everyday life by making her universally accepted iconic figure. Rightly envisaged by the myth-scholar Nrisinghaprasad Bhaduri when he says that by exchanging thoughts with Sukumari leads anyone to be engulfed in the unfathomable sea of learning world.(6)

Sukumari's thinking process on social issues was influenced by her political consciousness of the then times. She was a born communist who always demanded for equality and incessantly tried to establish the concept of equal rights among every human beings irrespective of biological difference, colour, ethnicity, descendance and community. Her political enterprise was churned up by the great political personalities like Hiren Mukhopadhyay, Chinmohon Sohanbish, D.D. Koshambi, R. S. Sharma and others. She never taught her students to put their feet in her shoes, rather she gave them

ample liberty and freedom to go beyond the usual contaminated thoughts of the day. Here lies her originality.

Sukumari Bhattacharya was one of the leading Bengali thinkers and educationists cum litterateurs in the second phase of 20th century. Through her potential and brightness of writings and social activism and movement, she continued to fight against religious vandalism, superstitious orthodox nature of high class and caste people, communalism, culturelessness and illiteracy. She paved the alternative way quaint essentially in order to gain liberty and freedom on behalf of women against Patriarchy within the society. She showed a dream to every women to fly in the sky by breaking cagedness of their soul. She is a feminist neither in its technical and usual term nor its misandryist attitude. She desired to have a world where love and affection, sympathy and empathy, happiness and sorrowfulness could be the divine inspiration of conjugal relationship between man and woman. She spoke for the equality on each other's part. Her powerful writings became a source of energy irrespective of man and woman. Today, Sukumari Bhattacharya's writings and her unusual method of education can revive this generation from impending extinct in reality.

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