Self and the State

Sunity Devi’s *Autobiography of an Indian Princess* is a rather inadvertent portrayal of a long conflict between the self and the State throughout which the self steadily gets confounded to submissiveness. The start of the conflict is at the time of her betrothal. The British government’s “experiment of training the ideal ruler for the ideal state [Cooch Behar] had succeeded beyond” its own “highest expectations” (Devi 51). For the “final success” of the scheme, it was necessary for the government to find an “equally advanced” (Devi 51) bride for Prince Nripendra Narayan. British authority finds Keshab Chandra Sen’s daughter as the suitable bride. Keshab is strongly disinclined, for he is a Brahmo while the Royal Cooch Behar is Hindu. But the determined British authority succeeds in persuading Keshab Sen, who finally is convinced that the “marriage would be for the spiritual good of the country” (Devi 53). Sunity is at that time not yet fourteen, which becomes another issue for criticism from the Brahmo side. (The Brahmo code allowed marriage of girls after attaining that age). Not Maharaja Nripendra, but Dalton the Englishman it is who arrives with Bengalee officials to “see” Sunity. The girl is under a “strong dose” of quinine, as she is “trembling like a leaf” with “fear and ague” (Devi 54). When asked
by Dalton to play the piano, Sunity “obediently” sits at the piano. “Dalton scrutinized me as I went up to the piano and back to my seat ...” (Italics added), she writes, adding that “he [Dalton] seemed favourably impressed” (Devi 55). Her ‘obedience’ under the British ‘scrutiny’ should adequately foretell the story of her continuous submissiveness. A sad commentary on the predicament of the Indian prince in British Raj, indeed. Sunity was the daughter of a great son of India and Maharani of a state that received a thirteen-gun salute. There is further friction relating to the observance of marriage rituals—whether they should be according to Brahmo convention or according to Hindu custom. The episode is an excellent gloss on the difficulties of princes/princesses in gaining entry to simple domestic life.

This is yet another dimension to the conflict between self and State. It pertains to Sunity Devi’s confusions relating to the contrary pulls of “ordinary” life and princely life. At many places she proudly declares that she was “taught” “wifely devotions” from her “infancy” (Devi 43). She mentions her grandmother who, though rich, devoted herself to housework:

She and her sister-in-law used at one time to hide their brooms under their beds, each meaning to
try and get up earlier than the other to clean the
room; such was their delight in their housework.
(Devi 28)

On the one hand, she praises a simple and ordinary life:
“Although a rich man’s daughter-in-law and a rich youth’s
wife, my mother was wearing a simple sari with hardly any
jewels” (Devi 16). On the other hand her narrative is
frequently punctuated by descriptions of jewellery and
royal dresses.

But her moral mix-up regarding the commoner’s life
and a king’s is most interestingly revealed through the
stories she re-tells. In one of them, a village is struck
by plague. The panic-ridden villagers believe that
regression of the epidemic would become possible only if
the image of their God is put into the river Ganga. But
they are told that the stone idol could be moved only by
one who is pure-hearted. None of the villagers succeeds
in moving the stone-god. Finally, to everyone’s surprise,
a swaggering drunkard lifts the stone-god as he would a
feather and carries it to the river-bank. This legend is
coupled with the account of a Maharaja who gives
thousands of rupees to save the “honour” of a British
officer—a man that incurs heavy debts because of his
horse-races (Devi 162-63). It must be noted here that the
stories here serve to pass off weakness as virtue in the
case of Sunity’s relatives and friends. The stories clearly show a discard between their content and the message Sunity Devi elicits from them.

A much more interesting story is the one that she tells her son Rajey. Its effect is better felt in her own words:

Once the souls of the poor were standing in front of the closed gates of heaven. Ever since they had parted from their bodies they had patiently spent many weary days hoping for admittance to the country of bliss where the ills of earthly life are forgotten. The horrors of their past lives had not yet faded from their minds, although in their place of waiting they were spared the pangs of poverty, hunger and thirst.

The vast multitude gazed yearningly at the gates which did not open. Suddenly word came: ‘Make way, make way, O souls, a rich Maharajah’s spirit is on its way to heaven and must be instantly admitted’.

The poor murmured a feeble protest, but the gatekeeper spoke again and the crowd parted to make way for the soul of the Maharajah.

At last it came. And the poor caught a glimpse of the pomp and circumstances which attended its
passage to heaven. The gates were flung open, the perfumed air of Paradise came forth for an instant, but the poor remained outside.

‘Ah!’ cried the weary spirits. ‘Is existence still to be the same for us it was when we lived upon earth? There the rich always oppressed us. We were as dust under their feet. We toiled that they might have the luxuries they demanded. And now that we are dead we still suffer. Why should we not be admitted to heaven without delay? Alas! There is no justice at the hands of God since the soul of a Maharajah but lately dead takes precedence over us.’

‘Oh, silence rebellious ones!’ cried the gatekeeper. ‘Surely, surely, you know that the road to heaven is an easy one for the poor to traverse. You have no temptations in your passage save the ills of poverty. You have not to combat with the lust of the eye, with the arrogance of riches, with the evil wrought by flattering tongues ... and the misuse of power. Think what allurements this ruler must have resisted in order to prepare himself for heaven. It is a stupendous feat for a Maharajah to have accomplished, and,’ added the gatekeeper unctuously, ‘we seldom see them here; therefore it
behoes me to give instant admittance to such a rare arrival’.

And the souls of the poor were silent, for they recognised the wisdom of the words which the gate keeper had uttered. (Devi 99-100)

It is indeed a marvelous story with a great potential for ambiguity (note the use of the word ‘unctuously’), recalling the story of the rustic seeking admittance to Law and the gatekeeper in Kafka’s The Trial. But the Maharani’s voice, and in the context of her autobiography, Sunity Devi’s story becomes one of moral cynicism. Her autobiography spells out indignation at the commoners:

I have often thought how uncharitable the general public are about the failings of those in high places. Without knowing them well, without knowing their inner lives, the public have an unjust habit of writing and speaking unkindly of rulers and princes. Often the public will compare their own lives with the lives of their princes—a commoner’s with a ruler’s life! God has chosen one man to be a ruler and others to be his subjects. (Devi 92)

She gives no hints as to who these writers and critics are; neither are there any clues regarding the issues and occasions for such writing. The very idea of a “commoner”
criticizing and judging those in high positions is atrocious for her. Elsewhere, an annoyed Sunity Devi writes: “Let a ruler or prince have but the slightest failing, it is instantly magnified fourfold and discussed unmercifully...” (Devi 162). She is unaware of the self-contradictions in her narrative when she quotes her husband the Maharajah: “I want my sons to be brought up just as ordinary boys, not as Indian Princes” (Devi 148).

Sarala Devi Chaudhurani and Pandita Ramabai, Sunity Devi’s contemporaries, have also written their autobiographical accounts in which they express keen awareness of the society in which they live. One should, for sheer contrast note the description of the “ordinary”, the multitude in the famine years in Pandita Ramabai’s “Famine Experiences”.

The poor people seem to have lost all human feeling ... . They do not care even for their own children ... .

Parents can be seen taking their girl children around the country and selling them for a rupee or a few annas, or even for a few seers of grain. (Ramabai, 255)

Many of the starving people wandering in jungles have eaten up all the fruit of the cactus ... and wild berries found in the land and are now
eating leaves, barks and small twigs of the trees ... . They are found gathering and winnowing manure and dust in the bazaars ... in hope of finding a few particles of grain for satisfying their hunger. They are filling their empty stomachs with sand and small stones in order to escape the pangs of hunger. (Ramabai, 267)

Ramabai is quite harsh in her criticism of the native kings who are indifferent to the sufferings of common people:

But it must be remembered that the extravagant expenses incurred by the Rajas and Chiefs on grand occasions like marriages and deaths, as well as at times of visits from Governors and other Government officials, have had a good deal to do with the impoverishment of the States and their people. (Ramabai 269)

Ramabai’s censure of the native rulers is long and stinging:

But woe to those who have never felt the pang of hunger, neither suffered from cold and from heat and coolly allow so many poor to die ... (Ramabai 271).
A brief passage describing the Delhi Durbar from Sunity Devi’s autobiography suffices to illustrate the truth of Pandita Ramabai’s indictment:

It was a magnificent sight, and I shall never forget the display of jewels worn by our princes. There were emeralds of a wonderful deep green, priceless pearls, rubies like blood, and diamonds dazzling in their brightness; in fact there were jewels everywhere, even the elephants were decorated with them. I saw a Maharajah whose gold fan was fringed with beautiful pearls. (Devi, 160)

Ramabai is speaking, not exactly of the famine in Cooch Behar, but of famine in Gujarath, Kathiwar, Rajputana and the rest of the country. But her observation regarding the imbalance between the rulers and the commoners strongly asks for a comparison with the princely life of Sunity Devi who devotes considerable space for description of jewellery, festivities and royal pomp. Sunity Devi knew both Ramabai and Sarala Devi. It was the time of a new awakening in India. Gandhi is said to have visited Sunity Devi when she was in England. Yet the autobiography of Sunity Devi mentions the common people only to chastise them for daring to judge people in “high positions”!
A shade of the bewilderment that the self experiences before the Imperial authority can also be seen in Maharani Sunity Devi’s language and attitude to her readership. It is a Western readership to which the autobiography mainly addresses itself to. “In India we offer betel leaf to our guests as English people do cigarettes” (Devi 79) she informs. A few pages later she elaborates: “Perhaps most English readers do not know what a valuable digestive betel leaf is” (Devi 94). In the rainy season, she thinks of “Cooch Behar as something like Venice” (Devi 93), and its “winters are like those of the South of France” (Devi 97). She proudly states: “We had British nurses for all our children except Rajey” (Devi 93). The tone of excessive reverence to the British also becomes conspicuous:

The Maharajah [her husband] was full of praise of England, and there never lived a more loyal subject than he. (Devi 81)

Expressions of deference abound in the book: “Lord Lansdowne kindly arranged” (Devi 145); “our beloved sovereign” (Devi 162); “our dear king” (Devi 163); “I felt I could have fallen at her [Queen Alexandra’s] feet and wept” (Devi 170); and so on. In her reading of her father’s New Dispensation, such veneration of the British is a duty:
Our religion of the New Dispensation teaches loyalty to the Throne. This loyal feeling is a sacred duty to me, and in the whole of India no family is more loyal to His Gracious Majesty than the Cooch Behar Raj family. (Devi 201)

The early parts of the autobiography that are devoted to her childhood and her days with her parents are markedly different in tone and mood from the remaining parts. Her father Keshab Chandra Sen is the remarkable figure in her life and she extols his virtues. “The expression on his face, people said was like that of Buddha, serene and unruffled” (Devi 20). She remembers a few extraordinary happenings connected with her father. Keshab’s small country house, ‘Sadhankanan’, had lush gardens infested with snakes. Sunity Devi once sees “a frog hopping at a tremendous pace where ... father and his followers were engaged in their devotions; it was chased by a snake.” The frog leaps “straight” on to her father’s knees “and the pursuer, stopping bewildered in front of his quarry, swayed to and fro for a moment with his head ominously raised, then turned and glided away ... whereupon the frog jumped down from his sanctuary” (Devi 32-33). Yet another event brings out Keshab Sen’s extraordinary powers: Her father is at that time staying with his followers away from Calcutta. One morning after
the usual services a follower wishes that Keshab would ask him to stay on instead of attending office; but since Keshab does not say anything, leaves sad faced. After an hour, sensing the mood of the other followers who wanted the man with them, Keshab Sen takes up a drum, with a smile strikes it gently, "calling the gentleman by name."

"It seems incredible but is nevertheless true that the person thus summoned heard the call as he stood under a tree by the roadside. "'I hear him', he cried, 'I am to return', and to the great surprise of all he did return, and related how he had heard his name being called" (Devi 21).

The mother is also associated with extraordinary events. However the influence of both father and mother is in inculcating in the children a sense of duty, a religious inclination and a regard for others. The family was a very large one in which "family quarrels were rare" (Devi 27). The very atmosphere in which she grew up accounts greatly for Sunity Devi's realization of the importance of wife's devotion to her husband. Such a temperament is understandably preferred by British authority for the queenship of Cooch Behar.

Sunity Devi's autobiography presents the predicament of a prince/princess under Imperial authority. By her very position as a subject queen, she can lay little
claim to herself. Her bewildered self is portrayed painfully in the references to her children’s education. Lord Lansdowne arranges to send her first son Rajey to Mayo College in Rajputana. Sunity Devi knew that her son had to be trained “for the duties of his position”, yet she “dreaded giving him over to others” (Devi 145). After Mayo College, Rajey is sent to England for education. Sunity’s unwillingness to take the princes “away from their country and people” (Devi 147) is quickly overruled. The Lt. Governor tells her that quality education for princes is not available in India. Sunity expresses apprehensions regarding Rajey’s re-adaptation to Indian people and climate after a long stay away from homeland. “Somehow”, she complains helplessly, “nobody took much notice of my remarks and suggestions” (Devi 147). She is baffled to hear Lord Curzon’s remarks, when he was Viceroy, that “the Cooch Behar boys were too English, and it was very hard on them to be sent away from Cooch Behar when they were so young” (Devi 147). She is confounded by British attitude:

The Maharajah did what he and the Government thought best at the time by sending our boys to England ... afterwards the boys felt their lack of knowledge of the Indian languages very much. They returned home knowing Greek and French, but they did not know Sanskrit or Urdu and found it difficult to
speak freely or fluently the Cooch Behari language.

(Devi 149)

She could see clearly that the British authority had deprived the king’s sons’ education that was of practical value:

The heir to a State should have a more general education than the other sons; he should have some knowledge of the law, engineering, accountancy, and agriculture, otherwise he cannot improve his State nor help the officials. (Devi 149)

It is not just that the education of the princes of “ideal states” was controlled by the British; all their important affairs were. This naturally deprived the freedom of personal life to the kings. When Rajey’s health deteriorates, Sunity Devi says: “The lives of rulers are in the hands of the doctors appointed by the State” (Devi 184).

Sunity Devi’s autobiography is an unwitting self-revelation of a queen who could not sight her personal self due to an inability to become political:

I hope I shall be forgiven if my readers do not find much about politics in this book, but I have never been interested in politics, and I think it is better for women not to take part in political work. (Devi 199)
Works Cited
