CHAPTER – 4

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4.1 Introduction

The literary and the educational development of Sita Devi as well as Shanta Devi would not have been possible during that time, if the minds have been filled with modern and traditional thoughts and that was only possible due to the influence of certain persons in their lives. To mention the first and foremost among them is their father, Sri Ramananda Chatterjee. It is worthwhile here, in the present study to discuss about Sri Ramananda Chatterjee, a member of the Sadharan Bramho Samaj with very modern ideas the thoughts about the educational emancipation of women and about the development of the society as a whole. While discussing about him, the discussion on Sadharan Bramho Samaj cannot be neglected either.

4.2 Sadharan Bramho Samaj

The Sadharan Brahmo Samaj is a division of Brahmoism formed as a result of schisms in the Brahmo Samaj in 1866 and 1878 respectively. The Sadharan Brahmo Samaj was formed in a public meeting of Brahmos held in the Town Hall of Calcutta on 15 May 1878 (2nd Jaistha 1284 of the Bengali calendar). A letter from Maharshi Devendranath Tagore communicating his blessings and prayer for the success of the new Samaj was read in the meeting. At the time of its foundation the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj was headed by three
men universally esteemed in Brahmo society for their high moral character. They were Ananda Mohan Bose, Sib Chandra Deb and Umesh Chandra Dutta. Of those three Ananda Mohan Bose was the youngest, scarcely more than 31 years at the time, yet he was placed at the head of affairs.

4.2.1 Sadharan Trust Deed of 1880

The intrinsic Primary Principles for Brahmo Assembly and Worship are reiterated by the next Deed of Trust of 1880.

Original doctrine and principles

- that faith in a Supreme Being and in Existence after Death is natural to man;
- that we regard the relation between God and men to be direct and immediate;
- that we do not believe in the infallibility of any man or any scripture;
- whatever book contains truths calculated to ennoble the soul or elevate the character is a Brahmo's scripture, and whoever teaches such truths is his teacher and guide.
- We regard the fourfold culture of man's intellect, conscience, affections, and devotion as equally important and equally necessary for his salvation.
- We consider love of God and doing the will of God as equally imperative in the routine of a Brahmo's life.
- We regard the culture of faith at the sacrifice of reason, or the culture of reason at the sacrifice of faith as equally defective, and as fruitful sources of evil in the religious world.
- We regard the worship of one God as the highest of a Brahmo's duties and as the best of means to improve the soul and the neglect of it as a way to spiritual death.
- We look upon the enjoyment of uncontrolled authority by a single individual in any religious community as a calamity, and far from looking upon freedom of thought as
reprehensible, we consider it to be desirable, and regard it as a safe-guard against corruption and degeneracy.

- We regard the belief in an individual being a way to salvation, or a link between God and Man, as a belief unworthy of a Theist, and those who hold such belief as unworthy of the Brahmo name.
- We consider it to be blasphemy and an insult to the Majesty of Heaven to claim Divine inspiration for any act opposed to the dictates of reason, truth, and morality.

4.2.2 Aims

“From this day we intend devoting ourselves to the propagation of Brahmoism and to the furtherance of the interests of our Church, apart from some of those with whom we have so long acted, but relying for aid and support on Him in whose hands are the destinies of man who supports every noble purpose, and has all along invisibly regulated the course of our Church who, in His inscrutable ways, has given strength when our Church languished from very feebleness, has vouchsafed life when her very vitality seemed ebbing away, and who has led her out from the darkness and superstition that eclipsed her face. May He enable us to discharge this sacred mission may He once more fill all the members of our Church with new life and resuscitated energy may He cause the day of hope to dawn upon the darkness of despair may He lead us out of the regions of discord and disunion into those of peace and tranquility may He bless our cause and lead the millions of our countrymen into truth and salvation.”

It is mentionworthy that in all fields of social reform, including abolition of the caste system and of the dowry system, emancipation of women, and improving the educational system, of boys as well as girls, the Sadharon Brahmo Samaj reflected the ideologies of the Bengal Renaissance.
4.3 The Influence of Sri Ramananda Chatterjee on Sita Devi and Shanta Devi

In 1892, the Age of Consent controversy intensified the debate between the members of Sadharan Brahma Samaj and the orthodox Hindus. Ramananda, a member of the Sadharan Brahma Samaj, was on the forefront of this controversy. The Amendment of the Age of Consent Act of 1892 prescribed a minimum age of twelve for the marriage of a Bengali girl (Chakraborti, 4). Ramananda Chatterjee, father of Santa Devi and Sita Devi, wanted the age of consent raised to sixteen.

As an editor of Indian Messenger Ramananda Chatterji interpreted the facts to champion the government bill. In the year 1892 he left Calcutta for Allahabad to become principal of the Kayasih College. There, in April 1901. he started Prabasi. In 1906. Ramananda Chatterji resigned his principalship in Allahabad and returned to Calcutta, where he took up residence at The Sadharan Brahmo Samaj mission quarters. In January 1907, he began to publish a new English journal, “The Modern Review”. Ramanada Chatterjee found stifling the nationalism created by Hindu orthodoxy: "We shall never have a liberal national and international mentality unless we can shake off the authority of priests, dogmatists and theologians. We can never achieve dynamic national growth in India," he continued, by adhering to "sectarian orthodoxy." but only through a "liberal national education" for all (Kopf. 153). Ramananda Chatterji also rejected caste system and untouchability which he thought was weakening the Hindu social order and had to be uprooted (Kopf, 153). Because of his anti-British nationalistic views, Ramananda’s home, which housed his journals, was often searched by the police (Purba Smriti, 66). His house was a meeting point for
Sri Ramananda Chattopadhyay
(Father of Shanta Devi and Sita Devi)

**IMAGE 3(a)**

Prabasi Banga-Sahitya Sammelan(Sri Chatterjee at the centre)

**IMAGE 03(b)**

(Source of Image :3(a)&3(b) : Devi,Shanta. (1945).
Ramananda Chattopadhyay O Ardhasatabdirdir Bangla.
Kolkata, IN: Prabasi Press.)
Bengali. A strong wave of education for women began during the 1890s as many leaders of Sadharon Brahma Samaj including Ramananda Chatterji, began an intensive campaign. They believed that education would make women versatile individuals, enabling them to discharge their obligations as wives and mothers, better than their traditional grandmothers and also better than the women from the lower classes (Chatterjee, 246). These women would modernize the family structure by being able to work outside the home if necessary and would be able to maintain the groups self-identity. In 1891, the Bramho Girls School was considered by the government as the "best boarding girls’ high school in the Bengal Presidency." and the Sadharon Bramhos, exceedingly proud to their record in providing higher education for women, founded by Bethune College. This then was the home environment of Santa Devi and Sita Devi. Influenced by their father's nationalistic ideas, they tried to inculcate the same feelings of nationalism among the middle and upper middle-class women.

The two sisters thus chose literature as their metier to spread their ideas. Through their literary works also they also spread the educational development of women. In their novels and short stories they rejected or challenged most of the traditional beliefs and systems of Bengali society which they are not conducive to educate women to cope either with the public sphere or with the private sphere successfully. In their writings they tried to assure their readers that it is acceptable to stand up against the traditions which stifled women's self-growth and ambition. To make it more realistic Santa Devi and Sita Devi wrote about the domestic world with which their women readers were familiar. In their writings the main characters were women, with the supporting roles filled by men. Thus it is observed that Ramananda Chatterjee, their father laid down the strong foundation of their thinking as well as their works.
4.4 The Tagorean Influence on Shanta Devi and Sita Devi

Ramananda Chatterjee and Rabindranath Tagore’s friendship go a long way back. Santa and Sita Devi were not only admirers of Rabindranath Tagore but they were simply mesmerized by him. Since both the sisters had very much less difference in age their literary careers as well as visiting important personalities progressed together. It is worthwhile to mention that they were not only sisters but were great friends. As a result one was influenced by the other and hence they both were great admirers of Kabiguru Rabindranath Tagore. In every occasion be it programmes in Santiniketan or in the Calcutta mansion of Rabindranath Tagore both the sisters were very much present. Santa Devi participated even in the felicitation ceremony in Calcutta after he became a noble laureate. Rabindranath Tagore has always wanted women to be independent. He has always wanted women to have a strong personality in expressing their true feelings. He always encouraged women to speak their own mind without any fear. Santa Devi and Sita Devi were very much drawn to the stories in his book which present one aspect of this humanism- portraits of women. These portraits are drawn in soft earth colors and they look real and familiar and last long in our mind. The characters shine like stars and do not blind the eye. Tagore’s stories reflect on child-marriage, the dowry system, growing gulf between city and country, bigoted orthodoxy of caste system and even wife burning. His stories are fables of modern man, where fairy tale meets hard ground, where myths are reworked, and the religion of man triumphs over the religion of rituals and convention, where the love of a woman infuses the universe with humanity. He writes with concern about such issues as the Hindu revivalism in the late nineteenth century and the bondage of women. The rhythms of daily life, his rural encounters and childhood reminiscences, unfold in his tales, as does a sense of history, the reality of the political situation and its impact on individual lives. Tagore wishes to see the world of humanity not only reflected in his own life but also actualized in Bengali literature. Tagore’s stories have a
distinctive poetic lilt, poignantly capturing those elements of their lives, laced with a gentle irony at times. Most of them deal with life of the middle-class family man, and often with the position of the not-yet emancipated woman in a patriarchal society. Despite his apparently supporting stance towards women, his stories have a rather one-dimensional view of women classifying them under the Madonna-Whore dichotomy. Many of his stories seem to be attempting to lift the veil from the hypocrisies of Bengali (and thus, Indian) society.

Being the champion of the emancipation of women in the true tradition of Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Tagore through his novels brings out the problems of the women of his age. For this purpose he makes women the protagonists in almost all his novels. The novelistic world of Tagore embodies a vision of India caught up in the cross current of opposing ideologies, of questioning of the old or traditional moral sanctions in search of self fulfillment, the clash between the reformist and revivalist forces the conflict between the moderate and extremist elements in politics as well as the eternal struggle in the human consciousness between love and sacrifice. His stories are written in a prose that is rhythmic, often to the point of being poetic. However, his stories are mostly rooted in the life of ordinary people. The stories of Rabindranath Tagore which brought a great influence on the lives of Santa Devi and Sita Devi are discussed below:

4.4.1 A Grain of Sand: (Chokher Bali in Bengali) is Novel Prize-winning author Rabindranath Tagore's classic exposition of an extramarital affair that takes place within the confines of a joint family. It is the story of the rich, flamboyant 'Mahendra' and his simple, demure, beautiful wife 'Asha' - a young couple who are befriended by the pragmatic Behari. Asha was an uneducated girl. Their cozy domestic scenario undergoes great upheaval with the introduction of the vivacious 'Binodini', a young, attractive widow who comes to live
Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore

Image 4(a)

Open Air Classroom in Viswabharati, Santiniketan

IMAGE 4(b)

with them. Binodini did not have any formal education even though her father appointed a European Governess for her instructions. Binodini though brought up in a village is skilled in all the households arts like cooking, knitting and interior decoration. Asha and Binodini become bosom pals. Binodini is initially drawn to Behari but then begins to respond to the advances of Mahendra, who has become obsessively attracted to her. After several twists and turns, Binodini elopes with Mahendra, leaving the entire family in turmoil. Bihari pursues them to Allahabad and succeeds in bringing them back to Kolkata, but the question remains: can a marriage that has once been ruptured by breach of trust be mended again into a meaningful relationship? This brief story of Binodini takes us through a course where we see the human vulnerabilities pitted against the lure and bait of ancient old flesh and as almost always happens, it is the lure that wins. The abysmal plight and pathetic state of widowhood shorn of any right of remarriage and conflict of carnal desires and morals of a young unrequited flesh forms the basic plot of this novel. The novel deals with several hidden and visible themes at different levels by stringing them together in a story that appeals to heart and mind equally. Somewhere, though it is not clear whether author intended or not, the role of destiny too creeps into the story.

4.4.2 Haimanti:

In Haimanti, Tagore takes on the institution of Hindu marriage. He describes ala “Strir Patra”, the dismal lifelessness of Bengali women after they are married off, the deep hypocrisies plaguing the Indian middle class, and how Haimanti, a sensitive young woman, has to pay for her sensitiveness and free spirit with her life. In the last passage the Hindu custom of glorifying Sita's entering in fire to appease her husband Rama's doubts, as depicted in the epic Ramayana, Rabindranath directly attacks The husband in the story loves Haimanti the wife soft and never complaining who will never tell her husband of the wrongs she is exposed to in their family. The mother-in-law, herself a woman, is the prominent cause of
Haimanti's suffering, and quite expectantly the tender readers, irrespective of gender, will harbour hatred towards the mother. However, one should hardly blame the woman, a poor creature, who, in all probability, herself was maltreated when she entered the family as a bride. The patriarchal values led her to accept all that she does as normal, legitimate and, therefore, inevitable. Over the years, a total demolition of womanhood has taken place and consequently she is no more a woman; rather, she is her husband's wife, son's mother and daughter-in-law's mother-in-law, who is not at all ashamed of injuring the other woman for dowry. And it has to be the manufactured self of the mother who will insist that her son remarry. The son feels that he will not be able to turn aside the request of the mother, implying that he will consent in time. So what could be the possible impact of the story on the young? They are supposed to adore Haimanti for her softness, gracefulness and patience, and abhor the mother-in-law because of her monstrous appearance. Once again it is inevitable that a woman is to remain either an angel or a beast identity constructed by man is trapped in a vicious cycle of which she can never come out. Through the story we also come to know the social conditions in which women were placed, almost always the victims, and more interestingly, responding differently yet with the same dignity, how each handled the pressures associated with it.

Most of the works of Tagore which include stories, novels, poems etc. are well known for the ideas put forth and revolve round the upliftment of women and children in the society. His stories have a distinctive poetic lilt, poignantly capturing those elements of their lives, laced with a gentle irony at times.

The above stories and also other notable stories of Rabindranath Tagore like The Lost Jewels’, ‘The Hungry Stone’, ‘Kabuliwallah’etc. have a strong influence not only on the lifestyle of Santa and Sita Devi but were also very much reflected in their writings.
4.5. Reflections of Ramananda Chattopadhyay and Rabindranath Tagore

in the writings of Shanta Devi and Sita Devi

Santa Devi and Sita Devi were both literary genius. But their inspiration came from their father, Sri Ramananda Chattopadhyay and their family friend Noble laureate Rabindranath Tagore. Their major works championed the cause of women in very context.

Mention must of the stories written by Santa Devi like –

“The Ugly Bride”; “Loyalty”;”The Cake Festival”. In both the stories the women protagonists were portrayed in a different light. While the “The Ugly Bride” is mainly about the marriage of a girl “Kalo” whose is dark skinned and is not a contender for marriage market, while “Loyalty” depicts the character of “Sunanda” who is caught in the whirlwinds of customs Vs love and who ultimately sacrifices love to the ancient customs built by the society. The story ends in a tragic note with the disappearance of her love in the strong cyclone and she repents her decision. She was left with little choice though in the custom bound society. Her story also depicts the social and the educational aspect of women during that time and mention in this context should be make of her story “The Cake Festival”.

On the other hand, mention must be made of Sita Devi’s stories –

The Letter: The story depicts the pathetic life of Nirjarine who was going to die. The story is narrated through a man’s eyes called Sushil. Only a letter can bring her momentarily happiness in her dying days. It also brings out the hypocrisy of the Bengali society, where men were fond of writing books about widow-remarriage but if it comes to their personal liking they can only flirt with women folk and cannot fulfil their promise to a widow. On the
Rabindranath Tagore surrounded by the young Shanta Devi & Sita Devi and other inmates at Viswabharati, Santiniketan

IMAGE 5(a)

Present Day Viswabharati, Santiniketan

IMAGE 5(b)

Source Image 5(a)&5(b): Retrieved from: http://www.visvabharati.ac.in/PhotoGallery.html
other hand, it shows the helplessness of the protagonist Sushil, in the above situation as the incident was connected to one of his closest friend Animesh. Finally he provides a death relief to the dying widow “Nirjharninee” by writing “The Letter”.

**The Broken Lily:** The Broken Lily or the flower which withered even it attained full blossom has a deep inner meaning even in its title. Here the story of Surama is portrayed through a man’s eyes, a poor school teacher. It shows also during that time how dowry system as the greatest evils of the Bengali society can cause great havoc not a girl’s life but also to the life of the would-be groom. One would indeed be moved by the helplessness and tragedy that struck with the characters of the story. It is worthwhile to mention that even in the 21st century also the stories of Sita Devi is still given strong importance and a Bengali feature film made by Ashok Viswanathan named “Bhrasta Tara” has been made based on Sita Devi’s novel “The Broken Lily”.

In their joint novel “The Garden Creeper” the protagonist “Mukti” and her father’s relation is a shadow of their own father Sri Ramananda Chattopadhyay and their affectionate relation with them.

It must be mentioned that the stories of Shanta Devi and Sita Devi depicted the following:

- The struggle of women in the male-dominated conservative society
- The struggle of educated young women for equality and freedom
- The plight of widows in the family and their exploitation
- Dowry system

But it is worthwhile to mention that what segregated them from other women writers is the positive male characters in their novels. Though their writings depicted the struggle of
women in the patriarchal society yet there were some positive male characters also in their novels who stood for the equality of womenfolk. This also depicts that their upbringing was in a liberal atmosphere where women were given much freedom to their thoughts and expression. Mention also must be made of the Tagorean influence and his writings in their life.

In their work the added interest of seeing Indian societal life during the 19th and the 20th century is witnessed. As Indians themselves see it and of noting how Indian society deals with the problems which are occupying society everywhere, the readjustment of the relations of different classes and above all the readjustment of the relations in which the sexes stand to other other. The two writers Santa and Sita Devi has truly tried to bring about the development and synthesis of both the sexes in a true manner.
References


