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Representation of Village Life in Sarat Chandra Chatterjee's *Palli Samaj*

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Abstract:

Sarat Chandra Chatterjee (1876-1938) was a prominent Bengali writer of the early twentieth century. He was known for a realistic portrayal of social situations and a critical evaluation of societal norms. His works exposed the hypocrisy and exploitation rampant in the social and cultural setup of the twentieth century. He voiced the agony and misery of the subalterns and brought their narratives to the centre of attention. He fought for the rights and dignity of the ignored classes his writing and destabilized the dominant discourse.

Keywords: Village life, Discourse, Problems, Reformation, Change.

Sarat Chandra wrote *Palli Samaj* after his return to Calcutta from Burma. The various translations of the title like *The Village Life*, *Rural Society*, *Dehati Samaj* provide a glimpse into the social relevance of the novel. *Palli Samaj* is a commentary on the condition of Bengali villages in the nineteenth and twentieth century. The novel aims to break the delusion of an idyllic village of romantic literature and is a realistic representation of village politics and squalor. Sarat does not glorify the quaint charm of the village but reveals the layers of hypocrisy and oppression buried beneath the haunting quietude of ancient traditions. Sarat portrays the process of social reform and progress through this novel and envisions a real idyllic future of villages. The protagonist of the novel, Ramesh, is the voice of the new educated class which has undergone reformation through western education and is playing a part in the regeneration of the social order. The feudal norms of the village are challenged by ideas of justice, equality, reforms and concrete social action. The stupor of indifference and hopelessness which had engulfed the lower classes is awakened by the idealism of Ramesh. He challenges the age old customs and instils a sense of power and accomplishment among the neglected members of the society. In the words of S.C. Sengupta, "*Palli Samaj* is a story of rural poverty and rural politics, of the bad Zemindar's oppression and the good Zemindar's idealism, and into the texture of this story is woven the nostalgic romance of frustrated, youthful love (55)."

Ramesh has returned to the village to perform customary ceremonies after his father's death. He had left the village of Kuapur for higher education and the village he knew has changed over the course of time. He had imagined the rural society to be as perfect as is written in books. He receives a rude shock when he is exposed to the factionalism and quarrels that the society is immersed in. The criticism of city life seems comical to him after he observes the shrewdness of the uneducated villagers:

"He remembered his life in the faraway city, reading and imbibing stories about a tranquil village life innumerable times. Even if society in Bengal lacks everything else, the

quiet villages possess a serenity that can never be found in a crowded metropolis. There, simple village folk are satisfied with very little; they soak in sympathy and are used to participating in the joys and sorrows of one another. It is only there, in those hearts, that the true wealth of Bengal still lies hidden!, so said the books. Alas, what a terrible fallacy! Ramesh had never witnessed such opportunism and spite even in the city. Whenever the lively city had sported some signs of sin, of wrongdoing, Ramesh had thought to himself, 'If only I can once reach my birthplace, that small village, I can escape these evils. There, religion governs life and society has still preserved its integrity.' But where was all this! Where was religion alive in these ancient villages? If the very essence of religion had disappeared, why did its putrefying corpse reign supreme? It seemed as if rural society was clinging in desperation to this distorted and decomposing cadaver and in the process, sinking deeper and deeper into slimy degradation. But the most pitiful contradiction of ethics was that the jibes of the villagers were directed at city life- where they asserted, religion was non-existent! (159)."

The 'sharadh' ceremony of Ramesh's father becomes a battleground for settling personal animosities. The rural society is divided into various groups and these groups indulge in blackmailing Ramesh by threatening to boycott the ceremony. Ramesh is unaware of the alliances and feuds prevailing in the village and feels dejected in an alien setting. Humayun Kabir rightly says that Sarat has painted with stark realism the poverty and degradation of village life in *Palli Samaj* (77).

The village people in the novel reflect the decadent social system. They are narrow-minded, indulge in petty fights and are greedy and shrewd. The elderly Brahmins shamelessly gulp down huge amount of food and keep insulting each other in a brazen way. "Sarat reveals an intimate knowledge of rural life by introducing a number of minor characters with their typical reactions to the 'sharadh' ceremony and other kindred social functions and problems (Madan, 64)."

Caste system is an integral part of rural society and the people of lower caste are looked down upon and discriminated against by the higher castes. The sharadh ceremony becomes a site of caste discrimination and the Brahmins reveal their petty side. One of them says,

"Bhairav, my friend, I really do believe that Babaji is not doing the right thing. It is an absolute waste of money to spend so much on clothes for the poor and downtrodden. Instead, I would say, distributing clothes amongst the Brahmins and their male off springs would be the best way to follow. What do you say Dharamdas? Dharamdas nodded sagely in agreement. 'Gobinda is not wrong there Babji! No matter how much you give them, those ingrates will never sing your praises. Why else does one call them lowly? You do understand, Ramesh? Ramesh had been silent all the while. In the course of this discussion regarding clothes to be distributed, he had felt as if he had been mortally wounded. It was not the arguments for or against the issue that concerned him; but the manner in which these respectable men squabbled so shamelessly in front of the so-called lowly people without any compunction was what stunned him (131)."

The conduct of the respectable Brahmins crosses the limit of decency in their gossiping and throwing mud at each other. The village elders are dual faced and feel no shame in disclosing scandalous details if it suits their interests. Beni is Bishheshwari's son and the main landlord of the village. Though he is Ramesh's brother, he is the villain of the novel and the main exploiter of the villagers. The elders instigate both brothers against each other and show false sympathy whenever necessary. They say to Ramesh, "Listen to us, Ramesh, we are not like Beni Ghosal- there is no controversy about our birth (137)." And then they go to Beni's house and say to him, "I can wager that within a couple of days Ramesh will go to the dogs- or else you can change my name, Beni Babu (137)." Ramesh overhears this conversation and the ugly side of the rural life reveals itself to him within a day. He feels disgusted and wants to leave this deplorable situation. His Jethaima comes to his rescue and helps in executing the ceremony smoothly.

Bishheshwari is the force behind Ramesh's efforts at the revival of the village society. She is the old wise 'woman' playing the mediator in the rejuvenation of a male dominated society. Ramesh's disillusionment is revealed early on in the novel when he says, "He had witnessed the degrading and scheming behaviour of the so-called heads of society only a few minutes ago and the flames of disgust were still burning bright within him. He burst forth in utter distaste, 'By village society you mean the likes of Dharamdas and Gobinda, don't you? Isn't it better that such a society remains absolutely powerless, Jethaima? (140).'" Bishheshwari plays the role of Providence for him and his mission of reformation. She enlightens him about the ways in which to direct his efforts and how to cultivate goodwill. As Bidhubhushan Das states, "In *Palli Samaj*, Saratchandra handles a society which is steeped in superstitions, old customs; it is, nevertheless, a society in transition. This village society furnishes a stage for action by Ramesh who is dazed by the amount of evil there in the shape of ignorance, pettiness, ill-will fraud, casteism, child marriage, disease etc. His illusion about peace and harmony and joy of village life is shattered but for the insights of Bishheshwari who opens his eyes to the futility of his resentment against them. The suffering of the villagers is endless and in turn they are portrayed as objects of deep compassion (144)."

Beni is the cliché 'evil landlord' and he is least concerned about the betterment and upliftment of the village. The efforts of Ramesh are an eyesore for him and he leaves no stone unturned to stop Ramesh's mission. He does not even hesitate to punish his mother for her help to Ramesh and uses every tactic for continuation of his reign of terror and exploitation. "Bishheshwari's action that day had received wide publicity across the ten villages in the district. Beni found it personally impossible to be harsh to his mother for having supported Ramesh and for going against social convention; yet he felt that his mother ought to be reprimanded for the embarrassment and insult her actions had brought on him, and so he took the help of Rama's aunt (148)."

Ramesh and Beni are brothers but are poles apart from each other. Ramesh comes to the village as a clean slate and the hardships of the villagers move him. He is unable to believe the level of degradation rampant in the supposed blissful rural society. When he enquires about the condition of the village from his elder relative he is unhappy to hear about the normalcy of this situation. "All villages are the same, besides being riddled by legal

battles and all manners of litigation. This is the peak of Kalyug- an era when sin abounds. It is only too apparent that you, the youth, are kind and generous; it is the old humbugs who cause problems. They do not let go any opportunity to take advantage of the weakness of people, they would hang them if they could (144).”

Sarat in his portrayal of the rural society, has not spared the villagers and has depicted their narrowmindedness and deceitfulness. Beni might be the villain of the narrative but the villagers are not innocent as a lamb. The upper caste people leave no opportunity to cheat the lower caste and blame the lower caste for indecent behaviour. One such incidence of the high handedness of upper caste is narrated as follows: “She immediately caught hold of my hand! Will I run away with all her dues- past and present? Is there any discipline in this village or not? It does not look like there is any such thing, or else should not that fisherwoman have been absolutely boycotted by all? What is the matter with all of you, Madhu? You are almost using force to get a bit of money out of me! We keep meeting everyday- have you lost all sense of shame? If everyone hounds a person in this manner it will become impossible to live in this village any longer (145-46-47).” Sarat believed that idealisation and glorification of the countryside is a falsification of life. Caste prejudices are at the root of rural life (Madan, 64).

The social norms of the village are gossip and blind faith in superstitions. Because of the rigid rules, widow remarriage is looked down upon. But the young widows are exploited and harassed and are publically humiliated. The novel has instances of transgressing widows and their public castigation. According to Rajul Sogani, “The transgressing widow calls into question the basis of conjugal love and the ideal of femininity as enshrined in patriarchal Hindu ideology (114).” Ramesh’s father’s ceremony is disturbed by such an incidence of power play between the upper and lower caste people who victimize a widow to reaffirm their social status:

“Khanto Mashi screamed, ‘You carry your own daughter to the funeral pyre when she expires. There is no need to worry about my child. Gobinda, don’t you ever look at your own self when you talk? Your relative there, sitting coily in the store room, where and why did she disappear for almost one and a half years, returning so sickly and washed out? Aren’t there any skeletons in the cupboards of the rich? Do not irritate me too much, I can reveal a lot of secrets. We too have borne children and can recognize the signs quite well. Don’t try to hoodwink us! (141).”

The villagers operate according to public opinion and concepts like freewill and reason have no meaning for them. The fear of social ostracization has numbed their sensibilities for any injustice. “In minutes, a group of people stood up, ready to leave. They were naïve and rustic people, well versed in obeying the dictums of society, particularly where it was most advantageous (142).” The secrets and scandals of various households are known to all and sundry. These are used to exact revenge and to settle scores whenever necessary. The social status of a person determines the level of punishment meted out to them. One of the villagers says to Ramesh, “What more is there to say, Babaji? Life in villages follows this pattern. Gobinda Ganguly- if one were to even mention all his sins, it would be necessary to do penance just from uttering the words. Khantomoni was not wrong-

but everybody is scared of him. He is incomparable so far as counterfeiting, organizing false witnesses and framing people in legal battles is concerned. Beni Babu is his toady; hence, no one dares to utter a word against him either! Rather, he is responsible for turning so many people into outcasts (144).” The futility of senseless logic and dead traditions is vividly portrayed by Sarat. As Humayun Kabir observes about the novel, “For most of the characters, ritual has taken the place of faith. The cruelty and narrowness which result from dead social forms is shown with remorseless logic (77).”

The subalterns of the village are widows and lower class. The lives of these classes are peripheral and their existence has no social standing and meaning. They are used as baits by the patriarchy to puff their egos and instil the fear of religion in others. The life of these socially marginalized categories revolves in a vicious circle of victimization, displacement, scandals, fines and punishments and the threat of repetition of this circle. The whip of a dead conscience and blind spectators keep them in the position of a perpetual prey of social customs. By displacing the narrative of a serene and sacred rural society, Sarat brought to the fore, the poignant and agonising state of the Bengali countryside. In the words of Shibdas Ghosh, “Saratchandra wanted to rouse a strong urge for social revolution by generating pain, anguish and a feeling of want in the minds of readers- leading to a yearning for higher values of life he did not want to deceive or be deceived by indulging in superficial, empty words about social revolution (284).”

Ramesh’s endeavour of social reform meets numerous obstacles due to the cold attitude of the villagers. The village people want to enjoy everything for free and don’t want to spend their time and resources for the betterment of their fellow beings. The village school is in tatters and no one is least bothered about the education of the children. The school teachers are forced to collect their salaries as alms and their pleas for basic infrastructure fall on deaf ears. The school headmaster tells Ramesh, “Beni Babu is the secretary, but he does not spend any money on the school at all. Jodu Mukherjee’s daughter, is truly a benevolent lady- if she had not taken an interest, the school would have shut down a long time ago. This year she had promised to have the roof of the school re-thatched; but it is a mystery as to why she has suddenly stopped all help (148).” The power struggle between Ramesh and Beni has forced Rama to give up her good efforts. As Madan says, “Appalling poverty, hunger, starvation, disease and death are a chronic feature of life in the countryside. Ramesh undergoes all these experiences and he is not only depressed but shocked by them (65).” The laidback behaviour of the villagers seems revolting to Ramesh. The main road of the village had greatly deteriorated but the villagers only used temporary methods to repair the road. Ramesh’s initiative to properly repair the road is met with casualness and no contributions are made. And on top of that he hears this conversation, “None of you contribute anything at all- it is mostly in his interest to do so. After all, his shoes must remain clean on the roads! Besides, all the while that he was not here, did we not manage to reach the station? Another person had responded, why not wait some more! Chatterjee Moshai was saying that he can even be hoodwinked into renovating the temple. If you can sidle up to him and appeal to his ego by addressing him as “Babu” a couple of times, that is all that is needed (156).” He has been made a butt of jokes and he feels emotionally and mentally stifled. His kindness is seen as cowardice and no helping hand is extended towards him. The mental state of Ramesh is

rightly captured by Madan when he states, “The village uplift is a stupendous task. Any person who attempts it invites animosity and hatred from the village folk. He will experience sheer apathy and indifference prevailing among them (65).” The spirit with which Ramesh embarked on this mission is traumatized by the prevailing darkness.

This text is an integrated picture of a rural society in transition which is still confined to the orbit of Hindu social experience. It is not a mere facsimile of life but is emboldened by the message of rural reconstruction. Ramesh’s anger at the apathy of the villagers is changed to pity when he thinks about his Jethaima’s advice. He clearly sees the darkness prevailing in the village when he says, “These people are so narrow-minded and petty that they cannot even understand what is good for them. They lack education to such a degree that the destruction of a neighbour’s strength seems to them to be the best way for them to become stronger! It is the height of foolishness to be upset with people who become agitated at the mere prospect of someone working for their betterment (158).” Despite repeated opposition and calumny caused by the ignorance and selfishness of people towards his efforts, he goes back to his work with renewed energy. Subodh Ghose asserts that the qualities, the symptoms and the significance of ‘national literature’ is to be found in *Palli Samaj*. The theme of rural regeneration and growth of the novel fits perfectly in the agenda of nationalist and political movement that was operating in Bengal at the time of its publication. The motto of rural advancement taken up by Ramesh serves as a miniature model and example for national evolution. The reasons of factionalism in the village society: caste and religious identity-both are questioned and interrogated by him.

Beni is the exploiter of the peasants and Ramesh poses as a threat to his schemes. The growing influence of Ramesh upon the villagers is a warning sign for his dominance. Ramesh is a saviour of the community and is an agent of social emancipation created by Sarat. In the word of L. Strizhevskaya, “In the second period of his work there were works in which Sarat tried to suggest his positive ideal, to find ways and means of delivering society from its evils, and of improving human relations. The novel *Palli Samaj* shows that in the matter of raising culture in the village the writer relied on the educational work of solitary intellectuals (344).” The unrelenting spirited of this educated young man creates a ray of hope and instils faith among the desolate subjects of the village. When Beni asks some of his subjects to stand witness against Ramesh in court for breaking the dam, they straight away refuse. All the pleas and reprimands of Beni have no effect on dissuading them from the path of righteousness. The benevolence of Ramesh had given them strength to stand erect against brute force. Their confidence and loyalty is reflected in their words, “Akbar said in harsh tones, Don’t you dare call us traitors, Boro Babu! We are Muslims and can tolerate everything but that. Who does he call a traitor, Didi? He sits at home and says all this-but only a personal meeting would reveal what kind of a person Chhoto Babu is! What are you saying, Boro Babu, don’t I have any shame? Am I not the headman of five villages? Didi Thakrun, I can go to jail if you so command, but this! (168).” Beni had underestimated Ramesh and he realises that he cannot be vanquished so easily. The vanity and despotism of Beni is under threat and he blames Ramesh for undermining the hierarchy of the village.

The power struggle accelerates after Ramesh's arrival in the village and its end result is the awakening of the lower classes when Ramesh is jailed. The passive and small scale resistance expressed through Khanto Mashi's rant takes the shape of open defiance when the villagers boycott Durga Puja festivities in Rama's house. The scene of protest is depicted in these words, "Every year Rama organized the Durga Puja festival with a lot of fanfare. The first day of the festival had drawn to a close and it was getting to be dusk. The half moon was gradually visible, but the huge courtyard of the Mukherjees was largely deserted, barring a few people who lingered there. Inside, heaps of food grew cold and unappetizing as time passed-but not a single farmer appeared to partake of even a morsel! (188)." The change that Ramesh had envisioned appears when he is absent to observe this advancement. The frustration of dominant forces is reflected by Beni's caustic remarks, "Oh! Then is all this food to be wasted by these low-down characters? Such audacity! I will teach those scoundrels a lesson. I will see to it that their crops are destroyed. You scoundrels, why do you not understand that the man on whose strength you are basing all these actions is languishing in jail. How much time will it take us to deal with the likes of you?! (189)." The wheel has turned in the favour of the downtrodden and power has been wrested out of the hands of the oppressor. The people who used to bow before Beni now openly defy him and refuse to obey his orders. An anti-authoritarian tendency develops among the villagers and the people now question the dominance of an idle landlord like Beni. When the subject Sanatan Hazare is asked about their daring boycott of the festivities he answers, "What daring? Whatever has been done so far has been done by you to me. But, no matter, whether it's blessed food or not, none of us will ever go to that house again for a meal. The Muslims of Pirpur are greatly agitated. They have targeted Boro Babu and are on the lookout for a chance to pounce on him-it is lucky that they have not managed to do so yet (191)." The protest which was in hushed tones is out in the open now and creates fear of a backlash in Beni's mind. His harsh tone changes into polite request and he urges Sanatan to make a statement in front of the police. But the subalterns cannot be fooled anymore. They are politically mobilised and are aware of the strength they possess. The lower classes have united in support of their leader Ramesh and shrewd tactics of Beni cannot befool them. Sanatan says to Beni, "How much longer can I hope to live, Boro Babu! If I commit such a grievous sin, when I die no one will be willing to even touch me with their feet, let alone perform the last rites. Those days are long past, Boro Babu, those days are no longer there! Chhoto Babu has turned everything upside down and put a new way of looking at things in place. Chhoto Babu said just an outward show does not make a person a Brahmin. I am not a young man and am well aware of all that is going on. Are your activities worthy of a true Brahmin? A new awareness has come upon a lot of us now...particularly among all the young men of both villages who gather every evening at Zafar Ali's house. They have stated very clearly, if anyone is the zamindar, it is Chhoto Babu-the rest are all thieves. Besides we pay for all our privileges, what is there to be scared of? A Brahmin is nobody special-he is someone just like me. The relationship between Hindus and Muslims there is like that of the relationship between siblings. They are united in every respect. Ever since Chhoto Babu was sent to jail, their anger has been piling up like a heap of dynamite-do not set it afire (191-92)." The awakening that Ramesh had envisioned for his village has been achieved. The idyllic village of literature has

begun to be realised in concrete form. The quiet masses have been radicalised and they have started taking issue with the established way of thinking.

The motto of the village revival has been achieved by Ramesh and he is a celebrated man now. People come to him for settling their disputes instead of going to the court. He has become an epitome of justice and equality and people trust his decisions. He witnesses a grand change in the demeanour and act of people who earlier saw him as an enemy. The tables have turned in his favour and he has acted as a catalyst of social change. "Ramesh observed that all the positive forces he had initiated and that had continually been retarded by Beni and yet continued to gather momentum, were now a might to be reckoned with! One by one everybody in the village came and proffered their regret for the wrongs that had been perpetrated against him (199)." His initiation and support gave voice and confidence to the voiceless sufferers of subjugation. His character of an educated reformer fits perfectly in the scheme of a nation's aspirations from its youth. The contemporariness of Ramesh's character is explained by Sogani when she states, "The male protagonists in these romantic novels embody the individualism as well as emerging national consciousness of educated middle class Indians. They are idealists and dreamers, searching for a meaningful existence through love, patriotism, self-sacrifice and community leadership. They do not have strong family ties but have inherited enough wealth to eliminate the necessity of working for a living. Working for underprivileged and marginalized groups, particularly in villages, is a matter of high priority with these young men. Being I love with a widow or wishing to marry a widow indicates their idealism and social conscience (88)."

This text is the personification of the Renaissance spirit of the nineteenth century. The novel's location of the village Kuapur is a mini representation of a colonized nation struggling to maintain its sanity in a tumultuous environment. The novel is an urge to the countrymen to rise to the challenge of nation building and locate and rebuild the lost idyllic culture. The power struggle enacted in the novel for social change is close to the idea of politics which Foucault propounded. As Sara Mills states, "Foucault is more concerned to develop and describe a politics which takes account of the transformative possibilities within the present (16)." The obstacles that come in Ramesh's way bring to light the political struggles of a reformer. His scepticism regarding ancient traditions meets the opposition and laxity of the villagers. His dissent and denouncement of mystifications of caste, class and religion offers strong resistance to the dominant discourse of Beni and his associates. Ramesh arouses the villagers from passivity and stimulates them to be active agents of their life situation.

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