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A Literary History of the Detective Genre in Bengali Literature: From the Rig Veda to Byomkesh Bakshi

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Abstract:

Sumanto Banerjee¹ states that the detective arrived in Bengal as a result of the advent of capitalist economy during late eighteenth and nineteenth century Bengal (Banerjee, 1987). Due to migration to the colonial capital Calcutta during urbanization the cityscape enfolded within its terrain pockets of crime which had changed its character from crimes before. If crime be as he argues an act of breaking the law then the nature of crime committed in modern Calcutta would be considerably different from what has been considered criminal before. For example the freedom struggle was considered by the British penal structure as a punishable offence and public execution of the criminal was accepted as a legal punishment then. Similarly, the urban Calcutta was faced with many new kinds of crimes such as forgery, theft, burglary and transformation from the police required to subdue the rebels. This article explores the literary journey of the character on pages of Bengali Literature.

Keywords: Gender, Readership, Masculinity, Detective Literature in Bengali, Sleuth, Translation studies, Feluda, Postcolonial Masculinity, Characterisation.

The detective story can be detected as early as in the Vedic age in the Rig Veda, where a female dog, called Sarama has been employed by the gods to find their lost cow which had been stolen by a band of foreign dacoits called *Pani*. Sarama traces the whereabouts of the dacoits and ultimately leads the gods to the lost cow. The first detective in India is extremely important a character if we are to trace an indigenous lineage of the non western detective. The colonial hangover of the genre is evident as I have previously stated and the idea that the masculinity of the detective alpha male is a direct import from the European counterparts where the crisp western rationality of the detective is evident. In fact the first ever detective in India is a female. The most striking feature of this characterization is the fact that her feline instincts as well as her female intuition to solve the mystery of the lost cow.

Sarama is a literary figure in those times when the consciousness of the loss of masculine strength was not imprinted in the mind of who wrote of the Indian male. Hence when Ashish Nandy writes of the merging of the *purusha* and *pakriti* in the formation of the male ideal, the detective of Bengali fiction is best perceived as a character emerging out of a literary tradition which had never shied away from the feminine but had heralded it.

Another prototype character who had been the predecessor of our modern Bengali detective was the judge or the *Kazi*, *Bicharok* etc. Various short stories and folk tales constitute the story of the judge (kazi) or a witty noble like Birbal, Naseeruddin and Gopal Bhaar, who would unravel mysteries while all the time they would provoke humour in their readers. One of the earliest stories of a resolution of crime in Bengali fiction can be traced back to 8th century in a compilation by William Kerry called *Itihasmaala* (Ranjit Chatterjee and Sidharth Bose, 2008), where he states the story of a Brahmin who had gone to the pond to bathe leaving a wad of notes tied to his clothes but came back only to find his money missing. Helpless and penniless he runs to the local judge who then order his men to go to the site of the crime and to stab the ground with their spears, after the men carry out his orders, the thief who is a milkman, seeing this while passing, foolishly comments that whether such an act would get them back the lost money. On hearing which the men brings him to the judge who punishes the milkman and returns the money to the rightful owner. Wit and humour have long since been a part of the literary tradition from which the modern detective derives.

The detectives so far as I have mentioned have belonged to the privileged noble class constituting of high caste powerful individuals who possess powerful offices and are hence influential. The offices they are given charge of demand of these characters a certain amount of seriousness, a trustworthy judicious nature which would justify their capacity to mete out justice to all who are in need. However, I do not want to trace the presence of a detective like or a functionally similar character in Bengali literature in order to establish the roots of the detective fiction, since my argument is that the detective emerged in Bengal for a given social context and cultural condition, I consider the beginnings to be in the fag end of nineteenth century when detectives were born out of colonial modernity.

The modern detective in Bengali came almost half a century later than the emergence of the European counterparts. The first detective narratives can be traced back to the year 1892, when Priyonath Mukhopadhyay, an employee of the government's investigation bureau, began writing first hand narratives of crime stories. One of such stories, *Kritim Mudra* (*Counterfeit Coins*) tells the story of how the detective had caught a notorious criminal after he had initially been tricked out of evidences. In this story the play of wit is far more prominent than the suspense due to the anonymity of the criminal mastermind. The terrain which Mukhopadhyay traverses to trace the whereabouts of the criminal is also obvious here. He is outwitting a known foe who is escaping capture by sheer deception. In this story, as I have discussed earlier, the police hierarchical structure is evident. Mukhopadhyay seems painfully aware of the fact that he cannot appear to be a fool in front of his white superiors.

The universe of his memoirs is the same as that his office and the frequent inadequacy of western logic and rationality system of investigation becomes prominent. In a case, cited by Sumanto Banerjee, where a client kills a prostitute who had a lot of jewellery in her possession by poisoning her. The coroner in charge of the post mortem fails to decipher any trace of poison in the victim's body; the plot precedes the times when the Indians were allowed to conduct a post mortem, Mukhopadhyay comments on the existence of certain

Indian poisons which eluded the English tactic of detection. The social real is an imminent presence in these stories. Since Mukhopadhyay himself is a Bengali sleuth employed by the Europeans the stories of his adventures gained tremendous popularity in these times for they were not only addressing the social truth but also shaping in the Bengali reader a very real image of a successful professional conscious of the superiority of his capacity and ethnicity.

A series was published called *Daroga'r Doptor* or The Office of the Inspector comprising of 206 stories, the first of which appeared in April 1892, was called *Banomali Das'er Hatya* or The Murder of Banomali Das. The stories were biographical, stripped of all ornamentation narrating stories of everyday crime in the author's universe stated in a very matter of fact way. The plots of these adventures lacked the sensationalism and the suspense content of later fictive detective stories. The detective of Mukhopadhyay's stories is tied to the government's functioning and his responsibility to the institution is obvious in the stories. Not too later the detective would be self employed without constraints of a disciplined occupation. The Holmesian nonchalance and whimsical lifestyle is yet to arrive to the Indian detective's characteristics.

At this same time Kaliprasanna Chatterjee compiled and published written by the first Muslim detective in Bengal, Barkhatulla, he, as I have mentioned, is a policeman employed by the government to capture the *Thugees*, his cunning and wit earned him the name Bankaulla which later came, to be known as Bankaulla. His twelve stories have been compiled in the series called *Bankaulla's Doptor* or the Office of Bankaulla. He is a decent young fellow who has an enthusiasm towards the knowledge of Hinduism, and gives up no chance to know more of the religion (*Bahurupi*, from *Bankaulla's Doptor*). Another investigation required him to enter a Vaishnavite temple in disguise and live there for some time. His appreciation of the other religion is apparent in the plots of the memoirs. His story range from the suburbs of the colonial capital city Calcutta and usually takes him to the various places away from it. Even though a trip to the in a time when a journey from Calcutta to Benares on a boat would take one and a half months, but however this does not prevent his detective from operating in a wide geographical terrain. The wanderlust of the Bengali imagination has been tapped in by the genre right at its onset. This detective policeman moves around without uniform, anonymous except for the fact that many of his foes know him from his fame.

However, what one observes right from the onset is the fact that the genre suffers from a disdain towards the female characters. The feminine intuitive skills might be upheld at times however, the female intervention in the workings of the alpha male universe of sinister operations had already started getting rare. In Bankaulla's writings though female characters are not rare and they do have their significance in these narratives since their instincts are usually used in achieving resolution to the puzzles which come in Bankaulla's way, he treats them as a mere hindrance to the daring feats he could have achieved in their absence. However, he does admit to taking immense help from Bibijaan, a prostitute from Sonagachi in many cases but he asserts how he had rewarded her for her services which required special skills of seduction and conviction.

Till now the detective stories produced are biographical accounts of the employees of the police department. The first fiction was written by Panchkori Dey but his stories cannot really be called original since they are stories originally composed in the West and given Indian colours. His detective is most certainly a derivation of Sherlock's brother Mycroft Holmes. He has been unsuccessful in his pursuit of academics and after whiling away four years he developed a habit of reading foreign books of detective stories. Yet when he expressed his desire to join the police department his brother, who was an established doctor in society, refused to allow him the joy of joining the department. Banerjee states that the police detective department had gradually become infamous since very soon it became the nexus of corruption. Bribery, extortion and other malpractices infiltrated the department and the policemen lost the previously enjoyed grandeur of their profession. Becoming a detective at the department had lost its glitter and the middle class who were attracted to the profession were already moving away from it. By this time Mukhopadhyay or Bankaulla's days were slowly trickling to an end and the upper middle class of these times were moving away from seeking employment as a servant of the police force. However, Dey's detective Akshay Kumar, has to impress his brother with his investigative skills in the story *Chithichuri (The Theft of the Letter)* so as to convince him of a career as a detective in the police.

The social implications of being in the police were fast losing its elevated stature, more so as is obvious in the writings of Panchkori Dey, the western influence on the Indian detective was gaining prominence at an even faster pace. Soon the Indian social context would appropriate the mannerisms of the western detective and the Indian male would start resemble his western counterpart. The growing antipathy towards the police department would soon rid the detective of plots where he would be bound to governmental rules and regulations. The figure would then evolve into the self employed independent professional who seeks occasional help from the police. His universe will have little to do with women characters and his stories will focus on his character and its evolution while he solves mysteries worthy of his interest. This can be marked as the beginning of Holmesian influence on the popular detective figure.

The first female author of the detective Saralabala Dasi (Sirkar), treats women with disgust. Her detective, Shekhar, is the first where the European influences are so evident. The man is unnaturally sharp and intelligent. However, due to his own lack of enthusiasm in the general things he has never achieved a stature he deserved. He had formerly been employed by the government but the job had almost girdled his capabilities into the clockwork of a routine, which he detested, hence he was now a free consulting detective who followed only his rules and regulations for the investigation he undertook. These stories are also written in first person narration but only this time the perspective is not of the detective's but that of an admirer's. Historically it is possible to locate the of narrative technique which is going to be undertaken by more successful authors of detective fiction in Bengali and most popular structure of detective fiction in Bengali that would eventually come to be.

The conventional garb of the male universe of the detective gets challenged right on the onset since the most popular conventions used by renowned names now recognised as the creators of the success of this branch of fiction, stems from a female imagination. However,

there is a marked disdain for women in Saralabala's writings. In one of her stories, *Gharichuri* or *The Theft of the Watch*, Shekhar most pompously points out, he can make out from the clumsiness of the writing which had left its impression on a piece of paper that it must have been written by a female hand and since he has been an expert in analysing handwriting while he was an employee of the police he is very well acquainted to the pathetic handwriting women have. With the import of Holmes like characteristic an all pervasive sense of the need for an all male universe of the detective can be perceived. The elaborate engagement with a letter written on a piece of paper torn from what appeared to the detective as a woman's note serves the purpose of establishing the detective's suave qualities also emphasizes how he casually dismisses a woman's skills with the pen and comments on the scents of her perfumed letter in a condescending tones. Ironically, all of this comes from the first female author of the detective. She seems to be very aware of the task she has at hand of constructing an awe inspiring, admirable male supreme and she assumes the slighting of the female as a natural consequence of this. Even harsher is the fact that she believes this to be task for her detective to earn success since he is authored by her female pen.

Within the years 1890 to 1930, numerous contributions were made to the genre by authors like Nagendranath Gupta, Harisadan Mukhopadhyay, Dinendra Kumar Ray. Police stories or the adventurous exploits of the *Daroga* was also written about, by Girish Chandra Basu called *SheyKaaler Daroga Kahini* or Stories of the Daroga from Yonder Years. The sudden enthusiasm about and the interest in the genre was aroused since the editor of the *Bharati* magazine, Swarna Kumari Devi decided to become the patron of the genre. *Bharati* encouraged and published detective stories due to which reason a lot of detective fiction was written in this magazine from as early as 1887. Harisadan Mukhopadhyay, Nagendra Gupta were all published here.

Another significant contribution which produced a lot of detective fiction was the announcement of the *Kuntalin* prize by technician and perfumer Hemendra Mohan Basu who had made *Kuntalin* and *Dilkhosh* named perfumes. A lot of prize winning stories have shaped the genre and the figure of the detective, and in this period, had kept an active interest in the genre alive. The winners of this prize include Saralabala Dasi (Sirkar), the first female writer of this genre and whose work I have discussed at length already, Rajani Chandra Dutta and Dinendra Kumar Ray. Many magazines came into being during this time which published detective fiction only, writer Ambika Charan Gupta published a monthly magazine called *Goenda'r Golpo (Detective Story)*, where he published his own detective novel called *Swarnabayi*.

Though Priyonath Mukhopadhyay was considered as the first author of the original detective fiction written in Bengali there were authors who had written detective fiction only to be published after Mukhopadhyay's stories became popular. These authors included Bhuban Chandra Mukhopadhyay, who had published a story called *Haridas'er Guptakotha (Haridas' Secrets)*. In 1896, he published a novel in six volumes called *Markin Police Commissioner (American Police Commissioner)*. Other contributors to this genre include Khetrāmohan Ghosh and Surendramohan Bhattacharya. Inspired by Priyonath

Mukhopadhyay's success Sarachchandra Sirkar published a series called *Goenda Kahini (Detective Stories)* where many others contributed.

Later Dinendra Kumar Ray translated many detective stories from English to Bengali. He has also written a few original detective fictions. One of his stories has a female detective, though she cannot really be called one since she is a mere housewife who took the responsibility of solving a murder mystery on her fragile shoulders in order to acquit her husband. In this particular story called *Hatya Rahasya (Murder Mystery)* all significant characters are females. From the murder victim, the detective and even the murderer is a female. The plot is set in the confines of a house in Benares; our investigator is forced to undertake a journey to Benares for her husband is the prime suspect of the murder. A mere girl bred on the benevolence of her benefactor, she says that the only reason for which she could undertake such a task was due to her deep love for her husband and the story ends with the declaration that love is the singular reason which can light the darkest hour, turn a curse to bliss etc. The crime committed in this story is also due to passion. The association of the female rationality has been associated with *crime passionel* or crimes of passion and love. Female universes can only include adult content. Their stories are not born out of adventurous spirits but out of swirling red passion. Emotions being the driving force behind their ventures. Their participation in the mystery has been the outcome of their emotional interests.

Our heroine leaves no stone unturned to lift all charges from her virtuous husband and in the end she is rewarded by his admiring gaze since she confides to the reader she had indeed achieved feats impossible for a woman to accomplish. The crucial reality that surfaces in this narrative is the fact that how barring transgressors like the working women, who were still majorly composed of actresses, prostitutes and domestic help, women had little mobility in contemporary society. The *Bhadromohila* or the lady was confined in her household and left her comfortable and protected abode only to head for the temple or to seek rare, sanctioned entertainments. Since by this time the genre had already become a part of popular literature skirting the sordid sleaze of its origins, the involvement of the woman detective had to be for a noble cause considered worthy by the broader patriarchal society. Her character could not be of any less stature but a certain amount of travel would be inevitable in tales of mystery hence the crisis has been asserted as a task any woman of bearing would take up in order to fulfil her duty to her husband. It is interesting to note that the woman detective of this story is not really of noble lineage. She had been adopted by the landlord after her father, who had served a lifetime of faithful service had passed away. She was indeed married to a man of no income and of a lower stature from the landlord's family. The class structure present in this story is extremely interesting. While all the ladies are women are of endless virtues, the victim belongs to the class of maids and it is due to her love for the nephew of a rich and pious lady that he is deprived of his legitimate inheritance. The detective is nestled somewhere in between the two classes since she is not a lady by birth but due to the mercy of her benevolent benefactor. While in the universes of the male detectives, modern capitalist economy has already shaped crimes and adventures, the woman's tales still reveal feudal class division and social structures.

The author Dinendra Nath Roy is also responsible for authoring two hundred seventeen detective stories. These stories were heavily influenced by series published in England called *Sexton Blake* and *Union Jack*, they were translations in Bengali bearing minor transformations published under the series *Rahasya Lahari*. The stories have western origins but since they are being translated into Bengali by Roy therefore the stories have been made identifiable to the Bengali reader. Some of his novels have been based loosely on English novels, namely, *Aisha*, *She*, *Rupashi Morubashini (The Beautiful Desert Dweller)*, *Bhuter Jaahaj (The Ship of Ghosts)*, *Chiner Dragon (Chinese Dragon)* etc. These are stories where sometimes he would change the plot and at other instances he would change names of the characters only. The first story of the series was called *Bidhi'r Bidhan (God's Decree)*. The crimes in these stories would concern the urban reality of Calcutta and their distinctive address of the failure of law and order due to modernization makes these inspired tales an important part of the Bengali detective genre.

These stories composed during the period 1890- 1930, were then taken over by writings of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay and RabindraNath Tagore. These three major literary figures in Bengal had successfully encapsulated a major portion of the Bengali readership making minor authors fade into insignificance and neglect. Hemendra Kumar Ray finally decided to tap into children's literature in order to resurrect the genre. Rzepka divides the detective story as belonging to mainly two categories, mystery and adventures. These stories prioritized adventure since they intended to capture interests of young adults. These stories involved the first trio of Bengali detectives, Bimal, Kumar and Sundarbabu, who is a policeman but would more often than not fail to solve the crime cases he was faced. Sundarbabu would also time and again the two professional detectives created by Ray Jayanto, Manik. Jayanto and Manik were professional detectives while Bimal and Kumar are adventurers, who would solve mysteries in case the professionals were not available. Ray was responsible for the genre evolving into a body of literature which was not only meant for adult readership, which had been the case so far. Taking his duos to distant countries and using the mysterious forests of Africa and the strange tribes of South America to weave immensely interesting and imaginative stories Ray gave the genre the required breath of air.

However, even beyond sheer literary success lay the important motifs and conventions that Ray created for detective literature which were meant for young minds. His writings bore the added trope of imparting fresh knowledge to his readers about faraway lands and their inhabitants. In his story *OgaadhJolerRuiKatla (Fishes of Deep Waters)*, Ray writes of a weapon used by the villain is a blow-pipe collected by the villain from Borneo during his travels. It is only because Bimal had travelled to this place too and knew of this weapon and its usage that he could defeat this murderer red handed. Hence wanderlust which had previously in the first era of detective fiction been confined to suburbs or till Benares due to the limitations of transportation in late nineteenth century Calcutta, broke away from all constraints in the twentieth century and took off on the wings provided by the detective like never before. The adventurer detective would be found travelling to Africa, Java, Ceylon and Burma etc. Bimal had the added advantage of having trained himself with the weapon so as

to foil the impeccable plan of the murderer, a feat the policeman Sundarbabu could never have dreamt of given his limited exposure to the world outside his custody. The trope used in detectives of mid twentieth century of having a character in their plot who is an assistant and another one who serves as a foil to the detective survived and evolved since it successfully tapped into the reader's humorous bone and enriched the genre. Hence Bimal, Kumar, Jayanto, Manik teaming up with Sundarbabu became the predecessors of many such trios who would fascinate readers in the later years. Humour also became a significant component of the detective universe.

In 1928, Manoranjan Bhattacharya created a Japanese detective called Hukakashi. Bhattacharya had begun narrating the adventures of Hukakashi in a journal called *Ramdhanu* (*Rainbow*). Hukakashi was a professional detective in Kolkata who was usually accompanied by his dedicated and admiring companion Ranajit. By nature this Japanese man is very different from the flamboyant and self congratulatory Bengali detectives; he operates silently, unnoticed by everybody, so much so as to the fact that he refrains from accepting a case until he requested personally, is efficient and swift. Proficient in mathematics, Hukakashi possesses an eye for all minute details. His characteristics vary vastly from the robust and dramatic Bengali detective, his strength lies in his mind. Bhattacharya, just like Ray, wrote adult fiction before authoring the cases of Hukakashi. Playing on the humorous nerve, Sibram Chakravarty, created Kalkekashi, who was a parody of the aforementioned detective. Chakravarty was one of the most successful authors of this time, he was known for his humour, satire and parodies. When he wrote of a parody the detective Hukakashi, the Bengali readers lovingly preserved his work amidst their favourites.

Kalkekashi was sadly far from revered by his assistant Prafulla, as a matter of fact, he considered working with the famous (known only in parts of Korea) detective as a task in itself. For this Korean man was greatly fascinated by Bengali food and hence gormandized at every given opportunity and his immense appetite could only be matched by his smartness, Prafulla, was more often than not quite irritated by this foreign man, only at times did he grudgingly grant him recognition for his genius. Prafulla says that Kalkekashi spoke fluent Bengali, Hindi and a few animal tongues, one of which could have been his mother tongue, was fat with rippling layers of flesh and had eyes of a fish. Blind to all except food Kalkekashi was hardly what popular expectation had shaped the imagination of a conventional detective to be. The detective stories written on him were farcical and his cases, exaggerated deductions were mirth provoking which ridiculed the conclusions he jumped to since there was little social relevance or importance to what these mysteries were usually concerned with.

Bhattacharya was also the editor of an adventure series called *Rahasya Chakra* (*The Wheel of Mysteries*). Numerous writers wrote for this series, Gajendra Kumar Mitra, who was known for novels and short stories also wrote a few mysteries for this series. His detective was called Tarun Gupta. Another series published during this time was the *Rahasya, Romancho, Adventure* (*Mystery, Thrillers, Adventure*) series. At around 1935 a lot of detective literature was being published, publishing houses like Deb SahityaKutir was publishing the *Kanchenjunga* series, a lot of renowned and established authors wrote for this

series, Hemendra Kumar Ray, Naresh Chandra Sengupta, Prabhabati Devi Saraswati and Nripendra Krishna Chattopadhyay, who had compiled a series himself, called the *Katyayani Goenda Gronthomala (Katyayani Detective Books)*, being amongst them. In the 1950s Deb SahityaKutir published yet another series called *Bishwachakra (World's Wheel)*, written by Swapan Kumar, which became tremendously popular with the youth of this time. Another series called *Prohelika (Riddle)* authored by the famous Sourindro Mohan Mukhopadhyay, who wrote under the pseudonym Sabyasachi, was also published by the same in this time. This series, however was heavily inspired by the famous western detective fiction. General Printers and Publishers Ltd. published *Bichitra Rahasya (Unique Mysteries)* series in 1938. Later *Mohan Series* was published by Sisir Publishing House. This series was also very popular amidst the youth. Mohan was modelled on Robin Hood and was created by Sasadhar Dutta. More than two hundred books were published in this series, but the demise of the author in 1952 caused the series to end abruptly.

While the publishing houses were riotously producing series after series, the minor detectives were outshone by an extremely important detective who entered the shelves of thrill obsessed readers in Calcutta with unprecedented ease and appreciation. The urban crime slaying impetus that detective fiction had tapped into from its inception finds its most successful execution in the hands of Saradindu Bandhopadhyay, who creates one of Bengal's most favourite sleuths, Byomkesh Bakshi. As a matter of fact, Ranjit Chatterjee and Siddharth Ghosh believe that it is due to Bandhopadhyay's writings that detective fiction gained its stature in the mainstream literature and became comparable to the writings of Tagore, Saratchandra Chattopadhyay and Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay. They quote the author,

"Mystery/ Adventure stories are definitely a part of literature, because they talk of human nature and human conditions, why must the thrill reduce its stature from serious literature? Some Nobel laureates in literature have also written in this genre. If language be the carrier of a narrative, then any serious dramatic narrative will suffer with the failure of it and if it be successful then even a detective story would be literature worthy of reckoning with" [translation mine].(RanjitChatterjee and Sidhharth Bose, 2008)

Bandhopadhyay's is feverishly Bengali, who prefers to call himself *Satyanweshi (The Truth Searcher)* instead of the English term *Detective*, wears dhoti instead of pantaloons and represents the middle class Bengali in all its defiance to any colonial hangovers. This detective, according to Chatterjee and Ghosh, is equal to Sherlock Holmes, Father Brown or Doctor Thorndike in terms of capabilities and intelligence. He is one of the most critically acclaimed creations of Bengali literature. His very middle class lifestyle, yet a certain arrogance which is an almost Holmes- like characteristic but a very prominent inclination towards a moral and ethical structure which distinctively distinguishes him from all Holmesian deviant ways. A bachelor with casually careless behaviour, Byomkesh shows a very deep sense of human bonding and grows very fond of Ajit, his friend and the narrator of his exploits right after they became roommates in a city mess, he possesses an extremely pleasurable, friendly disposition and has one of the shrewdest and smartest minds of Bengali literature. From smoking cigarettes, to being an ardent consumer of tea and eggs, Byomkesh

does not bear any weapon, he is hardly found travelling long distances seeking solutions to mysteries. Rather in his stories, he has by chance been visiting a place on vacation or has been invited over to an estate and mysterious circumstances have followed in his wake. In order to solve a mystery which has taken place in Calcutta he has never had to travel anywhere except around the locale of the crime scene. I believe Bandhopadhyay does this for a very fascinating reason, Bengalis are known for their tendencies of taking vacations, calling on distant relations, visiting friends settled at faraway places. Bandhopadhyay uses this extremely stereotypical trait in Bengalis to address the wanderlust, which is an extremely important feature of the genre.

Since Byomkesh is a detective of colonial Calcutta, the crimes in his stories give an idea of the underworld of modern Calcutta like never before. From hired assassins (in *PatherKanta*) to murders committed to claim life insurances (in *Agnibaan*) and robbing banks (in *ChitraChor*), the crimes of the Byomkesh series have consistently baffled readers. The varied nature and the richness of the plots of Byomkesh's cases make the series such an interesting read. The cityscape of modern Calcutta has never been utilised as pockets cradling crime as well as in Bandhopadhyay's representation. In *PatherKanta* (*Thorn in [your] Path*) a cyclist slays people he has been paid to get rid of by piercing their hearts with pins he shoots with his cycle-bell. This he accomplishes by using busy roads where the ring of the bell would be drowned by the din of traffic. In the first story of the series called *Satyanweshi*, Byomkesh foils the operations of an *anonymous* drug peddler in Central Calcutta, which is a part of the colonial capital known for the lodging of migrants and in consequence had a dingy, corrupt and congested ambience. The mess where our sleuth and the narrator were lodged had a Chinese colony on one side, a slum on the other and at the third lane of the triangular formation had a tremendous population of Marwari businessmen. His stories have characters that are extremely real to the social conditions of 1930s Bengal. The mess is full of bachelors or men who need to stay away from their families in order to earn their living in the city. Crimes are committed in the dark alleys of modern Calcutta. Drug peddling, murder, theft and blackmail, the capital was fast developing an underworld where the satyanweshi needed to intervene. Scientific inventions (like the poison used on a matchstick in *Agnibaan*), legendary gold which has been hidden in medieval times (in *DurgaRahasya*, incidentally the innovative murderer uses poison in a pen's ink in this case), exotic drugs from South America (in *Makarsha'rRas*) and the very familiar plot of human greed and lust for money makes this series one of the most enriched body of literature produced in Bengali.

The series was also known for its very complete characterisations, the descriptive narration of the Byomkesh cases made the characters of this series credible and easily identifiable. These extremely developed real life characters and their passion, desperation and fear forms one of the most successful features of this series. For once the women are as much a part of the plot as the men are. Though the number of male characters is far more than the female characters, not once has the significance of these characters been compromised. Usually the female characters of this genre have suffered in the hands of adrenaline driven machismos who have claimed all significance. In the Byomkesh series many powerful females have generated awe in the readers' mind. Be it Banolakshmi in *Chiriakhana* (*Zoo*),

Kumar Bahadur's daughter in *Chorabali (Quicksand)*, the obnoxious wife of the poor professor in *ChitraChor (Thief of the Photograph)* or Byomkesh's own wife, Satyabati, whose strength impressed him to almost speechlessness in *Arthomanorthom (Money causes Devastation)*, the women have enjoyed a seriousness like never before. In *ChitraChor*, he even buys her a perfume in order to exact permission for a smoke after his illness. The domestic space where the detective is answerable to his wife is an unprecedented feature in this genre. However, this adds to the humane attributes of the detective rather than taking away from his masculinity. It must also be kept in mind that this series was written for adults and the woman was often placed in the fulcrum of plots concerning bloodlust and murder. It is needless to say, that given all the best of Saradindu Bandhopadhyay's literary genius, this detective remains to be quite the favourite of many a Bengali, its popularity never has diminished ever since the first time *Satyanweshi* was published in a magazine called *Basumati* in the year 1932.

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