

Representations of Ghosts in Trailokyanath's Writings: A Reassessment

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Abstract:

The Bengali novelist Trailokyanath Mukhopadhyay is remembered in our times as a writer of fantastic tales. This article studies his presentation of ghosts and the supernatural, which frequently appear in his stories. It is commonly assumed that his writings contain a polemic against the belief in ghosts. Scholars feel that as a didactic writer he attacked all superstitious beliefs of his countrymen, including the belief in the supernatural. This article contests this somewhat oversimplified view. To do so, it minutely considers biographical evidences. It also studies in details some of his more conventional ghost stories. Particular attention is paid to his adaptation of Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton's "The Haunted and the Haunters". By comparing these two stories, it is shown how Trailokyanath's version deviates from the original to provide a more conventional explanation of the haunting. He thereby converts Lytton's more unconventional rendering of the occult to a typical ghost story. Thus the author therefore did not write ghost stories simply to scoff at the belief in the supernatural. Based on these evidences, it is argued that Trailokyanath's thinking was never unidirectional as the scholars assume. It is necessary to recognize the contradictions inherent in his thinking to arrive at an objective evaluation of his works.

Keywords: Trailokyanath, ghosts, Spiritualism, Theosophy, Edward Bulwer Lytton, Mrs Gaskell.

This paper studies Trailokyanath's presentation of ghosts and the supernatural in his writings. Trailokyanath Mukhopadhyay (1847 – 1919), a contemporary of such illustrious literati as Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1838 – 1894), was an important Bengali man of letters. Once held in high regard for both his fiction and non-fictional writings, his fame has

somewhat diminished in our age. This is proven by the dearth of scholarly writings on him. Contemporary Bengali readers remember him, if at all, solely as the author of satiric, humorous and fantastic tales like *Kankabati* (1892) and *Damarucharit* (1923). Trailokyanath remains largely undervalued today, despite sporadic attempts to critically rehabilitate him. One outcome of this is that our evaluation of the author has become hackneyed and outmoded. Following the lead of early twenty first century scholars like Dr Debnarayan Ray, Dr Manasi Sengupta and Dr Tapodhir Bhattacharjee, it has become the norm to focus on the satiric and didactic elements in his works to the exclusion of everything else. Even Trailokyanath's rendering of the supernatural in his writings has been looked upon as being the extension of his polemics against the then Bengali society. According to Sengupta, ghosts in Trailokyanath's tales become elements to generate social criticism and humour (Manasi Sengupta 132). Bhattacharjee voices a somewhat similar opinion when he looks upon the ghosts as being the "representatives of the stupefied categories of human beings" (Bhattacharjee 51). For him, "Trailokyanath's conception of ghosts has nothing ghostly in it, nor does it originate from the domain of the supernatural" (Bhattacharjee 51). While such observations are valid to an extent, they certainly do not hold true for all his writings. There are tales where Trailokyanath's treatment of the supernatural appears more serious than his patently satiric works. In fact, Sengupta does acknowledge that the author has also written conventional ghost stories (Manasi Sengupta 130). However, the scholars' neglect of these texts shows that the contemporary understanding of the author cannot escape the charge of being based upon selective readings. Trailokyanath's representations of ghosts need to be more adequately problematized, keeping in view the almost contradictory stance towards the occult that is manifested in his writings. Such an attempt has been undertaken in the present paper.

For a proper evaluation of Trailokyanath's works, it is necessary to understand his life and times. Hence a brief sketch of his life has been provided here. Trailokyanath Mukhopadhyay was born in a Bengali Brahmin family on 22nd July 1847. His ancestral home was at Rahuta, a village in the district of North 24 Parganas in Bengal. Left orphan at a young age, he had to shoulder the responsibilities of his younger brothers. This contributed to his early development and maturity. He was a maverick thinker and an autodidact. His adventurous nature often brought him close to many perils, but also enriched him by deepening his understanding of human nature. In 1866 he began his career as a school teacher in a village in Birbhum. Trailokyanath changed his jobs in quick successions. From Birbhum

he moved on to Raniganj and then to Pabna, teaching in local schools. He entered civil service in 1868, becoming the sub-inspector of police at Cuttack in Orissa. Later he was promoted to the rank of the officer-in-charge. During his stay in Orissa he learnt Oriya and edited a monthly magazine in that language named *Utkal Subhankari*. In 1870 he left this job to join the Statistical Survey Department. It was during this period that he drew the attention of Sir William Wilson Hunter who came to admire him. In 1875 Trailokyanath again left his job to join the Department of Agriculture and Commerce and worked in that department till 1881. He was transferred to the Revenue and Agricultural Department in 1881. In 1886 Trailokyanath travelled to England to participate in the exhibition displaying Indian art-manufactures. He also visited other European countries, writing a travelogue *A Visit to Europe* in English based upon his experiences abroad. On his return, he was appointed to the post of the Assistant Curator in charge of the Bengali Economic and Art Museum in 1887. Thus we see that a significant portion of his career was spent in the service of the colonial government. As scholars have recognized, this left an impact on his literary output. According to Bhattacharjee, he “seems to have collected the ingredients of literature throughout his service life ...” (Bhattacharjee 37). Particularly, his visit to Europe had the effect of widening his intellectual horizon. Trailokyanath retired from active service in 1896 on grounds of ill health. Thereafter, he dedicated himself entirely to literary pursuits. Trailokyanath passed away on 3rd November 1919 at the ripe age of seventy three.

As a writer belonging to the early generation of the Bengali novelists, Trailokyanath remains important to us. Novel as a genre had a late start in India, imported as it was from Europe. *Alaler Gharer Dulal* (1857) by Peary Chand Mitra (1814 – 1883) is often recognized as the first novel to be written in Bangla; though some earlier works like *Nabababubilas* (1825) by Bhabani Charan Bandyopadhyay (1787 – 1848) and *Phoolmani O Karunar Bibaran* (1852) by Hana Catherine Mullens (1826 – 1861) are sometimes considered as the contenders for the first position. But there is the general consensus that Bangla novel matured only with Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay’s *Durgeshnandini* (1865). Bankim set the standard which was followed by subsequent writers. Among Trailokyanath’s other contemporary novelists, one may mention Pratap Chandra Ghosh, Taraknath Gangopadhyay, Sanjibchandra Chattopadhyay, Romesh Chandra Dutt, Sivanath Sastri and Mir Musarraf Hussain. All these writers were the products of the intellectual awakening characterized by some as the ‘Bengal Renaissance’. Bengal Renaissance, as scholars have pointed out, was a predominantly Hindu urban middle class enterprise. At that time, the

contact with European modernity ushered in the spirit of scepticism and free thinking in the intellectual sphere. This trend is particularly reflected in the novels of the period. Trailokyanath himself questions and critiques such social evils as casteism, child marriage, and religious superstitions in his writings. Scholars justly point out that as a thinker he was much ahead of his time.¹ One example would illustrate the point. Criticizing casteism, Trailokyanath writes in *A Visit to Europe*, "I would nevertheless most reluctantly and most sorrowfully tell my countrymen, specially the low castes ... always to return blow for blow, be the return-blow ever so feeble and be the consequence ever so serious" (Trailokyanath, *A Visit to Europe*, 274). This statement appears very radical once we remember his own upper caste background. Trailokyanath's take on the other issues are often as bold and bespeaks his unorthodox outlook.

Given Trailokyanath's reputation as a progressive thinker, it has become easier for scholars to characterize him as a crusader against all forms of superstitions including the belief in the supernatural. The ground for such an assumption is laid by Trailokyanath himself. In *A Visit to Europe* he trenchantly criticizes his countrymen's belief in ghosts and evil spirits. Comparing what he took to be the fearlessness of the young English children with the timidity of their counterparts in India, Trailokyanath comes to the conclusion that the irrational belief in ghosts had enfeebled the children of his country. He complains,

The fear of ghosts, witches, and the whole brood of them is instilled into the tender heart of our boys and girls from their very infancy, which, acting on their mind like the iron shoe on the feet of a Chinese girl, warps the natural courage inherent in human beings. In after life these curdle-blooded men and women quiver with terror at the fall of a leaf or the rise of an owl when the evening shade has fallen upon the haunted garden (Trailokyanath, *A Visit to Europe*, 151).

Trailokyanath's statement regarding the Englishmen's general disbelief in ghosts is certainly an exaggeration, given that the period he speaks of is the late nineteenth century. One recalls that paranormal research was taken quite seriously during this period. Many of the British intellectuals in that age believed in the supernatural. The writer seems to have gotten too carried away with his polemic to note this. However, it must be kept in mind that this is not so much a reflection on English beliefs as an exhortation to his countrymen to give up their superstitious fear. In the same work, the author also ridicules the exorcists and the miracle workers in India who claim to drive away ghosts or to control weather phenomena

(Trailokyanath, *A Visit to Europe*, 150). Regarding his own belief, Trailokyanath boldly declares, “I am against ghosts, live or dead, in body or out of body, male ghost or female ghost, child ghost or adult ghost, Brahman ghost or Islamite (sic) ghost, land ghost or water ghost, cow ghost or horse ghost, against all manner of ghosts” (Trailokyanath, *A Visit to Europe*, 150). Trailokyanath’s statement about his personal belief has been corroborated by his son Sudhirkumar Mukhopadhyay who asserts that his father did not believe in ghosts. This statement is often taken out of its context and given exaggerated importance by scholars. But Sudhirkumar also mentions that his father did believe in spirits - a fact that most scholars deliberately ignore. Likewise, he also mentions Trailokyanath’s interest in tantric Shaivism and his supposed experiences of having extrasensory perceptions – both again conveniently overlooked (Sudhirkumar 18). More about these matters will be discussed as we proceed. The point is that most scholarly writings on Trailokyanath are based on selective handling of the available materials. They present an oversimplified view of the author’s treatment of ghosts and the supernatural which demands more nuanced understanding.

To be impartial, it must be admitted that there are places where Trailokyanath seems to be satirizing his countrymen’s belief in ghosts. For instance, in the story “Lullu” the author comes up with the outlandish theory that ghosts are formed out of solidified darkness (Trailokyanath, *Trailokyanath Rachanabali*, 406). Here he seems to imply that ghosts actually have their origin in the benighted state of human consciousness - a fact that scholars have readily recognized. As Tapodhir Bhattacharjee puts it, “these ghosts take shape in the deep recesses of the unlit and shadowy regions of human mind which thrive particularly in a feudal, obscurantist and stationary society” (Bhattacharjee 51). Shyamalkumar Sengupta believes that here Trailokyanath is ridiculing the researches of the Theosophists and the paranormal researchers of his times (Shyamalkumar Sengupta 34). This, however, is open to contestation as the latter part of the paper will show. Again in *Kankabati*, Trailokyanath seems to ridicule the belief in ghosts when he makes Skull declare that ghosts are transformed into marble balls when they die (Trailokyanath, *Rachanabali*, 524). In both tales, the ghosts express their disapproval of modern English education which turns Indians into unbelievers. Once it is recalled how vigorously Trailokyanath championed the propagation of modern education in India, it becomes easier to recognize that these ghosts represent obscurantist forces. Indeed, judging solely by these stories, it is tempting to concede that in Trailokyanath’s tales ghosts become instruments of satire and ridicule. That, of course, is not

always the case, as Trailokyanath had also written conventional ghost stories where the ghosts receive more serious treatment from the author.

It needs to be recognized that despite condemning his countrymen's belief in ghosts, Trailokyanath frequently introduced the supernatural in his tales. His considerations in such cases were not always didactic as the critics seem to think. Manasi Sengupta draws our attention to the fact that in a totality of twenty five of his tales the author has either directly introduced ghosts or has introduced supernatural characters (Manasi Sengupta 129). She feels that four distinct types of ghostly characters can be found in Trailokyanath's fiction. These are – 1. ghosts used as elements to generate social satire, 2. ghosts who produce pure humour, 3. traditional ghosts, and 4. beings that appear as ghosts but are something else in reality (Manasi Sengupta 129 – 130). Of these, 'traditional ghosts' are ghosts who fit in the conventional role attributed to them. That is, these are the ones that produce fear instead of laughter. Interestingly, despite acknowledging that Trailokyanath wrote tales about such 'traditional ghosts', she chooses to belittle this fact. In her opinion, such run-of-the-mill ghost stories do not exhibit the distinctive qualities of Trailokyanath's writings. Hence, these do not demand any serious consideration (Manasi Sengupta 130). The following stories are recognized by Sengupta as being conventional ghost stories written by the author: the short stories "Bhuter Bari" and "Keno Eto Nirday Haile" in *Muktamala*, "Megher Kole JhikiMiki, Sati Hase Phikiphiki", and "Pujar Bhut". What Sengupta fails to recognize is that some of the tales featuring 'traditional ghosts' are in fact adaptations or translations of English horror stories. For instance, "Pithe Parbane Chine Bhut" is actually an adaptation of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's short story "The Brown Hand" (1899). Tapodhir Bhattacharjee, who recognizes Trailokyanath's debt to Conan Doyle for this story, nevertheless commits a similar mistake with regard to "Pujar Bhut". "Pujar Bhut", mistaken as an original work by both Sengupta and Bhattacharjee, is in fact an oblique translation of Mrs Elizabeth Gaskell's "The Old Nurse's Story" (1852). Another tale mistaken as an original is "Bhuter Bari" in *Muktamala*, which is a translation of Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton's short story "The Haunted and the Haunters: or the House and the Brain" (1859). Here one may note in passing that Hemendra Kumar Roy's *Indrajaler Maya* is also an adaptation of the same work. The fact that Trailokyanath chose to translate/adopt these English ghost stories in Bangla is very significant. If his intention was to eradicate his countrymen's belief in ghosts as he himself declared, why did he take pains to translate English ghost stories which seem to promote such belief? This fact demands careful consideration. Shyamalkumar Sengupta tries to provide a

solution to this conundrum by suggesting that such stories were written to satisfy public demand for conventional ghost stories. He points out that even Rabindranath Tagore had to bow down to popular expectations by writing stories with supernatural flavour like “Manihara” and “Nisithe” (Shyamalkumar Sengupta 35). However, this line of reasoning appears unconvincing because not all writers of that time had written ghost stories. Moreover, from what we know of Trailokyanath’s temperament, he hardly appears to have been the one to pander to vulgar taste. Satyanarayan Bhattacharya points out that the author refused to yield ground even after being mercilessly slammed by critics for ridiculing Hinduism in his story “Nayanchander Babsya” (Bhattacharya 15). It appears unlikely that such a conscientious person would compromise with his principles merely to satisfy public demand.

Of particular interest in this regard is Trailokyanath’s translation of Bulwer-Lytton’s “The Haunted and the Haunters: or the House and the Brain”. This story recounts the experiences of an unnamed English gentleman who witnesses certain frightening paranormal phenomena while spending a night in a haunted house in the Oxford Street in London. Despite being a horror story from all angles, it is not a ‘traditional’ ghost story about spectral manifestations. The supernatural occurrences experienced by the narrator-protagonist are shown to have been produced through mesmeric (hypnotic) influence by a very potent, but living, magician. This antagonist, who introduces himself as Mr Richards, is described as being the possessor of arcane knowledge and limitless willpower which allow him to postpone death indefinitely and to control both animate and inanimate things from a great distance. No matter how absurd this may sound as an explanation, the point to be noted is that the author categorically insists that there is nothing ‘supernatural’ about these incidents as they are produced by a living mind and not by the dead. As one critic puts it, “Bulwer-Lytton effectively forges a rather hallucinogenic horror” (Wyse 38). Trailokyanath’s “Bhuter Bari”, on the other hand, becomes an average ghost story through the translator’s differential treatment of the same material. One of the things that convert “Bhuter Bari” into a run-of-the-mill ghost story is the expurgation of the final section of the original story, describing the narrator-protagonist’s meeting with Richards, from the translation. Of course, Trailokyanath may not have deliberately excised that portion. It is necessary to remember that a shortened version of the story excluding the bit about Richards was published by Bulwer-Lytton himself after 1861 (Wyse 33). It is possible that Trailokyanath may have read only this version, never knowing about the existence of the longer earlier one. Even if that is the case, he excludes much that was in the shortened version as well - including the ‘rationalistic’

explanation of the haunting provided by Bulwer-Lytton's narrator. For instance, the narrator's declaration that "if we could get to the bottom of these mysteries, we should find a living human agency" (Bulwer-Lytton n.p), which appears in both versions of the tale, has been left out by Trailokyanath. He deliberately eschews all references to magic and mesmeric influence at work. In absence of these, the story turns into a typical ghost story without any complications. Significantly, Trailokyanath's translation is entitled "Bhuter Bari" which may be translated in English as "The House of the Ghosts". The title thus exposes the intentions of Trailokyanath who wants his readers to recognize the tale as an ordinary ghost story.

A curious fact is brought to light once we compare Bulwer-Lytton's original with Trailokyanath's translation. Biographers reveal that Bulwer-Lytton (1803 - 1873) was very interested in paranormal researches and had even participated in the séances held by the famous medium Daniel Dunglas Home (1833 – 1886) (Wyse 32). Such fascination with the occult was not unusual for a mid-Victorian gentleman who lived during the heydays of Victorian Spiritualism. Nevertheless, when it came to the presentation of the occult in the story, the author acted very circumspectly. He seems to have given little credit to the theory that the dead could return or be brought back to the world of the living. Without dismissing the mediums and the spiritualists as frauds, the narrator in the story suggests that what becomes manifest during séances are impressions and memories left behind by the deceased rather than the dead themselves. He observes:

These American spirit-seers have published volumes of communications in prose and verse, which they assert to be given in the names of the most illustrious dead—Shakespeare, Bacon—heaven knows whom. Those communications, taking the best, are certainly not a whit of higher order than would be communications from living persons of fair talent and education; they are wondrously inferior to what Bacon, Shakespeare, and Plato said and wrote when on earth (Bulwer-Lytton n.p.).

Indeed, judging solely by this story, the author appears to dismiss the very probability of the existence of ghosts. On the other hand, Trailokyanath, generally accepted as a crusader against irrationality, chose to frame his translation as a ghost story. He thereby deviated significantly from the rationalistic tone of the original. Such a decision does not seem to be in line with his proclamation. Interestingly, what emerges from Bulwer-Lytton's story is the Englishman's fearlessness in face of horrors – a favourite assumption of Trailokyanath as

revealed in his *A Visit to Europe*. It is through logic and rationality that the narrator triumphs over the supernatural. Trailokyanath's protagonist Tom Saheb, on the other hand, seems to admit defeat by accepting the existence of the ghosts as a fact (Trailokyanath, *Rachanabali*, 713). Why did the author abandon his self-proclaimed crusade against ghosts? This question troubles us. It becomes apparent that Trailokyanath's treatment of the supernatural cannot be easily essentialized as being always satiric in purpose. The issue demands deeper scrutiny than is generally allowed.

After giving due consideration to the above mentioned facts, we would perhaps be right in concluding that Trailokyanath did not always use the ghosts to generate satire. There are stories where his treatment of the supernatural appears quite serious. We, however, move on to argue that far from being a sceptic, he was an ardent believer in the occult – a fact which his writings reflect. It is true that at one point in life he did profess a disbelief in the existence of ghosts as the quotation from *A Visit to Europe* (1889) reveals. But there is the equally compelling evidence that at least later in life he came to believe in the existence of souls or spirits. As his son Sudhirkumar's testifies, Trailokyanath professed that such spirits were harmless and invisible. More importantly, he seems to have maintained that one could communicate with such spirits through séance. If Sudhirkumar is to be taken at his word, the author actually participated in such séances with Sudhirkumar himself serving as the medium. Through such séances he tried to contact with the spirits of great men like Rammohan, Vidyasagar and others (Sudhirkumar 18). It is unlikely that he should have taken all that trouble if he did not seriously believe in afterlife. Thus Manasi Sengupta and others are wrong in asserting that Trailokyanath counted the very existence of ghosts as being baseless (Manasi Sengupta 132). Significantly, Trailokyanath seems to have modified his views on the supernatural after his spiritual preceptor made him formally undergo initiation ceremony at Deoghar. Sudhirkumar mentions that before this incident his father did not take incantations and spells seriously. However, he developed interest in these matters after his initiation. Particularly, a book named *Mahanirban Tantra* became his special favourite (Sudhirkumar 18). It needs to be recognized here that *Mahanirban Tantra* is a Shaivite text and Trailokyanath seems to have been initiated into Shaivism by his spiritual preceptor. Reference to this book can be found in the story "Madan Ghosher Badane Hasi" where the dying Bechu advises Madan to mould his life following the teachings laid down in this book (Trailokyanath, *Rachanabali*, 840). Portions from the text have also been cited by Binoy in the novel *Paper Parinam* (1908) (Trailokyanath, *Rachanabali*, 198 – 201). This proves that

the author was heavily influenced by this text. As one scholar reflects, he was a devoted Hindu in personal life and his faith in Hinduism is expressed in his writings (Satyanarayan Bhattacharya 62). All this is not to argue that Trailokyanath renounced his rationalistic outlook in later life. What is simply suggested is that he kept an open mind regarding the occult. He never became the atheist or the unbeliever that the scholars take him to be.

One thing which has curiously escaped the attention of the scholars is the influence of Spiritualism and Theosophy on Trailokyanath's belief and works. It is true that only a few direct references to these movements can be traced in his writings. But the author's attempt to communicate with the dead through séances shows how deeply he was influenced by Spiritualism and Theosophy. As we know, Spiritualism was a religious movement which originated in America in 1848 when the siblings Kate and Margaret Fox advertised themselves as powerful spirit mediums. The movement soon spread to Great Britain and the Continent where it gathered considerable followers. As Peter van der Veer testifies, "Spiritualism proved to be a great success in the higher circles of society, but perhaps as impressive was the substantial interest taken by working- or lower-middle-class secularists" (Veer 62). Central to Spiritualist belief was the idea that it is possible to communicate with the spirits of the dead who can provide knowledge about both this world and the afterlife. It was further claimed that any individual could become spirit mediums through practice. Trailokyanath's own experiments fall in line with Spiritualist thinking. There also references to Spiritualism in his tales. In "Ek Thengo Chaku", the savant Madhav was rumoured to have been able to summon spirits through the "Western technique" (Trailokyanath, *Rachanabali*, 662). Even more interesting is the reference to Spiritualism in "Pithe Parbane Chine Bhut". As already mentioned, it is an adaptation of "The Brown Hand". In Doyle's story, the surgeon Sir Dominick Holden is haunted by the ghost of his Indian patient looking for his amputated hand which was destroyed by fire while in Holden's keeping. Not wanting to offend his Indian readers, Trailokyanath transforms this ghost into a Chinese. Other than this, Trailokyanath does not deviate from the main plotline though minor amendments are introduced here and there for the sake of embellishment. One of these occurs at the beginning of the story when the protagonist Radhamadhav informs his maternal uncle about his misfortune. A doctor by profession, Radhamadhav finds his career jeopardized by the arrival of a miracle worker who is also a self-proclaimed spirit medium. Radhamadhav professes his disbelief in ghosts, adding that he had read every book published in English on the subject of communication with spirits. He had himself participated in séances without obtaining any

proof regarding the existence of ghosts (Trailokyanath, *Rachanabali*, 619). Here, the author seems to be referring to Spiritualism without directly naming it. From Radhamadhav's polemic, it may appear that the author is criticizing Spiritualism. That, however, is not the case as Radhamadhav is forced to change his opinion after seeing the Chinese ghost. Significantly, Conan Doyle was himself a believer in Spiritualism, and Dr Hardacre in the story (on whom Trailokyanath models Radhamadhav) is forced to abandon his disbelief after encountering the ghost of the Indian. Both stories thus seem to vindicate Spiritualist doctrines. Trailokyanath's attitude to Theosophy appears equally respectful. In one of his speeches entitled "Change and Progress" he mentions, "The new religion of India shall be love, not hate, call it by any name you like – Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Muhammadanism (sic), Christianity, Brahmoism, Aryaism or Theosophism (sic)" (quoted in Bhattacharjee 35). The inclusion of Theosophy in the list of major religions indicates that he had taken it seriously enough. Of course, that was not unusual for a writer of his age. The Theosophical Society was founded by the Russian occultist Madame Helena Blavatsky (1831 – 1891) and her follower Colonel Henry Steele Olcott (1832 – 1907) in the late nineteenth century. As van der Veer points out, it became very popular for a time in India, Sri Lanka and Britain (Veer 57). What contributed to its popularity was its syncretic nature. Theosophy combined the main tenets of the popular religions of the world like Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity. Madame Blavatsky claimed to have received inspirations from the mysterious preceptors called the Mahatmas, who are described by her as spiritual adepts with tremendous psychic powers. These Mahatmas were supposed to have their abode in Tibet. In Trailokyanath's "Betal Sharabingshati" in *Muktamala*, one comes across a character who resembles Blavatsky's Mahatmas. In this story a schoolmaster named Gourishankar becomes possessed by a *betal* or a malevolent spirit after he abandons *shab sadhana* midway. *Shab sadhana* is a fearsome *tantric* ritual in which the practitioner is required to meditate while sitting on a corpse at the cremation ground in the dead of the night. After much suffering, Gourishankar is exorcised by an ordinary looking Bengali man who turns out to be a spiritual adept in disguise. The *betal* instantly recognizes him as one who has attained perfection and omniscience through communion with God. Notably, the *betal* calls him a 'mahatma' (Trailokyanath, *Rachanabalili*, 799). It is possible that the term may have been used here in the general sense of 'great soul'. But given Trailokyanath's awareness of the Theosophical movement, there is also the probability that the Bengali man is conceptualized as being one of the mysterious teachers described by Blavatsky. Whatever the case is, both textual and

biographical evidences suggest that Trailokyanath did not necessarily sneer at Spiritualism or Theosophy as some scholars feel.

Our investigation into the life and writings of Trailokyanath thus establishes that his attitude towards the occult was not always derisive. We argue that this fact is to be kept in mind while evaluating his treatment of the supernatural. It is true that in some of his stories ghosts are made fun of. In these, they are made to think and act like human beings. The oft quoted example is Lullu who tries to westernize himself in order to impress Amir's wife. The ghosts in such tales become instruments of satire. But Trailokyanath has also written stories in which the ghosts evoke pure terror. Tales like "Bhuter Bari", "Keno Eto Nirday Haile", "Betal Sharabingshati", and "Pujar Bhut" are not didactic in purpose. Since Trailokyanath was a self-avowed moralist, scholars tend to overemphasize this aspect of his personality. In doing so, they forget that he was also a creative writer who sought to entertain his readers besides instructing them.

Our study therefore convinces us that there is a need to revisit the writings of Trailokyanath. Contemporary attitude towards his writings has become too inflexible to consider these in all their complexities. There is an urge to idolize him as a progressive thinker, which makes one ignore the contradictions inherent in his thinking. This engenders stereotypical evaluations of his works. It is necessary to give due importance to these contradictions in order to become aware of the possibility of divergent readings. Through such readings one can arrive at a better understanding of the contributions of the author. Our reassessment of Trailokyanath's presentation of ghosts in his writings has been the fruit of such an attempt. It is hoped that this study will encourage the readers to approach his works with an unbiased mind in future.

¹ This section has been summarized from the works of Sengupta and Bhattacharjee.

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