

Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay: The Luminary of Indian Freedom Movement in Howrah, Bengal

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Abstract. *There are a lot of extremely gifted and talented Indians who sacrificed their very promising and rewarding lives for their ultimate reward, freeing their motherland from the chains of bondage. Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, celebrated author, poet and social reformer is a stellar name amongst those who have our abiding respect and reverence. The paper talks about his work in the Howrah district of West Bengal during the peak of the freedom struggle in detail.*

Key words: Saratchandra, Howrah, Indian freedom struggle, author, motivation.

Introduction:

History is essentially the telling of the human story by the humans who live it, to subsequent generations of humans. There are facets of human civilisation that are creative, inspiring, progressive and also violent, dangerous, coercive. But one aspect is constant, the journey is always a lesson, an education for our future. Out of the myriad humans living those lives, so many are anonymous and faceless, though they too contribute to the collective, but some names stand out, they become etched in the pages of history as leaders, creators of flash points in the human story. The freedom struggle of Bharat against the Imperial Crown was such a slice of time, that created many unforgettable and cherished names in our history. Some of them are famous for being freedom fighters, for sacrificing their lives for their nation, and some stalwarts also have the legacy of their talent, their qualities, from being artistes, to authors, scientists and performers. Such a name is Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, an author and poet of international repute, who also used his acumen and knowledge in the freedom movement.

Howrah District of Bengal

There are also many geographical areas which spawned the movement and raised it to a point where it influenced entire generations of youth as well as professionals. Howrah district of Bengal is such an area, that draws attention to itself, as being the hallowed ground where the footprints of a lot of freedom fighters lie. Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's contribution to Howrah district Freedom Movement is incomparable. If we review the political history of Howrah district , it is seen the footprints of many famous political leaders are still unfaded. From **Nana Saheb**, one of the greatest leaders of the Sepoy Mutiny to **Surendranath Bandhupadhyay, Rishi Arabindo, Bagha Jatin, Ullaskar Dutta, Motilal Nehru, Chittaranjan Das, Mahatma Gandhi, Subhansh Chandra Bose** and many others made this Howrah district blessed with their footprints. The impact of almost all political movements particularly, the **Partition of Bengal**, protest against **Ilbert Bill, Non-Cooperation Movement, Salt Satyagraha, Civil Disobedience movement** touched Howrah district.

Again, the 'Howrah Gang Case' the famous political case was specially connected with the above political movements. So, under this political context famous Bengali novelist Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay transformed himself into a true supporter of the freedom fighters.

SaratChandra's induction into the freedom movement

After the review of the eventful life of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, we find six phases. He was born at Debanandapur, Hooghly, his early years and the beginning of his writing in Bhagalpur, education in Brahmadesh (now in Myanmar) and finally, his rise as a political figure was in Howrah. He lived at Bajeshibpur, Howrah after returning from Rangoon in 1916. It was the time when the golden age of his life started, particularly as many of his writings impacted people's minds. His revolutionary thinking and political activities created special social influence between 1920-1930. During this time he came in contact with his political guru Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das, who introduced him into the life of political struggle. During this time he met **Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose**. He flourished in his political identity by taking part in the **Non-Cooperation Movement** in his own unique way, as a warrior. Many young organisers were inspired by his revolutionary talent, like **Prabodh Chandra Basu**, from Nagpara Lane, Howrah who plunged himself in the Non-Cooperation Movement after resigning from a lucrative job at **Howrah Corporation**.

Loknayak Chittaranjan Das, observing the capabilities in Sarat Chandra, decided to bestow the responsibility of **Howrah District Congress** to him, which made him a political organiser and a freedom fighter of note. He promoted the freedom movement in a way so as to blossom the idea of freedom in the nation's mind. The arrival of Sarat Chandra showed a new light on the path of the political consciousness in Howrah and the country. After taking up the presidentship of **Howrah Zilla Congress** in 1921, he organised the party and created responsible teams. Setting up of spinning wheel, boycotting foreign goods and many non-cooperative agenda were taken up in a big way for the first time in Howrah. Even facing internal conflicts of Congress, due to his firm stand on taking up arms which was disliked by Gandhiji, he withdrew his resignation letter and held the post till 1936 because of his followers. Many renowned personalities came in close contact of him to materialize his well-planned agenda. Some of them were **Prabodh Chandra Basu, Gurudas Datta**, educationist **Sushil Gangopadhyay** from Shibpur, **Narayan Chandra Basu** from Mourigram; **Satisadhan Gayen** from Maju; **Dhirendranath Mukhophadhyay** from Domjur; **Harendra Nath Ghosh, Bipin Basu** from Howrah; **Gurupada Mukherjee, Dr Kanailal Ganguly** from Bali; **Agam Datta, Bibhuti Hazra, Jibon Maiti, Ajit Mallik, Kalobaran Ghosh** from Shibpur and so on. Due to his sincere effort the Movement of Congress got a stronghold in Shibpur, Salkia, Andul, Maju, Munsirhat, Domjur and other regions of Howrah district.

A noted addition to this team was renowned educationist principal **Sri Bijoykrishna Bhattacharya** who joined the freedom movement inspired by Sarat Chandra and went to jail several times. Bijoykrishna Bhattacharya wanted to observe the freedom of the nation through non violence and education. He took charge of spreading education particularly for the girls, because of Sarat Chandra's advice. Sarat Chandra wholeheartedly admitted the role of women in the freedom movement. In this context, he wrote in an essay titled '**Swaraj Sadhanai Nari**' (**Women In The Movement Of Self-Rule**), "I am one of them who are banging their heads to get self-rule, But my soul in no way supports me. I feel it is impossible. The effort where women of our country are not involved, where there is no sympathy, no knowledge to feel this truth, no education. In that way freedom cannot be achieved keeping women indoors. We have made women as women not human beings, so there must be atonement in the country for making women inactive before self-rule." This tells us how important the empowerment and respect of women was to Sarat Chandra, which is also visible in his writings, which were, probably ahead of their times.

Though a great supporter of Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das and one of his dedicated followers, Sarat Chandra was a proponent of free thought, and never hesitated to express his own opinion. During Non-Cooperation Movement, he became closer to Netaji because of his similar sentiments. Subhash Chandra Bose was his affectionate friend. His affection and friendship lasted till the end of his life. Subhash Chandra Bose considered Sarat Chandra to be a true nationalist and respected him as a great folk literateur. He helped the revolutionaries generously for their protection, survival and nurturing.

He took a rented house in an alley of Bajeshibpur with an intention to help them. He always donated money for medical assistance to the revolutionaries in Shibpur, Salkia, Domjur etc. Bipinbihari Ganguly a famous revolutionary, was Sarat Chandra's maternal uncle by relation. There were many followers of Bipinbihari Ganguly in different places of Howrah district. Bipinbihari Ganguly brought monetary help to Saratchandra's residence at shibpur. From his and other revolutionaries' letters, participation in meetings and conversations, it is clear that **Barinkumar Ghosh, Upendranath Banerjee, Charuchandra Roy, Amarendra Nath Chattopadhyay** and so on had affinity with him, but he respected all his team members equally and never played favourites.

The talented writer

The founder of **Prabartak Sangha**, Chandannagar was **Sri Motilal Ray**. Though he himself was a revolutionary, he gave shelter to **Sri Arabindo, Sri Rasbihari Basu** and others. Saratchandra had a friendly relationship with Motilal Ray, He spent several nights at the Prabartak Ashram. He also had special acquaintance with **Sachin Sanyal** who had been accused in the **Kakori Conspiracy case**. Sarat Chandra adopted his revolutionary and resistance styles from various personalities of the freedom struggle in Bengal and India. In this regard, **Sachinandan Chattopadhyay**, the author of the book 'Political Life Of Sarat Chandra' wrote " He has taken indomitable courage ,extraordinary physical energy, unlimited affection and forgiveness from the life of **Jatin Mukhujee**; extraordinary skill of making disguise and limping style of **Girish Mahapatra** from the life of **Dr Jadugopal Mukhujee**; Travelling across the world and organisational capacity from **Dr Rasbihari Basu** and **Narendranath Bhattacharya**; The idea of gaining degrees from different universities across the world from **Bhupendranath Dutta** and **Tarakanath Das**".

Dr Subothchandra Sengupta said in the introduction of the book '**Baksha theke Deuli**'(from Baksha to Deuli) written by revolutionary **Nikunja Sen**—"Sarat Chandra told us that he had collected materials of '**Pather Dabi**' from the interaction with revolutionary **Hemchandra Ghosh**." Revolutionary **Hemchandra Ghosh** was the founder of **Bengal Volunteer** party, and after his interaction with Saratchandra, gave monetary help and shelter to the revolutionaries at his residence of Bajeshibpur and sometimes at the residence of Samtabede. He helped to inspire the masses towards the freedom movement by writing essays and novels in his party newspaper. He gave monetary help to **Master Da Surya Sen** many times for the service of the nation, as is known from the book '**Jalalabadar Yuddha**' written by **Kalipada Bhattacharya**. Such was the power of Saratchandra's ideas that they influenced so many stalwarts.

When Sarat Chandra resided at Bajeshibpur, **Sri Ramaprasad Mukhopadhyay** and professor **Sri Kumud Raychowdhury** suggested him to publish '**Pather Dabi**' in '**Bangobani Patrika**'. But Sarat Chandra did not agree, considering the political situation at that time, British atrocities were at their peak, very few dared to publish this story anyway, Saratchandra was hesitant to hurt others. Later this story was published as a serial from 1922 in **Bangobani** and was first published as a novel in 1926. Right after the publication of '**Pather Dabi**' in **Bangobani**, there arose a storm of protest against the Imperial rulers, the British government banned '**Pather Dabi**', for its incendiary content. No printing press dared publish the book, but in a defiant gesture, people stood in support of this book. **Sri Ramaprasad** and **Umaprasad** (two sons of **Sir Ashutosh**) took responsibility to publish the book in '**Bangakesharsi**', after their father's honorary title. Finally Satyakinkar Babu, the owner of 'Cotton Press' also agreed and first published '**Pather Dabi**' as a book. It is a revolutionary novel set during British colonial rule in India. It portrays the struggle for independence through a secret revolutionary group called "Pather Dabi" that aims to overthrow British rule and bring freedom to India. The story follows its charismatic leader, Sabyasachi, who is depicted as a complex and passionate character, deeply committed to his cause, yet torn by personal conflicts and moral dilemmas. The novel explores themes of nationalism, resistance, and the moral complexities of violent rebellion. It also delves into issues such as social injustice, the role of women in the freedom movement, and the sacrifices required for independence. Despite the controversy surrounding it, for being ahead of its times, it remains a significant work in Bengali literature, symbolizing the fervor and spirit of the Indian independence movement, thousand copies of the book were sold on the first day. After the sale the first and the

second edition the book was sold in secret at Rs10, Rs15, Rs25 even Rs30 under the pressure of the British Government.

Saratchandra was sad and dejected to know about the ban on '**Pather Dabi**', though he had anticipated so. During this time, he came to **Rabindranath Tagore** to get his patronage on the movement and a support towards the protest against the ban. When Saratchandra lived at Panitras, he published a novel named '**Bipradas**', in the monthly paper '**Benu**', which added even more fuel to the fire in the youth revolutionary movement. Saratchandra inspired the emerging contemporary revolutionary groups with Bipradas that delves into themes of familial bonds, moral dilemmas, and social customs. The novel primarily revolves around two main characters, Bipradas and his younger brother Suren, and highlights the complexities of family dynamics, especially in the context of traditional Bengali society. Bipradas reflects Sarat Chandra's humanism and social consciousness, wherein, the elder brother, is portrayed as a responsible and morally upright individual who takes on the duty of caring for his family after the death of their parents. He is deeply devoted to his younger brother Suren, treating him almost like a son. The novel explores how Bipradas doesn't hesitate to sacrifice his personal desires with his responsibilities that he considers his duty. The story reflects on the generational clash between traditional values and modern thought. Bipradas, while adhering to traditional norms, also shows openness to new ideas. Suren, on the other hand, is more modern in his outlook, creating subtle tensions between the two brothers. It is an important work for its nuanced exploration of moral issues and family relationships, as lots of families plunging into the Swadeshi movement at that time were going through this pain. Its subtle critique of societal norms and portrayal of self-sacrifice resonated with readers, continuing Sarat Chandra's tradition of addressing social reform through literature.

The strategist

In July 1930, many political prisoners started fasting as part of the non-cooperation movement. Saratchandra came to Alipore central jail and requested them to break their fast unto death. He convinced them that their life was very precious for their country, and it is with that life that they would attain freedom, and his impact was such that they decided to end their fast. He published an advertisement in Bangalore on behalf of The Bongiya Pradeshik Congress Committee to congratulate the prisoners on 23rd July, 1928. This and other initiatives made the freedom movement of Howrah known in many parts of the country. He utilised his fame and following as a writer to create awareness in every man and woman of the country, and this was a most vital exercise in strengthening the struggle against colonisers. Saratchandra felicitated the released prisoners at Howrah Town Hall on 25th July in presence of Netaji. This was a significant moment for every citizen of Howrah as they felt proud of the presence of these luminaries who motivated the freedom fighters to join and be part of the revolution.

The impactful leader

Thus, it is clearly seen that Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, such a renowned Bengali literary figure, played a very significant role in India's freedom struggle through his literary contributions, motivational speeches and social connections. While he was not directly involved in political activism, his writings reflected the social issues, challenges, and nationalistic spirit of the time. Here are some key aspects of his contribution:

1. Criticism of Colonial Rule: Sarat Chandra's novels often criticised the British colonial system, highlighting the social and economic injustices faced by Indians under colonial rule. His works subtly fueled the spirit of nationalism and questioned the oppressive policies of a government which didn't have our interests on its mind.
2. Portrayal of Social Reforms: His stories depicted strong, independent characters, particularly women, who stood against social evils like caste discrimination, women's oppression, and poverty. Social awareness developed thus, addressed the broader goals of the Indian freedom struggle, which was as much about social liberation as it was about political independence.

3. Empowerment of Women: Novels like Devdas, Charitraheen, Srikanto and Bipradas depicted strong women characters who challenged norms that were unfair and unjust towards women, reflecting the emerging consciousness about women's rights during the freedom struggle. The resonance of his writings reached leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose and so many others who emphasized women's role in the fight for independence, and also worked towards society treating them as equals, with the respect that they deserved. Almost all his work reflects on the role of women in society, particularly focusing on the challenges they face within the rigid structures of patriarchy. The female characters in his books navigate these social constraints, reflecting the author's concern for women's rights and empowerment.
4. Highlighting the Idea of Resistance: Though not always explicitly revolutionary, Sarat Chandra's works embodied the spirit of resistance against oppressive systems, both social and political. His characters often encapsulated the common people's thoughts, viewpoints and aspirations, making his literature popular among the masses and inspiring an attitude to stand together, question establishments and making a positive change.
1. Association with Indian Freedom Fighters: Sarat Chandra was influenced by many leaders and movements such as the Brahmo Samaj of Raja Rammohan Roy. We have already illustrated how closely associated he was with many leaders of the Indian freedom movement. He maintained relationships with activists and reformers in supporting the ideas of the Swadeshi movement, and guiding them towards the right direction in their principles and decision making.

Conclusion

Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's contribution to the Indian freedom struggle was through his influence on public consciousness, raising awareness about social reform, justice, and the spirit of resistance, which aligned with the larger goals of the nationalist movement. Howrah district became an indelible part of the stage of the making of history. Such great luminaries, even today, inspire contemporary youth, students and professionals to perform their duties with dedication, courage and truth, and to be always aligned with the interests of their nation.

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