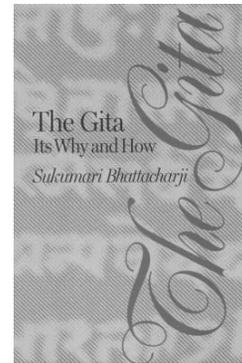


Intervention into Indian Gender Studies: Remembering Sukumari and Jasodhara

Sanchayita Paul Chakraborty
University of North Bengal

When we engage with the woman question in Postcolonial India, we do hear the voices of women writers and thinkers who reroute the issues of woman agency and emancipation within the postcolonial context. Theirs is not the derivative thoughts, brought from the western feminist scholarship and applied in their native soil. Rather they offer fresh optics to look at the woman question from their own space and shared experiences, with its divergent developments, with its pluralistic perspectives, and within the intersectional structure of the gender, caste, religion, family and state. The last couple of years in India faced the sad demise of these two women thinkers in India- Sukumari Bhattacharji and Jasodhara Bagchi who left us in 2014 and 2015 respectively. Their physical absence obviously does not annihilate the culture of their thoughts in the numerous texts they leave their legacy with. But this remembrance is necessary to recast their intervention into the women's issues in India to provide an alternative discourse of women's agency. Their sustained intellectual probing into the broad field of India studies offers us an alternative imagery of postcolonial India.

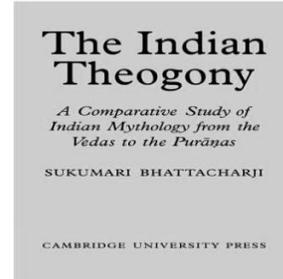


Interdisciplinarity of Thoughts: Sukumari and Jasodhara

Kairos, the Journal of Critical Symposium

Vol. I No 1 (January 2016)

Both of these thinkers acknowledge the interdisciplinary character of thoughts and therefore, traverse the multiple disciplines with ease. While Sukumari Bhattacharji presents herself as an expert in both the studies of English and Sanskrit with equal critical acumen, Jasodhara Bagchi moves beyond her identity as the Professor of English to establish the first Women's Studies centre in East India at Jadavpur University in Kolkata. She pioneered the institutionalization of the Women's studies along with Sukumari and thus, she had been a catalyst factor in the institutional proliferation of Women's Studies in India. Not only she spearheaded the centre as the Director of The School of Women's Studies in Jadavpur University, she revives the long forgotten voices of the Bengali women writers through the Bengali Women Writers Reprint Series. On the other hand, Sukumari's career kicked off with her



Professorship in English, but she subsequently cements her identity as the Sanskrit scholar and Professor of Comparative Literature and thus, like Jasodhara, she also moved beyond the traditional confinement of the disciplines to promote the interdisciplinary independent study even when, the current interdisciplinary approach has not come into fashion. It is really interesting that Jadavpur University was adorned with these stalwarts for a considerable period of time.

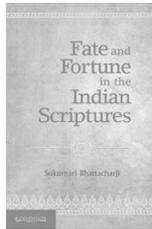
The Cambridge Years: The Family, Friends and Intellectuality

It is interesting to note that Jasodhara was a driving force in bringing Sukumari to Cambridge with family and this Cambridge

togetherness had been intellectually fulfilling for both the Bhattacharji couple and the Bagchi couple. It was the beginning of the lifelong intellectual and emotional bonds across generations. Here Sukumari wrote her seminal research on the Indian Mythology, the Ancient literature, society and culture and which was published in 1970 by the Cambridge University Press as the book, *The Indian Theogony*. This is the first text which brought her the international acclaim as a distinguished Indologist.

Sukumari: the Rebel against Religion

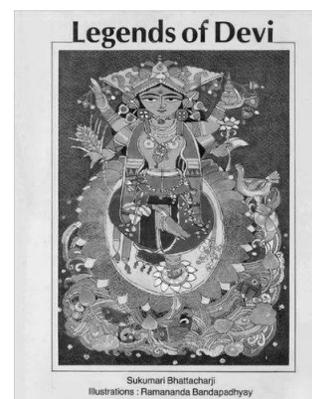
Sukumari hailed from the traditional Bengali Christian family and this so-called exceptional religious identity imposed impediments in her academic development. Her marriage to the conventional Hindu Brahminical family did not change her religious understanding. Later she became a staunch atheist and



her atheism was also shared by her husband, the eminent Professor of English Literature, Dr. Amal Bhattacharji. May be, this turbulent development in her religious (or non-religious) background shaped her intellect to demystify the religious discourse of Brahminical domination, casteism and women's subordination.

And 'Sachetana': The Resistive Voice

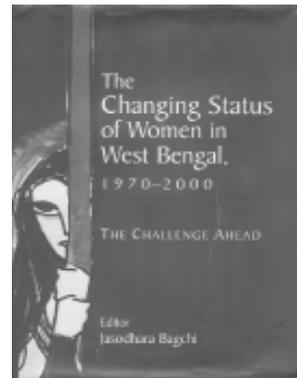
Jasodhara along with her other compatriots raised a platform of women's resistance against everyday subordination of women in Bengal. As the President of this one of the first Kolkata-based autonomous women's organization 'Sachetana', Sukumari delved deep into the intersectional structure of family, religion, state, class, caste and gender which



normativises woman's subordination. With the rationalist exploration of the ancient Indian texts and scriptures, she unearths the Hindu Brahminical Patriarchal discourse which channelizes multiple patriarchal machineries to attain unconscious consensus from women to their subjugation. 'Sachetana' has been a common platform for both Jasodhara and Sukumari to raise women's conscience against this deep-rooted structure of gender discrimination and to find possible way-out.

The Writing Women: Sukumari and Jasodhara

Sukumari nurtured a rationalist, analytical philosophic bent of mind and her philosophical enquiry into the nature of Fatalism in the Indian philosophy and the Vedic texts has been a central crux of her works. She was vocal against the belief of inherent fatalism of the Indian character, the 'janmantarbad' and the subsequent lack of philosophy of activism. She refused to project the Ancient period in Indian history as a 'glorious' one. Rather her exploration into the materialist aspect of Ancient Indian history unfurls a different aspect of the Vedic world which was



fraught with hunger, violence, domination, doubts and atheism.



Her engagement with the Ancient India, The Great Epics, Indian Mythology and Indian philosophy are documented in more than twenty books. Her books like *The Indian Theogony*, *Women in Ancient India*, *Fatalism in Ancient India*, *Legends of Devi* and

her numerous essays carry her enlightening thoughts for the

Obituary: Sukumari and Jasodhara

future readers and thinkers. Sukumari devoted considerably to the genealogical understanding of women's subordination in Ancient India and the Great Epics. Thus, she intended to demystify the projection of the 'glorious womanhood' in Ancient India and therefore, deconstructs the idealistic image of Hindu woman. She was also active to revive the simultaneous process of contestations and compliance by women to carve a space of their own. Jasodhara's work shifts the focus from Ancient India to the present condition of women in India. The variety of her academic production is reflected in her works which present her scholarship in English Literature as well as her books like *Indian Women: Myth and Reality* (edited volume in 1995) ,*Loved and Unloved: The Girl Child in the Family* (with Jaba Guha and Piyali Sengupta) in 1997, *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India*, co-edited with Subhoranjan Dasgupta in 2003 and *The Changing Status of Women in West Bengal 1970–2000: The Challenges Ahead* (edited volume) in 2005 represent her constant intervention in the women question in contemporary India. The burning yet unsolved problematic of the unwanted girl child, the escalating sexual violence in Bengal, the effect of Partition on women come to the fore in her works. Both of these two women writers projected an alternative imaginary of women in India and mapped the path of a substantial engagement with women's studies in India.

Not an Obituary

The demise of these two thinkers in the consecutive years does deprive the thinking world of the constant intellectual stimulation which these two thinkers preserved till their last breath. But the substantiality of their academic engagement, their feminist activism, their rationalist enquiry of the contemporary socio-political cultural condition, their formative contribution in the field of women's studies in India, their shared Marxist

attachment and their unflinching political consciousness percolate their intellectual legacy to the present and future generations of readers and thinkers. When the postcolonial states in the Global South face simmering tensions in multiple zones, these two writers should be revisited for their literature of dissidence, for their engagement with subalternity and woman's agency and last but not the least, for their substantial remapping of the woman question in Postcolonial India. ■