

**SHIBASHISH CHATTOPADHYAY'S POETIC WORLD:
TANTRA, YOGA AND LIFE AS IT IS LIVED**

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Abstract:

In the whole gamut of Bengali poetry today, Shibashish Chattopadhyay is a name as illustrious as any other who has claimed a quiet corner for himself through his poetic art. He is undoubtedly a formidable poetic voice from the arena of Bengali poetry written in India's Northeast. Shibashish touches almost everything under the Sun; so diverse is his poetic mind and art. He began his pietic sojourns with the publication of his first book of poems titled *Parthibo Korat* (Mundane Saw 2009). significantly, one notes in Shibashish's poetry that the harsh realities of life intersect with a deep inward spiritual quest. This is quite evident from a casual reading of his poems, particularly those compiled in his *Parthibo Korat*. This paper focuses on how Tantric and Yogic elements have made silent and easy inroads into his poetic pieces and the element of the *Sahaja* in his world of poetry.

Keywords: Spirituality, Kundalini, Snake, Tantra, Yoga

1. Introduction

As we go through modern Bengali poetry as produced in the twentieth century, we unmistakably note its multifaceted character. Modern Bengali poetry is surrealistic, realistic, down to earth, revolutionary, full of the quest for life, *sahaja*, spiritual, mystic, urban and what not. These elements are more often than not mixed up in a single piece making it difficult for the reader get at the core. The Bengali poetry of the North-east India again offers a new landscape. Here we suddenly stumble upon thoroughly new voices-- most of the time arising out of a landscape of fear and phobias, identity crisis, blood and torture (physical and mental), rootlessness, belonging issues and all that. This is very much true for the poets from the Brahmaputra valley of Assam and is a recurrent theme. In the poetry and other writings of this valley, this is evidently the predominant note.

The poetry of Barak Valley also exhibits all this, but it has its own stories and themes. The poems of the fertile soil of Barak are mature and elegant but it is not either much away from the dominant tone of the region as perceived in its Bengali poetic output. It is undoubtedly sensitive to issues such as Identity--linguistic, religious and other, sense of belonging and the like. The poems of Sanjay Chakraborty, Tapan Mahanta, Abhijit Chakraborty and so on mostly dwell on issues coloured by the unique geography and politics of the North-east: that of displacement from ancestral homes, racial hatred and fear. But despite being a significant poet hailing from this troubled territory, Shibashish retains a voice unique in its own way. It is non-local for the most part and deal with fundamental questions of life that have been facing humanity all along.

Shibashish raises our awareness of life to psychological and spiritual heights; it poses questions which look for answers in the wilderness of life. It is not that Shibashish is altogether blind to his locale-- the geography of fear and the politics of hate. His poetry too is often tinged with such elements supplied by his locale. But that is not all; his poems are not confined to such questions only. It surpasses them and looks beyond. A rare yogic vision is his boon and this triggers his voice. He is intensely spiritual,; a mystic in essence. But he has never ever rejected the world and his 'lived reality'. His *Parthibo Korat* (2009, 2016) exemplifies this rare gift by juxtaposing metaphysical inquiry and everyday struggle.

Shibashish's spirituality as expressed through his utterances is very deep and what is striking is that his spirituality is often intertwined with his day to day struggles in the mundane sense as he writes "The stomach keeps weeping inside love" It is obvious at the same time that there is nothing ritualistic or doctrinal in his spirituality. Rather his poetic expressions may be best described as *Sahaja*, that is to say, they exhibit a mystical state of mind and his poetic expressions are natural, effortless and uncontrived. This *Sahaja* state of his expressions in poetry is deeply connected with the harsh realities of his lived experiences. In another poem 'Corpse Persecuted in the Grave', he writes:

Corpse Persecuted in the Grave

**At the lotus-feet, there are only futile injunctions
Even for the abducted, offer fact-seeking clues
Even a venomous snake longs for liquid nectar
In the grave, persecuted corpses are mostly dead.¹**

The poem is a nice admixture of unanswered prayers at the lotus feet of God and abductions, murder of the abducted after inflicting torture, burying the corpse of the abducted. The poem most probably seems to suggest divine apathy even to terrible mundane sufferings that befall man. The poems often seem to speak of the existential crisis facing human beings and when divine intervention is nothing but a myth.

The poems of Shibashish Chattopadhyay, when placed within the modern discourse of existentialism and classical Indian philosophy, may offer the readers a healing experience as their reading may transform suffering, sense of isolation and bitter bodily experiences into something higher and lift the tortured consciousness to loftier realm of spiritual light.

According to Nolini Kanta Gupta, despite the demands of physical-material life, man in the modern age should not forget his source, the godhead within. Spiritual consciousness is not something that negates the demands of the realities of life. Rather it fulfils itself through life itself. He writes:

Our bodily needs, our vital hungers and our mental prejudices obsess and obscure the impulsions that thrill the hidden spirit. We hasten to gratify the immediate and forget the eternal, we clutch at the shadow and let go the substance. We are carried away in the flux and tumult of life. It is a mixed and collective whirl – a Weltgeist that moves and governs us. We are helpless straws drifting in the current. But manhood demands that we stop and pause, pull ourselves out of the Maelstrom and be what we are. We must shape things as we want and not allow things to shape us as they want.²

Keeping this insight in mind, it becomes easier to understand the poetic philosophy of *Parthibo Korat*.

2. Review of Literature

All the critical discussions on Shibashish Chatopadhyay available to his readers emphasize his fusion of modern sensibility with mystical undertones.. Some commentators have noted that his poetry resists both romantic transcendence and nihilistic despair, opting instead for a reflective inwardness rooted in social reality. However, indepth readings of *Parthibo Korat* with a focus on Tantric and Yogic underpinnings remain limited. This study seeks to address the issue specifically.

3. Theoretical Framework: Tantra and Yoga

It is a well-known fact that Tantric philosophy does not accept the binary between body and spirit, rather it challenges it. The body is not an illusion, it is very much real which leads to the divine realm. Mircea Eliade writes in his ‘Yoga: Immortality and Freedom’:

I discovered in the Tantric texts that India was not entirely ascetic, idealistic, and pessimistic. There exists a whole tradition that accepts life and the body; it does not consider them illusory nor the source of suffering, but exalts incarnate existence as the only mode of being in the world in which absolute freedom can be won.³

In the same way, Yoga lays emphasis on inner discipline rather than withdrawal from life. Patanjali's defines Yoga: “Yoga is the cessation of the fluctuations of consciousness” (Yoga Sutra, I.2). This actually refers to a process of inward transformation and by no means does it refer to withdrawal or escapism of any form.

4. Tantra, the Physical Body and the Sufferings of Real (Lived) Life

In one of his writings on the Bengali poetry of the North-east, Basab Roy has pointed out:

Spirituality is spread throughout the poetry of Shibashish. It is that concept in which the world is considered an illusion has offered the poet a boundless perception of life....the poet always speaks of a novel and higher realm of perception.⁴

In *Parthibo Korat*, physical exhaustion, social pressure, emotional turmoil and an underlying spiritual awareness form the very core of the poetic material. Chattopadhyay's poetry similarly converts hard realities of lived experiences into a mode of spiritual awareness: In *Ahladi*, you, he writes:

**The thorns scattered along the path pierce the feet;
unwillingly I take up the rosary, O my thumb.
Alone, I remain in delusion, brow-centre in stillness;
as if in play, I linger.
The inward arrow pierces the spiritual palate;
the palm fruit—the palate breaks open, entering the snake.
O Ahladi, everything is topsy-turvy
under the spell of your allusive glance.⁵**

The 'thorns scattered along the way' stands for everyday struggles the poet suffers from. The 'Rosary', 'brow centre in stillness', the 'arrow', 'spiritual palate', 'palm fruit', 'allusive glance' obvious indicates a spiritual journey that the poet has undertaken in the darkness of his mundane suffering—the darkest night of his soul.

5. Yogic Inwardness and Modern Identity

In the poems of Shibashish Chtttopadhyay, there is a strong and persistent movement that takes the readers inward. This is quite natural in poems that deal with spiritual-psychological themes. There is an effort on the part of the poet to communicate meaning amid fragmentation. The search for meaning must, of course, be carried out within the self. He writes:

**Across the fish-smelling waters, diving deep
to reach the other shore,
both eyes are crossed
by a sudden flash of millions of years of silence and memory.
The horn trumpet has been blown;
the boat is already afloat.
You have never understood the worth of the diver—
for this, the sea-city sinks
into salt-born desolation.⁶**

Commenting on Shibashish's poetry, Illora Dasgupta observes that in many places his poetic pieces refers to *dhyan* (meditation) and she questions whether the poet was under the unconscious influence of renowned Bengali poet Amiya Chakravarty who also hails from the same place.⁷ Referring to his poems such as Pratipadya Spasta Hole, Snanghare, Pratibimbita, Dasgupta further states that the poetry of Shibashish is multilayered and multidimensional and that a sustained reading of his poems gradually reveals the poet's true creative self.⁸ Another aspect of Shibashish Chattopadhyay's poetry is his vocabulary which often draws upon an ancient mystic-spiritual tradition of worship known as *Tantric Sadhana*, and is at times reminiscent of the diction of the Charyapada, the oldest Bengali text of mystic poems. Sanjay Bhattacharya, in one of his studies, rightly brings out this aspect:

Some more words are worth to be mentioned here: 'Sapini' (She-snake), 'Mahakal' (Lord Shiva), 'Sahasra' (Thousand), 'Joper Mala' (The Rosary), 'Brahmataalu' (The Crown of the Head), 'Shab' (Corpse), 'Shmashaan' (The Crematorium Ground), 'Turiya Dhyan' (Supreme Meditation), 'Padma' (The Lotus), 'Linga Thakur' (The Phallus God). The words give indication about a different kind of worship which is not conventional mode of worship; generally this is called Tantric Sadhana. Then a question arises: Does the poet believe in Tantric Sadhana? It is true that worshipping Shakti is the worship of God and since the ancient period this subject has been dealt in the world literature also. We have seen these kinds of words in Caryapada as well. This occult mode of worship has taken an individual position in the spiritual world against Brahminical hierarchy for ages. These words used in Bamachari Tantric mode of worship take us again near the mode of worship which is mentioned in Caryapada. This mode is practiced and studied far away from the society and Shibashish perhaps brings out that mode again before the readers of twenty first century in a new way.⁹

It can be safely said that Yoga, in the poems of *Parthibo Korat*, has become a metaphor for conscious self-examination in a hostile world.

6. Conclusion

There can be no denying of the fact that *Parthibo Korat* successfully demonstrates that modern Bengali poetry can make room for accommodating spiritual quest without ignoring individual and social reality. A careful reading of the poems shows that in the context of the poems, Tantra and Yoga are not just religious practices but philosophical orientations that enable the poet to confront suffering with awareness as well. Shibashish Chattopadhyay's work ultimately suggests that spiritual insight can go hand in hand with the pangs of lived experience—the worldly “saw” that cuts deep into existence.

The poems, when placed within the modern discourse of existentialism and classical Indian thought, may offer the readers a healing experience as they transform suffering, sense of isolation and bitter bodily experiences into something higher and lift the tortured consciousness to loftier realm of spiritual light.

¹ Chattopadhyaya, Shibashish: Parthibo Korat, Japankatha Prakashana, Guwahati-12, p-32 (Translation of this poem and other poems that follow are attempted by Dr.Runumi Chakraborty, the author of this article)

² Sri Aurobindo: The Creative Soul, composed in The Collected Works of Nolini Kanta Gupta, Vol-1, p.8

³ Eliade, Mircea: Yoga: Immortality and Freedom, Princeton University Press(Referenced in Guggenbuhl, E.D.Eliade, Das Gupta, Gesamp (pp. 29-30. University of Heidelberg Repository)

⁴ Basab Roy: Brahmaputra Upatyakar Kobi O Kobita, composed in Brahmaputra (Asom) Upatyakar Bangla Kobita O Kobi, Ed. Prasun Barman and Siddharthanjan Choudhury, Ubudash, Kolkata-12, p.184-185

⁵ Chattopadhyaya, Shibashish: Parthibo Korat, Japankatha Prakashana, Guwahati-12, p-4

⁶ Chattopadhyaya, Shibashish: Parthibo Korat, Japankatha Prakashana, Guwahati-12, p-5

⁷ Abhijit Chakraborty (ed.): Kavitar Purbottar, 2nd Issue, May 2006, p.107

⁸ Ibid, p.109

⁹ N.Pattanayak (ed.): Creatcrit-A Refereed Journal, Vol-5, July, 2018, p.55