

## **Swarnakumari Devi and changing role of women in late colonial Bengal: From mother to the daughters**

**Dr. Madhumita Mondal**

**Assistant Professor**

**Department of History**

**Hiralal Mazumdar Memorial College for Women**

Swarnakumari Devi (1856-1925), the earliest woman novelist and one of the most renowned literary figures of her time was born in a crucial phase of Bengal's history. In colonial India she was one of the earliest Bengali women who attended 5th session of Indian National Congress in 1889 as a delegate along with Kadambini Gangooly (1861-1923), the first female physician of colonial India as well as of south Asia. It indicates that role of women was gradually changing and they step out for greater cause like serving the nation and so on. Their participations in Indian National Congress lead the changing perception of Gender in the process of modernization in late nineteenth century Bengal as well as India. The socio-cultural and political scenario of Bengal was undergoing a process of gradual but significant changes at that time. Swarnakumari was born in 28 August, 1856. She was the eleventh child and the fifth daughter of Debendranath Tagore and Sarada Devi. Debendranath promoted women education and he was an initiator of public welfare. Debendranath sent his eldest daughter Saudamini Devi (1847-1920) to school soon after the establishment of Bethune School.

Swarnakumari was very talented like her brothers i.e Satyendranath Tagore, the first ICS (Indian Civil Service), Jyotirindranath Tagore and Rabindranath Tagore. Swarnakumari was fortunate enough to have a liberal childhood compared to thousands of girl child born and brought up in contemporary families of Bengal. The year Swarnakumari was born is the year in which a collection of verse by a woman, Krishnakamini Devi was published. Yet female education had not really advanced in those days. The Tagore family was an exception. Debendranath being an active member of the Brahmo movement, always encouraged female education.

On the contrary, there were a few who were particularly learned and therefore respected. Along with food, recreation and daily rituals, study was a daily practice among the women of the *antahpur*. A *Vaishnavi* came to teach Sanskrit and *puranic* literature in the *antahpur* to newly married young wives and daughters. The *Vaishnavi* had a booklet called *Sishubodhak* (a text earlier than Vidyasagar's *Barnaparichaya*) to teach the Bangla alphabets. That single booklet helped in teaching everything including letters, spellings, invocation of Gods and Goddesses, description of the different hours of the day and also the method of writing. To quote Swarnakumari, "...her intellect and learning were extraordinary. Quite well versed in Sanskrit,

she evidently knew Bangla well. Moreover, she had an excellent flair for descriptions and she would enchant everyone with her art of storytelling. The language of invocations and descriptions was so difficult and obscure that it was claimed that if it could be read and understood well, one would acquire the complete process of Bangla learning”. (‘Sekele Katha’)

The children initially practiced writing on palm leaves and then on banana leaves. Later they used paper to write with pens of bamboo twig. Swarnakumari noticed since her childhood that in the *antahpur* there were cupboards full of dolls, toys, cloths, along with others full of books in every household. A European lady used to come to their *antahpur* to teach the children English. Later a new *Pundit*, the *Acharya* of the *Adi Bramho Samaj*, Ayodhyanath Pahrashi was appointed as a teacher in the *antahpur*. Debendranath’s appointment of a male member in the *antahpur* of Jorasanko house to educate the daughters and wives of the family was an event of great significance in contemporary society. Swarnakumari wrote: A gentleman not related to the family gained access to the *antahpur*. My father did not think that the English lady’s method of teaching had produced the desired result. A new *Acharya* of the *Adi Bramho Samaj*, Ayodhyanath Pakrashi was appointed as a teacher in the *antahpur*. (‘Sekele Katha’)

Swarnakumari was married to Janakinath Ghoshal on 17 November, 1867. She was only eleven and Janakinath was twenty seven years then. The marriage was so special that the news was published in contemporary journals and newspapers. Janakinath was an active member of the Indian National Congress and became a deputy magistrate. He abandoned the sacred thread forever and denied castes. Swarnakumari was influenced by him and she also denied caste at the time of her son’s marriage. Jyotsnanath Ghoshal (1870-1862), the only son of Swarnakumari became an I.C.S and after Satyendranath he was the one to achieve that distinction among the members of the Tagore family. Jyotsnanath was married to Sukriti Devi, the granddaughter of Brahmo leader Keshabchandra Sen. Debendranath disapproved the inter-caste marriage. But Swarnakumari supported her son’s decision and argued against her father on that issue. At last the marriage was taken place and Debendranath sent his blessings to his grandson and grand daughter-in-law. Swarnakumari did not believe in caste discrimination unlike many of her contemporaries from Brahmo and Hindu communities. Janakinath also refused to abide by the norms of Tagore family. He did not accept Bramho religion. Jyotirindranatha appreciated the changes took place in the Tagore family after this marriage: “A change took place in *antahpur* when Swarnakumari married with Janakinath Goshal. Janakinath had a sense of household decoration. Gradually the *antahpur* began to change with the effort of Janakinath- and the *antahpur* decorated and cleaned. Beside hygiene conscious he introduced Homeopathy treatment for health care”. (Jyotirindranather *Jibansmriti*, p.41)

Swarnakumari was very much exceptional comparing with the contemporary women of Bengal in terms of thoughts and practices. Since her childhood she was busy with study and literary creations. Her desire was to be equal as her brothers in every domain. She used to go to *Pathshala* with her brothers. That was not a common scenario in those days. She was always keen to acquire knowledge rather than any other regular household chores which were usually taught to women. She had least interest in household works. Her daughter Sarala wrote in her memoir that Swarnakumari rarely joined the long *adda* sessions or spent too much time on household chores like the other women in the family. She had an extremely independent approach in this matter with respect to her sisters and other wives in the family. Sarala wrote, "In the act of peeling and cutting vegetables and preparation of other food items we saw mostly my maternal aunts being involved which included my 'bodomasima', 'mejomasima' and 'chotomasima'. Also the presence of my 'bodomami', 'notunmami', 'n-mami', 'Sarojadidi' and 'Sushiladidi' was noted frequently. Even my sister used to be there. However, my mother never used to be present there. Mostly my aunts were assigned to carry out all the household work. It was only on certain select occasions that my mother used to visit the kitchen; otherwise, it was never her area of interest".

At a time when useless chatting, gossip and card playing in afternoons were a regular practice especially among women of upper class families, Swarnakumari strove to set an example to her contemporaries. The history of modern Bengali literature and culture is intertwined with the history of the Tagore family of Jorasanko. The cultural ambience of Jorasanko helped Swarnakumari to develop her skill. Her liberal, cultured family provided her sustenance to develop her literary faculty. The kind of domestic life that her family led certainly helped. Swarnakumari involved herself in the field of literature since childhood. Her early writings prompted Debendranath to bless her in her childhood saying 'let it be raining flowers on your writings'. In later days she proved her talent as a novelist, poet, playwright, music composer and editor that made her the most distinguished literary figure of her time. Swarnakumari Devi was eager to have a home in its real sense where she could nurture her knowledge and be able to keep herself at a distance from many household troubles.

Swarnakumari introduced herself to the literary world of Bengal by publishing *Dip-Nirban* in 1876 at the age of eighteen. Though the novel was published anonymously, it was able to draw the notice of *Hindoo Patriot*. It became public in course of time that the accomplished writer was a young Hindu lady. There was much speculation about the author's gender identity. The Calcutta Review praised the novel: "We have no hesitation in pronouncing this book the best, that yet been written by a Bengali lady and we should no more hesitate to call her the most skilled women writer of Bengal".

Swarnakumari's literary creations thus offer an insight into thoughtful minds. She expressed her views on some of the most pertinent subject of her time through them. Issues crucial to interest of women and society at large were addressed. Not only did she enrich Bangla literature but also

expressed her devotion to the cause of liberation of women. Sympathetic to the condition of widows she highlighted the need for education. She addressed the importance of the development of the personality of women in it entirely. Her daughters Hiranmayee and Sarala were very much inspired by their mother and followed the thoughts and practices of her mother throughout their lives. They always accompanied their mother in almost all inspiring activities like editing journals, setting up women organization, joining national movement, fighting against gender discrimination and taking part in cultural activities. Her son Jyotsnanath also joined with them for many times.

Among the children of Swarnakumari, her elder daughter Hiranmayee Devi (1868 – 1925) accompanied her in most of her activities. Jyotirindranath Tagore together with Swarnakumari Devi, Akshay Dutta and Rabindranath Tagore wrote a dance drama called *Bibaha Utsav* on the occasion of Hiranmayee's marriage ceremony in 1884. Hiranmayee was married to Phanibhushan Mukhopadhyay (1860—1927) who was a science graduate from London University. Phanibhushan contributed a number of scientific essays in *Bharati* and wrote two books on education. He encouraged his mother-in-law Swarnakumari to write essays on scientific topics. Phanibhushan and Hiranmayee lived in Kasiyabagan at Kolkata. Hiranmayee edited *Bharati* along with Sarala for three years. She contributed some essays in *Bharati*. Hiranmayee took the charge of publishing *Bharati* when Swarnakumari's health deteriorated. In the name of her younger sister (Sarala) she began to publish *Bharati* regularly. Due to her untiring efforts, *Bharati* reached a new level of maturity. She gathered around her a group of intellectuals like Ramendrasundar Trivedi to serve *Bharati*. Hiranmayee was closely associated with *Bharati* for a long time. She edited the journal between 1302—1304 B.S. Sarala wrote in *Bharati* about her contribution to the journal after her death: "She began to serve *Bharati* some thirty years ago, initially to help our mother. She remained behind the curtain and helped Swarnakumari Devi a lot to publish the journal. She did not write creative essays but she was engaged with translating necessary contemporary information from English into Bangla to provide easy access to the Bengali reader. She was the first to introduce science based topics like Pastur's Institute etc. She also published a number of translated literatures. Her creative genius was in writing Sonnets. Her verses were simple and excellent—some musical talents are soothing to hear and have pathos in the tone though they are not great singer—her verses are like that".

Hiranmayee also retained her interest in active social work since her childhood. She established a volunteer girls' school at their Kasiyabagan house. She was able to gather, a number of girls from the locality to attend that school. She was the head mistress and Sarala, became her assistant. She was fifteen years old, Sarala was eleven only. After her marriage Sarala took charge of the school for a short period. The number of the students was around twenty. The students were mainly unmarried excluding some child-widows. They were generally taught Bengali, English, Sanskrit and Mathematics. Hiranmayee and Sarala arranged examinations for

the students. Once, Rabindranath was there to evaluate the students and awarded them. At the time of Sarala's entrance examination the school was closed for ever.

After marriage, Hiranmayee became her mother's assistant in activities other than publishing *Bharati*. Theosophy was very popular at that time and their house became the meeting place of the women's branch of Theosophical Sabha. Women from different families used to visit their place to attend the *Sabha* and they became the 'sakhi' (friend) of her mother. Later, Swarnakumari established an organization for women in the name of Sakhi Samiti. Hiranmayee became the chief assistant of Swarnakumari in all the activities of the 'samiti'. She founded Shilpashikshashram for the welfare of the needy and helpless women. Gradually 'shilpashram' was transformed into Bidhaba Shilpashram. Handicraft products were made there and were sold by the 'ashrama'. Sarala started 'Lakshmir Bhandar' to promote the handicraft products among the common people.

Sarala Devi Choudhurani (1872—1945), most promising among the children of Swarnakumari, was born on 9 September, 1872. Her youngest sister Urmila (1874—1879) died in an accident at the age of six. In early childhood, Sarala felt quite neglected by her mother. In Jorasanko, the children used to live separately from their parents. The servants were there to look after the children. Sarala wrote: "One more convention of the wealthy family of the time was very much practiced in the Jorasanko Tagore family—that is the children of the family were brought up with foster-mother's ('dhatri-ma') breast. Babies were detached from the mother immediately after birth and were sent to a maid who used to breast feed and there were other maid to look after the babe. They had no contact with the mother then onward. This happened to me too". (*Jibaner Jharapata*) Not much is known of Sarala's paternal family. There is no mention of their having ever visited their paternal home in the ancestral village. However, Sarala mentions that her paternal grandfather sometimes visited them in their house at Kashiayabagan in Calcutta. He brought with him a breath of fresh air and rustic charm. The children were very fond of their grandfather who was very indulgent towards them. Sarala had her 'hate khori' (a traditional custom to introduce the alphabets to the younger people at a certain age) at the age of five in Jorasanko. A pundit was appointed to impart primary learning. She continued her lessons at home till the age of seven. Then she was admitted to Bethune School. By that time her father came back to India and they left the Jorasanko house and started to live in Kasiyabazar. From that time Sarala and her sister Hiranmayee began to collect the children of their neighbors and used to teach them. When Hiranmayee got married Sarala alone continued the practice. She was a prolific writer, wrote many poems and essays. At the age of thirteen Sarala passed the entrance examination (1886) from Bethune school and entered into F.A. class. In the meantime, Bethune School became Bethune College (1886). Sarala completed her F.A. and B.A honours in English. She received Padmabati Gold Medal in 1890 for securing the highest marks in her B.A.

examination. She was the first recipient of the medal and also the earliest woman of Jorasanko family to be a graduate. She learned Sanskrit and also tried for M.A. in Sanskrit as a private student. However, she did not appear for the examination. She also learned French and Persian. She challenged the traditional norm of men alone studying science. She opted for Physics in Mahendralal Sarkar's Institution. Sarala was the only female student of the institution and used to seat separately from the boys. Sarala's two brothers accompanied her in those days. Accordingly, she was allowed to attend evening classes of the Science Association while her brothers kept guard on either side of her. Sarala was a bright student who developed a great interest in the natural sciences which she wanted to pursue at college level. Her mother advocated science education to make the people especially the women health conscious and free from superstitions. In *Bharati*, she attempted to popularize science education. She thought science education was very important for the society. She also felt the importance of the knowledge of good health. Sarala was deeply inspired by such thoughts of her mother. She thought that the chief duty for a woman was to maintain a good household with health care and a sense of hygiene. She emphasized on a mother's concern regarding her children's health. To maintain a healthy lifestyle a mother should be educated, she believed. She emphasized on female education to make women conscious. Sarala also thought that education could remove superstitions from their mind. Sarala thought that normalcy of family life was disturbed if hygiene sense, cleanliness and sense of punctuality were not taken care of. She emphasized on the mother's sense of hygiene. She wrote, "How can a mother teach health care to her children when she herself was indifferent about that?"

Sarala graduated successfully but did not continue with her master's degree: "In my mind, a tremendous restlessness started setting in. I wanted to leave home which was like a cage and rush out, on some purposeless and random journey. Like my brothers, I wanted to earn an independent livelihood". After the completion of her study she went to Mysore and took up a paid job of teaching and began to live independently there. She thought that financial independence is important to achieve women empowerment. She made an example of an attempt to empower the Indian women. She also worked as a private secretary to the Maharani of Baroda. A woman, who was educated, cultured and willing to earn an independent livelihood, she gave a new dimension to the women's question in the late nineteenth century Bengal. She was though criticized by *Bangabasi*, a contemporary journal for going outside the *antahpur* for a job to achieve financial independence: "What was the need for women of such families to travel alone to distant places to take up a job? Surely they are not wanting in food and comforts. Why create problems for one? Was she needy? The question is why she took such a decision. Is that only to enjoy a free life or something else?" Sarala was content to make the experiment and did not exhibit any concern for making the right to gainful employment a right to be fought for. In her words: "To know oneself

one must be away from the cloying atmosphere of one's home I came to realize this when I was away and living on my own in Mysore. My country, India, came alive to me, and I developed an understanding of Hindu religion and culture. No longer am I restless like a cage bird, for I have seen the outside world and come to understand myself.”

Whatever the consequence, it was true that Sarala showed the path of independent living to the women of her time. Her message was that one should take a job not only to earn money, but what was more important was to achieve an identity. She thought that only financial independence could ensure a position or prestige to a woman in her family as well as in society. Soon she left the job due to ill health. Besides, in those days it was not easy for a single woman to live alone in an unknown place far away from home. One of the reasons was that her Brahmo set of mind could not accept the conservative society of South India. Secondly, she was attacked by a mob one night and finally, she lost her interest in that job. Returning from Mysore she had to face many questions. She wrote: “Wherever I go in Calcutta, whoever I meet, make fun and say ‘Has the fancy for a job gone? Is the fancy to be independent over?’” She added that while the attraction for a job had declined, her desire for independence increased.

Returning from Mysore she devoted herself to the cause of her motherland through literature and music. Sarala inherited her literary mind from her mother and following her father became a nationalist. She became very busy in editing *Bharati* as well as in her public life and commitment to nationalist politics. Through the columns of that journal she began to spread the message of the necessity for self-defense and physical strength. Sarala was sensitive to the weakness and alleged cowardice of the Bengalis and felt that development of physical strength and strength of the mind of the youth is necessary. It is interesting to note that most of the male organizations recognized Sarala's potential and invited her to address people in meetings and to distribute prizes at public functions. Towards the end of the century, Sarala organized an ‘akhra’ for young men, where physical fitness was to be combined with training in the martial arts. These are considered as early revolutionary activities in Bengal. However, Swarnakumari encouraged silently her daughter Sarala in her extremist activities. Sarala wrote: “When I opened a club for young men in the house, when I handed them knives and sticks, organized ‘Birastami Utsav’ and so on, what did my parents and others say? Nothing at all –they did not put any constraints in my way. Their silent approval was the basis of my strength without this I would not have been proceeded even a single step.”

Sarala began her musical lessons on her mother's piano. Swarnakumari learned to play piano and later she encouraged her daughter Sarala to learn music. Sarala was a good composer and singer and she used her talent to instill patriotic feelings. She became highly successful in this field. She had the power to organize the youth of Bengal to serve the nation. Sarala made her

active debut in politics through her music. Once, Mrs. Sevier, a disciple of Swami Vivekananda, told Sarala that she could inspire the whole nation through her music. She wrote a number of patriotic songs that deeply stirred the people. Her music touched the hearts of millions.

Realizing early marriage and *purdah* system were of the main obstacles to female education, Swarnakumari arranged good education for her daughters. She represented the role of a 'new' mother. That helped her daughters to lead their lives in a different manner. She arranged music lessons for Sarala beside regular study. When Sarala wished to be financially independent like her brothers and took a paid job in Mysore far away from home, Swarnakumari stood beside her against every odd. She believed that financial independence is most important for women. Swarnakumari motivated Sarala to have a deep concern for the welfare of the nation. It is significant that while even Rabindranath Tagore accepted the prevalent custom of early marriage for his daughters, Swarnakumari refused to abide by the convention. Swarnakumari did not believe in caste discrimination and denied caste at the time of her son's marriage. She was free from that evil of the society unlike many of her contemporaries from Brahmo and Hindu communities. If her daughter Sarala Devi is considered the role model for 'new women' in early twentieth century, Swarnakumari herself was very advanced in respect of her time and gender identity. Her roles in education, in socio-political and cultural domain as well as in promotion of women issues were very significant. She changed the definition of perception of women in their time. She came out from the stereo-type social structure of contemporary society. Her family ambience and connection with Tagore house made a significant impact on her inner world. Moreover, her individuality, analytical power, philosophy of life, elite cultured background enriched her and helped her to overcome the narrow confines of paternal society. Most importantly she was successful to motivate and to guide her own daughters to this 'new' journey for Indian women.

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