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**The *Bhadralok* as Truth-Seeker:
Towards a Social History of the Bengali Detective¹**

SUMMARY: The figure of the socially-engaged detective who transcends his – a highly gendered agency operates here – generically-sanctioned roles as a glorified intellectual mercenary or “gumshoe”², solver of conundrums and “tangled skeins”³, champion of the rule-of-law and keeper of the last resort, while attempting to uphold a universe of moral and ethical values that, simultaneously, do not stray too far from the high road of societal and political acceptability, is a figure to conjure within the literary history of Bengal in the twentieth century. In the present essay, the attempt will be made to study, through a comparativist’s prism, this gravitas, endowed by society, which is associated with the image of the successful private investigator in Bengal; often, his is a voice striking a blow for the spirit of rational enquiry, as with Feluda, and, in other cases, he upholds the dignity of the traditional order/s, while exposing its/their soft underbelly of moral corruption and criminal collusion, as with Byomkesh Bakshi.

¹ All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are by the present author.

² A somewhat dismissive American slang for, initially, a police detective and, thereafter, his private counterpart; one of the most famous film-noir gumshoes was Sam Spade, notably in the film *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), whose footprints can be traced to Satyajit Ray’s Feluda.

³ A recent audio-drama, using the main characters of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes series, is called “The Tangled Skein”; <http://www.bigfinish.com/releases/v/the-tangled-skein-20>.

KEYWORDS: *Bhadralok*, *Raj*, detective, Calcutta, Bengali, Feluda, Byomkesh Bakshi, Anglophilia, crime fiction, Dr. Dilip Chaudhuri, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Partha Chatterjee, Ashis Nandy, Bruno Latour, Occidentalism, Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit, Alastair Bonnett

The role of the *Bhadralok*⁴ in crystallizing and articulating pre- and post-Independence Indian societal and cultural developments and aspirations cannot be gainsaid: viewed as a class, the Calcutta-based and *Raj*-educated *Bhadralok* located themselves in an arc of anglophiliac leisure, despite their well-entrenched and, more often than not, radical opposition to British colonialism. Thus, despite the occasionally aggressive manifestation of anti-British sentiments and political and ideological posturing, the early-twentieth-century Indian, especially Bengali, intelligentsia remained an avid consumer of socio-cultural Anglophilia. This was not only limited to the consumption of Anglo-European canonical literature but extended to the domains of popular culture, cuisine, modes of socialisation, intellectual priorities, political and cultural organisation, sports and recreation and even social and religious reform; in the early Bengali detective films, such as, for example, *Hānā Bādi* (“The Haunted House”, 1952) and *Cupi Cupi Āse* (“He Comes in Stealth”, 1960), the detectives not only dress in *pucca śāhebi* (perfect western) attire, down to their starched waistcoats, but also mirror the mannerisms of their Anglo-European archetypes, down to the patent leather shoes and the pipes. In some cases, however, the detective sports a much less westernised look and is, indeed, rather a level-headed *dhoti*⁵-clad bourgeois Bengali gentleman, who is rooted in his time but is keenly aware of the societal and political fault-lines that inform his context; the most famous example

⁴ A term (literally, “civilised people”) used, till quite recently, to denote the Bengali middle classes, which cultivated a specific aura of eclectic cultural and intellectual tastes, despite their social conservatism; often, this leisured urbane sophistication was bought by economic pelf.

⁵ A one-piece traditional attire, wrapped around the loins and legs, of the North Indian male.

of this is Byomkesh Bakshi, a creation of the Bengali novelist, poet and screen-play-writer Saradindu Bandopadhyay (1899-1970), who looks at his profession as, primarily, an exercise of intellectual passion. This attitude seems to match the contemporaneous Bengali attitude to the *vita contemplativa*; as Dipesh Chakrabarty notes, in the 2007-preface of *Provincializing Europe*,

[t]he legacy of Europe – or British colonial rule for that is how Europe came into our lives – was everywhere: in traffic rules, in grown-ups’ regrets that Indians had no civic sense, in the games of soccer and cricket, in my school uniform, in Bengali-nationalist essays and poems critical of social inequality, especially of the so-called caste system, in implicit and explicit debates about love-match versus arranged marriages, in literary societies and film clubs. In practical, everyday living ‘Europe’ was not a problem to be consciously named or discussed. Categories or words borrowed from European histories had found new homes in our practices. (Chakrabarty 2008: ix)

Thus, even the pronounced *bāngāliyānā* (Bengali-ness) of an interstitial character such as Byomkesh Bakshi seems but an inverted assertion of this rediscovery of the “archaic” in the “modern” as Chakrabarty and others have shown elsewhere.⁶ The norms of cultural alignment and societal accreditation, as transferred through western detective fiction and popular cultural icons such as Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot, Father Brown and Dr. John Thorndyke, found new sites in the characters of Feluda, Bakshi, Kiriti Roy and Dr. Dilip Chaudhuri, which, within a short time, acquired almost cult-status in Bengal. The all-knowing or, at least, all-seeing rationalist-realist private detective seemed to represent, at political, cultural, individual and societal levels, the fruition of the indigenous aspirational anxiety *à propos* Bengal’s hybrid Europhone cultural inheritance; thus, even if the character

⁶ In his keynote address given at the conference on “After Subaltern Studies”, which was held at Princeton University, 27th-28th April, 2012, Partha Chatterjee, a founder member of the Subaltern Studies collective, argues “that the time of colonial and postcolonial modernity was heterogeneous, that its practices were hybrid, and that the archaic was, in many significant ways, constitutive of the modern” (Chatterjee 2012: 46).

concerned always wears a *dhoti* and locates himself within the arc of indigenous trajectories of socialisation and the spectrum of legal-criminological interests of the Bengali *bourgeoisie*, the mediated configuration of his S/selfhood does remain Europhone and his socio-cultural project identifiable with post-Enlightenment Rationalism.

Hence, this expression of cultural choice, through the selection of fictive characteristics and psychological and social traits, was often mediated through the operation of transcultural subalternity and hybridisation, as is exemplified in the manner in which many popular Bengali fiction-writers of the early twentieth century based their fictional hero/ines on English prototypes. Nowhere is this truer than in the case of detective fiction, in which genre Bānglā literature has had a rich corpus: from Kiriti Roy to Jayanta and *dārogā* (inspector) Banka-ullah to Feluda, Bengali fictional detectives have succeeded in creating a dedicated universe of readership, which is incrementally ahead of similar figures in other Indian languages, for themselves. At the same time as Dr. Richard Austin Freeman (1862-1943), the creator of the medical detective Dr. Thorndyke, who used his mini-laboratory for forensic recreation of crimes already revealed to the reader, the Bengali adventure-novelist Hemendra Kumar Roy (1888-1963) created Dr. Thorndyke's Bengali counterpart, Dr. Dilip Chaudhuri.⁷ This "eminent chemist" had helped the police in many cases that required a "medico-legal" approach and always travelled with his "pocket-laboratory", which had the miniature testing-instruments and chemical compounds necessary for forensic investigations. Though the setting for his crime-narratives, as recorded by his "special friend and constant companion" Shrimanta Sen in his diary, is Calcutta and its environs, all the characters seem to be foils for their Europhone prototypes; thus, Manilal Bulabhai,

⁷ In his "Preface" to *Rahasyēr Ālo-Chāyā* (*The Chiaroscuro of a Mystery*), Roy acknowledges his debt to Austin Freeman and writes: "This is the story of a scientific detective. ... Though this is a story, real European detectives do nowadays operate in the ways described in this book. Hence, the story is immensely educative" (Roy 1953: 113).

the victim in *The Chiaroscuro of a Mystery*, is a prosperous jeweller dressed in a suit, sporting a felt hat, rolling his own cigarettes with “State Express” tobacco and “Zig Zag” paper and lighting them with “Wimco’s Club Quality” matches, which “do not sell well in the Bengali areas of Calcutta but are used a lot by the *Sāheb-s*”.⁸ However, he is shown as partial to the *rasagollā*, that iconic Bengali sweetmeat, despite being, as his name suggests, of Gujarati origin; there are a number of extremely complex and seemingly contradictory meta-narratives at work here: the creation of a pan-Indian “modern” individual who aspires to and, occasionally, achieves the Europhone life-style, the sense of colonial India necessitating a discourse of the confident Indian who can face up to the “West” on its own terms, the urge to leverage modern (read “Anglo-European”) habits of thought and action and the tortured but almost defiant realisation that one is, all said and done, in India and that is a privilege.

It is this location in the Indian/Bengali mindscape that makes *Satyānveṣi* (Truth-Seeker) Byomkesh Bakshi, a quintessentially *bhadrakok* private investigator, who spurns that designation and prefers to call himself a truth-seeker, a character created by Saradindu Bandyopadhyay, a fictive representation of an autonomous, proto-postcolonial identity-forming urge. In the words of Sukumar Sen (1900-1992), the renowned Calcutta-based polymath, linguist and cultural historian of Bengal, in his *Crime Stories’ Chronology* (1988), an authoritative diachronic study of “western” and Indian crime fiction,

[h]e is not a scientist, violinist or an addict. He is a typical Bengali gentleman of the 1930s – educated, intelligent, shrewd, reserved and sympathetic. Apart from his intellect and sedate serenity, he has got no other quality to distinguish himself from the average Bengali youths.

Though one may seek to differ from Sen about the typicality and averageness of Bakshi, given that the latter does seem to be endowed with an extraordinary intuition and sensitivity, coupled with exceptional

⁸ Roy 1953: 145.

erudition, and is not entirely bereft of masterly idiosyncrasies, as Sen observes; in “The Menagerie” and some other narratives, Bakshi is said to be playing with Bāsuki,⁹ his pet snake. It is also interesting that, instead of giving an affectionate, “light” name to his pet snake, Bakshi names it after a significant Purānic figure; one is tempted, given Bakshi’s self-location within the socio-cultural spectrum of the colonial “native”, to call this a subaltern attempt to talk back to the Empire, though that may be construed as reading too much into a selectional whim. The colonial twilight saw a discursive cultural nationalism enter into the realms of both public posturing and private choice, which was often mediated, especially in Bengal, through the prisms of mythopoeia and nationalist historiography; Saradindu Bandopadhyay, Bakshi’s creator, was rather interested in weaving cultural nationalism into his literary works, having written a number of historical novels and film-scripts based in Rajput and Maratha Princely States, the most significant of which was *Jhinder Bandi (The Prisoner of Jhind)*.¹⁰ However, such intertextual “nativism”, though putting the idea of an autochthonous subaltern forward, was, more often than not, based on nineteenth-century European configurations of nationalism, not unlike the mimetic constructions of patriotic and emancipatory discourses by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar or Rash Behari Bose; as a truth-seeker, Byomkesh Bakshi is, perhaps, re-seeking the socio-cultural absolutes that have already been introduced to him through the felt life and passivity of colonial subject-hood.

If one sees this, from a post-/Subaltern perspective, as a reconfiguration of the “archaic” in/as the “modern” – an idea introduced

⁹ *Vāsuki*, the King of the Nāga-s, mythical beings that could appear as snakes, was supposed to have been used as the churning-rope by the gods and demons during the *Manthana*, the churning of the Primeval Ocean of Milk, according to the Purānic lore (Lochtefeld 2001: 743).

¹⁰ The title and plot of this novel were inspired by *The Prisoner of Zenda* (1894), by Sir Anthony Hope Hawkins (1863-1933); in fact, Bandopadhyay’s novel is almost an adaptation.

above – one may be led to the idea that, in Bruno Latour’s words, “[t]he traditional choice between freedom and necessity never profers, despite appearances, a real freedom of choice” (Latour 1999: 24); the need to keep up the appearance of being autochthonous, in a cultural sense, irrespective of the depth and range of the same, might and did often collide with the lived actuality of cultural hybridity, given the interstitial nature of socialisation patterns. Thus, a figure like Bakshi, despite and, perhaps, even because of his protestations of indigenous inspiration, exhibits, through both implicit and explicit textual-narrative devices, the limitations of cultural choice that are faced, more typically than not, by a colonised sensibility; this, however, need not be a value-loaded deterministic judgement: Bakshi may still be construed as a simulacrum of the English private eye, who becomes, in the Calcutta of the Thirties, a somewhat crypto-nationalistic, somewhat Anglophiliac intersectional figure, and represents the target audience’s deeply ingrained societal and cultural roots and existential split, in the throes of its modernist and proto-postcolonial desire to re-/negotiate the boundaries and entanglements of a transcultural melange. This ties in with Latour’s definition of “politics as the progressive constitution of a common world”, within which it is problematic “to imagine a collective existence if all those who wished to participate were first asked to leave behind, in the outside vestibule, all the appurtenances and attachments that enabled them to exist” (Latour 1999: 30). This, further, leads to the possibility of the engagement of the individual colonial subjectivity, as, for example, in the case of Bakshi, with “the common world as the object of politics, or what Isabel Stengers calls ‘cosmopolitics’” (Latour 1999: 30); such engagement, however, need not produce an even-handed or even reciprocity-based relationship between “Occidental” and Indian configurations of selfhood. “Distinctions”, as Ashis Nandy says, “between westernisation and modernisation have not touched the bulk of western educated modern Indians, who are convinced that their future lies in being exactly like

Europe and North America” (Nandy 2007). This conviction, as Nandy had argued in the Eighties, stems from a

colonialism [that] colonizes minds in addition to bodies and it releases forces within the colonized societies to alter their cultural priorities once for all. In the process, it helps generalize the concept of the modern West from a geographical and temporal entity to a psychological category. The West is now everywhere, within the West and outside; in structures and in minds. (Nandy 1983: 11)

Perhaps, as he goes on to argue later, a possible response to this colonialist double bind could be to deploy, like Pandit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891), configurations of “dissent in indigenous terms” (Nandy 1983: 12). In Byomkesh Bakshi, despite his somewhat idiosyncratic “cafeteria approach”¹¹ to “Western” values and modes, forms of self-identification seem to avoid “the exogenous idea of rationalism” (Nandy 1983: 17) and carve out a new “native” space within the ambit of a re-calibrated domain of past “traditional” constructs; it is here that the possession of a pet snake named Bāsuki transcends the level of romantic whim and attempts to reinforce, with various explicit and implicit gestures, “the tradition of reinterpretation of traditions to create new traditions” (Nandy 1983: 18).

This attempt, along with Bakshi’s other acknowledgements of his socio-linguistic and, perhaps more significantly, religious and cultural roots and milieu, seems to belong within the domain of what Partha Chatterjee calls “eastern nationalism”, which “has been accompanied by an effort to ‘re-equip’ the nation culturally, to transform it. But it could not do so simply by imitating the alien culture, for then the nation would lose its distinctive identity. The search therefore was for a regeneration of the national culture, adapted to the requirements of progress, but retaining at the same time its distinctiveness”

¹¹ The term comes from marketing and involves the “establishment of a wide variety of program opportunities and allows the consumer to choose from the services offered”; http://www.prm.nau.edu/prm275/programming_concepts_lesson.htm.

(Chatterjee 1986: 2). The configuration of this distinctiveness, hence, was an intrinsic part of the nation-building project, one that, arguably, continues in India till the present day, with various socio-cultural and political platforms seeking to further the cause of what Swami Vivekananda had declared to be the twin goals of education, “man-making and character-building”; Bakshi comes across as a multi-faceted gentleman, who seeks, as do Sherlock Holmes and Feluda, to cast himself in the mould of the *uomo universale*, one whose constitutive traits would be derived more from the works of Kālidāsa and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee than those of the Graeco-Roman and Renaissance masters. However, these traits were quarried in the “authentically”-Indian sources by asking questions that stemmed from the classical European construction of the ideal man, who is intelligent, physically and mentally strong, equipped with a well-read personality and a cultivated subjectivity and rooted in the discourse of the inexorability of human progress; as Chatterjee notes, quoting Ernest Gellner¹², “[b]y the twentieth century, the dilemma [of choosing between ‘westernising’ and a *narodnik* tendency] hardly bothers anyone: the philosopher-kings of the ‘underdeveloped’ world all act as westernisers, and all talk like *narodniks*.” The philosopher-king in Bakshi perfects this existential split to a fine art and even the other characters in his detective-stories seem capable of switching between both worlds effortlessly; in “The Quills of the Porcupine”, an apparently-upper-middle-class Bengali couple, Dipa and Debashish, combine aspects of “western” and Bengali sartorial, culinary, ergonomic and even attitudinal preferences: Debashish wears “formal western clothes” to work and changes to “the formal Bengali attire of dhoti and kurta” while sitting down at the dining table and eating the traditional Bengali high tea of “puris, potato curry and home-made sweets” (Bandopadhyay 2006: 206). The plot of this story, in terms of this couple, weaves the informal but, nonetheless, binding networks of intra-societal groups

¹² Gellner, Ernest (1964). *Thought and Change*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, pp.147-78.

and neighbourhood gatherings and evening “tea and chat session[s]” (Bandopadhyay 2006: 208) organised by friends of friends, which are so very characteristic of Bengali socialisation to this day, the tensions and fault-lines of a loveless arranged marriage, the oppressive societal demands of caste- and *gotra*¹³-maches and the incessant onslaught of the process of westernisation into what is, basically, a murder mystery. The admixture of social drama with crime creates an osmotic interface between social-historical processes and the requirements of detective fiction; it is this combination of the real and the fictive that gives nuances to the representation of a divided loyalty such as that of Bakshi: he has to, continually, chart a middle course between the somewhat conflicting demands of being a Bengali approximation of Sherlock Holmes and a *bhadralok* truth-seeker, who fully comprehends the way global crimes are locally-inflected and tinged with shades of significant contextual meaning.

At this stage, it seems productive to take another look at the manner in which this nuancing of the “global” may and does take the form of selective replication, as Chatterjee and Gellner have argued, of Western socio-cultural deployments; in their celebrated book *Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of its Enemies* (2004), Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit advance the thesis that a certain nationalist and “nativist” resistance to the constructed trope of the “West”, in reality, masks a mimetic response to the modernisation drives that are best contextualised within the Euro-American societal and cultural paradigms, both among nationalist conservatives and utopian visionary radicals whose construction/s of governmentality was/were threatened

¹³ The term *gotra* means lineage-based “clan”, referring to the descendants, through a theoretically unbroken male line, of a shared male ancestor, who was, almost always, a Vedic *ṛṣi* (sage, seeker); Pāṇini defines *gotra* as *apatyam pautraprabhṛti gotram (Aṣṭādhyāyī, IV. 1. 162)*, which means “the word *gotra* connotes the progeny (of a sage) starting with the son’s son”. Cf. Ruegg, D. Seyfort (1976). The Meanings of the Term “Gotra” and the Textual History of the “Ratnagotravibhāga”. In: *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, U London, Vol. 39, No. 2: 341–63.

by the monolithic hegemonies of the Free Market, a liberal polity and State secularism. Buruma and Margalit argue that, despite the initial genuineness of the processes of cultural transaction implicit in colonial and other pre-modern contacts between alien cultures, quite a few of the later developmental trajectories of what they call “Occidentalism” fail to conceal the formative influence of certain core post-/Enlightenment values and ideas on Eastern intellectuals. Some of these ideas are those of the paramountcy of the Nation-State project, the Romantic repudiation of discursive rationality and the much-touted spiritual, moral and ethical degradation and ideological emasculation of liberal democratic socio-political entities. This is traced, in the book, back to German Romanticism and the history of intensely polemical debates between the “Westernisers” and “Slavophiles” in 19th century Russia, opining that comparable polemics appear, in varying constellations, within the Maoist, Islamist, Imperial Japanese and other discourses. This would seem to suggest that the idea of the “West”, as seen from the “East”, is one that has risen in a self-negating mimetic opposition to certain preconceived notions, themselves products of a Euro-American analytical sensibility, of what does or can constitute the West; as Buruma and Margalit write: “The West in general, and America in particular, provokes envy and resentment more among those who consume its images, and its goods, than among those who can barely imagine what the West is like” (Buruma & Margalit 2004: 15). Alastair Bonnett, in *The Idea of the West: Culture, Politics and History* (2004), however, disagrees with the Eurocentricity of such an analytical trajectory and argues for an alternative tradition of occidentalism, one that may be said to evolve from the intercultural cross-fertilisation between non-Western and Western intellectual frameworks. In a departure from Buruma and Margalit’s focus upon the non-Western deployment of Western ideas, Bonnett argues that the asymptotic roots of both occidentalism and the West may be traced to non-western metropolises, where, he asserts, concrete non-occidental structures of modernity were configured through the not necessarily negative deployment of Europhone modes of cognition and analysis. Thus, Bonnett appears

to emphasise the centrality and even inevitability of “Eastern” asymptotic reifications of the West in the process of developing sub-/national and ethnic identities worldwide.

Hence, in a figure like Bakshi, these meta-contextualisations of Europe, operating within the circumstantial space of Bengali socialisation, attempt to locate his personal non-extraordinariness in the overall intra-societal angst to dissociate culturally hybrid phenomena and products from those of the reified colonial Oppressor, while acknowledging and even cherishing the acute polysemy inherent to the trans-cultural process of borrowing and transcreating. It is through this polysemic transcreation of characteral idiosyncrasies and cosmopolitan context against a middle-class Bengali backdrop that Saradindu Bandopadhyay managed to fabricate a new, almost utopian socio-cultural project through Bakshi and his sidekick, Ajit Banerjee, men who, through their choices and actions, demonstrated the feasibility of a rapprochement between the local and the global, in an attempt at bridging the chasm between the seemingly divergent demands of a late-colonial South Asian ideational, more than socio-historical, anomie and the burgeoning aspiration of decolonisation. It is interesting to note that Bakshi, similarly to Jayanta¹⁴, another detective created by Hemendra Kumar Roy, enjoys the admiring support, if not adulation, of the police and, more often than not, is happy to collaborate with the colonially nuanced regime of law and order. In fact, Nara-Narayan¹⁵, the David and Goliath duo who were another of Roy’s avid crime-fighters, in *Pradīp ō Andhakār* (*The Lamp and Darkness*), even collaborated with the Calcutta Police against pre-World-War-2

¹⁴ Jayanta and Manik are a detective-duo, in the manner of Holmes and Watson, who solve a number of mysteries using, in a Poirot-esque manner, “the little grey cells”; some of their best-known narratives are *Cābi ēbam Khil* (“Key and Bolt”) and *Ēkratti Māṭi* (“A Speck of Dirt”) (Roy 1953: 203-22).

¹⁵ Narendra Majumdar (Nara) and Narayan Chaudhuri were “bosom buddies” who were “unrivalled in their expertise in the theory of crime in Bengal”: “even the most powerful police officers, when embroiled in the most complicated cases, were not embarrassed to consult Narendra” (Roy 1953: 77).

“fifth columnists” working with the Japanese; this would have put them at odds with the prevailing sentiment in the Bengali society of the time: hundreds of thousands of people were rallying to the call of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, who had, during WW2, created the Indian National Army in South-East Asia with Japanese support (Roy 1953: 77-109). Thus, the cheroot-s, teapots, “chicken pies” (Roy 1953: 205) and *solah topee*-s of the *Sāhib*-s have their keen interest for many colonial-era Bengali sleuths, who seem to be, at the very least, deferential to their envisioning of the distant Occident in terms of what constituted modern civility and, by extension, modern and/or progressive politics; Byomkesh Bakshi, however, in his white *dhoti* and *pānjābi* (a shirt-like upper garment), with a passion for individual justice and a love for the exotic, both local and global, does see the world in a somewhat conflicted manner. He does not seek to destroy the traditional socio-cultural order, but, with occasional conservatism, works for its possible reconciliation with the prevalent perception of modernity; however, his search for truth does lie in the leisured, old-world “charm” of the high noon of the Calcutta-based *bhadrakok*, soon to turn into their own lyrical twilight.

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