

## **Dinabandhu: A Tragic Burlesque of History-A Contextual Preface**

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On the 13<sup>th</sup> of February, 2015, popular professor and eminent theatre-worker Kaushik Roy Chowdhury committed suicide. On the next morning, right after waking up, I was informed through a message from Professor Jahar Sen. I met Kaushik Roy Chowdhury only once in his lifetime, probably in 2010. He came to Presidency College on some private business. I had already heard enough praise of the famous K.R.C. from the students. But the man I encountered at this meeting, was a dipsomaniac, moonstruck, and ailing personality who was crawling towards his demise step by step through the abundant maltreatment of life. I do not know whether it was a coincidence or not, on the 7<sup>th</sup> September of 2010, Professor Achyut Kumar Mondal, the professor of Bengali at Delhi University, died under some strange circumstances. He was a bosom friend and compassionate of Kaushik Roy Chowdhury and an “impossibly talented” poet and academician. I conjectured that the suicide of Achyut Kumar Mondal and Kaushik’s self-exiled, maltreated life was connected with one single thread.

Anyway, after Kaushik Roy Chowdhury’s death in 2015, on that same month of February, the Department of Bengali at Presidency College organised a memorial conference. A few close friends, colleagues, students and fans assembled there. Most of them opened the reservoir of their memory of the beloved deceased. Debsankar Halder, through his rumination, tried to express the fragments of his best friend’s wishes, reluctance, anguish, pain, anger, jealousy and emotions. He wanted to introduce his friend as an entire but honest human being through these broken images.

After him, when the students started ruminating the moments with their favourite teacher, I was truly mesmerized. It was being evident from their speeches how that spectacular man used to enchant them, puzzle them, confuse them at the same time. At last, one particular student came upon the dais. His indifference towards his own attire and dishevelled hairstyle brought him much closer to Kaushik, his deity. The summary of his speech was that we had been engaged in small talks about a formidable personality for the past few hours. Those small, perfectionist and essentialist thoughts had no similarity with the life that Kaushik Roy Chowdhury lived.

Therefore, these discussions should be stopped instantaneously. He then called forth everyone to celebrate his death as he had done the right thing by ending his own life. That last part of the conference, full of mirth and laughter, brought the flavour of a long-awaited reunion.

The Achyut Mondals and the Kaushik Roy Chowdhuries always choose the path of suicide. And this extreme abuse of life fits perfectly, sometimes magically, to the socio-political hegemony of our country. As if their birth and suicide is necessary for our 'celebration'. There is no apparent relation between the essay and this preface. But I must inform the reader that this tragic tradition of history continues and prepares garlands with an invisible thread.

1.

The reader must remember that Bankimchandra wrote an essay entitled *Ishwar Gupta's Life and Poetics* which was published as an introduction to Ishwar Gupta's anthology of poetry. In this essay, Bankim has called Ishwar Gupta a pure native poet, "He is a poet of this Bengali society. He is the poet of the City of Calcutta. He is a poet of the Countryside of Bengal." And according to him: "Madhusudan, Hemchandra, Nabinchandra, Rabindranath are the poets of the educated Bengal; Ishwar Gupta is the poet of the Bengalis." Right after this, Bankim comments,

"Now, pure Bengali poets are not born anymore – There is no way for birth – there is absolutely no point of being born. A pure Bengali poet will never be born if the condition of Bengal does not retreat towards its deplorable past".

Observe that in Bankimchandra's remark equilibrium has been made between the educated Bengali's literature and the educated Bengali poet through his instances cited from Madhusudan to Rabindranath. On the other hand, that tradition of pure poetry is being ended with Ishwar Gupta, "there is no point of being born". Why so? The reason is that, pure Bengali literature is not the sort of literature that is permitted by pure taste. Bankim has also mentioned that according to the 'law of an English taste', many of our ancient poets have been 'found guilty of obscenity without even committing that felony'. In the light of that law everyone from Valmiki, Kalidas to Bharatchandra are guilty. Ishwar Gupta is not an exception; so is Dinabandhu Mitra. Their guilt is that they tried to write in such a period and tried to follow such an ideology which the so called educated Bengali generation wanted to forsake fanatically for a long time. Bankim realised that it was not a suitable thing to do and also knew that it was a serious crime to tag all

native literature as 'obscene'. Therefore it made him anxious that "It was possible to accidentally eradicate the bed of flowers during the act of deforestation." For this reason he had to take up his pen in defence of Ishwar Gupta, and had to proclaim that Ishwar Gupta was the product of time, his obscenity is not sensational or corporal but social. He also willingly wrote the preface to the Complete Works of his bosom friend Dinabandhu and it is needless to say that it is, till date, the most valuable piece of criticism of Dinabandhu's writing. What did Bankimchandra write there?

Firstly, he admitted that his friend Dinabandhu had some faults as "there is no human being born without flaws". In his language, "Dinabandhu's book has many flaws and some criticizes him only for that reason." Bankim knew rather well that Dinabandhu had numerous enemies and all of them belonged to the upper-class gentry. He did not venture to throw stones towards that beehive. Therefore he admitted himself the faults present in Dinabandhu's writings. What is that fault? Bankim opined that it was a sort of bluntness originating from Dinabandhu's rage, for instance he named the character of the son-in-law Bhotaram Bhat in his play *Jamai Barik*. Bankim has called this characteristic as the tiniest spot of disgrace in Dinabandhu's character. Bankim opined that by satirising the negative critics of the periodical like *Friday Review*, Dinabandhu had satisfied his zeal for revenge.

Secondly, Bankim admitted that Dinabandhu had a 'fault of taste' and this fault originated from his universal sense of fellow-feeling. Due to this reason, Dinabandhu had drawn his characters meticulously along with their follies. They had made their appearances with their rusticity that seemed bland in the eyes of the so called urban readers.

The comment that Bankim has made to depict Dinabandhu's faults, can be considered to be an ambiguous one. He commented that in Dinabandhu's *Sadhabar Ekadashi*, there are some extraordinary faults intertwined with some extraordinary merits. He said:

"*Sadhabar Ekadashi* was published after *Biye Pagla Buro*. In *Sadhabar Ekadashi*, there are some extraordinary merits as well as demerits. This satire is not permitted by the civil choices. For this reason, I requested Dinabandhu not to publish it without proper editing. That request was kept for only a few days. Many will say that it was better that the request was not kept; we have got a character like Nimchand. Some will say contrary to it."

Now it is quite clear that though Bankim had a weakness for his friend and he had written about many qualities in him, he never considered Dinabandhu's literature to be acceptable in the civil society. In this context, Bankim had been driven by the traditional, larger sense of civility prevalent at his time. But he was the only one from the gentry who praised Dinabandhu with an open and honest heart. It was only possible for a formidable artist like Bankim. According to him, Dinabandhu's obscenity was triggered from his honesty, experience and enormous sympathy. To the modern educated Bengali class Bankim established this elder writer with some respects. But he made it clear that though Dinabandhu was worthy of respect, he was not to be followed as a literary forefather.

Eventually, the contemporary gentry consciously avoided the writings of Dinabandhu because of his revolutionary writing which he made transcending the limit and sometimes going against the ideology of the urban literature of the gentry. *Sadhabar Ekadashi* was dangerous to the Bengali 'bhadrals'. This sense was increased by the success of 1867 stage performance of this play by Bagbazaar Amateur Theatre.

2.

Atal visits the prostitute quarter despite having a young wife at home. He keeps Kanchan, 'the prime item' of the city, by paying her Rs. 300/- per month. And the youthful young wife Kumudini loses her natural libidinal self being deprived of his companionship for months. Her sister-in-law Soudamini shares the same fate as her husband comes occasionally, on Saturday, to her. Two young women, one deprived from the warmth of a husband and the other nearly similar in condition, share each other their states of mind. Kumudini says, "I shall hang myself", "it is better to be a widow." Her carnal existence of blood and flesh suffers at bed being alone night after night. Kumudini says, "Father got me married seeing his money, should I consume that money? I just wish for my death."

Her agony is felt by Soudamini, the sister-in-law. She is compassionate to Kumudini. But the picture of the family that we perceive through their conversations terrifies us. Their casual languages, slangs, reveal the obscene and adulterous picture of life. We put our finger into our ears listening to their raw jokes. Atal does not return home, and when Kumudini complains about this to Soudamini, she replies: "My dear, the taste of milk cannot be substituted by the taste of

buttermilk, or I would have fucked you for a few days.” Kumudini replies: “Please don’t tease me. The sort of hubby-sucker you are; you will fuck someone else?!...” Elsewhere Kumudini comments on his husband’s absence at home hinting at an incestuous relationship between the siblings:

“I could not help your brother – you are so young, beautiful, perhaps that’s why I am losing...why are you silent, eh? – wanna lie on your brother’s lap? Ok – should I call him? (holding Soudamini’s chin)

“Say brother O, where is the sap?

Why does my sister not lie on her hubby’s lap?”

This language of jokes gives us real shame. The lifestyle and atmosphere of the nineteenth century gentry’s zenana even defeats the atmospheric primitivism of the slum life.

Bringing Kanchan home, Atal starts dancing with her, holding her neck, at the balcony. People gather in front of the house, laughing. When Atal’s uncle came and threw him out of the house, he calls his uncle ‘incestuous sister-fucker’. He even ignores his father’s order when he asks him to stop. When the father says, “You have such a golden Sita at home; still you have to bring that shame to your family!?” Atal replies – “You stay with your Sita. I shall hang myself if I don’t get Kanchan.” In the same manner, he replies to Gopal babu when he says, “You have to forsake that prostitute”. Atal promptly replies – “Wonderful! What a warm advice, it’s freezing me!...today I shall leave her and then you will go and start taking her classes.” Basically, there was no familial system or healthy relationship during the time. So, Atal can tell Kanchan- “I do not feel ashamed even if my domestic slut goes away – why did you go?” Overall, this entire image of the domesticity of the contemporary gentry offers us nothing else but shame.

Let’s consider the language of an educated man like Nimchand: while Rammanikya started incantation for purifying the taboo of his act of drinking, holding a glass of wine in his hand, Nemichand comments – “Listen to his incantation while drinking Brandy, as if he will sleep with a slut putting a pillow between them.” This allusion is literally taken from the slum culture. There are numerous dialogues like this in the play. Let us quote some for instance:

- a. Hey motherfucker. Is it your Calcuttan bitch that fucks everyone around? – It will fix itself to one married house even, but will never spank others – never! (Rammanikya)

- b. My brother is such an asshole – he lives with that dry, thin slut, leaving such a busty bitch like you at home...(Soudamini)
- c. I am not your home’s harlot that my going to the garden will embarrass you. (Kanchan)

The larger portion of the vocabulary used in *Sadhabar Ekadashi* is the vocabulary of a fish market. *Sadhabar Ekadashi* is a paradise of all those slangs that we generally hear at the slums, markets, bus stands or the red light areas. Some words used in the play are mentioned:

Sala, Haggard, Drunkard, Napkin-eater, Asshole, Babe, Dickhead, Gigolo, Bitch, Guota, Sister-fucker, Hubby-sucker, Prostitute, Item, Ungrateful, Son of an impotent - All these words stab like arrows the sense of refinement in a gentleman’s mind.

Not only the use of language but many other elements of the oral culture, which were stamped as so called “mass culture” and “obscene”, are present in this satire. Some instances are here:

Let us go, o lover, to the lotus pond  
Soothing life with cold wind;  
Without the Lord, the body burns, heated soul  
Burns to ashes. (Prostitute culture: Prostitute song and dance)

or

Alas what you have done Aunty, alas what you did – You are  
Malini Aunty – Diamond Malini...( Illegitimate relationship in the BHaratchandraesque poems)

or

Tie that golden turban on which head,  
Shall roll on the crematorium dust when you drop dead. (Bolan song sung during the Gajan Fair)

or

Came out and became a harlot  
Left my family away  
Now that motherfucker husband

Scolds me away. ( Folk rhymes indicating adultery)

or

“Say brother O, where is the sap?

Why does my sister not lie on her hubby’s lap.” (Country rhyme about brother- sister incest)

or

Wood was not found in the forest

No water in the lake

The Rich household starves,

Raghubir’s life at stake... ( Tulsidashi Ramayana sung by the Hindustani Gatekeepers)

or

Just a little polagua rinse in the water

The mad dance will begin when the leeches will cover (Riddle from East Bengal)

or

Don’t cry anymore, my stupid boy, if I stay

You will be a father, why is the delay? (Country rhyme indicating the adulterous relationship with friend’s wife)

It is clearly understood that *Sadhabar Ekadashi* is standing solely on the oral slangs and culture of the contemporary Calcutta. The distinctiveness of this satire is there that Dinabandhu has never tried of refine the oral culture to make this play fit for the gentry. As its aftermath, not only the nineteenth century but also today’s urban gentlemen have rejected the play as ‘untouchable’.

3.

Now let us discover why Dinabandhu’s depiction of the society in this satire is dangerous. The play was written in the year 1866. The infamous Sepoy Mutiny happened nearly a decade before. The ferocious and violent faces of the soldiers and the tortures they inflicted in that mutiny, frightened the educated Bengali gentlemen. They stood beside the British without hesitation. The

newspapers and periodicals used to express a certain exhilaration of rejoice while reporting the arrests or surrenders or deaths of any Indian soldier by the British. Even the pure country Bengali poet like Ishwar Gupta wrote the appeals to Queen Victoria in his poem like some lines of consolation:

“How will this India be saved?  
Please don't think, mother!  
Cutting the head of that Tatia Topy  
We shall bring that 'Nana' ”

Dinabandhu grew up reading and beholding all these. Though in his play *Nildarpan* he represented the cruel, naked images of the tyranny of the Nilkar Sahibs, he also expressed in the preface of the book that under the reign of Queen Victoria there was a 'possibility of a new sunrise' for the people of India. He was not a less royalist than his friends. His service under the Government as the Post Office inspector, his devotion and achieving the 'Ray Bahadur' title is the proof of that loyalty. However, there was a certain reason for Bengali gentry's rejoice at the suppression of the rebellion by the British and shifting of the power from the Company to the Queen in the very next year. Coming under the direct administration of the Queen and being considered as the subject of the most superior nation of the world was indeed a matter of success and prestidge of the gentlemen. Amritalal Basu, in his memoir, portrayed the happy picture of the 'proclamation' of Calcutta's people on the day of 1<sup>st</sup> November, 1858; the day when the reign of the Queen officially began:

“Calcutta then did not see gas, kerosene; even Europe had not seen electricity; Mustard oil at Calcutta was Re. 1 per 5 ser; burn as much as you wish! Apart from that, there were sesame and coconut. The glass lamps were around Rs.1.5; enough for even lighting a palace...from the palace of the Governor, the verandas of the gentry to the shades of the poor people, all were illuminated.”

Another incident seems very significant. In the year of the Sepoy Mutiny, 1857, the English Government established three universities in this country. On one hand, they were suppressing the native rebels while gifting the educated Indians the boon of higher education on the other. Although, both of these incidents happened in the same year rather coincidentally, they were not entirely unplanned. The Royalist Bengali class never succeeded to overcome that colonial hangover, but a certain prejudice grew against the ancient Bengali literature and love for culture



and above all sheltering in Hinduism. This religious sentiment gradually grew into the nationalist identity of the Bengali gentry. Resurgence of the study of Ramayana, Mahabharata and mythologies began. Puranas or Mythologies were re-evaluated and reinterpreted in the hands of Madhusudan. After Kesab Chandra converted into Brahminism in 1860, a new tide of life force came into the Brahma Samaj. Foundation of Chaitra Mela in 1867 and the later course of nationalism, the introductory point of both of these events was the year 1858.

Therefore the first three decades of the latter half of the nineteenth century were a time submerged within a complex vicious circle of events. The groundwork of building an identity of the Bengali gentry continued within that circle. I would like to call this the cultural ideology of the Bengali 'Bhadralok' class. The chief feature of that was abjuring any instinctive and carnivalesque element that was in practice in literature from the time of Bharatchandra. It might be Nidhu babu's Toppa songs or the pastoral kabigaans of Haru Thakur, Netai Das Bairagi or Ram Basu. Bankimchandra used to consider most of the Kabigaans as unintelligible, obscene and disrespectful. In spite of that, the songs of all those poets and performers mentioned above were his favourite. But there was no place for these bards, as well as of Ishwar Gupta and Dinabandhu Mitra in Bankim's conception of a utopian republic.

Secondly, the neo-Bengali babus were then suffering from a vaulting ambition. Byron and Milton were their literary role models as Mill and Bentham were their gurus of logical philosophy. Their literary ideology and language was overwhelmed with that European empiricism and a strong Romantic undercurrent enwrapped with a Victorian moral sense. Breaking and distorting the traditional forms gave them the euphoria of an independence from the manacles of the native culture. This renaissance spirit of the newly illuminated Bengali middle class gentry was the central motif of their literature. The impending darkness under that transitory illumination was something that they wanted to forget. This false pride originated from their helplessness under the colonial rule, their illusion of individual freedom and the religious shield made by their predecessors. But the darkness that resided behind the colourful balloon of renaissance, no matter how the babus deny them, was traced and marked by the creators like Madhusudan and Dinabandhu. They shaped and represented this futility differently.

For this reason, in his play *Ekei Ki Bole Shovyota*, Madhusudan has portrayed the orgiastic attitude and the emptiness of life of the Babus behind the representation of the 'Jnantarangini

Sabha'. On the other hand, in *Meghnadbadh Kavya*, sitting amidst the treasures and prospects, Ravana lost his loved ones, one after one. He had all the treasures, all the eligibilities, but still he was unable to defend himself. Therefore he uttered like a scream:

“Decorated with flowers, illuminated  
Like a Diwali night, as an amphitheatre,  
Was my beautiful palace. But now,  
The flowers are drying, one after one,  
Lamps are extinguishing;  
Silent Rabab, Veena, Flute;  
Why then I live here still?  
Who wishes to reside in the dark?”

The poet here evokes the motherland, our golden Bengal; the fertile, enriched and resourceful Bengal. Through the colonial invasion we not only lost our material treasures and resources but lost our cultural treasures. We were uprooted from our own origin point, from the source of our own culture, from our soil. We lost connection to the common Bengali mind that resided apart from the so-called 'educated' urban gentry. During the 1857 mutiny the British had killed numerous native soldiers. On the other, Macaulay Minute's theory had started to produce a train of hybrid youths who were native in appearance but European in ideology. The more English educated youths crossed the threshold of the universities the more they got distant from the common Bengali mentality. Taking away of the resources from the rural or suburban territories destroyed the rural economy. The people of those villages turned rebellious. Everywhere in the massacres like Peasant revolts, Indigo revolts the youths like Titumir, Digambar Biswas or Birsa Mundas were sacrificing their lives. None of the Bhadrakok babus from Calcutta went and supported those rebels during the time. Better to say, it was not possible for them to support. The neighbours had retreated, the golden Bengal was ransacked, some self-conceited babus were in distress. They had written lengthy articles in newspapers narrating the deplorable condition of Hasim Sekh, Rama Kaibarta or Paran Mondal, tried to argue on the fact that is responsible for their misery, but it was never possible for them to forsake the prejudice of a bhadrakok and to join their compatriots. So what else could they do apart from being frustrated with despair and contempt? Therefore, when Ravana utters, "Alas, I wish/ Leaving this golden Lanka, entering a dense forest, shall console my burning heart", it is not only Ravana's, or Madhusudan's anguish but the

social utterance of the entire Bengali gentry. Then Ravana helplessly blames his destiny or leaves his fate on the hand of Nemesis. The self-willed death of a sensible human being in a fragmented, hurdled and anguished life – that can be called a suicide – is the only way of salvation. And from this particular juncture we need to understand the character of Nimchand.

4.

Nimchand, in this play, is a highly educated youth from Hindu College. His uniqueness is that he is such an expert in the English language and literature that he can speak it as fluent as his mother tongue. He has read all the famous creations of the World Literature. He has consumed all from the Hindu Purana to Greek Mythology. His perfection of English can make any higher educated man ashamed. He recites eloquently from Shakespeare, Pope, Byron, Milton, and Keats. He is the ultimate specimen of Bengali talent and intellect. But this same Nimchand never turns out to be a Bengali ‘Good boy’ or ‘Gopal’ (as Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar named the category). Rather he does not want to be a Gopal, the Rakhal (also Vidyasagar’s nomenclature for wanton boys) self dominates him. Sivaji Bandyopadhyay has commented on the existence of ‘Rakhals’ within the ‘Gopals’ and the constant struggle between them. Nimchand is not ‘Gopal’. He has abjured the concept of ‘Gopal’, he does not want it. To be like a doll named ‘Gopal’ within the artificial lifestyle of the pseudo-moralist hypocrite Bengalis, is been consciously rejected by the geniuses like Nimchand.

On contrary to this, the presence of the ‘Rakhal’ self in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal is rather dominating and overpowering. Atal is the representative of that. But he was not destined to be Rakhal, as his parents, from his childhood onwards, wanted to make him a ‘Gopal’ and left no pains in that process. Even they still consider Atal as their beloved ‘Gopal’ and to make him happy admits all his demands. Being frightened of losing him, his mother, earnestly requests Kanchan, the harlot, to stay with him. But still Atal fails to become a ‘good boy’ and his ‘wanton boy’ self engulfs him entirely. He has no self-conflict or contempt within his soul for not being able to be a ‘Gopal’. Nimchand, on the other hand, who could be a ‘good boy’, hatefully rejects that artificial project. He has not suffered less for that, he goes torn inside as he fails to fulfil the dreams of his parents and relatives. In Act III scene ii of the play, Nimchand has a soliloquy:

“Dear Nimchand! You came out of the school as a deity, and now you are an apparition, you have fallen as much as you could. Your mother-in-law, beholding you, wishes for her daughter’s

widowhood;...my beloved is unable to show her face in the society for me, never talks to anyone just to avoid listening to the criticisms about me.”

Truly, Nimchand is fully aware of his downfall and he has chosen that way wilfully. Therefore, it is a self-imposed wantonness because he understands the essence of education. He knows how detached these Calcuttan babus are from their native roots; he knows how uprooted and deprived they are from the larger human society. With their talent, presence of mind and intellect, the Nimchands of the time has learnt to examine the society and country with a logical understanding; they have seen that, in the fragmented colonial system, there is no respect for the real talented minds – “Mother, in Calcutta no one looks for taste, but only estate.” The society is ostentatious; the hypocrisy has engulfed the time. A handful of rich Bangalis build their own prospect with other people’s money like a parasite. The Money lender landlord class emerges. And in the administrative sectors, only the flatterers and solicitors, who can butter their superiors well, gets the promotion – like that Deputy Kenaram. Nimchand does not want a job like that. He hatefully rejects that way of survival. But where is the alternative way of survival and shelter for the rootless Nimchand? He is considered untouchable even by the so called ‘others’ in the society. Moreover, he does not have the spine to revolt against the British rule, as that sensibility was never built within them. They invested all their dreams of progress to the British Raj, along with their beliefs, intellects, logic and power – everything. Therefore the only thing that is left for them is the utmost despair, the way of drowning. This was the predestination for Nimchand – a self-willed suicide. Therefore wine is the other metaphor for life to him. He wants to destroy himself as Madhusudan wanted to waste away like a fire cracker. “Honey never turns into Neem’ – behind this proverb, there may be an eternal truth. But the self-imposed death becomes the final outcome of salvation for both of them. We offer our respect and thanks to Dinabandhu Mitra for delving deep into the social psychology and for gifting us this extraordinary creation.

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