

An Evaluation of Saratchandra

On a host of occasions Comrade Ghosh made analyses to evaluate the literary creation of Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, the great Renaissance litterateur of India. The following is a compilation of selections from six speeches. In the background of the meditated and long-pursued move of the ruling class and its intellectual hirelings to stamp out Saratchandra, the most outstanding exponent of the revolutionary trend of Indian Renaissance, from the heart of the common millions, this evaluation is the guideline to help people grasp the true essence of Saratchandra, the man, his literary creation, his philosophical outlook. In an era, when the larger section of the humanists is under spell of compromise with idealism, it needed the penetration by an outstanding Marxist philosopher for correct recognition of Saratchandra.

If we want to evaluate scientifically Saratchandra's literature or, for that matter, the literary thoughts and works of any litterateur, we should always keep in mind the particular time and the particular historical phase of social development, that is, the particular time and social environment, in which that litterateur appeared and created his literature. We shall commit an error if we try to discuss or evaluate the thoughts and the philosophy of life of any litterateur independent of his time and social environment. This is because, human thoughts and ideas are conditioned by the limits of time, space and the social environment. Man's power of thinking is, no doubt, infinite and knows no bounds, but this 'boundlessness' or 'infinite power' is, in reality, limited by the limits of a given material condition or environment, that is, conditioned by the given time and space. However great a genius a man may be, his power of thinking can by no means supersede the limits of objective condition. And this is why it was not possible for Buddha, so great and outstanding a man of his time, to discover the Theory of Relativity. Similarly, even with his amazing genius, Buddha in his time could not conceive of the democratic concepts of life like humanism, women's emancipation, dignity of womanhood, etc., which even a common man enlightened with the concepts of democratic education of the modern civilized world so fondly cherishes. It would be wrong to think that those who, at a later stage, propounded these modern democratic concepts of life and made unique discoveries of science could do so because they far excelled Buddha, Sankaracharya, Muhammad or Jesus in talent. By this I mean that prior to the emergence of any idea or thought, the ingredients for the development of human thinking and the intellectual faculty, that is, the necessary material condition, develop first in society. While evaluating a litterateur or a great man, many often forget this too vital a point. And, as a result, they often arrive at quite queer conclusions. If we understand that no man, however great or talented he may be, can supersede the material condition which objectively limits his power of thinking or talent, then and only then shall we be able to make a correct evaluation of the great man in the perspective of the given time and social environment. And only then shall we be able to evaluate correctly also the questions like whether the thoughts, ideas and activities of the man whom we are evaluating in the perspective of the given time and social environment were really progressive or reactionary from the point of view of the then social movement for progress, or what was the kind of social thinking, aesthetic taste

and cultural standard which he reflected through his thoughts and ideas, and what was the extent to which those helped social progress, or, if reactionary, then the extent to which those were reactionary. Otherwise, we shall have to accept that there are some original, fundamental elements in human thoughts and values of life which are not subject to change with the change of time, space, environment, etc., that is, not conditioned or governed by material condition and so are independent of time, space, environment, and hence eternal. I consider such a notion unscientific and faulty. This is not only erroneous but harmful too, because such conceptions stand in the way of development and progress of human thoughts and create impediments to comprehending truth. Anybody who refuses to accept it will have to answer this : Was it because Buddha was inferior in talent to Einstein that he failed to propound the Theory of Relativity, or the different theories pertaining to electro-magnetic fields ? Again, was it because of their superior talent and wisdom compared to Buddha, Sankaracharya and Socrates that the European humanists could give birth to the democratic concepts and ideals, or was it because Karl Marx was a greater genius that he was able to propound the theory of scientific socialism — a still higher concept ? I am totally opposed to such views. I consider that the great thinkers of different ages, despite being the greatest thinkers of their time, could not overcome the historic limitations of the age, the limits of time, space and social environment. Even at the peak of highest talent and power, it was impossible for any man of an earlier age to have even an inkling of such modern thoughts that appeared at a later stage of social development. That is why the emergence of Newton was possible only on the basis of the understanding of natural science that Copernicus had developed. Similarly, the emergence of a genius like Einstein was possible only after the foundation of the Newtonian mechanics had been laid.

Likewise, in literature too, no particular thought or idea, no particular norm or principle, no particular cultural mould can guide man for all ages to come. A particular category of concepts of a particular epoch embracing a definite stage or, at best, a few more stages of social development may help man advance some steps further. But, afterwards, in newer circumstances, in the face of newer problems, the very thoughts and ideas which once helped to bring social welfare and betterment of life in the course of social progress and advancement become ineffective and obsolete. Thus the same old ideas and thoughts become ineffective, inadequate and unreal in throwing light on newer and newer problems. Although these new ideas and concepts grow on the firm foundation of the highest and the most advanced ideas and thoughts of the past, still then, in their historical continuity, there is a break. Then, under newer conditions and out of newer necessities of life and society, a totally new ideological category evolves through contradictions and conflicts with the older one. And, in this way, the ideas and thoughts, the cultural and aesthetic concepts, the concepts of ethics and morality and the sense of values — all these have, time and again, undergone changes transforming themselves into newer and newer ones. So, no truth is absolute or eternal. Truth is always concrete and relative. And, it is because of this, that truth is inexorable and decisive. Truth influences and determines the course of events and phenomena. Since the concept of absolute or eternal truth is unreal, it makes man incapable of adopting an objective outlook on life and activity.

So, while evaluating Saratchandra's literature, we must remember that if Saratchandra, in his time, had not voiced the thoughts and ideas which we consider today to be the highest and loftiest, to conclude from this that he becomes at once a reactionary is no evaluation at all. Such people fail to understand that the main point at issue here is whether or not the philosophy of life, the thoughts and ideas, and the ethical-cultural standard that Saratchandra reflected in his literature were really conducive to the progressive movement and revolutionary struggle of our

country in the then particular stage of social development. The present-day revolutionary movement differs from the revolutionary movement of that period not only ideologically, organizationally and in character, but even the people who will accomplish revolution have undergone change. So, if any thought or idea of Saratchandra does not appear to be as progressive as we deem to be the most advanced thoughts and ideas necessary for progress and revolution of today, we cannot at once call it erroneous and brand it as reactionary. This is not the way to evaluate any one. Buddha, Socrates, Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Rabindranath, Saratchandra — none would then be evaluated correctly. We would be rejecting, in that event, our entire past as erroneous in relation to what we consider to be correct today. And it would simply mean that we have completely lost our link with the past and have become rootless.

...Let us now examine what were the characteristic features of Saratchandra's contemporary period. It was the period of the Renaissance movement of India, when the mighty surge of the anti-imperialist freedom struggle was sweeping across the country. In our country Renaissance movement is deemed to have started with Raja Rammohan Roy. He initiated the Renaissance movement in our country through religious reformation, through fusion of the bourgeois humanist concepts and moral values of the European Renaissance with the main theme of religion. As a result, the Renaissance movement of this country proceeded along the course of religious reformation. The emergence of Vidyasagar thereafter was a landmark in the Renaissance movement, because, in my opinion, it was he who, for the first time, brought about a break with its religious orientation. He, for the first time on our soil, tried utmost to develop the humanist movement, as far as was possible in the then condition, on the firm foundation of science, history and logic. ...Our countrymen regard Vidyasagar as a great man and do respect him greatly no doubt, but how many of them could really understand him? Most of the people take him for an orthodox Brahmin from his outward appearance and traditional Brahmin dress. True, his dress and appearance made him look like a theologian and an orthodox Brahmin, but, in reality, he was a true humanist in the then social environment of our country. He wanted to bring about a rational integration of the Indian civilization with the scientific concepts of the West. So his firm opinion was: Teach the students English, teach them the 'Logic' of Mill as it is not possible to make this crippled nation stand erect on its moral backbone through teaching Sanskrit. ...For the resurgence of this nation, our countrymen must be made conversant with the treasure-house of knowledge and science of the world. What is more, it is through the knowledge of English that our students and youth may be made acquainted with the history, logic and modern scientific ideas as well as with the materialist philosophy of Europe. Therefore, opposing Ballantyne's view, he said that as Sankhya and Vedanta were false systems of philosophy, so also was the philosophy of Berkeley of Europe. ...In order to be free from the influence of such erroneous philosophies, our people should get acquainted with the knowledge of science and the materialist philosophy of Europe. Then and then only our countrymen, knowing the material world meticulously, would be able to grasp truth and on the basis of that alone could they evolve a new philosophy of life and a new sense of values. That is why he was vehemently opposed to teaching such inane idealist philosophies. A close examination of his outlook on education would clearly reveal that Vidyasagar marked a distinct break with the trend of religious reformation which our Renaissance movement had been following since its inception. The thoughts and activities, the approaches and attitudes, habits and practices of his entire life prove beyond doubt that he wanted to free the humanist movement, as far as possible in the then condition, from the religious tutelage.

...Barring this distinct role of Vidyasagar and after his period, our Renaissance movement started moving once more along the path of religious reformation. ...The country witnessed, on the one hand, a strong tide of the Brahma religious movement, with a view to reforming the Hindu society from its serious aberrations and vices, while, on the other hand, as a reaction to it, the Hindu revivalist movement swept across the country. The Hindu religious reformers following the tradition and heritage of the Hindu religion appeared on the scene to free the Hindu society from the curses of casteism and its other vices. It was in this period that Ramakrishna made his debut. ...Vivekananda was an outstanding product of this Hindu revivalist movement. He did not keep the Renaissance movement confined within the bounds of mere religious reformation, but, instead, he laid more stress on the *Karma-Yoga*¹ in place of worship and meditation and was able to instil a deep sense of national pride and patriotism throughout the country. ...The sense of nationalism and patriotism with which he awakened the country was based on the Vedanta philosophy and the spiritual pride of ancient India. ...It was mainly for this reason that the mighty independence movement that grew and developed throughout the country remained basically a Hindu-religion oriented nationalist movement. ...It was in such a period, when the urge for freedom and the freedom movement were gradually intensifying in our country, that Saratchandra appeared as a litterateur in Bengal. ...Just as the role of Vidyasagar marked a distinct break in the Renaissance movement in the matter of freeing the humanist movement from the religious tutelage in the then social condition, so also, in the independence movement, Saratchandra marked a distinct break with the Hindu-religion oriented nationalism as well as with the decadent humanism making compromise with religion. The literary thoughts and outlook of Saratchandra were basically materialist. Where, in the literary outlook, he could not maintain a consistently materialistic position, he remained an agnostic. But never did he indulge in idealist thinking, nor did he ever make any compromise with supernaturalism in his literary thoughts and ideas. In the yardstick of progress and reaction in the then social context we shall have to judge which of the two trends — the compromising or the uncompromising — that were reflected in both the political and cultural fields in our anti-feudal, anti-imperialist freedom movement, is helpful and conducive to the growth and development of our present-day movement for social progress. We shall have to determine in continuity with which of these two trends can today's new class-consciousness, the anti-capitalist revolutionary consciousness and the proletarian cultural movement be given birth to. Judged on this yardstick, it will be clear that the proletarian culture of our country can grow and develop today only in continuity with the most militant and youthful, secular and uncompromising tone of humanism that found its best expression in the thoughts and values of Saratchandra's literature. Though it is true that the proletarian cultural movement of our country would develop today on the firm foundation of the thoughts and sense of values of Saratchandra, still a contradiction between these two is also inevitable.

...So, most assertively and unreservedly, I would say that in our country Saratchandra is the only literary personality who, in the domain of literature, most boldly and consistently held high the lofty banner of social revolution and most devotedly fought for its accomplishment. Other litterateurs talked about social revolution, no doubt, but did not perform, in the literary field, the very necessary task to bring it about. Through their literature they could not make people unquestionably realize the futility of the old social order by evoking in their minds pain and anguish, sense of deprivation and longing for a better and higher social order. It was Saratchandra who alone accomplished this task quite successfully in our country. That is why Saratchandra was the main target of the most virulent attacks from the defenders of the old

society. The orthodox Hindu society was vehemently opposed to Saratchandra's thoughts. Though the Brahmos were no less vociferous against the blindness and superstition, narrowness and prejudices of the Hindu society, the orthodox Hindu society simply ignored them and did not raise such a hue and cry against the writers belonging to the 'Brahmo Samaj', because the orthodox Hindu society realized that those litterateurs could not even touch the fringe of the social problems. The thought and literature which, with a view to bringing about a change in the mental make-up and outlook of the people, have been acting against the old customs, prejudices and sense of morality of the old Hindu society, while maintaining all through the closest touch with it, are none else than Sarat-literature and thoughts of Saratchandra.

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...And how strange ! A Bengali literary critic did not feel any qualm to comment that Saratchandra was a *pakshalar sahityik*² ! And now-a-days, our students read this type of criticism of Saratchandra. Naturally, what else can they become other than big pundits ! To go by this type of critics, it would seem as if Saratchandra's literature has no basic conception and no well-conceived philosophy of life. It is of course true that in his stories and novels, Saratchandra never used erudite phrases unintelligible to the common people. He sought to instil in the minds of the people the very essence of the higher ideas and concepts but always through the most artistic creation of *rasa*³ — feeling that is sublime, aesthetic and artistic — by evoking compassion, pain and anguish in the minds of the readers so that it does not become imperative for one to exercise one's intellect. There are lots of theoretical discourses on science and epistemology for those who can grasp intellectually. Wherein then lies the utility of literature? The necessity of literature lies precisely in making the realized truths and higher thoughts acquired through theoretical analyses sublime in the shape of stories through the medium of *rasa*, blossomed beautifully in a mosaic of forms and channels with artistic excellence, and to make a niche for them even within the subtle sensibilities and delicate feelings of men. Necessity of literature lies in imprinting these lofty ideas, even if partially, by evoking pathos and compassion through aesthetic creation even in the minds of those who are unable to grasp through reasoning and intellectual exercise owing to lack of educational base and critical power of judgement.

For instance, humanism once brought in its wake the concept of ethical motherhood. Saratchandra knew that all these lofty concepts were there in many treatises in the form of theories. But most of the people, even after studying these, often fail to grasp their essence. He sought to inscribe in the minds of the people the loftiest ideas of that age by evoking realization of the finest feelings of aesthetics, by awakening pathos and compassion, working upon the contradictions and conflicts that arise centring round life, the complexities that develop in human relationship and the waves and turmoils that grow in the feelings and emotions of the human mind. Those who can grasp through studies and intellect, for them there is no problem. But those who cannot — the vast section of the masses — they can grasp any lofty idea if it is presented to them through the medium of *rasa*. And once a man truly realizes the ennobling essence of an idea, he gets changed even without acquiring the theory conceptually. Even without the slightest knowledge of the theory and concept of ethical motherhood, women would be more and more attracted towards the qualities that ethical motherhood really reflects. In the course of the story, as the characters like Bindu begin unfolding themselves, enriched with the values of ethical motherhood, they would surely attract them ; so would Yadav, and they would try to understand Madhav as well. Saratchandra thus strove to highlight the problems of life by evoking

compassion and by awakening a sense of deprivation leading to a deep yearning for something noble and great. He did not want to encumber his writings with explanations and expositions page after page.

... For example, the educated women, who have had enough of lectures on ethics and ethical motherhood, but they are yet unable to acquire the qualities that have been very easily attained by Hemangini of *Mejdidi*, Bindubasini of *Bindur Chhele* or Narayani of *Ramer Sumati* through the nobility and virtues of their characters. Neither her husband nor her mother could induce Narayani to deviate — no petty self-consideration could take her away from her path. These female characters of Saratchandra's works fulfilled all their obligations toward those whom they considered to be their own children, though not related by blood. And in return, they got the real taste of impersonal motherhood. Through these stories, the issues which Saratchandra wanted to clinch is that if a woman comes to experience the real taste of impersonal motherhood in her life, then how is that felt, what comes to be its exact form and nature, grace and elegance, how is the difference between her own child and that of another perceived by her — all these Saratchandra tries to deal with in his stories one after another. Are these merely stories ? The portrayal of women's sense of dignity in these stories charms everybody. No woman, after reading *Mejdidi*, would aspire to be Hemangini's elder sister-in-law. After going through these stories, every woman, no matter whether she can become a Hemangini or a Narayani, would surely feel an intense urge to be like these characters. What is the significance of this longing ? If ordinary women develop an intense eagerness for attaining the ethical standard of Narayani or Mejdidi, if they start reckoning these characters as ideals to be followed, then it would mean a real upsurge of woman's awakening making its way into each family. But strangely, these aspects escape the notice of these critics. They criticize Saratchandra's literature as something bereft of any theory. But how is it that the very essence of these theories, when it is carried to the innermost of our family life by Saratchandra with such a superb artistry appears to the critics as one bereft of theory ! What a peculiar and hollow intellectualism !

...The literary art and style of a writer and his literary thought are two separate things. In evaluating the work of a litterateur, these two aspects should not be mixed up and confused. One aspect is about his thought, while the other is about his work being aesthetically and artistically satisfying — showing what high standard of aesthetic values he is capable of creating and what fine artistic beauty he is capable of producing. Judged from this point of view, it may be said that Saratchandra's form of presentation of *rasa* is so superb, so artistic, so delicate and subtle that the readers, while relishing it, themselves change to an extent even unknowingly. In this, Saratchandra was the best among the then litterateurs. So, I would say without any hesitation that he was the best in literary artistry among his contemporaries.

...It is not for the litterateur to enter into learned discussions on theories, and in scholastic discourses deal with their intricacies — he is a creator of *rasa*. Herein lies the real worth of a litterateur. In my opinion, those who always seek high theories in stories and novels and judge their merit on this yardstick alone are totally unfit to be literary critics. The worth of literature does not lie in dispensing scholastic discussions. Its utility in society is elsewhere. There has never been any dearth of personalities in the world giving learned lectures. For that there are big personalities in the society, who can be regarded as more accomplished in their own spheres than the litterateurs. There are the philosophers, the economists, the political thinkers and the scholars in different branches of science and epistemology, but what they cannot do is done by a litterateur. And it is because of this that the litterateurs are admired and esteemed, respected and adored even by them. They are effective where we are incapable. The ideas and thoughts which

the philosophers and the thinkers want to convey are portrayed by the litterateurs so aesthetically, in such an artistic and lucid manner, in such diverse forms through *rasa*, that even if a man fails to grasp these due to lack of intellectual aptitude, still, while relishing the beauty, going repeatedly through the artistic expressions and mastering the dialogues, he becomes used to these and undergoes some changes in outlook. Thus, in bringing about a revolutionary change in the mental make-up and a cultural revolution in the society, literature is a very effective and powerful weapon. Litterateurs are to perform precisely the task of preparing the necessary cultural background for any political movement, be it a freedom movement, a socialist revolution or any struggle for bringing about a radical transformation of society. Herein lies their progressive role. Judged in this context, Saratchandra was the pioneer playing the most progressive role in the field of literary creations conducive to the on-going Renaissance movement, national freedom struggle and the movement for social revolution. Through his writings, Saratchandra did convey the most advanced thoughts of his time. But he did so through the weaving of stories, through the medium of *rasa*. He never resorted to theoretical discourse to convey his ideas. And herein lies his greatest worth and success as a litterateur.

Perhaps I too am capable of some theoretical discourses, that also on such problems of different branches of science and epistemology that may highly impress one. But I too am indebted to litterateurs ; I do approach them with a begging bowl. Otherwise, you see, I may not have to go to Rabindranath and Goethe to listen to scholastic discussions. I presume that many may take exception to this, but still it is true that we need not go to Rabindranath or Goethe for theories and higher thoughts. We have to go to them, but that is for something else. Even a man like Lenin had to knock at the doors of the litterateurs and seek their help. So, do I. And same is the case with thinkers of all ages, of all countries. They do so because they too have a feeling of want. And this want they satisfy through literature. Moreover, the litterateurs implant artistically those thoughts and ideas, principles and precepts into the social consciousness which we like to carry deep into the society, but cannot. A litterateur is superior to us precisely in this. This is why we respect them, adore them. Throughout the ages, it has been found that the leading literary figures have held the great thinkers in high esteem. So also, the great thinkers understand the real worth of the great litterateurs and respect them. Mediocre writers not having that worth are found to be suffering from false vanity and ego. For that they refuse to acknowledge the greatness of the leading thinkers. But in no country did the really great litterateurs ever show disrespect to the great thinkers of their time. Because, they appreciate the real worth of each other and are aware of their respective spheres of importance and efficacy. So, whoever have sought to find in Saratchandra's literature abstract theories, have utterly failed to understand him. And, having failed to do so many of the critics have branded Saratchandra as a *pakshalar sahityik*. Pity for them ! And again, those who have praised him, they too have called Saratchandra just 'a writer of sweet tales', 'a compassionate writer', 'the great story-teller', not being able to grasp the real essence and greatness of his literature,

...A close and careful study of the history of the European Renaissance would clearly show that in its early stage it was full of youthful vigour, was basically secular and revolutionary in approach. This Renaissance reflected, in the main, an uncompromising tone against religion and spiritualism. The pioneers of the Renaissance movement held that the search for truth must be based on history, scientific reasoning, as well as on experiment, proof and verification, even if some error creeps in in this process, even then. If there is anything unknowable, neither you nor I can know it. So, it is futile to run after it. In our country, Saratchandra's literary thoughts reflected this uncompromising tone of the early stage of the European Renaissance. So,

Saratchandra jokingly said : “I shall leave alone what is really impervious to intellect — only because it is so. To declare something as inexplicable, inconceivable, unknowable, but to try continuously, at the same time, to know and explain that very unknowable — this I would never do. Nor shall I tolerate one who would indulge in such practice. ...On the one hand, they are declaring something as unknowable, then again, in the same breath, they are giving vivid elaboration on the very thing — as if they have just witnessed it. Page after page is being filled up to comprehend what cannot by any means be comprehended, book after book is being written. But why ? ‘Formless’, ‘Propertyless’, ‘Unconcerned’, ‘Indifferent’⁴ — all these are meaningless verbiages.” If they study and analyse history critically, all such concepts will be revealed to be ridiculous more and more.

Saratchandra was often asked : ‘You are a litterateur, how is it that your library is packed with books on Physics, Chemistry, Mathematics, History, Psychology and Economics, but not a single book is there of any renowned novelist of the world?’ Once, in a meeting at Chandannagar, Mati Babu and others also asked several such questions. While answering them, Saratchandra said : ‘I myself write fictions, it is not that I do never go through any works of fiction. Naturally, if you look for, you may come across a few in my collection. But I do not enjoy much reading those fictions’. Although Saratchandra said this humorously, what he actually meant to say was that if an author wanted to understand the social problems and had to say something about these through stories, or, in other words, if he wanted to reveal truth through portrayal of characters and events, he could do it only when he had truly realized the problems of man and society. And it is absolutely impossible to know this truth unless one acquires a deep knowledge of science. So, to comprehend in which way the mental make-up has developed and through which complex process with what peculiarities, one should study science carefully and analyse history meticulously.

So, we see, because of such an objective and scientific outlook and approach of Saratchandra, there arose a great difference between him and Rabindranath on the question of how to fight superstition. It is quite natural that any rational man would regard superstition and casteism as social vices. During the days of struggle for independence, no great men of our country ever supported these practices, but as regards the very method of fighting these vices Saratchandra was not in agreement with Rabindranath and others. Saratchandra knew that the ritualistic practices of untouchability and casteism, prevalent among the people, are nothing but superstition. When, through long practice, something develops into a social habit — without judging right or wrong, when people get accustomed to abide by it — it becomes a kind of deep-rooted prejudice, a superstition. Saratchandra tried to explain this problem in many of his articles and short stories. Citing instances, he shows how even a loving mother weeps haunted by the fear of her son becoming an outcast by going to a foreign land. On his return, if he falls ill, she does not fail to nurse him with supreme affection and endurance, caring little for her food ; but thereafter, she will take her food only after a bath in the holy water of the Ganga. Tears may roll down her cheeks, still she would not take the food touched by her outcast son. When superstition is so deep-rooted, can it be eradicated by such naive logic as Gurudev⁵ has advanced : ‘Is man inferior to even a cat ? How is it then that the sanctity of your caste remains unaffected even when your pussy cat eats from your dish, but is lost at once when a person of lower caste or of different religion touches you !’ With deep pain Saratchandra replied with a tinge of banter to Rabindranath, wondering how plants and animals could at all enter into discussions on human problems. And how do such examples help ? What do they prove at all ? “The right and wrong of human conduct can never be judged by such sophistries as why a cat is favoured to sit on

one's lap, or an ant is allowed to creep into one's dish. ...However apt it may sound, or however dazzling it may appear, on close scrutiny such kind of analogy turns out to be of little worth''. On Rabindranath's remark — "When the pet cat of a Brahmin lady sits on her lap with 'unclean mouth',⁶ her purity is not blemished, she does not object" — Saratchandra said in jest : "Probably she does not ; but how does it help ? Citing the example of cats, one cannot argue : You do not object when a cat, an inferior animal, sits on your lap. I am a much superior being ; naturally, therefore, you should not refuse my sitting on your lap''. Is this a logic at all ? Those who properly understand the problem of casteism know that it is not so simple that one refuses to take food from an outcaste or a lower caste person out of disrespect only. Where there is not even the slightest disrespect, where there is the deepest of love and affection, even there superstition stands in the way of accepting food. He tried to highlight this problem by depicting the character of Ram Babu in his novel *Grihadaha*. He showed how prejudice instantaneously turned such a kind and affectionate man into a rigid and rude one. When his love and affection for Achala had almost taken him out of the narrow bounds of religion, how his prejudice, all at once, turned him, a man with great emotion and compassion, into almost a brute. So, by portraying the characters in this way, by evoking pain and anguish in the minds of the readers, Saratchandra tried to make them realize that these norms, rituals and superstitions and adherence to casteism and untouchability, which make man inhuman, make him forget his duties and responsibilities, dry up his feelings and emotion, should better be rejected. He wanted to fight out these superstitions by arousing pathos and compassion in man. Because he knew it well that without developing a social movement against all sorts of prejudices and superstitions, without striking at the very roots of these social evils, the society cannot be freed from their pernicious effects. Once he remarked with pain that a man like Vidyasagar had tried to introduce widow-marriage in revolt against the society without paying heed to the then social mind ; he had tried to do it with the help of legislation, and had even arranged marriage of a few widows. Yet he had failed to really introduce widow-marriage, because it had not taken the form of a social movement. If it would have assumed that character it would have succeeded. Though widow marriage got legal sanction, still prejudice about widow-marriage remained entrenched in the social mind. If the contemporary authors, by arousing pathos and compassion, could have changed the attitude and mental make-up of the people and could have convinced them of its necessity, then an opinion might have developed in society in favour of its introduction. This can be achieved not by simply harping on its necessity in articles or speeches, but by bringing the issue into bold relief through sympathetic and beautiful portrayal of the pathos of widows to arouse compassion in the minds of the readers — as, for example, Saratchandra has artistically done in the episode of Roma and Ramesh.

A group of critics allege that Saratchandra was not in favour of widow-marriage since he did not get any of his widow characters married — Sabitri, a widow, was not given in marriage ; nor was Roma, also a widow ; obviously, his conservatism stood in the way ! I feel that such critics are quite unfit for any discourse on literature. Saratchandra knew it well that if he had to get Ramesh and Roma married in the then social condition, he would have had no other option but to take them out of the society and put them up in, say, a hotel, or portray them like the heroes and heroines of trash films, because the marriage of Roma and Ramesh in the rural set-up of those days would not have been held in respect. Unless one can acquire a position of honour in society, love cannot maintain its beauty and charm simply on its own. This is why he painted Roma as a widow — but a widow with unparalleled beauty and charm of character. Then, after depicting a really beautiful and aesthetic relation between Roma and Ramesh, he wanted, as if, to ask :

‘Now, tell me, reader, does this relation, the beauty and grace that have bloomed out of it, seem ugly even though Roma is a widow ? ...Is it the kind of love relation which you who are leading a traditional conjugal life usually enter into, or is it something greater than that ? Does the episode of Roma and Ramesh evoke compassion in you ? Do you want that the relation that grew centring round these two lives consummates in union ? If you really want them to lead together a life of honour and dignity, then this age-old Hindu society has to be changed radically.’

...In *Charitraheen*, Saratchandra portrayed Sabitri who, in the light of the then social prejudices, mental make-up and religion-oriented morality, would appear to be no better than a fallen woman and a mere degraded maid-servant. But how could Satish, a man coveted even by an educated and cultured woman like Sarojini, love Sabitri ? Usually, the relationship with such a woman, if it develops at all, can be no better than an imbecile one, or otherwise a kind of degraded sexual relation. But Saratchandra, with supreme care and sympathy, painted a truly attractive and ethical relationship between such a woman and Satish, and developing it gradually through witty and charming dialogues and protecting them from all propensity to base tendencies, created a high aesthetic beauty. And then, presenting it before all — bigoted and orthodox readers, ordinary housewives, educated as well as uneducated people — he intended to ask : ‘Does it look unethical ? How do you like it, how do you appreciate this relationship ? Does this episode pain you ? Do you feel for Sabitri ? Do you feel pain, do you feel aggrieved that they cannot unite ?’ All, in one voice, would surely say : ‘Yes, we do. We wish they could unite.’ Through this episode, Saratchandra wanted to point out : ‘Wish as you may, they can never unite, so long as the present Hindu society and the Hindu religion exist.’ Through these writings, Saratchandra wanted to rouse a strong urge for social revolution by generating pain, anguish and a feeling of want in the minds of readers — leading to a yearning for higher values of life. He did not want to deceive or be deceived by indulging in superficial, empty words about social revolution.

Kiranmayee in *Charitraheen* is another magnificent creation of Saratchandra. Portraying the character of Kiranmayee with rare skill and supreme artistry, he wanted, as if, to ask the educated, cultured readers : ‘How would you like it if women be such ? Compare with your typical old-styled, tradition-bound wives, daughters, sisters or fiancées — and then say, how do you like Kiranmayee ? But in your superstitious Hindu society, what is the fate of a woman like Kiranmayee, a character of such height, so magnificent in wisdom, knowledge, intelligence, erudition, generosity and beauty, other than becoming an insane ? How can such a dignified lady with so high an ethical and aesthetic taste and womanhood be satisfied, like ordinary women, with a commonplace life or the degraded life of a fallen woman ?’

Although Kiranmayee slept on the same bed with Dibakar in the ship, she did not surrender herself. Referring to this incident, many critics say that through this Saratchandra reflected the age-old Hindu religious prejudices. But in his discussion with Mati Babu and others, Saratchandra himself explained why a woman like Kiranmayee cannot give herself to Dibakar. In that discussion in Chandannagar, Mati Babu and others remarked with a banter : ‘Sarat Babu, however unconventional you may appear from your writings, in reality you hold the Hindu religious concept of chastity in high esteem ; and that is why you did not let Kiranmayee’s chastity be defiled’. Saratchandra burst out into laughter and said : ‘You have hardly understood this character ; while painting this character, it was not at all a matter of consideration to me whether your Hindu concept of chastity would be upheld or not. I have portrayed the character of Kiranmayee with great care’. In the same novel, Sarojini has been presented as an educated and enlightened lady in sophisticated surroundings. There is also Surabala, and a husband like

Upendra is simply absorbed in the charm of her love ; and we also find Sabitri, so full of wit and humour, beauty and grace. Had these characters not been there, the portrayal of Kiranmayee would not have been so difficult. To portray Kiranmayee side by side with these characters, Saratchandra had to take great pains and extreme caution. Had she offered herself to a boy like Dibakar, this most dignified character, developed with so much of care, would have been completely spoiled. Kiranmayee is such a woman compared to whose knowledge, wisdom and ethical standard, Dibakar is but a mere boy. Can a woman of such extraordinary personality, character and culture offer herself to such a boy ? True, from her passion to wreak vengeance on Upendra, Kiranmayee drew Dibakar out of home. As she knew that Upendra had great affection for Dibakar ; she tried to retaliate against Upendra in this way. But ultimately, she realized that it hurt herself more than it hurt Upendra. She committed a blunder no doubt, but, after all, she was a woman with a delicate sense of aesthetics and high sense of dignity. Consequently, she had to contend with her own self till her last days. She became tormented from within while protecting the honour and dignity of her womanhood from Dibakar in whom she had roused lust and longing by pretending love to him just to retaliate against Upendra. But she could never allow her womanhood to be denigrated. So Saratchandra bantered that it was his least concern whether the chastity of the woman remained unblemished or not. His only concern was to see that the character of Kiranmayee, built up with so much care and caution, endowed with so high a standard of womanhood, did not get spoiled.

...Saratchandra, through aesthetic presentation of characters like Roma, Kiranmayee and Sabitri — evoking pathos and compassion in the readers — intended to bring about a change in the superstitious, conservative and narrow outlook of the then society. He wanted to raise the question : ‘How would you like it if women be like Kiranmayee ? How do you like such accomplished and cultured women ? If you like them, how could you nurture them in this society ? Do you prefer women with whom you are living, or aspire for those who talk in Sabitri’s language ? In that case, even if such characters do appear in this society, how could you nurture and sustain them ?’ So, either you remain content with those unsophisticated, tradition-bound women of your family, follow the customs and rituals of the Hindu society, or else change this society radically. It is for their own sake that the men need most the education of women and their emancipation, development of their character and self-respect. But foolish and mean as they are, they do not understand even their own good. That is why the men, victims of superstition, oppose the movement for women’s emancipation. And again, the educated men who, given any opportunity, excite gatherings with fiery speeches on women’s emancipation, have been found very keen to confine their wives within the four walls — a strange contradiction indeed ! So, Saratchandra intends to say that even if we leave aside women’s own need, men themselves, for the sake of their own development and progress, their own freedom and refinement of taste and upliftment of culture need the emancipation of women, their education, development of womanhood and culture. This is the way Saratchandra speaks and this is the way in which he seeks to raise the issues.

...Seeing the fate of Roma, Kiranmayee, Sabitri and Rajlakshmi, many critics comment that sex has been disregarded in Saratchandra’s literature. They allege that Saratchandra was a puritan and pleaded for Platonic love. See the fun ! These ultra-modern critics brand him as a puritan, whereas in those days the puritan and orthodox Hindu society accused him of moral laxity. Both these groups are sagacious indeed ! During the freedom struggle when petty bourgeois revolutionism had great impact in Bengal, Saratchandra was in our heart of hearts. During those days, we read Saratchandra’s literature passionately. Even now, whenever I get an

opportunity, I read his works, and the dialogues are still fresh in my memory. In Part Four of *Srikanta*, Rajlakshmi once tells Srikanta : “Would I be having you for naught without paying a price — having no obligation to fulfil — am I not to reciprocate ? That I came in your life truly — shall I not leave behind an imprint ? When I depart, shall I go barren like this ? No, never.” Hearing this, Srikanta was all respect, love and affection for her. What is implied in this expression ? Are these subtle hints meant for the simpletons or the intellectuals ? And what sort of intellectuals are those who fail to grasp this subtle hint and fail to appreciate the superb artistic form of this expression ? Only people with delicate sense of aesthetics can appreciate this. Has the role of sex been denied here ? Has the physical aspect of love been denied ? Elsewhere in the same novel, Rajlakshmi is telling Srikanta : “Last night, while talking, you fell asleep. I removed your hand from around my neck and sat by your side. ...At dawn I left. Fortunately, the sleep of a *Kumbhakarna*⁷ cannot be disturbed so easily, as otherwise, I had almost awakened you out of temptation.” And nothing more is said. Saratchandra himself has stated that literary skill does not lie only in the ability to write. The capacity to control the pen and stop in time is also a very important virtue of a writer. One should know exactly when and where to stop, in order to create higher form of art and aesthetic beauty. People with low taste are not satisfied unless they get a graphic description of what Rajlakshmi did, but a man with true aesthetic taste would simply shudder at the idea of such a description. Saratchandra, all along, dealt with finer arts and aesthetics, his pen never catered to low taste.

...*Baikunther Will* is a story by Saratchandra with a simple plot. In the opinion of the intellectuals, it is just a story having nothing thought-provoking in it. But as for myself, I face a problem every time I go through it. When I get absorbed in this story, emotions mount high in me — it is so difficult to check. Because, something that we have lost, which we aspire to regain but cannot, is embedded in this story. In this story, we find a truly charming picture of brotherhood of the by-gone days. True, our old society had innumerable bad aspects, but there were certain good aspects too. Sweet and charming relations between brothers and sisters could be found in the joint families which thrived under feudal economy. Now the feudal economy has disintegrated, so have joint families, and families centring round husband and wife have emerged. All these have taken place in the course of social progress no doubt. But we can enjoy even today with great relish, if someone artistically paints the delicate charm and beauty that flowed from the interaction of emotions and passions of relations in those joint families. Coming to know Gokul, we all wish we had a brother like him — however ignorant and uneducated he may appear.

Another important aspect that Saratchandra wanted to highlight through the characterization of Gokul is that the true essence and tune of culture cannot be acquired just from bookish knowledge and academic degrees. Gokul’s younger brother Binod has obtained a First Class in B.A. and is a gold medalist — and Gokul himself is proud of it — but despite all this, has Binod been able to grasp the essence of culture ? Does he know how to accord true respect even to his own mother ? He has merely learnt how to maintain an outward decency and etiquette in his behaviour. How aware is he about the essence of culture ? But Gokul, though he talks erratically due to lack of education, has grasped the real essence of culture and has attained true self-dignity. That is why he knows how to honour his mother and brother, he knows how to respect others. But in spite of his academic qualifications, Binod does not know this.

By portraying Gokul, Saratchandra tried to reveal this very truth and wanted to show as well what real brotherhood means. True, the social framework in which such charm and beauty of brotherhood flourished — as portrayed in the story — would never come back. In today’s

changed society, in place of joint families, families centring round husband and wife have appeared. But why should that tender and charming relation not be there ? Rather, when one is not dependent economically on the other, it is to be expected that the feelings of love and affection would take a still higher form. Why should then petty selfishness and low taste, even worse than what was prevalent earlier, be there now ? Saratchandra painted Gokul as a man who does not humiliate others even though he may be subjected to many an insult even by those who are dependent on him. He really loves men ; although uneducated, he knows how to love others. This shows that he has acquired the very essence of ethics and culture. He knows how to protect the honour and dignity of his mother. His father-in-law, despite persistent efforts, could not coax him into doing anything against the will of his mother. Nor could his wife even. But what are the 'educated', 'sophisticated' and the so-called champions of 'Rabindra-culture' not doing today just to please their wives ! But look, here is an uneducated man who, it seems, can easily be talked into doing anything and everything, and yet he possesses what a fine sense of dignity ! No one can make him budge an inch.

...Gokul's father-in-law, with the help of his daughter, persuaded Gokul and managed to get hold of the keys of the shop and finalized arrangements to turn Chakraborty, an old employee, out of the shop. He quite succeeded in his manoeuvre to make Gokul believe that his step-mother was conspiring against him and ruining him and so, to save himself from ruin, Chakraborty had to be driven out. Gokul, being taken in by this trickery due to his ignorance and simplicity, concluded : 'Yes, quite true she is but my step-mother, how could she wish my well-being ?' On the counsel of his father-in-law and wife, he took away the keys of the shop from Chakraborty. Gokul's father-in-law was sure that everything was all right and Gokul was now completely in his grip, his wife also became jubilant. She too thought that she had at long last been able to establish her control over her husband, freeing him from his mother's clutches. So, she too felt elated at her victory.

But Gokul, whom his wife, his father-in-law and even his mother could not understand, was understood perfectly by Chakraborty, though he was an ordinary employee of the shop. He left the place silently, without any protest, went to Gokul's mother and told her everything. Mother came out and called : "Gokul !" Gokul, forgetting everything at once, responded, all alert : "Yes mother." The mother just said : "Chakraborty is an old hand, I desire that as long as he lives, he will be with us. Let him go to the shop with the keys of the safe and the account books". Gokul at once dropped the bunch of keys on the floor. Chakraborty picked it up with a smile and left. Then started an incessant shower of insults and rebukes on Gokul. Gokul bore all these silently. Shameful and distressed, almost in tears, Gokul could only say in a choked voice : "How could I know that mother would become inimical and give such an order ?" See, how wonderful this is ! It seemed that everything was almost settled and Gokul was made to believe that his mother was doing mischief and conspiring against him, but the moment mother ordered him to give back the keys to Chakraborty, the whole design got upset. No more could they interfere with the affairs of the shop. Neither the dictate of his wife nor that of his father-in-law worked any more. This is Gokul !

Through this simple story, what Saratchandra wanted to convey is that education is very important no doubt, but high university degrees alone do not always enable one to grasp the essence and tune of culture. This is why, what Binod, a gold medalist, could not acquire, Gokul, even being uneducated, could grasp well. Only, he does not know how to express it. As he cannot say the right thing in an articulate form at the right moment, he is often misunderstood ; many a complication crops up and he cannot achieve what he wants to — his attempts end in

futility. Precisely here lies the utility of education. What Saratchandra wanted to convey here is that lack of education is fraught with many a danger ; nothing good comes out of it. But can we grasp the very essence of culture, its main theme, merely by acquiring academic qualifications or having degrees ? Look, and say, who has acquired better the higher human qualities and high culture — the educated Binod, or the uneducated, apparently foolish Gokul ? Being educated be a Gokul and not a Binod, then and only then will education be really meaningful. Even without being educated, if you can be at least like Gokul, then you will be able to do more good to society than Binod. Gokul knows how to honour his mother and uphold her dignity. He is not a slave to sex. He can never disown his obligations to his mother and younger brother at the dictate of his wife, and put them in distress. Yet, in my long experience, I have come across many so-called communists and progressives of the day who do not hesitate in the least to throw their mothers into utter helplessness and live separately with their wives to lead a fashionable life. Saratchandra has conveyed these ideas through the medium of *rasa* and never tried to theorize and never explained — ‘here I discussed this and there I discussed that’. Precisely here, on this point, he has surpassed all in his success as a litterateur. In the context of the countrywide moral and cultural degradation which is affecting even the leftist movements today, if Saratchandra is critically studied and correctly evaluated, then a new concept of morality and culture would emerge. It would bring in its wake a sea-change. Naturally, it would also cause a great change even in the prevalent ideas and concepts of culture.

Everybody would admit that the proletarian ideology, which is much higher than the bourgeois revolutionary thoughts and values, emerged in history in continuity with the noble thoughts and characters that developed stage by stage in the course of advancement of human society. Then, is it not to be expected that the persons, the characters, which would emerge out of the proletarian revolutionary movement, would attain a much higher standard than the old humanist or bourgeois revolutionaries — the finest product of the bourgeois democratic revolution ? But what do we actually find in our society ? The Indian freedom movement during the time of Saratchandra, was weak-kneed and full of shortcomings. It was not free from religious orientation, nor was its mainstream uncompromising in approach even against imperialism. The leaders, in their eagerness and haste to assume political power somehow, had thrown away the banner of social and cultural revolution ; even the most advanced section, the vanguard of the political movement, compromised with religion and its heritage, compromised in the sphere of social customs, personal conduct and family relations. It should be borne in mind that despite all these, because Saratchandra’s literature had a tremendous impact on the freedom movement, those who were influenced by it, the then revolutionaries and youth of Bengal had such firm and determined character. But today, those who are self-styled communists, who seem to be adept at discussing and analysing intricate matters and deliver high-sounding speeches, have not been able to maintain even that standard. Today the real communists are supposed to acquire much higher standard than that of C. R. Das and Kshudiram. Not to speak of attaining that level, these self-styled communists have degraded themselves much. Do you know why ? The reason lies in the failure to evaluate Saratchandra’s literature correctly, in the refusal by the so-called progressives to accord due recognition to his role as a litterateur and in their utter failure to understand Saratchandra, the man. As a result, while effecting a break from the past, we have lost the very tune of continuity and have thus become rootless. Those who could not understand Gokul, who have failed to notice that behind all his apparently unseemly utterances and meaningless behaviour, he embodied a high standard of culture and ethics, who could not learn anything from him and could not attain even that cultural standard — can they ever be

communists ? Those who cannot be at least a Girish or a Yadav can never become communists. In our society, only those who would be able to appreciate both the values and limitations of Yadav, Girish and Gokul and be able not only to assimilate all the beauties of their characters but would also go further ahead, may become communists some day. But can those who are devoid of the cultural tune inherent in Gokul's character and who belong to the category of Binod and Harish, become communists simply by Marxist phrase-mongering? Men like Binod and Harish can never become communists. Men like Yadav, Gokul and Girish, in the course of attaining higher standard, may become communists. Likewise, given the opportunity, women like Bindu, Narayani, Hemangini and Chhoto Bou, Baro Bou of *Niskriti* may, in the process of development, become real communists.

Those litterateurs, who cram their writings with hollow high-sounding words and the critics who assess how progressive a literature is on the basis of such verbiage, actually belong to the category of Binod of *Baikunther Will* and Harish and Meja Bou of *Niskriti*. These writers and literary critics have totally failed to understand the characters of Saratchandra's literature.

As I was saying, it is only women like Narayani who can become communists and not the type of Narayani's mother or Meja Bou, even if they are educated. With education, they can at best be a Bela but not Kamal of *Sesh Prasna*. Women like Kamal, in the process of gaining knowledge and experience, develop one day into communists. To women like Bela, women's liberty means a right to anyhow have maximum share of the husband's property through litigation whenever rapport breaks down with him. They say : 'You married me ; since we are divorced now, why will you not pay the alimony ?' These women, the so-called 'champions of liberty', do not even understand the simple logic that if a man has married a woman, she too has married him. So if the question of maintenance arises, why should the responsibility be his alone, why should it not be mutual ? Can any woman with truly independent spirit, education and sense of dignity even think of proposing : 'Since you have married me, why will you not provide for me ?' The ordinary uneducated women with age-old superstition may be accustomed to such a way of thinking. I do not blame them. But how is it that even those who are educated, who talk of democracy, freedom and equality of sex indulge in such thoughts ? How is it that the present generation lacks so seriously in the concept as to what is love, affection, dignity of womanhood and values of life ? Was there any dearth of authors in our country who wrote high-sounding words ? No. But our trend of thinking and bent of mind would take a new turn if we understand Saratchandra properly ; everybody would then realize that getting something at the cost of self-respect is beneath human dignity. Women, too, would be able to realize this. Food and shelter, wealth and happiness, sex and love, affection and compassion are all, no doubt, very important in human life, but what is left if anybody gets these at the cost of dignity and self-respect ? All these sense of values are no more in our social life today. The cult of Saratchandra's literature will help revive them.

...I know many so-called communists and progressive critics who hold that in his novel *Bipradas* Saratchandra has patronized Hindu revivalism. I do not fully agree with them. It seems to me that they have taken only a superficial view of this novel. They did not read it deeply, or even if they did, they have failed to grasp the main theme of Saratchandra's thought reflected in this novel. It is true that the impact of the Hindu revivalism which was there in our freedom movement was reflected only in *Bipradas* among his novels. Before we discuss this, the point which we should bear in mind is that the various social thinkings — their conflicts and contradictions — act on a litterateur as well. In order to correctly evaluate the literary thinking of a writer, we must first of all find out what trend of thinking is dominant in him. Is it not true that

both positive and negative qualities exist in a man ? When we call a man good, does it mean that he does not have even an iota of negative ? Then how do we characterize a man having both positive and negative qualities ? We go by the dominant aspect of his character. We call one bad whose dominant aspect is bad. And one in whom the dominant aspect is good — we call him good. In this way the character of everything, of every phenomenon, is to be determined by its dominant aspect. Judged from this angle, even if we fully accept the opinion of the aforesaid critics regarding *Bipradas*, still then it cannot be denied that the dominant trend of Saratchandra's literary thinking is uncompromising, secular and revolutionary humanism, full of youthful vigour.

My considered opinion regarding *Bipradas* is that Saratchandra tried to portray characters like Bipradas and Dayamayi with great care and caution because he could not keep himself completely apart from under the impact of Hindu revivalism in our nationalist movement. Although, because of his powerful pen and magnificent skill, Saratchandra was somewhat successful in portraying these two characters at the beginning — all their charm and beauty were lost ultimately. A discerning man cannot but observe that such a powerful pen as Saratchandra's practically lost its flow and charm while painting Bipradas. His usual artistic and elegant style of expression was lacking while depicting the characters of Bipradas and Dayamayi. He tried his best to paint Bipradas beautifully just by arranging some chosen dialogues and creating a solemn atmosphere. But whenever he presented Dwijadas, Bandana, or even Mr. Ray, who had a very insignificant role in the novel, his pen became lively and eloquent and regained its usual flow and the style was artistic. It is clear from this that, in spite of his being such a powerful litterateur, in his endeavour to depict revivalist character, Saratchandra's portrayal of Bipradas and his mother ended in utter failure. The characters which ultimately came to the fore as noble were neither Bipradas nor his mother — but Dwijadas, Bandana and her selfless, absent-minded father. If we understand the novel in this way, it will be found that his secular humanist outlook and sense of values gained ascendancy, may be unknowingly, even in this novel.

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... In his literary thinking, Saratchandra was essentially a secular humanist, not a Marxist. The thoughts and ideas which we, the communists, so fondly cherish today were not reflected in Saratchandra's literature. So, it is pointless to discuss, while evaluating Saratchandra's literature, whether he reflected the proletarian culture and voiced the idea of the working class revolution or not. Those who, on and off, raise this sort of question while evaluating Saratchandra's literature, actually muddle the whole thing by indulging in what is utterly irrelevant. Here the point is : who represented the most progressive trend of humanist thinking during the national independence struggle of our country ? That is, in the then Indian condition, who actually reflected the most progressive thoughts and ideas of bourgeois humanism ? Were they not the petty bourgeois revolutionaries ? Petty bourgeois revolutionism, in those days, was the most progressive trend of thinking in bourgeois humanism and Saratchandra reflected, in the main, that very trend in his literature. So, in our country, it was Saratchandra's literature in which was reflected the highest standard of the most progressive thoughts and culture of bourgeois humanism. Still then, how close had he come to the working class thoughts and ideas ! During the last phase of his life, the working class movement was already growing in our country. So, had there been a great Marxist leader like Lenin at that time to provide the correct guideline for our literature, it would not have been altogether impossible that proletarian literature might have grown in our country through Saratchandra as was the case with Gorky in Russia. And, in that

case, it would have been of much higher standard because, Saratchandra's artistic skill was undoubtedly superior to Gorky.

In this context, I would like to cite a few illustrations from Saratchandra's literature. Whatever may be the literary value of *Srikanta* from the point of view of reflecting the humanist values and high cultural-ethical standard of those days, how much significant is it in the sense of reflecting proletarian culture? Still then we find that in the Third Part of *Srikanta*, in which the construction of a railway track is described, the spontaneous indignation with which Srikanta bursts out on observing the wretched condition of the workers' with whom he had to spend a night in the slum, reflects not just humanist thinking, but something more — a higher thought and culture. For example, seeing the subhuman and distressed condition of the workers, Srikanta says: "But, you, the bearers of modern civilization, you are dying, you die! Forgive not, in the least, this cruel civilization that has made your life such. If you are to carry it, carry it down speedily to the abysmal depth of its grave."

The attitude of Saratchandra regarding workers' movement, as reflected in *Pather Dabi*, though not fully consistent with the Marxist understanding, does undoubtedly raise a strong voice of protest against economism and reformism in labour movement. ...He has clearly shown there that those who organize workers' movement just for wage-increase and some reforms do the greatest harm to the workers' cause under the garb of sympathy and thereby they virtually oppose the revolution itself.

...In *Pather Dabi*, Saratchandra articulated, from various angles, some aspects of his philosophical view-point. From these, it appears as if he was about to supersede the limits of humanist thinking. Today, the humanist values have assumed a stagnant character. Bourgeois humanism has reduced the concepts about the right and the wrong, about ethics and aesthetics to 'unchangeable', 'absolute' ones. The concepts and ideas which once grew and developed out of the necessity of bourgeois revolution to meet the needs of the revolutionary transformation of production — subsequently the humanists attempted to keep them arrested at one place by attributing absolute and permanent status to them. Although between this kind of absolute concepts of the bourgeois humanists regarding aesthetics, ethics and morality and the Marxists' concept of aesthetics, ethics and morality, there is a historical continuity, a link — yet the two constitute two completely different ideological categories. According to the dialectical materialist or Marxist concept, 'necessity' does not mean pragmatic necessity, the petty interest of an individual; it grows out of objective reality, in the light of which the correctness or otherwise of any social idea, concept or ideology is determined. In *Pather Dabi*, we find a trend of thinking and pattern of reasoning almost similar to this concept. It is true that the dominant thinking reflected in it was bourgeois revolutionism expressed through 'anarchism' in the then social condition of our country, and humanism in its most vigorous form but, still then, in this novel Saratchandra tends even to supersede, here and there, the bourgeois humanist thinking and some aspects of communist thinking and idea flashed in him like startling sparks. See, what Sabyasachi says in *Pather Dabi*: "There is nothing like realization of absolute or eternal truth in this ever-changing world. It comes into being and goes out of being. With passage of time, from one age to another, it undergoes changes and assumes newer and newer forms in conformity with the changing needs of human society. The truth of the past must be adhered to in the present — such a belief is erroneous, such a notion superstitious." This very concept of truth and method of reasoning of Saratchandra reveal a great deal of influence of dialectical materialism, communist thoughts, ideas and reasoning in him.

Sabyasachi in *Pather Dabi* also remarked : “To me, truth or falsehood, good or bad, are determined only by the necessity of ‘Pather Dabi’.⁸ This is the creed, the guiding principle of my life. This is my mode of existence, this is what I am, my candid realization. You speak of the ultimate truth, the eternal truth — to you these meaningless, hollow words are inestimably valuable, but there is no greater a trick to befool the ignorants. I never lie, but I create truth at the dictate of necessity.” By this he means that the necessity of the ‘Pather Dabi’ organization is inseparably linked with the cause of national independence. And again, the question of all-round development of the country is inextricably linked with the question of national independence. So what is a necessity for the freedom struggle is the necessity of ‘Pather Dabi’ and hence it is the truth to Sabyasachi. Just see what he says immediately afterwards : “The necessity of Sabyasachi and that of Brajendra are not one and the same.” Here he wants to differentiate between impersonal or social necessity and the petty necessity of an individual. Otherwise, anyone may try to pass off his petty personal necessity as social necessity. So, by necessity he does not mean the necessity of an individual. He wants to point out what is the real, impersonal and historical necessity of life and society. So, Sabyasachi explains to Bharati : “For the sake of freedom, if necessity so demands rivers of blood have to flow, and for that I would not hesitate to kill, if necessary — but, remember, the necessity of Sabyasachi and that of Brajendra are not one and the same.” Since Brajendra’s realization of necessity is not identical with that of Sabyasachi, he kills out of personal vengeance. Whether he runs a risk or not, he does not miss a chance to kill. But it is Sabyasachi who shows utmost magnanimity to Apurba, whose treachery puts his life dangerously at stake. When all others stick to a blind and mechanical sense of discipline, failing to realize that discipline also comes out of necessity and gets remoulded according to necessity, and are very eager to condemn Apurba to death, then none else than Sabyasachi, whose life is extremely endangered by Apurba, comes to his rescue. See, how amazing are his approach and argument. He says : “What Apurba Babu has done cannot be undone. We will have to face the consequence — whether we punish him or not”. As we judge today, following the dialectical methodology, that a confused man may cause great harm to us and so also can a confirmed agent of the enemy, but these two should never be put on a par. Similarly, Sabyasachi saved Apurba because he could differentiate between a traitor and a genuinely confused and weak man. So, he says to Bharati about Apurba : “Believe me, he is really not so mean, not so petty. ...He is educated and gentle. He, too, feels the shame of foreign domination. He also, like most of the Bengali youth, sincerely desires the country’s independence and well-being”. Again he says : “Apurba is not a traitor. He loves his motherland from the core of his heart. But like most ... well, let me not criticize my own people, but he is very weak.” Sabyasachi wants to say that in spite of these qualities, Apurba is a very weak man. In this respect he resembles many a Bengali who are weak. Yet the beauty and charm that developed centring round the lives of Apurba and Bharati — have these no worth ? That is why Sabyasachi says to Bharati : “The beauty that has bloomed out of the relation between you two, ordinary man and woman — is it of so little worth that I shall allow a brute like Brajendra to destroy it ? Only because of this Bharati, only for this — otherwise, do we care for a life ? No, not a whit.” In literature, Saratchandra was the first to introduce these concepts in our country.

... It is true, in the main, Saratchandra did not create his literature around workers. But it is not true that he had not thought over and had not dealt with the problems of the workers and peasants at all. In some other novels he has spoken in a way about the workers and in *Pather Dabi* the working class movement has assumed much importance. It is noteworthy here that in those days he even organized a socialist ‘group’ in the neighbourhood of Calcutta. ...Once in the

course of a discussion on workers' movement, he sounded a note of caution : "Look, the workers of our country are not yet awakened, they are not organized. Unbridled exploitation and ruthless oppression are let loose on them. Today, your service is indispensable for rousing, imbibing and organizing them ; you should devote yourselves to this task. But remember, the day they will rise up, the day they will get organized, their leadership will emerge from among themselves. Your service will no longer be necessary that day. You must be prepared mentally, so that you can then hand over the task of conducting their struggles to their own leaders happily and voluntarily. Remember, while you are engaged in organizing them, let not an urge grow in you to lead them for ever."

In *Pather Dabi*, Saratchandra has expressed views on the objective of the workers' struggle, which are almost akin to the Marxist concept of class struggle. Yet, in reality, he is basically an advocate of the petty bourgeois revolutionism and bourgeois humanism. But because Saratchandra was the torch-bearer of revolutionary humanism, he came very close to the Marxist thoughts and ideas that were making inroads in the national liberation movement of our country in those days. Hence he says about religion through Sabyasachi : "All religions are deceptions — superstitions of the ancient times. There is no greater enemy of humanity than this." But such a concept was quite inconceivable to even the petty bourgeois revolutionaries.

There are other beautiful aspects too in Saratchandra's literature. I feel the necessity to discuss some of these. For example, the concept of freedom of love that grew in the early phase of bourgeois democratic revolution — Saratchandra tried to give an expression to that very concept in his novel *Sesh Prasna*. But this bourgeois concept of freedom of love suffers from one-sidedness. What the European bourgeoisie actually practised in life, in the name of freedom, reduced this concept to a privilege, a licence. As against the age-old obscurantism, the mentality to lend permanence to things through codes and axioms — Saratchandra in his novel *Sesh Prasna*, with care and sympathy, very beautifully portrayed Kamal as a living protest. He has portrayed Rajen, side by side, to point out the one-sidedness of Kamal's approach. We do not get such thoughts either in the classical humanist literature, or in the literature of the Renaissance. This is a feature unique to Saratchandra's literature.

In *Sesh Prasna*, Rajen tells Kamal that he would leave Harendra's 'ashram'. "Because", he says, "I have nothing in common with them, either in views or in method of work; affection and love are the only bonds." Kamal replies : "What could be greater than this, Rajen ? When the minds have met, let there be difference of opinion. If views differ or methods of work vary, does it matter much ? People can live together only when all would think alike, all would act alike — why should it be so ? What is education worth if one cannot respect the views of others ?" In reply, Rajen says : "I do not undermine the union of minds, but to proclaim it as the only thing has now-a-days become a fashion for the intellectuals. ...As if only the mind exists in the world and the rest are all unreal — nothing but illusions. This is thoroughly erroneous." Just see how Kamal, who defeated all, one by one, by her irrefutable arguments, is herself outwitted by Rajen ! In Kamal's opinion, mind seems to be everything, and social customs, views — all these are meaningless. In reply Rajen says to Kamal : "You were saying that the ability to respect different ideologies is a great virtue, but do you know who can respect all views and beliefs ? Only he who has no belief of his own. Education enables one to silently ignore opposing views, but not to respect those." His contention here is that education may enable one to tolerate the opposite views and put up with it. See, how close is this understanding to what we call philosophical tolerance ! Only he who has no belief of his own can respect the opposing views.

Again, he is saying that the union of minds alone is not enough — social ceremonies also count ; therefore, he tells Kamal that such a great love between Shibnath and Kamal could die out so easily, probably because the existing social custom of marriage was ignored. So, he tells Kamal : “You have decided that union of minds is the ultimate truth in regard to marriage, therefore you could dismiss the anomaly in outward ceremony as being of no consequence. Since that is not true, everything between you two has turned into untruth today.’ Because, ceremonies too have got a role to play. It is not that love would not have died if only the ceremonies had been properly performed. But still, it cannot be said that the skipping of the ceremonies did not contribute at all to the dying out of love between them. Consequently, Rajen argues in his own way : “My only concern is identity of views and unity of purpose ; I bother little whether minds meet or not.” This is a sort of mechanical materialist thinking.

...In *Pather Dabi*, likewise, Saratchandra portrayed Sabyasachi in this vein. Anything noble and tender received Sabyasachi’s attention and respect. But he had hardly any time to ponder over the finer feelings of human mind. So, Sumitra compares him with a boiler — cool and calm outside, but a blazing fire within. One day she was passing by a workshop along with Bharati. Suddenly, the boiler-lid was opened — a blazing fire roared inside. Seeing this, Sumitra heaved a deep sigh. She said : “Mark this machine, Bharati, and you will understand your Doktor Babu¹⁰.” What she meant was that, like the boiler, only the passion for freedom was blazing in him and all else — love, affection, tenderness — were burnt to ashes. But the way he saves the life of Apurba makes it amply clear that everything in him has not been reduced to ashes. His sweet and affectionate relation with Bharati also bears testimony to it. But he could hardly pause to ponder over this, it was a luxury he could ill afford. Almost similar is Rajen. In the depiction of such characters, we find the influence of a mechanical approach in Saratchandra. But still, what I want to point out is that Saratchandra was free from the one-sidedness from which the European litterateurs, who fought for freedom of love, suffered. This too, in the then social condition, played, to a great extent, a revolutionary role.

Only the so-called intellectuals, the pedlars of tall talks, who cannot grasp the underlying significance of these ideas in Saratchandra’s literature, say : ‘He has written stories about the landlords. He is a *pakshalar sahityik*. Is there any high aesthetics in Saratchandra’s literature ?’ — and so forth. These are the critics, the so-called intellectuals, who talk big in public meetings, but are not ashamed a bit, at the next moment, to reduce their brothers to paupers by usurping all their properties, to deny sustenance to their widowed sisters and do not even hesitate to get their mothers humiliated by their wives.

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... To meet the need of the era, if you are to give birth to the proletarian culture and proletarian literature which may be called the post-Rabindra and post-Sarat literature, you can do it only when you have been able to realize thoroughly and exhaust completely the most revolutionary trend of humanist literature which was reflected in Saratchandra, that is, when you are able to exhaust in the process of assimilating all the essence of the revolutionary humanist values reflected in Saratchandra’s literature. Only then will you be able to give birth to the most advanced culture of the present era — the proletarian culture. Because, if the standard of the proletarian culture is lower than that of the bourgeois humanist culture, that is, if it reflects an ethical and aesthetic standard inferior to that of Rabindranath’s and Saratchandra’s literature, then it would not only fail to serve the purpose, but would break the very moral backbone of the

working class movement and would ultimately benefit the bourgeoisie. The proletariat cannot destroy the bourgeois society with anything inferior to that of the bourgeoisie. The working class movement can destroy the bourgeois social system only by means which are superior in all respects to what the bourgeoisie have been able to produce in the fields of ideology, politics and literature. Hence, if the torch-bearers of proletarian culture cannot understand and appreciate properly the literature which reflected the most revolutionary bourgeois humanist thought of the then society, the literature that had built up a very high standard of thought, art and aesthetics, then they would fail to grasp the essence of proletarian literature itself and may at best produce one mechanically, as per stereotyped formula.

...If we can properly appreciate Saratchandra's literature, that would help create the moral-ethical base for the progressive movement of today and we would be able through interaction and conflict of ideas and views to find out a way for attaining truth. Since we have forgotten Saratchandra, the high moral, ethical, cultural and aesthetic standard of political and literary-cultural movement that was once attained in our country, has fallen down. As a result, we have become rootless. So, we talk big, but do not cultivate noble emotions and delicate feelings. No movement is a mere intellectual exercise or a matter of intellect only, it demands both intellect and emotion. Revolution, too, is not an exception. Thoughts are advancing, if emotion, feelings lag behind, then surely a gap would appear between the two. In that case, the movement as well as the thought would eventually go astray, leading to a blind alley. I note with deep anguish the absence of ethics and morality at all levels of the present-day mass movements in our country. You know, I am a man of politics, a man from the left and communist movement. Why the organizers invite me to such literary gatherings, it is they who can say why. Because of their insistence, sometimes I have to come. But being a man from the political movement, the thing that strikes me time and again is that the moral and ethical basis and the cultural tune of the very base of all these movements has completely collapsed — today most of the movements are virtually reduced to slogan-mongering. That is why, in wave after wave movements are surging forth, cries do reverberate — ‘change we want, revolution we aspire for’. Men are dying, youth are sacrificing their lives ; but no change is forthcoming, no revolution is taking place. Changes will never come through such sporadic movements that are thoroughly devoid of culture and ethics — however sincerely you may struggle, however much sacrifices be made. If the mass movements are guided on the basis of definite political objective and morality, then and only then the moral backbone of the nation can be restored.

...Sarat-cultivation, discussions and exchanges on the thoughts and ideas of Saratchandra, are needed all the more in our society, because we are completely cut off from the cultural heritage of the past — we have become rootless today. We are failing to maintain continuity with the high cultural standard attained during the days of our freedom movement. Lofty phrases we are culling from the outside world no doubt, but we have lost the link with the high cultural tune that had once developed on our own soil. We have to establish that link once again, although a contradiction with it is inevitable today, because Saratchandra was a believer in the petty bourgeois revolutionism and bourgeois humanism. But we will have to accomplish the task of the working class revolution, the socialist revolution — the revolution for the overthrow of capitalism. So, we shall have to advance a stage further in our all-out, dedicated revolutionary struggles. But we can forge ahead only when we have been able to evaluate and appreciate Saratchandra properly — when, grasping him, we have been able to assimilate the essence, rejecting the inadequate and the useless, when we have been able to absorb the wealth of his literature and thereby exhausted it completely, when there would be nothing more left for us to

take from him. Unfortunately, we could take nothing from him, rather we have lost the link itself. Even the advanced outlook and sense of values Saratchandra reflected are absent in us. How could we then be the vanguard of revolution today ? So, we have to know Saratchandra, we have to study and understand him.

The English version of a compilation of several speeches in Bengali, was prepared by a commission entrusted with the job and appointed by the Central Committee, Socialist Unity Centre of India. It appeared first in the 'Golden Book of Saratchandra', published in 1977, the year of the birth centenary of the litterateur, at the behest of the All Bengal Sarat Centenary Committee.

Notes

1. Cult of work.
2. A writer whose works lack intellectual elements and are not thought-provoking.
3. Artistic or aesthetic beauty and flavour.
4. Non-entity, omnipotent, omniscient.
5. Rabindranath Tagore.
6. With cooked food in mouth. According to Hindu superstition, a man of lower caste, with unwashed mouth, is untouchable to a man of upper caste but a cat is not.
7. A character in the *Ramayana*, who used to keep awake only for a day after sleeping for six months at a stretch.
8. Name of revolutionary organization of that time which he had built up.
9. Something like a hermitage.
10. Sabyasachi