



The Obscured Shine of Thakurbari: A Study of Jyotirindranath Tagore (1849-1925)

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Abstract:

Jyotirindranath Tagore - the elder brother of the legendary Rabindranath Tagore but with a doomed fate. Much is not talked about him as an individual; rather more is talked about him in the context of the relationship between Rabindranath and Kadambari Devi - the soul playmate of Robi Thakur and wife of Jyotirindranath. In a way, Jyotirindranath was a victim of not only the relationship of his younger brother and his wife but also the rigidity of strict patriarchal environment of Thakurbari framed by Pince Dwarkanath Tagore and obediently carried by Debendranath Tagore. The paper, thus, tries to analyze the position of Jyotirindranath in the context of the men's position in patriarchy, his relationship with his wife and his legendary younger brother and he as an individual persona who had all the potentials to be legendary in his own right yet had to succumb to an obscured fate. He was the emerging icon of Thakurbari yet he became the obscured shine of the family outshined not only by his living younger brother but also by his deceased wife. The paper further deals with the absence and presence of women of Thakurbari who influenced the changing pattern of gender roles within Thakurbari with special mention to Jnadanandini Devi.

Keywords: Jyotirindranath Tagore; Rabindranath Tagore; Kadambari Devi; Thakurbari; patriarchy; relationship

Introduction

An excellent playwright, a skilful musician, writer and a painter, Jyotirindranath was indeed a shining rising star of Thakurbari. As Tagore would recall in his later life, his elder brother had a rare gift of spotting and recognizing talent in others. The most just example was Tagore himself who was acknowledged as gold first by the goldsmith Jyotirindranath. Mastered in satirical plays, Jyotirindranath's skill excelled in composing plays as well as musicals along with the skilful display of acting potentials. Drawn into recitation of poems by Nabagopal Mitra (1840-1894) in Hindu Mela founded by his cousin Ganendranath Tagore (1841-1869), Jyotirindranath developed a sense of patriotism which enhanced itself in the later stage of his life presenting glimpses in some of his plays. It was his cultural organization Biddvajjan-Samagam founded in 1874 that provided stage to some of Rabindranath's earlier plays and dance dramas to be performed. The paper from her on will analyze Thakurbari and its culture with Jytorindranath as the epicenter thus diverging from the usual representation of him as a side character losing its shine when compared to the laurels of his younger brother Rabindranath Tagore. The paper also penetrates a bit deep into the socio-cultural chaos within and outside Thakurbari and tries to analyze Jyotirindranath Tgaore's position amidst all such circumstances seeking answer to as to why has he been usually sidelined from limelight in majority of the works so far. The



paper is a humble attempt to perceive the position of Jyotirindranath Tagore from an angle different from what has been perceived of him as an individual persona so far analyzing in the context of being a brother and a husband, his relationship with Jnadanadini Devi (1850-1941), the absence versus presence of women along with the patriarchal rigidity in Thakurbari.

Jyotirindranath Tagore - The Doting Brother and Husband

Amidst an air where theatre was not so much embraced as profession Jyotirindranath paved the way for young Rabindranath in the strict patriarchal environment of Thakurbari by facing the rigidity of the family himself. As Jyotirindranath played notes on musical instrument young Robi's job was to provide those notes with lyrics. This was probably the stepping stone for Robi in the world of poetry and musicals where he later dominated the notes to sing and dance on his tunes. As a doting elder brother he was aggressively active in encouraging his little younger brother to follow his passions in the world of music, dance and plays. One incident that proves this nurturing brotherly love between the two is the Jauhar scene in Sarojini (1875). As a young and vibrant assistant to Jyotirindranath, Robi felt that a prose narrative is not doing enough justice to the emotions that should be echoed in the scene; a song for the same would be more apt. This small suggestion was warmly welcomed by Jyotirindranath who readily incorporated the song beautifully composed by young Robi and thus escalating the level of the play a notch higher with the notable musical backgrounds.

Same can be said for the Jyotirindranath - the husband. A doting and dutiful figure, Jyotirindranath was quite liberal in his views on conjugal relationships of man and woman. Contrary to what patriarchy dictates Jyotirindranath went a step beyond all the

conventions to liberate his nine year old wife of all the traditions that confines her in anyway. Starting from education in western languages to horse-riding as a past time Jyotirindranath encouraged his bride to take on all those activities that stood in contrast with the conventional behavior of *bouthans* of Thakurbari. While many may debate whether he actually encouraged all such activities yet there is less or no doubt that there were no restrictions by him at least that were imposed on Kadambori Devi. His sense of duty did not exclude taking regular vacations with his wife as well. Time and again Jyotirindranath would take his young wife to countryside to spend quality moments, to cherish their conjugal relationship amidst a gentler air of the lush greens away from the cultural chaos of Thakurbari. It is also stated/recorded that after the marriage of Rabindranath and even before that when the relationship between Robi and his *notunbouthan* hit a rough patch Kadambori Devi often used to keep unwell. It was Jyotirindranath at this point of time who stood by his young bride often taking her away from the turmoil that was going on both inside and outside of Kadambori Devi. It was like a Romantics' shift from court or city to country seeking solace; a conjugal solace here which might heal the damage being done to their relationship both in literal and metaphorical level.

Absence v/s Presence of Female Figures

With a thick quilt of patriarchal norms wrapped all around the position of women in Thakurbari becomes an interesting point for analyses in this context. With the mother figure Sarada Devi being absent (or passively present) from the scene the only women who ruled the *andarmohal* of Thakurbari were the young and vibrant *bouthans*. Patriarchy having roots in Prince Dwarkanath Tagore (1794-1846) with a strong stem like Debendranath Tagore (1817-1905) the women of Thakurbari, needless to say had little freedom of rights or expression.

While the Tagore men were championing the outside world the women had to soothe ears by listening to their husbands' epic-scale achievements. This was completely natural given the time period in which Thakurbari is set in and aptly fitted within the patriarchal puzzle of Thakurbari. But like every situation has an exception this confinement was also broken; the shackles of traditions were broken free, and that too by none other than one of the *bouthans* of Thakurbari itself - Jnanadanandini Devi, the pioneering figure in the field of women empowerment who introduced the conjugality of sarees with blouse-petticoats-bodices-shoes to not only the Bengal elites but also to the entire Bengal. Being an illiterate when she first entered the Thakurbari as wife of Satyendranath Tagore (1842-1923), the first ICS officer in India (1864), she transformed herself to be the first "wife" of Thakurbari to step beyond the *andarmahal* spreading her wings to Europe on accompanying her husband. Undoubtedly, this was all done with the initiative and constant support of Satyendranath Tagore but Jnanadanandini Devi created a space of her own within Thakurbari and outside it as well making us all remembering her as the first champion of women empowerment in Bengal and India as well.

With the mother-in-law absent from the scene or possibly having quite a passive presence it was Jnanadanandini Devi who ruled the *andarmahal* of Thakurbari. Fusing the home and the world in her own way she was an embodiment of the much needed change that youngsters of Thakurbari such as Jyotirindranath or Rabindranath for instance probably longed for - a change from the autonomous authority of the father Debendranath Tagore. A noted writer as well she had contributions in women's monthly *Bamabdhini Patrika* (1863-1922). Later on she decorated the interiors of Thakurbari with the west winds of theatre, plays, music and dance.

Jnanadanandini Devi, in all, embodied the motherly affection as well as the vibrancy of a youthful mind all at the same time within herself. And this is exactly what made her a figure to look upon to her beloved and dear brother-in-law Jyotirindranath. In his work *Kadambari Debir Suicide Note* (2012), author Ranjan Bandapadhyay presents a draft of what might have been the last letter or probably the suicide note of Kadambari Devi. In there, the author presents what can be termed as an ego clash between the two *bouthans* of Thakurbari - Jnanadanandini Devi and Kadambari Devi. Most of this ego clash is probably because both of them are probably on the same scale as far as the qualifications are concerned yet far apart when analyzed from the point of domestic bliss. While Satyendranath was a staunch supporter of Jnanadanandini Devi, good or bad, Jyotirindranath was also the same to Kadambari but it was a self-confessed loveless relationship between the two. Nobody knew of the reason but there was a sense of ambiguity that was there in the relationship; most of the reasons are based on some of the probable facts and mere assumptions. One of the most cherished and probably scandalized reasons was her inclination towards her childhood playmate Rabindranath. But was it the sole reason? If analyzed from a socio-cultural perspective, Kadambari Devi did not have a secured position as a daughter-in-law within Thakurbari. As echoed in the work of Ranjan Bandapadhyay in *Kadambari Debir Suicide Note* she was the wife of Jyotirindranath himself yet she was the victim of class-conflict within the boundary walls of elite Thakurbari. This class-conflict was probably the reason which kept her at a bay from the rest of the *andarmahal* members, instigated and fuelled prominently, as usually quoted and perceived, by Jnanadanandini Devi herself. Being the authority of the inner world she might have felt her sister-in-law as a probable threat to her cautiously emerging reputation. Having a strong hold and influence on Jyotirindranath



both as a nurturing mother figure as beloved *mejobouthan* and also as a companion in all of his plays and recitals she shared quite an affectionate relationship with him - a fact that never went well with Kadambari essentially when coupled with her own conflicts with *mejobouthan*. All of these were enough reasons for drifting apart Kadambari and Jyotirindranath away from each other and bringing Robi - and his beloved *notunbouthan* even closer. Nobody probably noticed but it was amidst such chaos that the once playmates were now standing on the verge of becoming the soul mates with their affections and ideals approaching a unknown goal. It was not even known what exactly evaporated the love between Jyotirindranath and his beloved wife; it was probably a relationship where the difference in age transformed itself into the differences in ideals and opinions which could never be matched with each other even though should have.

The other way of analyzing the same situation can be from the perspective of men-women relationship within the framework of patriarchy, and it becomes even more interesting when it is the patriarchal structure of *abhijat* (elite) Thakurbari. Given the conservative nature of the time there were two ways in which a relationship between daughter-in-law and the younger son of the house would be perceived. One was of course the mother-son relationship which was probably the case with Jnadanandini Devi and Jyotirindranath with Jnadanandini Devi being the affectionate motherly figure to her young brother-in-law in the absence of the real mother of the house; and the other was the relationship of that of friendship that was quite freely acceptable between the two, which, undoubtedly, was the case with Robi and Kadombori in their initial years of childhood. But at the same time the ease with which this relation was accepted was confiscated in husband-wife relationship; the frank nature was never allowed; what was

more acceptable was a dominant-submissive relationship where the wife must unquestioningly surrender and obey the dictates of the husband. Such a tough notion of patriarchy no wonder weighed heavy on the shoulders of both the person involved in the conjugal relationship forcing them to break free. But this breaking free came with a highly uncertain probability of breaking free from each other instead of breaking free from the customs together. Such was probably the situation with Jyotirindranath and Kadambari but grew into a nurturing tree of love and support between Jnadanandini and Satyendranath.

When compared with his younger brother Rabindranath, a young vibrant youth having all the probable potentials of charming away women Jyotirindranath's youthful vibrancy seems to lose its shine. Even though equal on all the probable parameters, Jyotirindranath lose out to his younger brother on almost every point of life. He was not only outshined as a cultural figure but also as a conjugal figure where he failed as a husband while Rabindranath had an apparent consistency of marital bliss with Mrinalini Devi.

The Weaving Thread between Rabindranath and Kadambari

While analyzing Rabindranath and his women most of the works so far have always been heavily focused on Kadambari Devi only. Therein, of course, have been the mentions of Jyotirindranath but cautiously and essentially in a partial space and shades. Most of the works so far have been portraying Kadambari Devi as the common thread between Jyotirindranath and Rabindranath that weaves the two together. It is as if it is not the blood that binds them together but the bond that they share with the lady is what binds them together – one as husband and the other as the younger brother-in-law.



Arriving at the age of nine, just two years older to young and her beloved Robi, she was a way too young to be the perfect companion for her husband who was nine years older to her. This little fact is probably what acted as the first stepping stone towards a serene affectionate relationship which was fated to be reduced to a mere scandal in the later period. It becomes an unfortunate fact that most of the studies so far have relied on the romantic interpretation of the situation where Kadambari and Rabindranath appears to be the soul mates with Jyotirindranath being the odd one out. But the other way in which one can see this is the mere victimization of Jyotirindranath probably at the hands of fate driven fiercely by the then contemporary socio-cultural conditions. It was not Jyotirindranath who chose the bride for himself; rather he was the chosen one for the bride. He might not be a loving husband but what surely reflects from various case studies and researches so far is that he was definitely a generous husband for sure who did never confined his wife in anyway. If analyzed from a different angle Jyotirindranath is sure to be reflected as the common thread that weaves the other two together. He was a doting elder brother as well as a doting husband who dutifully obeyed his both the roles. In the extreme initial years of Rabindranath it was Jyotirindranath who influenced many of his works, be it his short rhymes composed on fine rainy evenings during their country vacations or the song composed in Sarojini, or even furnishing his acting skills as the protagonist in *Alikbabu* (1900) which was a remodeling of the farce play *Ami Aar Korbo Na* (I Won't Do It Again, 1877); yet unfortunately nothing much is talked about those, probably because nothing are there in a recorded or written form, unlike those of Rabindranath whose works have been archived sincerely in many forms. As a husband as well he confronted criticisms for allowing a way too much liberty to his wife. Despite knowing everything that was going on around and the apparent wall between himself

and his wife that was progressively constructing itself with every pass by second Jyotirindranath had enough evidences and opportunities to scandalize Kadambori Devi; yet he did not do so. Again there is an ambiguity that runs through here as very little is known of him as a person or about his nature. It is an extremely unfortunate fact that Jyotirindranath occupied quite a less space and rather denied any space of his own in whatever work has been done on Thakurbari in general or Rabindranath Tagore. He never got his due recognition as a playwright even though he was one of the pioneers along with many other notable geniuses, such as Girish Chandra Ghosh, Dwijendralal Roy to name a few, in the Bengali theatre world. Coupled with such personalities Jyotirindranath is credited with bringing about a revolution in the theatre arena of Bengal which was dominated by his younger brother in the later period. But his fame and recognition were cut short as by the time Jyotirindranath brought on the revolution Rabindranath's destiny was aggressively approaching towards him outshining Jyotirindranath and his contributions.

Patriarchal Rigidity of Thakurbari

Even if analyzed from feminist-patriarchal perspective women of those times were not allowed to take decisions of their own. Their lives were subjective of the males around them who were more rational beings to understand the politics of life and hence more able to take decisions accordingly. Yet Kadambari Devi emerged as the decider of her own fate denying the opportunity to the superior beings around her of their rights. She decided to take her own life by consuming *afim* (opium) in a large dose than the usual in the determined hope of pushing away the life from her bodily cage; thus pushing away the dim light from Jyotirindranath's life as well. He not only failed as a cultural figure overpowered by his younger brother but also emerged as a failed husband whose wife has committed suicide.

All that is talked about in this context was the sorrow and blow that Rabindranath received and how it influenced him and his works in both good and bad ways. The wrath and the fear of getting scandalized coupled with the concern for the reputation of the elite Thakurbari in the voice of Debendranath Tagore is also heard about which resulted in the burning of all the possible evidence and assets related to *mejobouthan* of the house. With such a decision Kadambari Devi was surely successful in truly freeing herself from the chaotic turmoil of this materialistic world and its dilemma which constantly traumatized her in her entire life of 25 years; it was as if *Mejobouthan* of Thakurbari never existed, such an aggressive way was adopted in which everything associated with her was transformed into vapors. But what goes missing and is hardly mentioned are the emotions of the husband of the deceased lady - Jyotirindranath Tagore. Nobody knows how he felt or what crossed his mind amidst all these. The recent screenplay adaption *Kadombori* (2015) shows Jyotirindranath, played by Kaushik Sen, being cautiously cooperative with Debendranath in removing all the possible evidences. Was he happy that he finally got rid of a living scandal; or was he afraid as what was till now under the wraps is now laying right there in the open for all to see and gossip about? Or was he genuinely remorseful to have lost his wife for whom he might not have harbored so called romantic feelings but definitely never harbored any hatred? None of these have ever been discussed, approached or even considered worthy of discussion.

Jyotirindranath, in this context, comes across as an example of “maligned men” being the victim of a society that fixed marriages not on the basis of potentials of the bride and the groom but of the reputation of the family. And considering the patriarchal notions needless to say that the brides’ family usually had less say or no say at all at times. Such was the case with

Kadombori and Jyotirindranath who were ordered to be together by Debendranath despite not so high status of Kadambari’s family when compared with the *abhijat* Thakurbari.

“The society that forces women into the humiliating position of constantly striving to catch a husband also pushes men into the dubious privilege of being the prize in such quest.” (Aparna)

Such was probably the case in this marriage where Jyotirindranath was the perfect prize and Kadambari Devi’s family was or at least supposed to be more than obliged for the kindness that has been bestowed upon them by the aristocracy. In this way it was not only Kadambari Devi who was trapped in an unhappy marriage but also Jyotirindranath who shared the common pain and was an equal sufferer as his young bride. The patriarchal rigidity of Thakurbari deprived not only Kadambari to ever voice her thoughts but also Jyotirindranath, the husband and the male of the family by the head Debendranath. This clearly shows that it is not only the women who are subjugated within patriarchy but also imposes a constant pressure on the man as well to live up to the conventional notion of masculinity. The same can be compared in the context of Satyendranath-Jnadanandini Devi as well but destiny seems to be the only escape in their case as the couple was destined to be supportive of each other despite Satyendranath going against the conventions of masculinity as a husband. But the same step backfired in Jyotirindranath’s case obscuring his shine for lifetime.

Conclusion

In the ultimate scene on the stage of life Jyotirindranath Tagore emerges as a forgotten hero remembered only as the husband of Kadambari Devi who committed suicide under mysterious circumstances and the elder brother to Rabindranath Tagore, the *gurudev* of



Bengali and Indian literature in general. His laurels in present times have been obscured by the honors of his younger brother; the fact that he was a great playwright, a versatile actor and a skilful musician on his own right - all seems to be faded away somewhere in the loopholes of the time and also in the memory of the people. Nonetheless, Jyotirindranath Tagore will always remain as one of the pioneering figures in not only Bengali literature but also in the theatre arena of Bengal for had it not been him the world would not have the Bengal theatre as known of today.

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