

Anurag Banerjee

Jyotirmoyee

Hers was the story of how one's destiny could be changed by love and how love could ruin one's life. Hers was the story of how one aspired to find love first in mortals, then in the Divine and again in a mortal but at the end of the day, it was love that made her lose all that she had gained in life—fame, her very identity and above all, the aegis of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. She was Jyotirmoyee, renamed Jyotirmala by Sri Aurobindo.

Jyotirmoyee was born in March 1903 in a Buddhist family of Satbaria, situated in Chittagong (now in Bangladesh) to Nagendralal and Biroja Chowdhury. Her paternal grandfather Krishna Chandra Chowdhury (b 1844, married to Sharmishta Chowdhury) was known as 'Krishna Nazir' (since he was the head of the bailiffs in the law-court). He was an educationist and renowned social reformer who established a number of schools in the district and also founded the Chittagong Buddhist Samiti in 1887 whose aim was to promote education among the Buddhists. This society, now renamed as Bangladesh Buddhist Samiti, still exists. Always athirst for knowledge he had an impressive collection of a variety of books and journals of that era and was also an essayist who produced his articles in English. He was also the publisher of Boudha-Bandhu, a magazine which saw the light of the day in 1887 and was the first magazine meant exclusively for the Buddhists. His eldest son Nagendralal was a student of Scottish Church College of Calcutta where he was studying for his Bachelor of Arts degree when he was compelled to discontinue his studies as he, being the eldest son of the family, had to look after their family business Sanguveli Company when Krishnalal fell ill. The company enjoyed an impeccable goodwill in Chittagong, Calcutta and Myanmar.

Jyotirmoyee was born in an era which witnessed the awakening of the women-power— *nāri-shakti*—across India. The members of the so-called weaker sex of the society were no longer keeping themselves confined within the four walls of the house; on the contrary, they were coming out of their veiled existence, studying with men and often progressed better than them. They were overcoming and gradually eliminating the tag of being the backward sex that had been associated

with them since time immemorial. However, the village of Satberia where Jyotirmoyee was born was still underdeveloped where people discriminated between a girl and a boy. The fact that Nagendralal's first child was a daughter was not accepted with a smiling face by all in the family and the village. But Nagendralal was a progressive young man who could foresee that his daughter would one day become a luminous personality. Therefore after consulting with his mother, he named her Jyotirmoyee and also gave her the nickname of Betty.

Not only was Jyotirmoyee bestowed with a sparkling beauty but she also possessed a rare intelligence. Through the stories she heard from her father she was introduced to the history of the world at a very young age. A tutor was appointed for her who would come to her house to teach her Sanskrit, Bengali, English and Mathematics. After the completion of her preliminary education in Satberia Adarsha Vidyalaya (founded by Krishna Chandra) she was taken to the city where she was enrolled in Dr Khastagir High School for Girls in 1914. Her brilliance impressed her teachers immensely. Whenever she returned to her hometown, she played with an uncle of hers who was almost of her age. Her younger brothers and sisters (Sudhir, Potu Rani, Moni, Suman, Tonmoyee, Baby and Sushil) adored their eldest sister who, with her curly golden tresses tied with pink ribbons and fair complexion, looked like a Westerner. By nature she was shy and reserved and preferred not to mix up with the other girls of her age but to spend her leisure hours sitting on the banks of the river or reading the works of Tolstoy, Shelly and Keats.

Jyotirmoyee passed her matriculation from Dr Khastagir High School for Girls and secured a first class in the examination. Then she came to Calcutta where she stayed with her uncle Pulin Bihari Chowdhury in his residence at Free School Street; she enrolled herself in Bethun College from where she passed her Intermediate Arts examination. Then she migrated to Rangoon (Myanmar) where her father was looking after the family business. At Rangoon she joined the Judson College (run by the American Baptist Mission) affiliated under Rangoon University. In 1924 she obtained her Bachelor of Arts degree and secured the highest marks in three subjects which earned her a gold medal. She was the first lady from the Bengali Buddhist community to become a graduate. Since she was already twenty years of age it was suggested to Nagendralal that the time had come for Jyotirmoyee to get married. But Nagendralal rejected all such suggestions and declared that

Jyotirmoyee would go abroad for higher studies. But was it safe for a young, inexperienced girl to go abroad all alone? No, not at all. Therefore it was decided that Jyotirmoyee's uncle Nirodbaran Talukdar would accompany her.

From the early days of his life, Nirodbaran aspired to go abroad and study law to become a barrister. Since he lacked the means he had written to Nagendralal (who was married to Nirodbaran's step sister, Biroja; Nirodbaran's father Rajkumar Talukdar had two daughters Saroja and Biroja from his first marriage and from his second wife Chitrlekha he was blessed with a son Nirodbaran and a daughter Pratibhamoyee) expressing his desire. Nagendralal replied that Nirodbaran would have to accompany Jyotirmoyee to England and that all his expenses would be borne by him provided he studied medicine instead of law. Nirodbaran agreed.

On 24 October 1924 Jyotirmoyee and Nirodbaran sailed for Europe. Both of them enrolled themselves in Edinburgh University (Nirodbaran for the MB Ch B degree which was awarded to him in 1929 and Jyotirmoyee for PhD). Jyotirmoyee's subject for PhD was unique and the very title would explain its uniqueness: *A Comparative Study of Sri Aurobindo and Kant*. It should be noted that in the 1920s no one had thought of doing a PhD on Sri Aurobindo and his works. However at that time, any research project on Sri Aurobindo's works invited the wrath of the British Government and therefore her research was stopped mid-way due to the intervention of the British authorities.

Jyotirmoyee visited a number of cities in Europe. During the course of her travels, she met Dilip Kumar Roy at Paris in 1927. Dilip Kumar had spoken of Sri Aurobindo to her and Nirodbaran and also informed them about his visit to Pondicherry in January 1924 and the talks he had with Sri Aurobindo.

During her stay in Europe, Jyotirmoyee fell in love with Ajay Banerjee, the son of Jnanendra Prasad Banerjee (the then Chief Justice of Allahabad High Court). Ajay, who was a Communist and an associate of Rajanipam Dutta, the Chief of the Communist Party, was a student of medicine. Ajay was too charmed by the dazzling beauty of Jyotirmoyee and eventually they got married. But the marriage was not destined to be a blissful one; she was betrayed by the one whom she loved dearly and within a short time they separated and filed for divorce which was granted soon after. But it took her a long time to overcome the shock and sorrow she had received from Ajay. However, she continued to

nurture a 'soft-spot' for him and wore the pair of bangles made of conch-shells which he had gifted to her even after her return to India. These bangles adorned her wrists for a very long time. Once, seeing these bangles which are worn by Hindu wives her friend Pratibha Bose (whom we shall meet soon) asked her: "Jyoti-di, who is your husband?"

Jyotirmoyee replied: "Don't you know that one who is not married does not have a husband?"

"Then why are you wearing these bangles?"

"Someone had gifted them to me with lots of love so I wear them", was Jyotirmoyee's answer.

After her return to India, Jyotirmoyee went to Kumilla (in Bangladesh) where she took the job of an assistant School-Inspector. Her efficiency and dedication for her work soon promoted her to the post of School-Inspector but as she was unable to cope up with the job she resigned and came to Dhaka where she accepted a job in Nari Shikkha Mandir (a school for girls founded by Lila Nag) and stayed with her Christian friend Nishamoyee Biswas who was a School-Inspector at Bakshibazaar. It was during her stay at Dhaka that she was introduced to Pratibha Bose, the future-wife of the renowned poet and litterateur of Bengal, Buddhadev Bose.

A lot of information has been obtained about Jyotirmoyee from Pratibha Bose's reminiscences. To her Jyotirmoyee had once said, on being questioned about her religion: "I've no religion. My father was a Buddhist." Jyotirmoyee used to pay a visit to her house after the school hours and stay till evening. Not only Pratibha but her parents also were extremely fond of Jyotirmoyee and they would remark: "What an exceedingly simple girl! There is not even the slightest trace of dirt in her heart. The world would be a tough place for her to live."

Their premonition did not go wrong.

After staying in Dhaka for nearly eighteen months Jyotirmoyee returned to Bengal and took a job in Nolini Ranjan Sarkar's Hindustan Cooperative Insurance Company. However,, she was compelled to quit her job as she found it difficult to work with her male colleagues who took more interest in her than in the tasks assigned to them. Her aspiration for a higher life and quest for inner peace turned her to the teachings of Sri Aurobindo to which she was re-introduced by Dilip Kumar Roy during her stay in Europe. And in 1932 she came to Pondicherry and became an inmate of Sri Aurobindo Ashram.

The Ashram of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother had become, in the words of Georges van Vrekhem, “a hotbed of poets” who further added: “To him [Sri Aurobindo], however, culture was not a superficial layer of varnish; it was the product of a dimension, or of dimensions, without which the human being is not fully human. And poetry, to him, was not an irrational fancy of characters who cannot manage reality: it was a direct contact with the ‘overhead’ regions between our ordinary mental consciousness and the Supramental. To Sri Aurobindo, writing poetry was not a fanciful plight of the imagination, but a means of access to higher worlds and therefore a form of spirituality if practised with the right inner attitude. The great poets have never doubted the reality of their inspiration or the concreteness of what they saw and where they saw. Here now was somebody with a knowledgeable, practical, everyday involvement with those worlds, for whom poetry was a higher form of experience of great importance, and who helped his disciples with sufficient capacities or interest in their efforts to express those overhead worlds in words, to become aware by means of the word, as part of their sadhana.”

The Ashram had, among its inmates, a number of poets whose creations can be compared with the best of poetry produced in English and Bengali literature. The best known poets of the Ashram were KD Sethna alias Amal Kiran who was hailed by Sri Aurobindo as a poet of international stature, Dilip Kumar Roy, John Chadwick alias Arjava, Harindranath Chattopadhyay, Nishikanto Rai Chowdhury, Nirodbaran and Pujalal. And Sri Aurobindo, who called himself the ‘Head of the Poetry Department’ of the Ashram, took all the pains to read and correct the poems of his disciples and teach them the various rhythms and develop a distinct style. Since all guidance was received through the letters Sri Aurobindo wrote to his disciples it won’t be an exaggeration if it is claimed that the sadhaks blossomed into distinguished poets through a correspondence course conducted by the Guru.

Among the aforesaid poets, Jyotirmoyee made a mark for herself with her poetic creations. She had a love for literature and her command over Bengali and Sanskrit was quite impressive. Initially trained in rhythm and metre by Dilip Kumar Roy (who also taught Nirodbaran, Sahana Devi, Anil Bhattacharya and Amiya [Sahana Devi’s sister]) she began to pen innumerable mystic poems whose meaning often baffled her but Sri Aurobindo, to whom the poems were sent for correction, understood that she was expressing the inspiration he was sending to her

in the most appropriate terms. “Sri Aurobindo said that she had an idealistic tendency,” recalled Nirodbaran.

Sahana Devi recalls about those days: “Jyotirmala, Nirod, Anil Bhatta and myself used to sit down to write daily at a fixed hour calling down Sri Aurobindo’s force with prayers to him, as we tried to make this too as a limb of our sadhana. With what enthusiasm we aspired to water the very roots of our poetry with the inspiration cascading down from Sri Aurobindo! We, all of us, were moving together with the sole and sincere effort towards progress through poetry. A new taste in writing was ours aided by a constant impetus from Sri Aurobindo. Every poem written was eagerly submitted for Sri Aurobindo’s perusal and with a greater eagerness we were waiting to receive his comment brought by Nolini the next morning. It was Nolini’s [Nolini Kanta Gupta] job to distribute to everyone letters from Sri Aurobindo. By 7 am we got our letters. His comments, ‘good’, ‘fine’ or occasionally ‘very beautiful’ were hailed with joy filling our efforts to the brim. All these were fresh experiences and delightful feelings. We often asked for not only his comments but his suggestions also and whenever a suggestion was due he rarely failed to give it. When several expressions giving the same idea were put before him for the better choice, he indicated them with such remarks as ‘On the whole this seems to be better.’ ”

“Jyotirmala,” writes Goutam Ghosal, “didn’t know much about her words and phrases which poured in like magic through her pen. Many of the words used by her were Greek to herself. It required Sri Aurobindo’s intervention to verify the meaning.”

Once, when a poem of hers was sent to Sri Aurobindo with the prayer of explaining its meaning, Sri Aurobindo wrote back to his correspondent on 10 June 1936: ‘I find no difficulty in the last stanza of Jyotirmoyee’s poem nor any in connecting it with the two former stanzas. It is a single feeling and subjective idea or vision expressing itself in three facets. In the full night of the spirit there is a luminosity from above in the very heart of the darkness—imaged by the moon and stars in the bosom of the Night. (The night-sky with the moon (spiritual light) and the stars is a well-known symbol and it is seen frequently by sadhaks even when they do not know its meaning.) In that night of the spirit is the Dream to which or through which a path is found that in the ordinary light of the waking day one forgets or misses. In the night of the spirit are shadowy avenues of pain, but even in that shadow the Power of Beauty and Beatitude sings secretly and unseen the strains of

Paradise. But in the light of the day the mystic heart of moonlight sorrowfully weeps, suppressed, for, even though the nectar of it is there behind, it falters away from this garnish light—because it is itself a subtle thing of dream, not of conscious waking mind-nature. That is how I understood or rather try mentally to express it. In this kind of poetry it is a mistake to fix a very intellectual or a very abstract sense on what should be kept vague in outline but vivid in feeling—by mentalising one puts at once too much and too little in it.”

While commenting on Jyotirmoyee’s poetry, Goutam Ghosal writes: “There is a Sanskritic density and grandeur in Jyotirmala, which is virtually untranslatable...Unlike Nirodbaran, Jyotirmala seldom writes the prayer proper. She sees and feels and takes delight in her own sight and feeling by translating them into words. Like Harindranath, Jyotirmala has a soft spot for the bird and the swan, while the sun, the moon, stars, lotuses, dawn, night, streams and golden light are characteristic images of the Aurobindonian school. Jyotirmala moves inward and even her irony is sublime sight put into rhythm...Jyotirmala’s poetry was an advancement of the mystic tradition, which Tagore, DL Roy and Atulprosad Sen had already created. The novelty lies in her total one-pointedness, her total consecration to the mystery woman, her whole-time rendezvous with a faery White whose footsteps she constantly hears on her breast.”

References

- [1] Georges Van Vrekhem, *Beyond Man*, p. 175
- [2] Supriyo Bhattacharya, *An Interview with Nirodbaran*, p. 10
- [3] Sahana Devi, *Forty Years Ago* in *Breath of Grace* edited by MP Pandit, p. 147
- [4] Goutam Ghosal, *Jyotirmala: New Trend in Bengali Poetry*, p.1
- [5] Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Poetry and Art*, pp. 490-491
- [6] *Jyotirmala: New Trend in Bengali Poetry*, pp. 2-3