The Political Self: Gender and Politics of Identity in Sarala Devi's Autobiography- A New Perception

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Abstract: *Can autobiographies be considered history? If literature is regarded as a form of history then Sarala Devi Chaudhurani's autobiography, Jeebaner Jharapata can claim to be an important part of Bengal's social history of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The Bengal in which Sarala Devi was born and lived was undergoing significant changes, especially in terms of elite relations with the British colonial presence and the changing nature of cultural nationalism. Sarala Devi's maturation as an author and political thinker unfolded against this milieu. The arguments of this essay have been inspired by what is now a well-worn phrase – The Personal is Political – the famous theory of American Feminist Carol Hanisch. Hanisch argues in her essay that most problems that women faced in their day-to-day lives were a result of deep-rooted political structures that were patriarchal and intrinsically oppressive. In this context, I will try to show that Sarala Devi's Jeebaner Jharapata is just as political as personal. This article explores how the 'politics of self' and the 'politics of gender' were articulated in the autobiography of Sarala Devi Chaudhurani. Using the framework of inter-subjectivity – the notion of the construction of the self through a wider network of social relations and identities – this article analyses how Sarala Devi performed the political self in her autobiography by positioning her life within a larger domain of public life and muscular nationalism.*

Key Words: Sarala Devi, Autobiography, Jeebaner Jharapata, Political-Self, Politics of Gender, Colonialism, Feminism.

'What a wonderful sight it was! A meeting with no speeches, no table-thumping, only evocative of a past hero of Bengal, demonstration of martial arts by youths of Bengal, and their leader is just a young Bengali lass – a Brahmin lady from whose tender hands the boys received their prizes.'[1]

It was reported by *Bangabasi*, a noted periodical after Sarala Devi presided and inaugurated a literary event in the heart of Calcutta. Sarala was much more serious in her other commitment, that is, participating in the freedom struggle. It was the time of the Swadeshi movement in Bengal against the British Raj.[2] Her nationalism became accentuated with time. It may be well claimed that Sarala was the first Indian woman leader in our nationalist movement.[3] The above extract reveals an interpretation of the feminine in Sarala Devi's muscular nationalism. Women become the mothers of the nation and India is imagined as a mother. By speaking of the need for men to protect their motherland, she configures a woman's body (the nation) as the representation of masculine (conflated with national) honour[4], by going through her autobiography properly, I would like to analyze all these aspects from a different perception.

The colonial discourses on India from its inception were gendered as the colonised society was feminised and its 'effeminate' character, as opposed to 'colonial masculinity', was held to be a justification for its loss of independence. The 'women's question' figured prominently in these discourses as Western observers, like James Mill, used it to construct a 'civilizational critique of India'.[5] Therefore, the status of women became the main focus of the

reforming agenda of the modernising Indian intellectuals of the nineteenth century. There was a time when women lost their social freedom, a sharp cleavage between '*Sadar'* or 'Public sphere' and '*Andar'* or 'Private sphere' restricted their movements within the confines of home.[6] In the first phase of the nineteenth century Nationalist Movement, thinking about women got a new dimension. How will the body of indigenous culture be formed to the opposite of imperialism and what will be the role of Indian women in that culture? Nationalist thinking revolved around these questions. At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, the great initiative of constructing an idealized idol of the new gentlewoman (*new-bhadramahila*) was the testimony of this thought. On the one hand, there was the ideal of pure scriptural femininity; on the other, there was the idea of educated women who were inspired by the ideology of western culture – facing pressures from these both aspects, women have analyzed their own identity and social status through their writings in different journals and periodicals. Writing 'Autobiography' or *atmakatha* was part of this initiative. Women have always been in the stories of our past, whichever country we talk of, or write about. But how their stories were told, to what extent they were told, who was narrating the story and with what purpose, changed with time, producing different paradigms of understanding women's role and position in society. Gradually, the study of women's history became part of the practice of people's history.

The arguments of this essay have been inspired by what is now a well-worn phrase for scholars and historians of women and gender – *The Personal is Political*[7]– the famous theory of American Feminist Carol Hanisch, a strong and provocative feminist outcry of activists from the *Second Wave of Feminism***.** Hanisch argues in her essay that most problems that women faced in their day-to-day lives were a result of deep-rooted political structures that were patriarchal and intrinsically oppressive. In this context, I will try to show that Sarala Devi's *Jeebaner Jharapata* is just as political as personal. This article explores how the politics of self and the politics of gender were articulated in the autobiography of Sarala Devi Chaudhurani. Using the framework of inter-subjectivity – the notion of the construction of the self through a wider network of social relations and identities – this article analyses how Sarala Devi performed the 'political self' in her autobiography by positioning her life within a larger domain of public life and muscular nationalism. Reflecting on her public career Sarala Devi began to write her autobiography in the late 1940s and the first half of the 1950s, adding her voices to a growing body of Indian life writing. Autobiography as a form of postcolonial life writing provides a useful analytical tool for feminist scholars enabling the 'recovery' of women's voices from history[8]. Telling one's story requires a narrator; to have a voice one must have an identity as an individual. As Carolyn Steedman notes, one of the tacit assumptions accepted by scholars working with this genre is that writing is linked to subjectivities, the urge to tell the self is part of the process of self-construction.[9] This self is not constructed in isolation but through the perspective of the 'self in society', inflecting the individual life through a wider network of relations and identities.[10] The inter-subjective or relational nature of identity construction has been identified as a feature of post-colonial and women's life writing.[11] And it is precisely this inter-subjectivity that makes Sarala Devi's autobiography useful tool for exploring how that generation of women of her time negotiated within this nexus of social relations and historical forces to construct an identity for themselves as political subjects.

Can autobiographies be considered as history? If literature is regarded as a form of history[12] then Sarala Devi Chaudhurani's autobiography, *Jeebaner Jharapata* can claim to be

an important part of Bengal's social history of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. As is known and as *Jeebaner Jharapata* accentuates, Bengal witnessed two strands of nationalism in the first half of the twentieth century – the premier and the established one, chalked out by the Indian National Congress and the other still underground but quietly materializing, revolutionary (*biplabi*) consciousness. Sarala's heart was with the *biplabi* consciousness.[13], though the Tagore family and Sarala's father, Janakinath Ghosal, the son of a local zamindar of Krishnanagar, were supportive of the Congress to some extent. The Bengal, in which Sarala Devi was born and lived, was undergoing significant changes, especially in terms of elite relations with the British colonial presence and the changing nature of cultural nationalism. These broader social changes had important implications for women as authors who constructed and debated female subjectivities in the nation. Sarala Devi's maturation as an author and political thinker unfolded against this milieu. She was related to the Tagores of Jorasanko, unquestionably the most illustrious family in the then Bengal. The Tagore family occupied a unique place in the cultural efflorescence of the time.[14] Social reforms, especially in favour of women, were introduced during this period. The tremendous impact of education in women's lives and indeed on the whole society was quite beyond the 'reformers' imagination'. Sarala was privileged in being an integral part of both the cultural and the political stirrings. If we look carefully, we may find that the west dominated the outer world, the beauty of the Indian soul resided inside, within the family. The *griha* (home), the seat of the family, was conceived in terms of an emotional and moral rather than a physical construct[15] and women were valorized as the presiding deities – *grihalakshmi* – of the homes.[16] The nationalist imagining of the country as 'motherland' – opposed to the western concept of fatherland – was perhaps formally created by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay through his memorable song 'Vande Mataram', which meant 'hail our mother, motherland'. Abanindranath Tagore's painting of *Bharatmata* – India, a mother Goddess – encapsulated this image.[17] Sarala was a firm believer in this new creed and *Jeebaner Jharapata* brings to the fore its impact on her. The very notion of effeteness was built into the existence of western-educated Bengali elites. They were haunted by the unhappy awareness that they were creatures of colonial modernity. Sarala's contribution lay in the encouragement of a martial, heroic culture in Bengal that would serve the nationalist cause. She was aware of the prevailing views about the 'effeminate' and 'physically weak' Bengalis[18] and felt shamed by the stigma of cowardice attached to the Bengali community.

In keeping with the value of hierarchy of gender, Sarala Devi's autobiography frequently expresses anxiety about Bengali manhood and the following extracts emphasize that her vision of nationalism imagined a martial and muscular male body, 'Both Bengali and western Indian coolies are men, but what a difference in appearance! My first emphasis was on attempts to erase the differences between the weak bodies of Bengalis when compared to those of Bhojpuri, Marathi and Punjabi men. I also realized that it was necessary not only to erode physical weakness but also the cowardice haunting the Bengali mind. I saw that even the muscular bodybuilders of western India were afraid of Englishmen. We have to remove this fear of white skin from our psyche'.[19] In her writings and speeches, Sarala Devi reiterated the need for Bengali men to take on the masculine traits integral to muscular nationalism. Through a wonderful essay titled, '*Biliti Ghusi Banam Deshi Kil*'[20], she started her campaign by inviting reports of humiliation suffered at the hands' white civilians or military personnel – be it in railways, on steamers, or anywhere – personally or by members of their families, where the victims immediately retaliated instead of taking recourse to the courts of law to seek redress.[21] Sarala's sympathy lay with the revolutionary philosophy. It would not be wrong to describe

her as the first woman of Bengal to get involved in the *'Biplabi'* (revolutionary) movement, for even before the emergence of the movement in Bengal, she took the initiative to prepare the stage.[22] As she wrote in *Jeebaner Jharapata*, 'Remember always that you are children of India, heirs to that boy hero Aniruddha, you are of the same blood. Do not sully your heritage; do not run away from the battlefield. You may think that of your generosity you have forgiven the assaulters, but let me tell you that to forgive is not for the weakling. Before you earn the majesty to forgive, you need to be strong and powerful, and then from your position of strength, by all means, show mercy to the offenders, absolve them of their misdeeds. Otherwise to overlook wrongdoings is nothing short of a demonstration of cowardice'.[23] Sarala Devi's interpretation of nationalism was built on a muscular, martial and aggressively poised male body. To train male bodies to achieve these traits, she formed an *akhra* (club) and a *byayam samiti* (gymnasium). '.....From amongst the young people, I formed a select group. I initiated the indoctrination of this group by making them salute a map of India and then take a pledge that with all their heart, body and soul they would serve the motherland. I tied a *rakhi*, a symbolic thread, round their wrists binding them to their oath of dedication and sacrifice. It is said that the Mughal Emperor Humayun once promised to protect a Rajput princess, at any cost, by accepting a *rakhi* from her. Similarly, my *rakhi* was an acceptance of commitments by the young men of my group to face any hardship in the cause of service to the motherland'[24] – one should realize the fact that Sarala was an enthusiastic participant in the *rakhi* ritual (a *rakhi* usually symbolizes fraternal loyalties) wherein women urged their brothers to join the battle for independence. In essay titles, 'A Test for Bengalis', she wrote, 'Let the imprisoned mind remain awakened, The White Spy is near. Grasp your sword named Kali and shield named Tara, The Briton dare not defeat you'[25] – This poem offered a celebration of martial valour, an essential component of muscular nationalism.

'....I was leafing through a Bengali almanac to find the dates of the forthcoming Durga Puja when I discovered that the second day of the Puja, commonly known as Ashtami, had also been celebrated in the past as *Birashtami* – paying homage to the brave and the valiant.....I planned to re-introduce the celebration of Birashtami starting with Bengali mothers. It was necessary to indoctrinate them with the ideals of motherhood that produced and nurtured brave and heroic sons. The idea was to mould the otherwise timid mothers to be stouthearted, to be able to tell their sons unequivocally to be daring, encourage them to go for adventurous activities and games. There had been, I believe, an ancient tradition when mothers and sons, as part of religious rituals, worked hand in hand to lead the country to a glorious summit. How is it, I wondered, that the same country had now sunk so low?'[26] to inspire the youth of Bengal with ideals of heroism, Sarala Devi inaugurated the *Birashtami Utsav, Pratapaditya Utsav and Udayaditya Utsav*, one after the other.[27] In May 1903, Sarala Devi initiated *Pratapaditya Utsav*. Many young men from Bhowanipore, Kalighat and Baghbazar participated in it. Sarala read an essay entitled *'Bangalir Pitridhan'*. She contended that while the Rajputs, the Marathas, and the Sikhs were recognized as the heroic people of India, Bengalis were denied the memory of their heritage and consequently they lacked a sense of pride. Yet Bengal had produced brave heroes. Pratapaditya, the last independent Bengali Hindu zamindar of Jessore, had 'kept all the Muslims of Bengal loyal to him', defeated the King of Orissa, ventured to resist Mughal arms and met the challenge from the Portuguese pirates. The Bengalis needed to cherish this heritage and develop national pride and confidence.[28] Sarala Devi continued her quest for Bengali manhood through words and public speeches, 'Manilal Ganguly was one of the young men who often came to see me. He was a nephew of Satish Mukherjee, then the editor of the journal Dawn. Satish-babu and I often got

together. Manilal was keen on literature and ran a literary society in Bhowanipore. He once invited me to chair the annual function of his society. In my life, I had been intrepid enough to travel all by myself to many distant places away from home. Even so, the thought of presiding over a literary event, consisting of men only, that too in the heart of Calcutta, appeared daunting.'[29] But when Manilal continued to plead, Sarala gave him an alternative proposal. She told that instead of commemorating the creation of their society, they should organise *Pratapaditya Festival* on the first of Baishakh, the day of Pratapaditya's coronation. She also suggested that there should be no speeches, but instead, they should arrange for a display of martial arts to celebrate the occasion. Sarala advised Manilal to comb through Calcutta to locate young men who were skilled in boxing, wrestling, displays with swords and rods. She also asked him to do some homework to collect material about Pratapaditya's life and achievements and to write up a brief sketch which would be presented at the ceremony in place of the society's annual report.[30] Sarala Devi wrote, 'The meeting was conducted as I had planned. At Manilal's request, I inaugurated the celebrations to create an ambiance for the occasion. Manilal then read his short report on Pratapaditya, which was followed by displays of various martial arts. The event concluded with me distributing prizes and medals to the participants.'[31] Sarala Devi started another festival, *Udayaditya Utsav*, named after Udayaditya, a young prince of Jessore, who had repeatedly fought bravely against the Mughal army and died in the field of battle.[32] Sarala advocated for her countrymen and women the cultivation of 'bravery, strength and mental prowess.'[33] After the ritual was over, there were demonstrations of various forms of physical training and competitive games and the prizes for the winners of the competitions were awarded by a Muslim woman, the wife of Sujatali Beg.[34] Sarala's initiative here was an attempt to make a bond between the Hindus and the Muslims and to inspire the Bengali youth with the philosophy of armed revolution. In Hinduism Goddess *Durga*, the embodiment of *shakti*, defeats *Mahishasur*, the embodiment of evil and the enemy of the Gods, Sarala was influenced by this heritage.[35] She once said, 'Ours is the country where, since time immemorial, *Chandi* (another name for *Durga*), the Goddess incarnate of power, has been venerated. Each Bengali home ritually pays homage to this deity of power.[36] In a deft rhetorical maneuver Sarala Devi uses another warrior Goddess, Kali, to describe her location within the nation. Thus in her autobiography, the figures of Kali, Durga and the motherland intersect her quest for Bengali manhood within a muscular nation. Tanika Sarkar also points out that male Bengali nationalists had an anxious relationship with these representations of feminised power as indicated by their attempts to 'tame' Durga by depicting her as a smiling maternal figure while holding weapons of war in her hands, '...the icons depict a smiling, matronly, beauty, ...the archetypal mother and daughter, fundamentally at odds with the dying demon at her feet and the weapons in her hands'.[37]

On the other hand, with the politics of anti-colonialism, another kind of politics was there – it was the politics of Gender. Education stimulated the power of thinking and the urge of writing in some women. Gainful employment was an effect of and an impetus for reshaping women's lives and thoughts in Bengal. Sarala, like her brothers, wanted to earn her living, went to Mysore and taught for some time at the elite Maharani Girls School as she felt that 'to know oneself' one must be away from home, at least for some time.[38] However, she soon gave it up as it believed that the reason for this was a threat of molestation[39]; but *Jeebaner Jharapata* is silent on this point. Sarala concedes that the women of India had been made to think of themselves as inferior, incapable and weak. It was Sarala's mission to assist women to become aware of their potential and be confident of their power. It is, however, clear that Sarala Devi did not view women as apolitical or passive, indeed, her own robust, political life

attested to her belief in feminine vigour. Her enterprise was cut short in Bengal by her marriage with Rambhuj Dutta Chaudhury, a lawyer-cum-journalist and a political activist and sojourn into Punjab. Sarala had often challenged traditional norms, but in this crucial area of her life, marriage, she had to bow to her parents' wishes. There is no evidence to indicate whether the marriage was happy or not. She ends her fascinating autobiography before telling the story of her life after marriage, which makes one feel that perhaps she did not wish to highlight it. Though she cooperated his husband in his political work and helped him to edit the nationalist Urdu weekly, *'Hindustan'*.[40] Sarala Devi laid the foundation of an all-India women's organization – *Bharat Stree Mahamandal* in 1910 in Punjab, which was formed by women, of women and led by women.[41], it reflected the careful negotiation of elite women. She wrote that this organisation was created to train women to be social and political leaders, but *Jeebaner Jharapata* does not relate to the story.

Jogesh Chandra Bagal has recorded for us a few of her anti-colonial activities in the Punjab and Sarala's sudden conversion to Gandhian philosophy.[42] It is history that Gandhi appeared on the Indian scene, casting a spell of his extraordinary variety over the classes and masses of India, who joined the freedom movement under his leadership. Non-violence and the spinning wheel were perhaps the two most distinctive features of his philosophy. When Gandhi came to Lahore after the Jallianwalla Baag Massacre, he was Sarala's house guest and thus a very warm relationship developed between the two.[43] Then, Sarala gave up her revolutionary ideas and moved towards non-violence. It is a mistake to discuss Gandhi's fascination with Sarala Devi without reference to the political context which demands separate discussion. In early April of 1920, Gandhi and Sarala were in Ahmedabad to greet Rabindranath Tagore, who attended the *Gujarati Literary Conference* and visited *Sabaramati Ashram*. It was at this time, during National Week, that Sarala Devi decided to wear a *Khadi* sari.[44] In his letters, Gandhi called Sarala 'the greatest Shakti' and urged her to become one with India.[45] But, he was also captivated by her brilliance and charm, envisioning, it seems, some kind of partnership that transcended conventional unions.[46] In August 1920 when Gandhi left Bombay, he penned the much-quoted letter to Kallenbach, in which he called Sarala his 'spiritual wife', adding, 'A friend has called it an intellectual wedding.'[47] In late 1920, it seems they were both disappointed; Sarala would not wholly commit to Gandhi's programme, at the same time she was unwilling to accept his ideas and strategies without question.[48] Despite the rift in her relationship with Gandhi, Sarala did not abandon her political activism or her interest in women's issues, except for a period in 1922-23, when she took the unusual step of entering *'Vanaprastha'* (retirement) and experienced her husband's death.[49] For women, she believed, cognition of power would ensure the acquisition of power. Her attempt, therefore, was to make women self-aware through education, build up women's power and harness that power in the service of the nation. There is no doubt that the concepts which Sarala Devi was advocating in her autobiography must tear asunder the basis of patriarchy. It is true that she always condemned the injustice done to women and tried to redress the situation but never asked for gender equality.

Sarala Devi's narrative is really about the nationalist story of India's struggle for freedom and its development as a country from her perspective as a participant. Whichever form a woman chooses to write about herself, it is emancipator. She may be a person who has so far received little attention from the family or the world, or she may be a well-known public figure. So she writes about many selves, not about one coherent 'Self' but a melange of many lives and experiences. In other words, the pen gives her agency: she moves out from under the

shroud and becomes one who can write about her life.[50] There is a selective silence or a kind of reluctance in some of the life histories. Women write about their public life but unlike in the west, are embarrassed and reticent to write about private realms. Sarala does not write about her marriage in detail or her relationship with Gandhi or why she withdrew from politics and public life. Though she continued to be very active after her marriage, her story ends with it; which, I would like to say, was not a proper ending for autobiographical writing. But I completely agree with the view of Bharati Ray that *Jeebaner Jharapata* can claim threefold importance in Indian literary productions – as 'a piece of literature, as 'an autobiography of the first woman national leader of India' and as 'an intimate history of the time'.[51] One has to value it as a description of contemporary society and polity as seen from the 'vantage point' of a woman. Sarala's language was sophisticated and chaste. The development of the autobiographical subject around the 'axis of the nation' where the political self develops concerning a collective political consciousness defines her text as typically colonial. This cohort of Sarala Devi articulates a unique subject position for herself in her autobiography by situating her character as a pioneer within a larger public domain and also within the larger story of India's birth and development as a nation. At the same time, by analysing *Jeebaner Jharapata*, it can be said that Sarala's ideological perception of women stemmed from her acute political and social consciousness. Her autobiography *Jeebaner Jharapata* allows me to analyse her performance not only as an autobiographical subject but also the refashioning of her as a political subject. In that period, Sarala Devi tried her best to develop a public career that was self-made, a career marked by her personality, political orientation and creativity, which defined her not as the products of the social relations and political contexts of her time, but as dignified political-self which was able to negotiate an individual identity for herself within this context. Her political beliefs sprang from anti-colonialism and deep resentment against the power of the colonial rulers at the cost of the colonized. This is one reason why the notion of power was at the forefront of her thoughts. At the end of the discussion, I may say that despite the presence of the concept of the separation between the *private sphere* and *public sphere* within the bourgeoisie society of the west, Sarala Devi Chaudhurani connected and portrayed an invisible association between 'personal' narrative and 'political' terminology through her autobiography.

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47. *Ibid*, p. 53. Mahatma Gandhi, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vols. 18*, New Delhi: Publications Division, Government of India, 1999, p. 130 cited in Geraldine Forbes, *Op.cit*, 2020, p. 53.
48. Geraldine Forbes, *Op.cit*. 2020, p. 65.
49. *Ibid*, p. 57.
50. Aparna Basu, & Malavika Karlekar, (Eds.), *In So Many Words: Women's Life Experiences from Western and Eastern India*, New Delhi: Routledge, 2008, p. x.
51. Sukhendu Ray, Bharati Ray and Malavika Karlekar, *Op.cit*. 2010, p. 25.