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Swapan Kumar's Detective In Bengali Literature

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Abstract: Samarendranath Pandey (1950s-80s) was a name that resonated with the common people. The man reached us via his fictional detective, *Dipak* Chatterjee, created under his pen name Swapan Kumar. The stories by him still remain a matter of 'dispute' in most Bengali households especially in an era dominated by Mass Media. Unlike other fictitious sleuths, *Dipak* was different in himself. Highly inspired by "westernized" culture. Swapan Kumar's tales were pathbreaking. It is no wonder that it found a place in the pulp fiction category. For the very first time, readers in Bengal witnessed a detective like *Dipak*. He was more of a super-hero than a common man.

Swapan Kumar's tales were action-driven, not rooted in realistic investigation. It is through this paper that I have tried to paint the character of *Dipak*- kind of a Gen-Z sleuth in the light of contemporary society where people have already witnessed the craze of an 'Avengers', Marvel, DC superhero. The paper also examines the relevance and extent of his mass appeal in contemporary society.

Keywords: sleuth, mass, pulp fiction

I. INTRODUCTION

Shri Swapan Kumar started penning down his stories at a point of time in History when Bengal was practically passing through political unrest, food shortage problems, it was torn between the Partition of two vast pieces of land. Caught in such a situation, Swapan Kumar intended to portray a "hero" who lives in this city of Calcutta, like many other detectives, gets easily assimilated with the crowd, yet leaving his own mark. It is very unlikely for the portrayal of a character even in such a backdrop to exhibit contrasting characteristics. It becomes a beacon of surrealism infusing the doze of immense imagination in its audience. Howsoever, it was a very big "no-no" in Bengali household. The point stands how did Swapan Kumar go on writing such stories when the readership of which was quite doubtful. The idea of mass access is totally negated and something that we don't prefer to talk about. *Dipak* has remain underrated till date!

There are a lot many authors and poets who have celebrated the 'colours of life' even when the neighbourhood was gloom. Comparing Shri Swapan Kumar with other writers, he seems to follow their path. The ravages of war, famine have not necessarily been captured in all of the works of contemporary writers. They taught us Hope. Similarly, *Dipak* carries both a pistol and a dagger in his hands which is hard to imagine for any analytical mind trying to find logic in such tales. 'Detective *Dipak* Chatterjee' fights with '*baaj-pakhi*', dragons, Cobra. Such narratives and depiction of the unreal is usually found in low-grade Bollywood movies. Readers might question how does '*Dipak*' exert his importance in a society where characters like 'Feluda' and 'Byomkesh' characterized by utmost Bangaliana and

appropriate handling of events infested. They were extremely logic and reality bound driven towards familial ties, the avatar of a detective “hero” probably for the first time was painted in history.

Swapan Kumar’s personal life was adventurous too. He was a ‘jack of all trades’. Astrology was his area of passion. He has curated a lot many books in that area. The idea that Swapan Kumar has always remained a ‘subject less-talked about’ is evident here and forms an important area of my study. He churned out a ‘*niche*’ market for himself. His subscribers had always been in small proportion. Starting his career as an author, he took to various publications at a time. His detective stories have challenged the societal codes. Fiction and reality ran parallelly to each other. The genre that he wrote in was crime fiction. Detective genre by large follows intellect, intuition, reasoning and remains an all-time **readers’ favourite**. Facing stiff competition from other detective genre writers, Swapan Kumar persisted on his own lines. He never really thought about copyright, worked tirelessly towards his dream. From a standalone perspective, *Dipak Chatterjee* can be seen as an individual, in his mannerisms, etiquette, his fighting spirit and the overall personality he carries, he had actually shown how to carry that ‘heroic’ image that too without getting burdened its intense pressure. *Dipak* is the name that infested many Bangali families of that time. The ‘cult’ status is portrayed through it. Swapan Kumar’s contribution to the Bengali literature as a whole cannot be denied. The fact that *Dipak* failed to gather mass appeal lies in the printing, publishing and circulation at that point of time. Detective Swapan Kumar and sidekick Ratanlal by far remains anonymous. The books were charged at a very nominal price and still forms the gamut of a hoo-dun-it. College, school goers therefore were its ‘target audience’.

II. Dipak’s emergence as a Hero – *Dipak* here is not a next-door neighbourhood “Dada” like other characters like Feluda. He hails from an upper-caste Brahmin family and works as a detective in the city of Calcutta. He is ambi-dexterous, adept at operating dual weapons from both hands simultaneously (*Byomkesh*-like) He has a scientific bent of mind as he takes keen interest in experiments, has installed a laboratory at his place. It is after completing his graduation, that he takes to detective cases, so we get a student in him. His mastery in Science have helped him solving the cases. Is extremely intelligent, sharp, observant and determined in his mission. Beginning with a background totally surrounded with financial crunches, Swapan started penning the heroic ‘*Dipak*’. The exact number of how many books in the ‘*Dipak Chatterjee*’ series is hard to count and tell. *Dipak* here is the rescuer of the city. Bengal probably got the very first hero who is adept in action as well as Science through the character of *Dipak Chatterjee*. The books dropped with strict Censorship ‘for strictly adults’ suggestive of its content. *Dipak* was responsible for adrenaline rush. *Dipak* was found inside the school bags of students who used to carefully keep those books in hide. *Dipak* is the mass-hero who in reality fails to capture the masses!

Looking at Calcutta through the lens of *Dipak Chatterjee*, one finds it infested with crimes which he tends to clear out. *Dipak*’s weapons like a dagger and pistol is very ‘westernised’ embodying the western culture acculturation into the Indian. He in his dressing style can easily be passed off as some ‘Hollywood’ superman. Our Desi-Indian heroes like “Shaktiman” used to wipe off criminals in their own heroic ways. The other detective tales like *Kiriti Roy* also performed action but they were never seen carrying such instruments in their hands. This is where Swapan Kumar’s genius lie. He had been quite choosy and path breaking in his approach towards detective fiction. *Dipak*, as belonging to the upper-stratum of society is perceived as an intellectual in himself who very diplomatically came to conclusions and innovative solutions to solve an issue. Therefore, the contribution to the world of detectivity through this character will always be written in bold letters. Never did Swapan Kumar tried to reach the audience by bringing any narrative or methodical change in his writings. He carried on with his own “extravagant” hyperbolic portrayal of crude reality, carving the way towards a fantasy world. The urge for validation or competition with contemporary detectives have never been found here atleast. The so-called “*bangaliana*” caught in the backdrop of a city like Calcutta, is absent in *Dipak*’s “aura”. He is confidently different.

Dipak and his mannerisms have been criticized and mocked hurting the “intellect” quotient of the stories. The sight of *Dipak* climbing down a pipeline for instance have been fantastically described and *hyped*. *Dipak* is not invincible. For any *Art* to thrive, it is important to grab the market if not always. Keeping aside the revenue quotient of the books, market analysis and surveys depict how some youngsters appreciated them, were its regular buyers whereas we see a completely different ‘audience’ detasting the pieces disposing those as trashy, too whimsical, a stoppage in the acquisition was found. Exact and precise understanding and value judgement of his works therefore his hard to state where we see “*mixed*” opinion amongst the public. The circulation and actual readership, how the audience did

respond at that point of time is difficult to fathom. **Got popularity in the sub-altern Calcutta however failed to sustain.**

Not that we see a “Swapan Kumar” classic in Bengali households. He was Bengal’s poster-boy in counter-culture. His stories came up with “*masala*”. We see *Dipak* as a bearer of western culture wearing a coat occasionally with a *dhoti* and *kurta*, signifying elitist class consciousness of Bengal, has travelled to foreign lands, is trained in martial arts but how far the books were popular in abroad is a matter of debate. The struggle for survival in the author’s personal life had got its vent through his “*unrealistic*” tales. *Dipak* was introduced to us through The ‘**Bajpakhi**’ series. Dacoits, *Kalnagini* have always appeared in Swapan’s tales. The first of the ‘**Bajpakhi**’ series is ‘**Mrityuchokre Bajpakhi**’. This particular series have given the character the **most popularity**. Consumers of his book used to instantly grab their copy the moment it appeared in a book store, which states that ‘craze’ existed.

A particular pattern that have been observed in the tales is that both *Dipak* and his sidekick ‘Ratanlal’ who is ‘watson-ised’ often used to *disguise* themselves, comes out from imminent death while chasing the villain whosoever it is, a *Bajpakhi*, *Kalo Nekre* or dacoits but the enemies escape at the last moment securing the thrill of such adventures. Chasing assumed prominence in the stories than actually detecting the criminals because often they are seen writing letters to the detective about their next possible crime and location. They apparently appear to be very dutiful and ‘moral beings’. The crimes mostly occurred at the pink of darkness, in the night. The cityscape of Kolkata gets vivid coverage in the tales. Adventure was at its peak in these series. Each villain had its own significance, the **Bajpakhi** for instance was somebody who did not harm the poor, instead was seen helping a character named *Anil Sengupta* in a series. Similarly, all other villains belonged to a particular *syndicate* of criminals, part of a community. An utopian world, appearance of scientists were all seen in the stories where *Dipak* was the protagonist. The villains and *Dipak* are at the same pedestal, *masters in disguise*. Most of them are Robin Hood styled outlaws. They respected *Dipak* for his skills but at the same time beset his path with challenges, used to hoodwink even the detective. Swapan Kumar with his typical idiosyncracies occupy a very important place in detective fiction and overall genre of pulp fiction. At that point of time, word-of-mouth spell was the only advertising tool for which it did not travel far off and got restricted to a distinguished periphery often earning criticism. ‘Prithibhi Theke Dure’ was a *sci-fi*. Not only as a pulp fiction but it largely contributed to science fiction. Crimes were rooted to wars, dacoities, murders.

Few of the series- *Dipak* started his journey with ‘*Adrishya Sanket*’ in 1953.

- Rahasya Kuhelika series
- Crime World series
- Dragon series
- Bajpakhi Series
- Biswachakra series
- Kalrudra series
- Kalnagini series
- Kalo Nekde series

III. Portrayal of women- Unlike other detective tales, women here assumed important role. In the ‘*Kalnagini*’ series, the antagonist *Kalnagini* surpassed *Dipak*, *Kalnagini* could fly planes. In an era of abject subjugation of women and them been labelled as calm and docile, *Kalnagini* was a fighter in herself, brave. **Tandra** is *Dipak*’s female assistant in his work. Sleuths and their sidekick had especially been males showcasing a male-dominated stereotypical society. Females lesser in intellect. Apart from rare examples like stories of “*Mitin*” and her *Tupur* as sidekick, feminine detective or assistants have never discovered. As the society of 1960s goes it had never let women come out of their shells, surpassing the males. But in Swapan Kumar’s tales, we see a *role-reversal* in an unusual path that he adopts in his writing. Not much is stated of **Tandra**, nor talked about. Only that she assisted the ‘duo’ in some cases.

Ethics- Swapan Kumar’s other tales have followed paths towards violence and sex, where the original literary value had been compromised. There had been multiple errors caught in Swapan Kumar’s writings because he was writing in a spree and was usually in a hurry to submit those to the publishers next morning, he often forgot to proofread and read between the lines. **Mahesh Publication**, a renowned publication house have highly profited from these books. There was no structured approach that he

followed in his storytelling technique. It can be mentioned that the society, **1960s** Calcutta wasn't possibly ready for tales like that stuffed with “*non-sensical*” and absurd elements. If we look closely at the cover design of the books, we will notice visuals which were sexually appealing. Such visuals especially in the cover was seen demeaning and not considered something very “*literary*”. To some they appeared uncomfortable. For any Bengali household, the books were forbidden to touch and weren't read out in public like other “*sahitya*” or not even discussed at the tea-table owing to its portrayal. We now know about its reception from the reactions. The stories failed to be marketable because the villains often fled from their hands, it is not something that our psychic mind is trained to see. The books had been questioned on ‘ethical’ grounds and were considered ‘*illicit*’ and scandalous in its depiction.

IV. How is Dipak relevant in today's digital age- definitely media wasn't strong at that point of time. *Dipak Chatterjee's* character evokes **cultural nostalgia**. It was absolutely the railway-stall novels priced very low, cheap to avail. The concept or idea of a **pulp fiction** had never occupied such a bulk portion in the history of Bengali Literature. From that point of view, *Dipak* was extraordinary and laid the first foot in this genre.

Swapan Kumar's tales have **archival value** in this digital age. Each and every piece of Literature offer a deep dive into the history and time period of a particular age. Similarly, culture has been very important over here unusual of the society to accept any counter-culture event, what dominated a *Dipak Chatterjee* story. Turning down the pages of History, any literature lover can easily trace to Swapan Kumar. The stories have been stress-busting and offered relaxation to individuals reading them without going much into the use of one's cerebral faculties.

The intricate details, the approach in fighting the evil and criminals had been very unique in this regard. Swapan Kumar probably is the very first man who talked about corruption, forgery and crimes of that level in an explicit way. The crimes like currency fraud, forgery still stand relevant in today's society making it an ‘important document in history.’

Movies and series in modern-day are been thought of centering these stories. The recent Debaloy Bhattacharya movie starring Abir Chatterjee in and as *Dipak Chatterjee* is an excellent example to show that how it still kindles young minds to think of its importance. Coming totally out of the unsung pages of history, its portrayal in film makes us realise its importance in today's time and its acceptance among the mass. Seeing *Dipak Chatterjee* in a film was surreal. The validation and acceptance among the masses now through modern-day **OTT** paves for a better future and treatment of the book series.

V. CONCLUSION

Swapan Kumar was a phase in Bengali literature. The creative depth in his tales is a topic of debate. The dynamicity and the chemistry shared between the duo *Dipak* and *Ratanlal* had been the USP of these tales. For some, the adventures of Dipak Chatterjee is an underrated gem. The stories comprised of fast-paced narratives, dramatic descriptions and a clear distinction between good and evil. Shri Swapan Kumar had never really focused on the ‘*qualitative*’ aspect of the pieces in the hurry of attracting the mass. Through *Dipak*, he has gifted Bengal its first “heroic” detective who is adept at handling weapons and easily drives away the enemies. The entertainment value in these tales is undeniable, blending heroism, suspense and adventure. It had cultural significations. The stories had been less complex. Laid the foundation of other detective narratives in Bengal.

Swapan Kumar is a name that resonated with the mass audience, efforts are now seen in bringing back the tales. The books of which has never really come up in a book fair or exhibition laying largely redundant and anonymous to mainstream Bengali Literature.

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