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Sunil Gangopadhyay's *THOSE DAYS* : The Bengal Renaissance Revisited

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Abstract: The author begins the saga a few years before the 1857 mutiny and portrays well-depicted characters, touching not only illustrious families, intellectuals and literary men but also those living on the edge of society. Nineteenth century Kolkata forms the backdrop for a fantastic amalgamation of history, politics and romance. Historical characters are made to mingle with great ease with the fictional ones. A period of darkness, ignorance and religious dogmatism is the focus as also a society steeped in medieval culture which tries to imbibe enlightened European values and stands on the brink of a change. Though primarily the story of Nabin Kumar and his brother Ganga Narayan, the novel recreates the history of nineteenth century Bengal by incorporating in a powerful narrative the life and works of towering personalities who actually shaped the society, culture and destiny of Bengal. A crucial historical period, the Bengal Renaissance, has been chosen.

The Bengal Renaissance and the 1857 uprising form the backdrop of *Those Days*, a saga of human frailties and strength. The story revolves around the immensely wealthy Singha and Mukherjee families, and the intimacy that grows between them. The manner in which the feudal aristocracy, sunk in rituals and pleasure, slowly awakens to its social obligations forms the central theme of the novel. Historical personae interact with fictional protagonists to enrich the narrative. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, the reformer; Michael Madhusudan Dutt, the poet; the father and son duo of Dwarkanath and Debendranath Tagore; Harish Mukherjee, the journalist; Keshab Chandra Sen, the Brahmo Samaj radical; David Hare and John Bethune, the English educationists; Rani Rashmoni, founder of the Dakshineswar Temple, and a host of others walk the streets of Calcutta to bring alive a momentous time. The vast array of historical and fictional characters are deftly intertwined and one finds the British educationists and reformers like James Hope, John Bethune and David Hare playing important roles in the novel. The novel has an epic dimension with its many protagonists and a plethora of issues. One finds the historical figures, too, not just venerable ones but people of flesh and blood with their share of frailty. Each character, involved in a struggle, evolves with the passage of time.

Index Terms – mutiny, amalgamation, feudal aristocracy

Those Days, an English translation of the Sahitya Akademi Award winning original Bengali landmark classic *Sei Samai* by Sunil Gangopadhyay, is a remarkable period novel set in nineteenth century Bengal. It takes for its setting the Bengal Renaissance period of 1840 to 1870. While following closely the fortunes of two zamindar families, the Mukherjees and the Singhas, the novel paints the life events of many historical stalwarts on its vast canvas and brings alive some of the most eventful and turbulent chapters in the history of Bengal. It is in this context that this paper, taking as its primary material of study, *Those Days*, proposes to explore and get a better understanding of how the awakening of Bengal had been fuelled and its significant consequences.

The author begins the saga a few years before the 1857 mutiny and portrays well-depicted characters, touching not only illustrious families, intellectuals and literary men but also those living on the edge of society. Nineteenth century Kolkata forms the backdrop for a fantastic amalgamation of history, politics and romance. Historical characters are made to mingle with great ease with the fictional ones. A period of darkness, ignorance and religious dogmatism is the focus as also a society steeped in medieval culture which tries to imbibe enlightened European values and stands on the brink of a change. Though primarily the story of Nabin Kumar and his brother Ganga Narayan, the novel recreates the history of nineteenth century Bengal by incorporating in a powerful narrative the life and works of towering personalities who actually shaped the society, culture and destiny of Bengal. A crucial historical period, the Bengal Renaissance, has been chosen. Though the novel spans across Nabin Kumar's life time, the author makes him the chief protagonist. The city of Kolkata is the centre of all activities because Kolkata was the focus of British administration and trade and commerce. A class of Bengal's elite, able to mingle with the ruling British, emerged and became permanent residents in Kolkata in the later part of the eighteenth century. This group is said to have initiated the Bengal Renaissance during which Bengal witnessed an intellectual awakening almost akin to the European Renaissance of the sixteenth century.

As one turns the pages of this novel and tries to understand a culture which, at that point of time, was trying to dispel its darkness and groping for a new identity, one needs to have a true historical sense of the past. This work of literature can be properly understood within the wider framework of historical reality. Readers of the novel may tend to interpret it as a wonderful journey through the Bengal Renaissance period providing a view of the way of life in Bengal in the nineteenth century, the decadent Bengali aristocracy and the rise of the Bengal reformists who shaped the destiny of Bengal. But the novel can be better understood by relating it to its moment of time in the history of Bengal. Then one is bound to consider the working of social and historical forces beyond the control of the characters.

The most important development in the eighteenth century that gave a new dimension to the relationship between Europe and Asia was the transition from trade to rule over millions of Asians. This began the epoch of Western superiority in Asia that was to continue until after the second World War. The process largely affected the fate of British India which was not only an important possession of any European country but also the model for a new form of European colonial rule. Now the primary issue of trade began to be attached more firmly to political rule exercised by a small number of Europeans over a huge number of natives. The relationship between the Mughal Emperor and the English East India Company, the British

stronghold on Bengal becoming secure, both liberal and conservative governors-general working on the modernization of India in the first half of the nineteenth century, English becoming the official language, a growing interest in English education and a new Indian middle class of businessmen and lawyers finding it advantageous to adapt to British culture formed a significant conglomeration of factors that set the scene.

The intellectual awakening during the period of the Bengal Renaissance is compared to the European Renaissance of the sixteenth century. Nineteenth century Bengal witnessed an intellectual and cultural revival, the Renaissance, which was the result of Western critical and historical thinking, European knowledge in the fields of philosophy, history, science and literature, British empiricism, rationalism and education in the English language affecting an important segment of the Bengali Hindu society. Renaissance minds primarily included Raja Rammohun Roy, Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, Debendranath Tagore, Akshay Kumar Datta, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and Swami Vivekananda. The Bengal Renaissance was a cultural, social, intellectual and artistic movement that, for almost two centuries, saw a radical transformation of the Indian society. It originated in the Bengal Presidency of the British Indian Empire, but more specifically its capital city of Kolkata, formerly known as Calcutta. This colonial metropolis was the first non-Western city to use British methods of teaching in its schools. "Print language and literature played a vital role in shaping ideas and identities in colonial Bengal from the eighteenth century onwards," writes Anindita Ghosh, continuing that "commercial print cultures that emanated from numerous cheap presses in Calcutta and its suburbs disseminated wide-ranging literary preferences that afforded a space to different sections of the Bengali middle class to voice their own distinctive concerns."

Raja Rammohun Roy was the cofounder of the Brahmo Sabha movement in 1828 which produced the Brahmo Samaj, an influential socio-religious reform movement, that made significant contributions to the renaissance and the makings of modern Indian society. Bengal, being the pinnacle of culture and heritage, was the foremost region inspired by the European Renaissance. Idealistic attempts were made to create a spiritual synthesis of Western and Indian thinking. Hence, the minds of scholars, reformers and a section of the elite, that were cultivated by Western ideas, responded to these influences and the nineteenth century became the high point of British-Indian mutual reciprocation especially within Bengal. Many famous Bengali intellectuals, who ushered the renaissance, got their higher education and exposure in Great Britain as well. So, one finds the young scholar, Pran Gopal, in the story well acquainted with the works of Voltaire, Rousseau, Kant and Russian social doctrines. The period after 1857 witnessed an overflow of Bengali literature and development of the Bengali language. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar reconstructed the Bengali alphabet and reformed Bengali typography into an alphabet. Writers like Rabindranath Tagore, Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and many others contributed immensely to the cause of breaking socio-religious superstitions and bigotry. While Raja Rammohun Roy was able to convince the British rulers to legally ban the burning of widows, Vidyasagar promoted widow re-marriage, Sir Ashutosh and his wife Basanti Devi worked for literacy, especially for girls, Acharya Prafulla Chandra Roy promoted science education and scientific research. An effort was also made by the great Bengali saint, Ramakrishna Paramahansa, and his disciple, Swami Vivekananda, to harmonize the various conflicting Hindu sects. Thus, the Bengal Renaissance became a massive social reform movement.

In its huge sweep of events, *Those Days* becomes a strong statement about history being not just about rulers and their kingdoms but, more importantly, about those gigantic people who fought difficult battles to shape our destiny. Pushing himself beyond the frontiers of the fiction, Sunil Gangopadhyay enters the fascinating world of family and period history, reportage, travel narrative, folklore and ethnography. The author's deft integration of small local histories of Bengal into grand narratives of the nation invokes our cultural memory and offers a new understanding of our colonial past. Focused on the Bengal Renaissance crucial decades between 1840 and 1870 the novel encompasses some of the eventful and turbulent times of our colonial history and attempts to reconstruct an epoch whose significance has divided the community of Indian historians and cultural critics. In his treatment of men, matters and events, the author adopts a scrupulously non-partisan approach. His Bengal of the Renaissance period is inhabited by good characters such as David Hare and John Bethune, sympathetic to the Indian cause, as well as bad Englishmen who comprise the bulk of the trading and missionary classes. There are plenty of bad natives too, collusive and decadent. One finds in the novel, which is a complex chronicle of the bonding of two aristocratic families of the nineteenth century, not only the fate of the members of these households but also the looming presence of the fate of the land, the working of larger forces and cross-currents of history, the impact of colonial rule on a decaying feudal order and the beginning of progressive reformatory movements.

The Bengal Renaissance and the 1857 uprising form the backdrop of *Those Days*, a saga of human frailties and strength. The story revolves around the immensely wealthy Singha and Mukherjee families, and the intimacy that grows between them. The manner in which the feudal aristocracy, sunk in rituals and pleasure, slowly awakens to its social obligations forms the central theme of the novel. Historical personae interact with fictional protagonists to enrich the narrative. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, the reformer; Michael Madhusudan Dutt, the poet; the father and son duo of Dwarkanath and Debendranath Tagore; Harish Mukherjee, the journalist; Keshab Chandra Sen, the Brahmo Samaj radical; David Hare and John Bethune, the English educationists; Rani Rashmoni, founder of the Dakshineswar Temple, and a host of others walk the streets of Calcutta to bring alive a momentous time. The vast array of historical and fictional characters are deftly intertwined and one finds the British educationists and reformers like James Hope, John Bethune and David Hare playing important roles in the novel. The novel has an epic dimension with its many protagonists and a plethora of issues. One finds the historical figures, too, not just venerable ones but people of flesh and blood with their share of frailty. Each character, involved in a struggle, evolves with the passage of time.

With a grand sweep that is cinematographic and enlightening, this great tale, spanning Bengal from the nineteenth to the early twentieth century, gives a real sense of something important and historic developing in society. The decadent life of the elite intellectuals, the grip of orthodoxy and obscurantism, religious mores dictating the lives of the rich and poor alike, the tragic plight of women, rampant child marriage and the sorry plight of peasants in rural Bengal are portrayed with realism. An action-packed novel, it explores in vivid depth the struggle of the Bengal intellectuals to break free from a decaying system, their thought process, doubts and vibrant efforts which eventually ushered in the reawakening. The story flows at an amazing pace with historical and fictional characters richly interwoven to create a complete picture of the changing society of those days. It describes in detail the Bengal Renaissance and its principal architects, stating emphatically

their indispensable role. Interestingly, the author provides no dates at any point but only gives references that are known or can be looked up. History is moulded to make it sound prophetic as when the story ends with the discovery of Nabin Kumar's note expressing his desire to hear the cannon boom usher in a new century. This was perhaps the desire of every enlightened soul in Bengal that was awaiting 'a more glorious world'.

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