

The Detective Series of Sriswapankumar: A Critical Survey and its Relevance

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Abstract

Sriswapankumar's detective series which were written between the 1960s and 1980s gained immense popularity and most of this popularity still exists. However, apart from this popularity, the series has also faced undue mockery and negative criticism. Consequently this has led to skepticism regarding the excellence and credibility of the series. Hence it is imperative that the series should have an unbiased critical analysis. This essay seeks to objectively study the detective series in the context of the narrative expression of Sriswapankumar.

Sriswapankumar's detective series have often been mocked based on some incredulous and fantastical descriptions. For instance, the sight of the protagonist Deepak Chatterjee climbing down from the fifth floor through a pipeline

with a pistol in one hand and a flashing torch in another; or when the use of the word 'dong' thrice to indicate that it is now 1 am. It has to be noted here that of the two aforementioned examples of Sriswapankumar's writings, the first one is not present in any text of Sriswapankumar. The publisher of 'Swapankumar Samagra' Nimai Garai corroborates this by saying that although he has heard about it but never found any such descriptions in his writings.¹ Regarding the second example it can be argued that traditionally his fiction represented time in this manner.² This is his typical style to represent 'time' in his fictions. When two eminent personalities were asked if they had read the detective stories of Sriswapankumar, one of them exclaimed that she has obviously read them rigorously.³ Whenever there was a new book, they would buy the book and often fought amongst themselves to read it first.⁴ Whereas the other personality expressed that he did not like the content of his writings as it seemed amateurish to him, so he had read only a few books and not all of them.⁵ This goes to show that there exists opposing views regarding Sriswapankumar's work as detective fiction writer. While one views him as popular, the other holds his work to be not up to the mark and uninteresting. Therefore it is difficult to get a clear understanding of his work. The present essay seeks to objectively analyze his work through a critical and textual study, keeping in mind the criticism of his work. Firstly, we will

have to look into the context of Sriswapankumar as a detective fiction writer.

The Real name of Sriswapankumar is Samarendranath Pandey. Although he was born in the district of Rajshahi (26 October 1927) in a family of a lawyer, he wished to become a doctor and hence came to Kolkata at the young age of 14. To fulfill his dream to become a doctor he got admitted in Kolkata's R.G.Kar medical college. However, due to financial strains his family was unable to support him in the second year of his studies. To earn fame and some quick money Samarendranth devised a plan. From a very early age he was fond of reading books and had also written a little bit. The struggle to survive in life led him to write detective novel using the pen name of Sriswapankumar. This struggle to write for his own survival has influenced his literary oeuvre.

The 1963 publication from Chitpur's Krishna Chandra Gupta's 'General library' is generally considered to be the beginning of his 'Bajpakhi Series' of detective fiction. However, this is a much contested issue. Critics like Adrish Biswas and Abhi Chatterjee believe that the 'Bajpakhi Series' marks the beginning of his literary career.⁶ On the other hand critics like Proloy Basu and Arnab Saha believe that the 'Biswachakra Series' marks the beginning of his detective fiction.⁷ However, when we come across the text of the first novel of 'Bajpakhi Series' titled 'Mrityuchokre Bajpakhi', we come across an episode where private detective Dipak

Chatterjee is engaged in a duel with the dacoit Pradyuman.⁸ Based on this it can be argued that detective Dipak Chatterjee meet dacoit Prodyuman as his enemy or competitor before Bajpakhi. The third part of 'Swapankumar Samagra' and an article from the newspaper 'Sangbad Pratidin' informs us that the aforementioned novel is part of the 'Rocket Series'.⁹ Whatever the first detective series of Sriswapankumar is, it must be noted that it is the 'Bajpakhi Series' that has given him the most popularity. He did not stop there and wrote many more series one after the other. Sriswapankumar became the author with the highest number of series publications in Bengali literature. Some of his series are 'Biswachakra Series' (this is his largest series, arguably this series contains 87 or 100 books) 'Rajesh Series', 'Rahasya Kuhelika Series', 'kalkeutay Series', 'Raktochakro Series', 'Dragon Series', 'Mayajaal Series'¹⁰, 'Crime World series', 'Kalnagini Series', 'Crime and Mystery Series', 'C.I.D Series', 'Bicharok Series', 'Black Panther Series', 'Kalrudra Series', 'Kalo Nekre Series', 'Rohosyo Pyramid Series', 'Romancho Rohosyo Series', 'Gobhir Rater Bhoyonkor Series', 'Niyoti Series', 'Mystery Man Series'. The demand and popularity of his novels could be gauged from Mahesh Publication's (previously General library publisher) Mahesh Gupta's statement where he mentions that the moment the newly printed books of Sriswapankumar arrived in the store it used to get sold out instantly.¹¹ Despite such immense sale and popularity of his books, he neither got

the recognition of a respected novelist, nor the deserving monetary benefits. Sriswapankumar aka Samarendranath Pandey passed away on 15th December 2001. The essay will now focus on the form and its characteristics of his detective series.

In his detective fiction we come across the famous Deepak Chatterjee and his accomplice and friend Ratanlal fight with infamous villains like Bajpakhi, Dragon, Kalo Nekre, Kalnagini. While pursuing the villains, Deepak and his friend Ratanlal undergo several dangerous adventures; sometimes they disguise themselves, sometimes they are captured and face imminent death, but at the last instance they get out, towards the end they finally trace the villain but on most occasions the villain escapes at the last moment leaving readers in thrill. It has to be noted here that the reader while reading his fictions do not get the chance to intellectually engage or compete with the omniscient author or the detective (this is a very common and popular trope in detective stories). This is because in most of the fictions the criminals are from organized criminal syndicates. Therefore, they seldom try to hide themselves and rather they often leave their distinctly marked cards in the crime scene to let everyone know about their deeds. Not only this, sometimes they write letters or inform detective Deepak or the police about their next crime. This is a way of challenging the police or Deepak Chatterjee that if they can stop them from

committing the crimes. This is the reason that in most of his detective fictions chasing the criminal becomes more prominent than detecting the criminal.

The criminal characters of Sriswapankumar are generally portrayed as larger than life figures having traits like cruelty and infamy who engage in activities like murder, bank robbery, forgery of currency notes, stealing important government documents etc. (however, there are also exceptions like Ishan Mitra from the novel 'Adrishya Sanket', Ahmad from 'Asanta Ghurni'). They often use aliases and disguises which make them even more mysterious. It must be noted here that although these characters have mostly the same core values, the author has endeavored to give every one of them some individuality which makes them distinct from one another. For instance, the author represents Bajpakhi as a person who targets only rich people and we don't see him intimidating or harming the poor. In the fourth book of 'Bajpakhi Series' named 'Bajpakhir Protihingsha', he saves the life of an innocent man named Anil Sengupta. From the first book of the 'Dragon Series' named 'Dragoner Abirbhav' we get to know that Dragon is a crime syndicate of south-east Asia whose leader is a Burmese man named Yunam. Though Yunam calls himself as Burmese, his parentage tells us that he is half Burmese and half Indian (mother from India, father from Burma). It could be argued that by giving the leader of the Dragon group a mixed race

heritage the author has represented him as distinct from others. The Dragon leader also has the skill to speak in eight to ten languages. The Dragon group's activities span across countries like Burma, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Hong Kong. The Dragon leader lands in Kolkata for the purpose of taking revenge on four people who betrayed them. Another fascinating character of his novels is Kalrudra. Although Kalrudra is associated with criminal activities, he donates a lot of money to the poor people. That is why although he is deemed to be a criminal in the eyes of law, the poor people always support him. The comment of a rickshaw driver in the novel 'Doshu Kalrudra' is mentionable here wherein the man says that the person traveling in the motor van whose feet he just touched is Kalrudra, the person who is their god, their everything.¹² This sympathetic and humane characteristic of the criminal character is more vividly represented in the 'Kalnagini Series' through the character of Kalnagini. This representation of the criminal with a humane side reminds us of Sasadhar Dutta's character Dashu Mohan who was also a friend for the poor. Apart from this love for the poor another important characteristic trait of Kalnagini is love for the nation. In the novel 'Chin Simante Kalnagini' Kalnagini disguises in the form of a man named Tapan Sen and saves the country from external enemies. In the novel 'Digbijaye Kalnagini' Kalnagini herself dons the role of the detective and traces and catches the criminals and detains them even before Deepak

Chatterjee. The personality of the protagonist detective Deepak Chatterjee pales in comparison to the skill, efficiency and personality of Kalnagini. In a time when women were represented as weak, docile, passive and dependent, Sriswapankumar's representation of Kalnagini (a woman who could also fly airplanes) is indeed brave and praiseworthy and would have emboldened the contemporary women of the society.

Private detective Deepak Chatterjee is the main protagonist of the series of Sriswapankumar who fights these larger than life characters like Bajpakhi, Dragon, Kalo Nekre, Black Panther. Ratanlal is the associate of detective Deepak. After completing his graduation (B.A) and getting a long break Deepak starts working as a private detective out of sheer interest.¹³ With time this became an addiction for him. As a detective Deepak is not only extremely intelligent but also has the capacity for keen observation and he repeatedly resorts to taking help from science to solve the cases. Like any other hard-boiled detective we see him wielding pistols in both hands, shooting targets in the dark, fighting with physical strength. To make him more acceptable and palatable to his Bengali readership, Sriswapankumar represented Deepak as a traditional Bengali man with distinct Bengali values. That is why we do not see any so-called deemed feminine weakness or any character flaw like succumbing to temptations. He never loses sight of his objective. The physical get up and

dressing sense and behavior of detective Deepak is not extraordinary and the readers could easily relate with him in this regard. Due to many restraints of their lives it is not always possible for the common people to intervene into organized forms of crimes that occur around them, however they found solace in the fact that detective Deepak can fight against these crimes in the narrative of the novel, it is this that gives the readers a mental peace and a sense of security. The success of Deepak Chatterjee in investigation metaphorically becomes their success.

In the following section we will look into certain patterns and traits of Sriswapankumar's detective narratives-

1. In these novels crimes generally occur during night time.
2. Most of the novels of Sriswapankumar conclude with the criminal escaping, sometimes even after he or she has been caught. This is a trope used by the novelist to perpetuate or continue with the character in his next novel of the series.
3. For the purpose of tracing and chasing the criminals we see Deepak and his accomplice Ratanlal visit numerous towns, cities of India, numerous places of Kolkata, and even outside India. However, we do not get a distinct or particular picture of these places and cities, their representation is mostly generic and not particular and the places seem like any other town or city. An example is his description of Rangoon, from which the reader can

understand that this could be any city.

4. A close reading of the texts of the novels exposes a certain irresponsibility or carelessness of the novelist while using his words. We can see sometimes he juxtaposes two unrelated words inappropriately, while sometimes there is excessive repetition of the same words. In actuality, since he was writing these novels to financially sustain himself, he wrote novels very quickly, sometimes he would finish writing his novel overnight as he had to hand over the manuscript to the publisher the next morning. Therefore he had no time to proofread and to edit his manuscript. And since his novels gained immense popularity, oftentimes he had to write multiple books for different series simultaneously. This can be one of the prime reasons for the flaws of the text of his novels.
5. One of the most important features of Sriswapankumar's novels that distinguish him from other novelists is the short length of his books. Generally they ranged from forty eight to one hundred pages. These books were printed on cheap paper with colorful covers. Keeping in mind the common people, the books were moderately priced ranging from four annas to one rupee.¹⁴ His books were written on popular demand and for the common masses. Short length and cheap prices of the books ensured the popularity of Sriswapankumar's novels. His novels also bear remarkable similarity with the American pulp fiction

created after the First World War.

Sriswapankumar's novels have been deemed as unreal and not have any literary value. Although in part this holds true for his novels, his novels are not completely flawed and we should not base them on these traits only. It cannot be denied that at once his novels were vigorously read by the people of Bengal. His novels are read even today by the contemporary reader. The repeated reprinting of 'Dev Sahitya Kutir's 'Sriswapankumar Kuriti Goyenda uponnash' is testament of this fact. This begs the question what magic does his writing hold that people have been reading his novels for so many decades. To fully comprehend the tradition and culture of Bengali readership it is imperative to revisit the writings of Sriswapankumar His novels deal with many contemporary issues such as the Indo-China border disputes and war, the second world war, black outs, forgery of currency notes, and many other events that took place due to organized crimes. In this regard the series are extremely significant documents that provide us a glimpse of history. Besides this his novels also hold significance in the context of the tradition of Bengali pulp fiction.

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