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## **Social Consciousness of Shankha Ghosh in the Poetry Collection**

### **Babarer Prarthana: A Critical Study**

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#### **Abstract**

*Shankha Ghosh's poetry collection 'Babarer Prarthana' occupies an important place. One can clearly notice the social and political upheavals of the decade of the seventies mirrored throughout this collection. For instance, the widespread state of emergency imposed across the Indian subcontinent during that time – especially its impact on the lives of the people of West Bengal – has left a deep imprint. The intense political turbulence, state oppression, and the distress of ordinary people are powerfully reflected in these poems.*

*As a conscious poet, Shankha Ghosh could not keep himself detached from this reality. Through the medium of poetry, he has portrayed this decade with sharp clarity. Poems such as " 'Adim Latagulmomoy', 'Bondura Mati Torjay', 'Mukh Boro Samajik Noy,' "Babarer Prarthana," capture the realities of that time vividly.*

*Particularly in the poem "Babarer Prarthana," we find a new dimension of the poet's social consciousness. In our present research work, we attempt to discuss the decade of the seventies as reflected in Shankha Ghosh's poetry, from the perspective of social awareness and realistic representation.*

**Keywords: 1970s, society, politics, Shankha Ghosh, generation, Babarer Prarthana**

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#### **Introduction:**

In modern Bengali poetry, the poet Shankha Ghosh occupies a distinctive and significant position. A poet is shaped by the demands of his time, and his voice grows stronger through the experiences of that era. The decade of the sixties and seventies was not a time of ease. Especially toward the end of the sixties, movements such as the Naxalite movement in West Bengal and the Bangladesh Liberation Movement in the eastern region created a deep sense of instability within society. Social life was marked by intense crisis, and everywhere a severe moral decline could be observed. Gradually, a frightening form of ethical decay began to take shape.

Standing in the midst of such an unsettling time, creating a poetic structure of artistic beauty was an extremely difficult task. Poet Shankha Ghosh courageously accepted this challenge. Inevitably, during this period, he did not present poetry merely as a refuge of personal security. Instead, he emerged from the ivory tower and stood alongside the common people, sharing in their suffering and struggles.

Just as a lamp illuminates its surroundings by burning itself, he too set his own pain aflame to offer light, and even uttered the powerful declaration:

*"Even if you destroy me, let it be so –*

*My existence shall remain intact."*

Bhor elo bhoy niye, sei swapno bhulini ekhono." ('Panjore Darer Shobdo')

The end of the 1960s came amid two major wars – China-India (1962) and India-Pakistan (1965) – and the peasant uprising of Naxalbari in 1967. The armed rebellion that began in Naxalbari spread across colleges and universities of Kolkata and other cities in 1970-71. As Sushanta Chattopadhyay observes:

"Shat-er doshoker sheshdik theke shara desh jure srishti hochhilo bhumihin krishoker andolan o palta prashashoner domonnitir sutrapat gote, tar abhigat chhariye pore shara deshe."<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War brought waves of refugees into West Bengal, causing food shortages, disease, and widespread instability. The middle class suffered unemployment, inflation, and insecurity. Shankha Ghosh saw this crisis firsthand:

"Koilkattar lashe  
jar dike chai tar-i mukhe adyikaler maja pukur  
syaolapcha bhase." <sup>2</sup> (Kolkata)

In this politically and socially unstable context, the decade of the seventies began. In such turmoil, poets too could not remain unmoved. Especially a socially conscious warrior of words like Shankha Ghosh could never stay silent. He uttered in a tone of deep introspection: "sthir amabasya, ami shiyore darie achhi diganter dhare." What is this new moon? Why is this new moon 'still'? It is not difficult for us to understand that this dark night has spread and settled across the entire society. The "sthir amabasya" becomes a symbol of a darkened era. Through the metaphor of the new moon, the poet articulated an inevitable social truth of the seventies. Later, in an interview with Arunesh Ghosh, the poet said: "ek somoye likhechhiam je shotyi kotha bolai holo kobitar ekmatro kaj. jortharth kobitar swarup bolte eitakei bujhi ami ekhono."<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, in the poetry of Shankha Ghosh during the seventies, we observe the reflection of these social and political truths. In his essay *The Poet and His Reader*, Shankha wrote:

"kobi kokhono bhule jan na je ekhate deshonihoito kaal aar onno hate deshottor kaal dharon korbar muhurtteo tini pa rekhe darie achhen asthir somoysomer sonkot-er opor."<sup>4</sup>

Shankha Ghosh's journey in Bengali poetry began in the 1950s with the publication of *Dinguli Ratguli* (1956). This journey gradually grew longer and richer. During the fifties and sixties, he established a distinctive poetic path within Bengali literature. In the seventies, one after another, several of his poetic works were published: *Adim Latagulmamoy* (April 1972), *Murkh Boro Samajik Noi* (June 1974), *Baburer Prarthana* (August 1976), *Tumi to Temon Gouri No* (August 1978), *Nikolas Guillen-er Chiriyakhana O Onnyanyo Kobita* (December 1979), *Panjore Darer Shobdo* (April 1980) – these six collections by Shankha Ghosh. Each collection captures the essence of its time. In the intimate dialogue between time and contemporaneity, the burning image of society unfolds on the canvas of his poetry. With solemn articulation, he declared:

"ratrir jibon ami naishobdwer nibhrit kannay bhore dei."<sup>5</sup>

Carrying the heat of the times upon his body, the poet's journey continued unceasingly. He closely observed the breaking and rebuilding of society and the state in his contemporary era. The decay of social ethics, human disintegration, and the loss of values deeply unsettled him. He felt an intense sense of shame:

"amar jonyo ektukhani kobor khorō sarbahsha  
lajja lukoi kancha matir tole"<sup>6</sup> (Kobor)

At first glance, the poet may seem escapist. But Shankha Ghosh is not an escapist. Then why does he speak of “hiding shame”? Does he wish to flee from the ongoing situation around him? Certainly not. He is a poet filled with unwavering optimism. Rising above contemporary despair, frustration, and failure is his cherished dream:

“gopon rokto ja-kichutuku achhe amar sharire,  
tar saptukutei shashyo jeno phole.”<sup>7</sup> (Kobor)

Shankha Ghosh is a poet of conviction; there is no room for despair in his inner being. Even by sacrificing himself, he wishes for the safety and well-being of the next generation:

“dhwongsho kore dao amay jodi chao  
amar santati swapne thak.”<sup>8</sup> (Baburer Prarthana)

This is a profoundly introspective utterance. The word “santati” suggests the idea of an entire future generation. ‘My descendants’ refers to our next generation. Bowing in prayer, he seeks their welfare before God. Even when the society around him is collapsing under the sound of destruction, he remains firm and unwavering.

It was during this turbulent social and political maelstrom of the seventies that his poetry collection *Baburer Prarthana* (August 1976) was composed. Needless to say, *Baburer Prarthana* is one of the representative poetry collections of the decade. Divided into three sections—*Manikarnika*, *Khor*, and *Hatentai*—this collection contains forty-seven poems in total. Among them, *Manikarnika* contains fifteen poems, *Khor* fourteen, and *Hatentai* eighteen poems. Each poem was created from a distinct contextual background. In his book *Kobitar Muhurto*, Shankha Ghosh has given us glimpses into the contexts behind these compositions. After exploring the poetic world of Shankha Ghosh, we reach the conclusion that at the core of his poetry lies—

There is present a deep sense of time and social awareness. In the moments preceding the birth of the poem ‘*Babarer Prarthana*’, this consciousness of time and society stirred the poet’s subconscious mind in such a way that we come to know through his own words: *Ekdin Jadavpur-er campus-er modhye, diner class ar shondhar class-er shondhimukhe majhkhane onishchit faka bikel, bondhura keu shonge nei sedin. Pashchim theke pube, rastar opor paychari korte korte ghor-er chhobi-r shonge mone viddho kore ashe campus-er purono onek chhobi. Du-ekti chele meye kokhono kokhono pas diye chole jaay, tader mukher dike takiye mone hoy: kidin aageo ekhane joto prokhorota jholse uthto nana samaye, ta jeno ektu sthombito hoye ache aaj. Kebol je ekhanei ta to noy, gotho desh jur-ei. Se ki khub shantir shomoy chhilo? Ekebarei noy. Songhorsa ashantitey barong bhore chhilo din-guli. Ei poth oi math, er protiti bindu tar kono-na kono unmad-er chihno dhore ache, bhuler lanchonar atmakshoyer, kintu sei shonge kichu shopner-o, kichu jiboner-o. Aaj proshomito hoye ache shob. Kichu-ekta hobar kotha chhilo, olokkho kono protishruti chhilo. Kintu holo noy thik, hoye uthlo noy.*<sup>9</sup>

Out of this very self-reproach, the famous poem ‘*Babarer Prarthana*’ was born in his subconscious mind. The essence of the poem captures the prayer to protect future generations from the prevailing unstable social conditions:

“Aj basanter shunyo haat -  
dhwangsho kore dao amake jodi chao  
amar santati swapne thak.”<sup>10</sup> (Babarer Prarthana)

In the poetry collection 'Babarer Prarthana' (1976), the fragmented nature of society is revealed. The decade of the 1970s was a period of extreme social uncertainty, political instability, despair, and rebellion. Political turbulence, social disintegration, the Naxalite movement, the Liberation War of Bangladesh, the influx of refugees into West Bengal, food shortages, Emergency rule – together these mark the 1970s as a decade of near-total crisis in post-independence India.

Yet, even in such a dismal period, poet Shankha Ghosh did not fail to keep the lamp of conviction burning. He believed that no matter how dark the clouds in the sky might be, one day they would surely part. Therefore, as a socially conscious human being, giving protection to the next generation becomes his primary responsibility. His earnest prayer is –

“Amari hate eto diyeccho sambhar  
Jirno kore oke kothay nebe?  
Dhwangsho kore dao amake Ishwar  
Amar santati swapne thak.”<sup>11</sup> (Babarer Prarthana)

In an adverse political atmosphere where protest or resistance becomes almost impossible, when the unbearable heat of the time scorches his body and he, as an individual, cannot raise his voice, then –

“Ami bolte chai, nipat jao  
Ekhoni  
Bolte chai, chup  
Tabu bolte pari na  
Ar tai  
Nijeke chire feli diner por din.”<sup>12</sup> (Monikornika)

Although he cannot fully break free from the inherent narrowness of middle-class mentality, his poet's heart cries out in deep agony –

“Shudhu porag, abarton, shudhu ghurni  
Shudhu gahbar  
Bolte chai nipat jao – dhwangsho hao- bhango.”<sup>13</sup> (Monikornika)

It feels like a curse. To convey the filthy paradox of society, he uses the words “whirlwind” and ‘abyss,’ and with these alone he carries the resonance of a thousand meanings. Shankha Ghosh, a poet of few words, is extremely economical in his use of language. He never constructs inflated mountains of decorative vocabulary. In this context, critic Ashrukumar Shikdar makes a significant remark:

“Kal theke kalottore, desh theke deshatic mukti ei kobir kobitar pradhan prosongo. Tai shobdo chitrakalpo o chhondobyabohare nijoshsho poddhoti-r moddhe diye sei muktir shotyokei tini songotipurno bhabe rup dite paren. Shobdo byabohar prosong-e ei kobi bare-bare nirbota-r, nisshobdota-r kotha bolen, bolen gan-er kotha. Shobdo-r moddhe diye tini khojen bangmoy nirbota, ‘shobdomodhyagot abachyata’-ke bartabihin obhyasotarito shobdobyabohar-er biruddhe, shobdobilasher biruddhe protikriyar jorotamoy shobdo-r theke palate chan kobi. Bhasha-r moddhe tini dhorte chan nirbota-r obadh bistaar. Kotha-biral saajhin, dibyo karpnyamoy shob-med-jharano saratsar, himnether nogno kobitar moto, ei kobita.”<sup>14</sup>

A conscious poet cannot remain silent in response to an unstable era. Thus comes his truthful utterance:

“Aaj amar kotha bolar kotha noi  
Tabu boli:  
Darie achhi ei pother banke  
Ar samnei  
Dalpala hara dirgho bakol  
Thanda ar chup.”<sup>15</sup> (Pother Banke)

“Today is not my day to speak” – yet as a socially responsible individual, he cannot remain silent. In the symbolic expression “dalpala hara dirgho bakol,” an indication of an uncertain future emerges. The poem reflects the image of a violent, unsettled time. It presents a precise, brutal truth of the social reality of the 1970s:

“Amake rekhe jaay ekhane  
Ashitipor, andho ar santan-tihhin.”<sup>16</sup> (Pother Banke)

Through subtle hints and symbols, he reveals the extensive devastation of society. The West Bengal of the 1970s appears like a “valley of death”:

“Se din ratre fire asar muhurte  
Shohorer buker moddhe  
Kuasha bhenge jege uthchhilo rashi rashi nam-na-jana kobor.”<sup>17</sup> (Shada Phalok)

A shattered picture of the emerging time becomes visible here. Through this prophetic utterance of Shankha Ghosh, it becomes unmistakably clear that 1970s West Bengal was indeed a ‘valley of death.’ Another eminent contemporary poet, Nabarun Bhattacharya, voiced the same feeling in his famous declaration: “Ei mrityu upotyaka amar desh na.” Shankha Ghosh confronts us with an even more horrifying social reality:

“Amra keu karo mukher dike takai na  
Hate shudhu chhuye thaaki pathatan  
...  
Choturdoshir andhokare boye jaay Ganga  
Ek shmashan theke arek shmashaner majhkhane  
Amra keu karo mukher dike takai na.”<sup>18</sup> (Monikornika)

What truth could be more piercing than this? A deeply self-centered society is revealed here. In poem after poem of Babarer Prarthana, the poet portrays a restless and turbulent era. But will this all-devouring unrest last forever? Is this instability a fixed, eternal constant like a polar star? The poet does not believe so. Therefore, he raises the question –

“Shunytai shudhu? Shunyer vitore eto dheu ache  
Se kotha jano na?”<sup>19</sup> (Shunyer vitore Dheu)

The poet knows and acknowledges that emptiness is not the final word. Even within the void, there is a sense of complete fullness. Even after total destruction, the beauty of serene creation exists. Shankha Ghosh is not a believer in whimsical aimlessness; that is why he proclaims,

“Dirgho charachar  
Tar cheye ar kono dirghotor yobanika nei  
...  
Keno poreyonti phool, chitar rupali chhai, dhabman shesh tram

Sokolkei cheyeche ashroy.”<sup>20</sup> (Shunyer Vitore Dheu)

He is always a believer in new beginnings. Forgetting all old grief, pain, and despair, he calls for renewal:

“Eso notun hao abar”<sup>21</sup> (Milon)

This sense of faith distinguishes Shankha Ghosh from others. He never confines his poetry within a web of obscurity. With a completely simple and unpretentious diction, he renders the structure of poetry adorned yet unburdened. He has portrayed the intense reality of the seventies in a language that is ordinary, simple, silent, yet sharply incisive. Critic Asaduzzaman notes:

“Konno sunirdishto rajnaitik motadarshe samorpo nito nei ei kabi abar bektisworobshotar biboreo nikhap koren na nijeke. Uchchokontho ghoshonae ba tar biporit lirikh-er torol swotospurto udvase nijeke bhasiye debar probonotao nei tar. Khoy o mrityur bodhke dharan koreo kobitae tini sphurito korte paren ujiboner amogh ishara, beche thakar bodh. Asle otonto songbedonshil kabi hishebe tini lipto hoye achhen amader-i somokalin emon ek jothil somoy-e, je somoyke odhikangsho khetre tini ghan-songhot liriker madhyome tule anen tar kobitae. Kokhono kokhono epiktulya boktobbo prokash-er jonno ek-doi dirgho kobitar o ashroy nite hoy take. Arth-shamajik kathamo prekkhapote atmobishlesoner madhyome tini onubhob korte chan bekti, somaj o jiboner swarup.”<sup>22</sup>

We agree with the critic’s observation. Time and social consciousness are the unique and defining characteristics of Shankha Ghosh’s poetry. His poems are the most reliable poetic evidence of how the turmoil of the seventies scarred the human psyche. Shankha Ghosh knew that often silence is the strongest protest. The incomplete lines, pauses, and solitary words in his poetry intensify the political impact. Preeminent critics note:

“Shat-er somoyporbe eshe Bangla kobita jokhon kramashah bakchaturyo, sangbad-dhormita ba abochetanar orthohin rohossher bhare nuye porechhilo, tokhoni rupangik o bektitto-r ei sankotke otikrom kore kobita likhte cheshta korechhen tini. Ar ei jonno tar obhipray chhilo somokale procholito adhunikotar dharona ke kichuta dure sare dewa. Emonki proyojonbodhe purbopurbi kono kono kobir kabyattwo ke sojotno eiriye jete cheshta korechhen Shankha Ghosh. Kenoona ei sob dharona tar mone hoye chhilo khondito o simaboddho.”<sup>23</sup>

This effort was not limited to the sixties; it continued in the subsequent decades as well. ‘Babarer Prarthana’ is the supreme evidence of this. He has built a distinct poetic universe in Bengali poetry. In the flowing continuum of Bengali literary space, Shankha Ghosh is undoubtedly an indisputable poet.

### **Conclusion:**

At the end of our critical discussion of Shankha Ghosh’s poetic journey, we arrive at the conclusion that, despite the severe and turbulent circumstances of the seventies, Shankha Ghosh’s poetry emerges as a powerful expression of the era. In his poems, the struggles and demands of the decade are deeply and sensitively reflected. Through the intense turbulence of time and society, Shankha Ghosh’s poetry stands as a mirror of the seventies.

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