LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Scholarly Emotions and Scholarly Spaces: Reading the 'Letters of Sukumar Ray'

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> As soon as I receive my money from the university I will probably set off for the Continent. Eight or ten days in Paris maybe, perhaps a week in Germany and Austria, then Switzerland and Italy for eight or ten days, finally Trieste where I shall catch a ship. It will be another month and a half before I set out from here. (*Selected Letters* 1987: 220)[1]

So wrote Sukumar Ray, a young Bengali student studying in the London School of Photo Engraving and Lithography in July 1913. Upbeat about the prospect of a continental tour, Sukumar dreamt of places that inspired him. As Europe was sinking into war, Sukumar absorbed everything London could offer to an academically minded gentleman. He visited

the city's several libraries, museums, book shops, and art galleries, and never missed an opportunity to socialise with his friends in intellectually charged gatherings. From his letters published by his son Satyajit Ray and Andrew Robinson in 1987, we, the readers, gather his frenetic passion for academic exercises and social networking in London.

As we read his letters, Tulika and I discuss Sukumar's geographical emotions over emails from two different locations in the world. I am in London and Tulika in Guwahati (Assam). We realise that we are reading Sukumar's letters not only as scholars but also as Bengalis interested in the lives of our cultural icons. Arguably, every Bengali knows about Sukumar Ray's collection of nonsense verses that Abol Tabol published in 1921. At least in West Bengal if not in Bangladesh, Ray's books have been regularly included in syllabuses at primary level. Several Bengali scholars have followed up their childhood fascination with Sukumar's verses by writing scholarly texts on nonsense in the Bengali language.[2] Tulika and I, as Bengali scholars aware of Sukumar's literary legacy, have decided to adopt the epistolary mode to respond to how Sukumar's experiences mirror our geographical emotions. For us, these letters are as much in the present as they are in the past. They're personal texts that have a strong cultural grounding to which we connect. Therefore, throughout this essay our use of the term 'we' telescopes our cultural and scholarly connections to Sukumar's experiences in the first city of the British Empire. In today's postcolonial world, London still presents remarkably similar experiences. I tell Tulika that for me the best moment among the letters is Sukumar procuring a guide map for London (*Selected Letters* 1987: 192). It's ideal for a scholar to know a place by reading about it. I've done the same multiple times in London.

Sukumar's city experiences in London remind us of the urban consciousness seen among modernist writers in the years leading to the First World War. Andrew Thacker wrote that this consciousness was characterised by the writers' erudition and their sensory responses to the built environment of large cities. Thacker identifies these responses as geographical emotions affected by the surroundings. Several modernist writers felt 'outsiders' in a megalopolis like London – a feeling that influenced their strategies of narrative innovation. Despite feeling alienated and detached, the numerous cultural and social institutions of London gave the writers a sense of belonging as these became vital for the intellectual and social sustenance necessary for a writer (2019: 1-4).

Sukumar, as Robinson suggests, was in every sense a modernist because of his preoccupation with liberal forms of religion (Brahmoism) and his passion for innovation in printing technology (1987: 169-72). His letters to his friends and family members show his zeal for religious reformation and his feelings of despair when facing bitter reactionaries both in the religious and the print world. As Bengalis, we cannot but marvel at Sukumar's choice of friends to write to. From seeking advice from future statistician Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis (1893–1972) and writer Kedarnath Chattopadhyay (1896–1965) to letters about his friendship with Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) -- Sukumar lived among Bengal's cultural icons during a year (1913) when the Bengali language would be receiving an unprecedented honour because Tagore would be the first Asian to receive the Nobel Prize for his collection of poems titled *Gitanjali*.

But there is obviously another Sukumar we Bengalis have grown up with. For us, Sukumar is a humorist par excellence who gave us bitingly satirical nonsense verses that have been handed down to us as poetry collections through generations. His rhetoric of nonsense has given our language a huge list of common phrases that we readily use without acknowledging our debt to Sukumar. Despite being a century old, his collection of poems *Abol Tabol* (1923) remains an ideal gift item for Bengali children. To us, Sukumar belongs to a long cultural legacy of 'Rays' beginning with his father Upendrakishore (1863–1915) and carried forward by his son Satyajit (1921–1992). Published during the birth centenary of Sukumar in 1987, these letters, with an introduction by Satyajit, poignantly mark a son's attempt to preserve his father's experiences – a father Satyajit could hardly remember since Sukumar had died during Satyajit's infancy. As an editor, Satyajit maintains a literary distance from his father by addressing him as 'Ray' and not 'father'. Readers relate to Satyajit's role as a reader, critic and translator who distinguishes between literary relations and blood relations.

Unlike Satyajit, Sukumar had the benefit of his father's guidance. In his letters, he could indulge in long discussions about his career prospects with his father. To his mother, Sukumar writes more devotedly about his favourite food, health, and his daily interests. In all his letters, Sukumar maintains the hierarchical courtesy of addressing *gurujon* – family elders – by not referring to their names. Whereas, the younger siblings, relations and friends are referred to by their names whenever required. In our epistolary response to Sukumar's letters, Tulika and I shall maintain this courtesy which still remains in practice in our Bengali culture.

To our surprise, the letters reveal to us the everyday lives and emotions of several of our cultural icons. We read these letters as we grapple with our urban experiences at a time of global economic turmoil, widespread digitisation, a conservative turn in politics and climate disaster. Yet, navigating our world as scholars at different stages in their careers, we cannot but identify with Sukumar's love for books, learned company and intellectual environment in a Europe about to disintegrate into war. Today, we're reading Sukumar when Europe is once more at war in Ukraine, and when academics in India and elsewhere are finding it hard to justify their intellectual freedom. We can sense Sukumar's anguish in the final letter of this collection to Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis expressing his sense of despair at the way things are in the Brahmo community. In this letter written in 1920, Sukumar says he wishes to break out but fearing indecency and impropriety he also also wishes to remain silent. We realize that he has returned home after the war, and that he is looking for meaningful engagements in Calcutta. Despite being torn by his need to open up, he says he would rather withdraw himself from being too involved in the daily workings of the community (Selected Letters 1987: 223-24). His feelings reveal the connection a young scholar might feel about one's beliefs, ideals and value systems. His emotions further indicate how places can make or break a person. If London had inspired him, social institutions back home in Calcutta perturbed him beyond measure. One must note that in Calcutta, he was close to the repressive imperial machinery of governance, whereas in London he must've seen the glittering sun of the British Empire before it began its long decline in the twentieth century.

In London: From Rajarshi to Tulika

Dear Tulika,
This summer when I land in London, I look for a map of the city. To my surprise, no tourist information booth keeps a guide-map handy. With google maps giving us directions, no one seems to rely on the printed maps. But tell you what, google has disappointed me a number of times! A printed map makes me explore, but the google map makes me anticipate. A printed map makes me create a parallel imaginary city in my head using my senses to fill in the gaps the map leaves. But the google map seems to colonise my senses with its reviews and previews and time-maps.

On my second day in London, I decide to avoid using google for a while and lose my way. I'm supposed to go to the British Museum completely relying on the experience of my previous visits. To Google's delight, I unwittingly take several wrong turns and end up somewhere in Holborn. "Where's the Holborn Tube Station?" I ask a policeman to reorient myself. I'm confident of finding my way from the tube station to the British Museum. The policeman gives me a very precise location explaining the three turns I need to take to reach the tube station. I give up. I've a meeting at the British Library in about half an hour which I'll miss if I'm heading for the museum now.

Thankfully, I made it on time for the meeting and spent a very exhilarating day browsing through archival material at the British Library. I hope to tell you more about my findings when I'm back home. Did you know that the library is facing a sustained cyber-attack? It seems several archival materials can't be accessed because the robots guarding those won't listen to commands. What an agony! Where have we come to? Tell you what, this over-reliance on digital technology might be our undoing!

I'm appalled by over-digitisation. We're being completely colonised by screens all around us in London. All our movements are being controlled by these screens at our stations, airports, on the roads and departmental stores. As if to lodge my protest against this overt colonisation, I decide to hit an antiquarian bookstall near the British Library. You can't believe what I've found. I picked up a pocketbook edition of the collected poems by George Crabbe published in 1858.

So long. Rajarshi.

At Home: From Tulika to Rajarshi

Dear Sir,

Recently I rewatched the documentary film on Sukumar Ray directed by his son Satyajit Ray and produced by the Government of West Bengal in 1987. Sukumar Ray's writings had become canonised by the 1980s and were now taught in schools. The documentary seemed an extension of this canonisation. I feel Sukumar still belongs to our childhood and leisure.

But while writing these letters from England, he was a young learner - an intellectual 'babu' as we call them in Bengali. I think the suffix babu needs some explanation. The term was associated with the rise of the Bengali bourgeois class after the permanent settlement in Bengal in 1793. The term has a history associated with land ownership and agrarian capitalism. Later, with the growth of the educated middle class, babu assumed a different meaning — now with a new cultural and intellectual connotation. We see this reflected in Sukumar's letters. In a letter to his mother Bidhumukhi, he wrote about the arrival of Rabindranath Tagore where Ray refers to him as "Rabibabu". In Sukumar's letters, babu is an etiquette because it works like an honorific title. To this day we preserve this etiquette in our culture.

As a reader, I could easily locate how differently Ray connected to his father Upendrakishore Roychoudhury, and to his mother Bidhumukhi. To his father, he wrote about the progress of his drawing skills, and new findings in the field of photography, work, exams, and study while to his mother, he mostly talked about family matters, Bengali festivals and the cultural strangeness of England. But it's fascinating to observe that he is writing all the events by following the Bengali calendar. In the thirty-ninth letter, written to his mother on "11th Magh (25th January) in 1913, he mentioned that he couldn't concentrate on work as his 'mind was in Calcutta' (*Selected Letters* 1987: 213) and he was missing 'Maghotsav'.[3] It's so relatable to me as I've had similar conversations with my mother over the phone. During our autumn festival of Durga Puja, she mentions the days as *Sasti, Saptami, Ashtami, Navami, and Dashami* and suggests that I should come home early. But, with my father, I discuss my studies and my financial situation. I laughed when I found Sukumar Ray in similar financial predicaments. It seems to me that though the centuries are different, the way of expressing cultural emotions to our dearest ones from far away, whether in print or over the phone, remains the same.

Through these letters, I could link the lived and imagined geographies of the writer, his reader, and scholars like us. Sukumar is in England, his son Satyajit was editing the letters from Venice and we are living between London, Calcutta, and Assam, where I live and study. Like Sukumar, I long for 'patishapta'[4] (1987: 208), homemade mango pickle (1987: 215), and 'gur' or jaggery (1987: 215). These emotions turn the letters into a geographic event where the 'imagined' and the 'lived' geographies are seeping into each other (Hones 2022: 15).

See you soon! Tulika

Notes

[1] *South Asia Research* divided the article "Selected Letters of Sukumar Ray" into two sections. The first section was a scholarly take on the letters by their translator Andrew Robinson, and the second section had the actual letters with an introduction by Satyajit Ray. After digitisation, each section has been provided with a separate DOI link and citation information. For clarity, this article will refer to the first section of the article as Robinson 1987 and the second as *Selected Letters* 1987.

[2] Some of the Bengali tests are translated into English: *Wordygurdyboom!, t*ranslated by Sampurna Chatterjee and published by Puffin Classics in 2004, *Select Nonsense of Sukumar*

Ray, translated by Sukanta Chaudhuri and published by Oxford Indian Paperbacks in 1997, *The Book Mine: The Crazy Tales of Pagla Dashu and Co.,* published by Hachette Indian Local in 2012 etc.

[3] A Bengali Festival occurring in the month of Magh

[4] A Bengali sweet pancake roll filled with semolina, coconut, sultans, and other stuffings.

Works Cited

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