

THE MORTALS OF DEVDAS*

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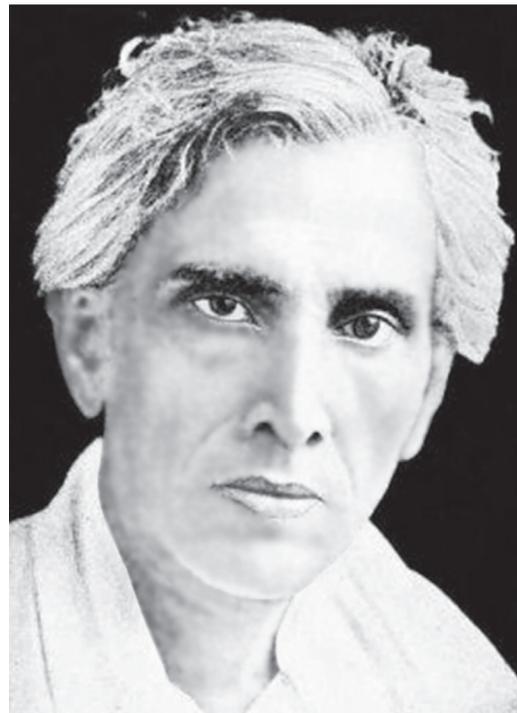
An actual relationship in the writer's youth may have produced the protagonists of Devdas, but they are, in the end, a metaphor for the human self stumbling through life.

Devdas is a poignant tale of eternal love and its joys and agonies, an alluring stream of primordial longing for togetherness, a craving for union with the unknown, and a propensity to suffer and perish.

Ever since its birth, the novel has had numerous incarnations in translation and cinema and, above all, in the popular imagination of millions. It was written in 1901 by the noted Bengali novelist Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, but it could not be published until 1917. So it remained underground for a long time, and then at once it became a hit. This shows its complexity and uniqueness. People have been drawn to its story and the characters, to the lead characters Devdas and Paro in particular, as they find in them their own reflections and share a mutual empathy with them.

These true-to-life characters of this immortal story have often tempted readers to ask whether they existed in reality. What has made this novel one of the most compelling stories of the 20th century? Its admirers have tracked many a character in Saratchandra Chattopadhyay's life and his novels. Finally, the search closes up on an elusive pair on the banks of the Ganga, in Bhagalpur in Bihar: On a closer look, Devdas is none other than the author himself, and Paro a young vivacious girl of the same town.

Saratchandra Chattopadhyay was born on September 15, 1876, at Debanandpur in Hooghly, West Bengal. Poverty



forced him to move, in 1893, to his maternal uncle's home at Bhagalpur, where he lived for about 20 years. His parents' demise compelled him to give up studies after obtaining his F.A. degree.

The responsibilities he had to shoulder were too huge for him, so he tried to find escapes. He took to music and adventures and indulged in several vices. Otherwise, he was shy and introverted, but faithful to his emotions and fearless in his inner callings. He like a vagabond for most of his life. He lived at Samta Ber in Howrah district for

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some time but ultimately settled in Calcutta (now Kolkata). By then he had earned great fame as a writer, was financially sound, and was admired by people.

In 1918, a *Times Literary Supplement* review compared him to Guy de Maupassant. At heart, Saratchandra sympathised with revolutionary nationalism (*Pather Dabi*, 1926) but later actively participated in Gandhi's movement for swaraj. Poverty and misfortunes had, however, already sapped his lifeblood. Addiction to alcohol ended in his death in Calcutta on January 16, 1938.

Parvati, affectionately called Paro, was Dheeru in real life (though there are other contenders, too). Saratchandra met her at school in Bhagalpur. She was the sister of a childhood friend and classmate. She was lively and boisterous, but impulsive and haughty. Often the two quarrelled, but only to reunite again and again. Saratchandra's family did not like their friendship very well as Dheeru belonged to a lower rank in the caste hierarchy. Yet, their relationship continued. They often met at the tomb of Khanjar Beg on the riverbank though social circumstances kept them from deciding on a future together. Dheeru's parents eventually came up with a matrimonial proposal, which Saratchandra's family declined. This was both heartbreaking and humiliating for the haughty Dheeru. She could never forget it. Yet, they continued to meet and something kept their relationship going. Meanwhile, her parents arranged her marriage. One night, Dheeru sneaked into Saratchandra's room hoping that he would agree to marry her, but he declined. Devastated, she returned home and perhaps never met him on amicable terms again.

Soon, Dheeru was married in Muzaffarpur, another town of Bihar. It was now Saratchandra who was devastated. He became almost insane for a while and lived like an ascetic. Ultimately, he decided to meet her once again. He came to Muzaffarpur in 1901 and wandered around until he met her one day. Drunk at the time, he caught hold of her. She resisted and reminded him that there was no place for him in her life after her marriage. She complained to her husband, whose musclemen thrashed Saratchandra badly and left him near a pond, presuming him to be dead. The next morning, a dancing girl named Puntty recognised him and took him home to a red-light area called Chaturbhujsthan, and she nursed him until he recovered.

Depression and Despair

The incident sent Saratchandra into depression and absolute despair. However, as he was a master storyteller and sang well, he was welcomed in the local mehfils, where

he met Mahadev Sahu, who belonged to the elite circles of Muzaffarpur. Sahu loved music and dance and often hosted dance parties. He became Saratchandra's mentor and cajoled him to come out of the emotional morass and enjoy the pleasures of life. Saratchandra surrendered to the temptation.

Saratchandra had to return to Bhagalpur after his father died. He was an emotional wreck when a friend, Raju, took him to a courtesan called Kalidasi at Mansurganj in the town. Saratchandra was so mesmerised by her beauty and artistry that he started living with her. She loved him, too. (Some people believe this happened in Muzaffarpur.) Saratchandra started writing Devdas here and made her a character—Chandramukhi—in it. For him, she was an extension of Dheeru. It was a return of hope, howsoever illusory.

Saratchandra wanted Kalidasi to give up her profession and lead a respectable life. But how could she live without any income? So, he managed to get himself a job in the neighbouring Banaeili estate. But the wanderer in him drew him out again. A dejected Kalidasi started searching for him and even visited his native village, only to go back disappointed. Gradually, she became religious, sang devotional songs and refused payments for her public performances.

Still miserable about losing Dheeru, Saratchandra, on the other hand, wandered from place to place. He went to Rangoon (now Yangon) in 1903 and worked there for several years. He was financially stable now. But he lived a secluded life in an impoverished colony, deeply empathising with its residents and sharing their joys and sorrows.

Meanwhile, he had got married. But misfortunes were not yet over for him. He lost his young son and his wife, Santi Devi, in a plague epidemic. This left him emotionally shattered and utterly lonely. Once again he craved intimacies with women. He met with many and also visited prostitutes. Eventually, he formed a partnership with a poor and illiterate girl, Hironmoyi. She was his live-in partner for the rest of his life (she died in 1960). All this was socially scandalous then.

In 1916, Saratchandra returned from Rangoon. He met Dheeru again, by sheer chance. Sadly, she was widowed by then, whereas he had become a noted literary figure. What transpired between them is not known. Saratchandra's love for Dheeru had by then transformed into compassion for all women in distress. It is not known what happened to Dheeru afterwards.

Separated from Saratchandra in life, Dheeru, however, kept returning in his novels, which showed that he never could shake off his memories of her. She and the writer appeared separately, or together, in many of his later novels such as *Borodidi* (1907) and *Srikanto* (1917-33). He bestowed grace and dignity on her fictional versions and created an aura around her that has captivated a legion of admirers, including the celebrated Suchitra Sen, who paid her a magnificent tribute in Bimal Roy's legendary *Devdas* (1955).

Mahadev Sahu is portrayed as Chunnilal in the novel, and Mushai, the domestic in the maternal uncle's household, is Dharamdas. A century later, the locale that provided the story its ambience is on the verge of disappearance around Sahu Road in Muzaffarpur. Many of the structures connected with it, situated on the Manik Sarkar Lane and elsewhere in Bhagalpur, are mute reminders of the era gone by.

Throughout his life, Saratchandra had to battle with poverty, adversity and social rejection. What did not desert him though were his love for Dheeru and a passion for writing. These sustained him as he silently burnt to his end. Pain and suffering sent him into an inner sanctum from where he interacted with the world outside. His unfulfilled love for Dheeru infused into his life an element of romance forever. This was the fountainhead of his creativity and of the courage that helped him face life's difficulties.

Saratchandra was interested in many subjects, including history, philosophy and science, and was sensitive to social and political problems, especially those that no one dared talk about. Unlike Rabindranath Tagore, who regaled himself with the joys of life and nature, Saratchandra chose to look at its pain and pathos. He wrote only about what he experienced and stood by the sufferers. A Brahmin by caste, he was bold enough to live with prostitutes and with those on the margins of society. He had deep sympathy for suffering women. He portrayed their miseries, especially of widows and prostitutes, with deep empathy and compassion.

In a meeting with Ila Chandra Joshi, the noted Hindi writer, Saratchandra confided that he had seen the sufferings of prostitutes from close quarters and had decided to support their cause. No wonder he highlighted their qualities of the heart in his writings (as of Chandramukhi in *Devdas*). He wrote a long piece on the position of women in history decades before Simon de Beauvoir's seminal *The Second Sex* was published. Unfortunately, it was lost in a fire in Rangoon in 1912, and despite his efforts, it could not be

retrieved to its original form. In his personal life, Saratchandra helped many women. In his native village, he was the only person who helped a young widow. She eventually died as an outcaste because of her relationship with a man (recounted in *Charitrohin*, 1917). He had a natural urge for loving the rejected and helping the needy. He helped people during dreaded epidemics and even buried the dead. Intriguingly, one of his havens for solitary joy was a graveyard in Bhagalpur, where he also hosted his literary meets. He loved animals, and his dog, Bhelu, an ugly street dog he had adopted, was closest to his heart. All this was abhorred by the Bengali bhadraklok.

The problems of his life and the distressing happenings all around obliged him to ponder over the basic philosophical questions of life in *Shesh Prasna* (*The Final Question*, 1931).

Crusader against superstition

Saratchandra was also a silent crusader against superstition and oppressive traditions, fighting for the cause of the weak and the marginalised. *Devdas* and *Paro* are a metaphor for the "Agony and Ecstasy" of the individual in bondage—of society, of nature, of self. His writings exposed the nasty goings-on in society and questioned the age-old values of morality.

They ignited one of the earliest protests against the oppression of women. Not unexpectedly, the diehards attacked him vehemently, compelling him to live like an eccentric recluse. What is grossly overlooked, however, is his steadfastness to pure and deep humanism, his relentless war against social discrimination and questionable morality, and an unwavering determination to speak for his cause against all odds.

He was among the earliest Indian writers who emerged from the grass roots and focussed on it. Tagore and Shri Aurobindo were quick to recognise his genius, and he was admired by countless readers, many of whom visited him personally to appreciate his works and share their feelings. His books became bestsellers and were sold in the black market, and he was among the highest paid authors of his time in India. No wonder his death was a major public event, with unprecedented public response and media coverage.

But what about Dheeru, Kalidasi, Hironmoyi and others? They vanished from the scene quietly, leaving behind no memorials for themselves. Yet, they will forever remain in our hearts for their love and sacrifice that made Saratchandra what he was.

This story of a simple girl and a poor boy is, ultimately, an account of the unfolding of the self into an expanding whole—of a drop making the ripple! It reveals the queer nature of human destiny. The tragedy of Devdas and Paro is not only “a simple cause and effect affair, but a lifelong struggle that fails to ever succeed in bringing happiness or peace of mind”. They “represent our attempts to make sense of love and life, pain and pleasure, the

pathology of the male/female relationship, the unbreakable bond we have to the society into which we are born, and the lifelong dilemmas we face within those social boundaries”. We cannot appreciate their message fully without having some taste of similar experiences and empathy for them. Until then, let us take it as we wish, with hope and fortitude, and savour the best and worst in our lives.