

Swarnakumari Devi and Mesmerism

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Abstract :

This essay deals with an extremely interesting and unknown chapter in the life of the illustrious Swarnakumari Devi, the tenth child of Maharshi Debendranath Tagore and Sarada Devi and elder sister of Rabindranath Tagore. This erudite, pioneering spirit had a brief encounter with the controversial healing and communicating method of mesmerism. This essay tries to shed light upon that episode of her life with special reference to the rise, gaining of popularity and untimely death of mesmeric practices in colonial Bengal.

Keywords :

Swarnakumari Devi, mesmerism, colonial Bengal, Bharati, Rabindranath Tagore

Swarnakumari Devi and Mesmerism

Swarnakumari Tagore (1855/1856 – 1932) was born to Debendranath Tagore and Sarada Devi at a very crucial juncture of Indian history. The tenth child of an enlightened household, an elder sister to the illustrious Rabindranath Tagore, Swarnakumari was a prolific writer, editor, essayist, poet, novelist, playwright, composer, and social worker. She, along with her sisters, was home-tutored at Jorasanko by Brahma educationist and scholar Ayodhyanath Pakrashi under the strict supervision of their father. Systematic training in the disciplines of Mathematics, Sanskrit, History, Geography and English from early childhood created an academic bent in Swarnakumari's mind for the rest of her life. After getting married to deputy magistrate Janakinath Ghoshal at thirteen and becoming a mother of three (including Sarala Devi Chaudhurani), Swarnakumari got back to writing at the age of eighteen.

Her first novel *Deepnirban* (published anonymously in 1876) was so well-written that Swarnakumari's elder brother Satyendranath Tagore, who was in England at that time, took it to be Jyotirindranath Tagore's creation. *Deepnirban* was probably the earliest novel in Bengali written by a Bengali woman. Swarnakumari has written thirteen novels, four dramas and published in 1879 what might well be the first opera written in Bengal, *Basanta Utsav*.

Swarnakumari Devi wrote as many as twenty-seven scientific essays in her lifetime which were published in the collection titled *Prithibi*. She dedicated this book to her chief inspirer,

her father who had aroused this scientific curiosity in her since childhood. One of her most original contributions to the field of scientific knowledge in Bengal is the creation of a whole gamut of scientific terminology. When she started writing scientific essays, she found a dearth of precise synonyms for scientific objects, procedures and inventions. At this point, she started coining appropriate synonyms in Bengali, thereby creating a rich repertoire of scientific terminology in her mother-tongue. Her contribution in this field has gone a long way in helping future translators of scientific essays and theories.

It is very interesting to know that Swarnakumari's initial scientific curiosity was not only aroused by reading the works of famous contemporary European scientists, but she was also influenced by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's book *Bigyan Rahasya*, Swarnakumari wrote her first seven essays on Earth science. Her simple exposition of scientific theories and lucid explanation of complex scientific procedures created a revolution in the field of scientific studies. The educated Bengali women of the-then Bengal started exhibiting interest in science in an unprecedented way.

It is not unnatural for someone as erudite and dynamic as Swarnakumari, who kept herself abreast of all scientific events and inventions across the world, to have sensed the 'mesmeric mania' of nineteenth century Europe, especially Britain. So, her taking upon this subject as the topic of a series of essays in *Bharati* is equally credible. But before understanding Swarnakumari's stance towards mesmerism, one must know about the phenomenon of mesmerism in general.

In February 1778, Franz Anton Mesmer arrived in Paris and proclaimed his discovery of a superfine fluid that penetrated and surrounded all bodies. Mesmer had not actually seen this fluid; he concluded that it must exist as the medium of gravity. While bathing the entire universe in this primeval agent of nature, Mesmer brought it down to earth in order to supply Parisians with heat, light, electricity, and magnetism; and he especially extolled its application to medicine. Sickness, he maintained, resulted from an obstacle to the flow of the fluid through the body, which was analogous to a magnet. Individuals could control and reinforce the fluid's action by mesmerizing or massaging the body's poles and thereby overcoming the obstacle, inducing a crisis, often in the form of convulsions, and restoring health or the harmony of man with nature.

Mesmer was dubbed as a descendant of Paracelsus, J.B. van Helmont, Robert Fludd and William Maxwell who believed in the theory that health is a state of harmony between individual microcosm and the celestial macrocosm involving fluids, human magnets and occult influences. Mesmer's theory also corresponded with theories of cosmology according to which a variety of fluids under the name of electricity, gravity, light, fire etc. went swirling through the universe. Von Humboldt was experimenting with the magnetic influence of the moon whereas Abbe Nollet and Bertholon were busy discovering the miraculous powers of the universal electric fluid. Notably, Galvani was experimenting with "animal electricity" in Italy

when Mesmer was curing hundreds in France through the influence of his magnetic fluid. Mesmer was not a man of theory and his cryptic theoretical publications said less than the elaborately published description of his cures. In spite of the suspected note of charlatanism in Mesmer's practice, it was accepted that his apparatus resembled the popular Leyden jar and the machines illustrated, worked on electricity. All the discoveries that ranged between Newton and Lavoisier were not hoax at all but it was definitely difficult for common people to draw the line between fact and fiction. In any case, Mesmer's theory, under such confusing circumstances did not seem incredible at all.

In the general scheme of things, the practice of Mesmerism has been often awarded an ambivalent status. Could it be subsumed under the category of *occult* in which a mystic fluidic connection is set between a proto-omnipotent mesmerizer and his vulnerable mesmerisee? Or could it be overtaken by Braid's notion of Hypnotism which does away with the belief in the flow of mesmeric fluid from the mesmerizer to the mesmerized, and believes instead in the subjective, 'projectional' power of the hypnotized? Was Mesmerism to be treated as a source of spiritual healing – ineffective without that crucial factor of belief, or could it be explained away as any other scientifically verifiable phenomenon?

People, both ordinary and illustrious, got immensely benefitted by this practice in the latter half of nineteenth century in Victorian England as well as in her colonial 'Raj' in India. Incurable diseases, especially nervous disorders, had an astounding history of mesmeric cure in England. In India, Dr. James Esdaile used it as an anaesthetic medium for performing painless surgeries of giant proportions – though primarily on the body of natives. The expanse of diseases cured and social classes positively affected by this medium of treatment practiced in his Mesmeric hospital was so huge that Mesmerism could not be dismissed as the mere working of 'imagination'. Though the dominant ideology of Science berated Mesmerism as fraudulent, many scientifically oriented people, both in England and India, tended to accept Mesmerism as a newly emerging scientific method of cure.

After the tremendous frenzy generated by mesmerism among the 'beau monde' in late eighteenth century Paris and Vienna, mesmerism found a strong foothold in England in the person of Dr. John Elliotson. At least one of the colonies of Britain was to follow suit and that was – India. Here parts of both the European and Indian communities were taken in by the mesmeric movement. When James Esdaile started using mesmerism as an anesthetic for performing painless operations and difficult surgeries on the 'natives' in the Hooghly Imambara Hospital and Hooghly Jail Hospital, rumours of his spectacular success received both positive and negative critical attention.

People who had been convinced of the powers of mesmerism were few but well-known and belonged both to British and Indian classes. Two medical practitioners themselves, namely Dr. A. Webb, professor at the Calcutta Medical College and Dr. Kean of Berhampur had reputedly come 'under the influence'. Esdaile highly depended on Calcutta's public figures like J. Hume,

the magistrate, Rev. Fisher and Revd. LaCroix for moral and institutional support. Members of native Indian aristocracy (referred to as “4 Rajahs and 2 Baboos”) were also patrons of this institutionally forbidden “art of healing”. By 1846, Esdaile’s mesmeric treatment of Indian patients “in the Imambarah [sic.], and Jail Hospitals” at Hooghly was widely publicized in local Indian and English newspapers, and “at the famed Imambarra [sic] Hospital, the compound was full of carriages.” Doctors, clergymen, Archdeacon, Judges, Magistrates, Military men and civilians, merchants and men of science – all flocked to observe the “extraordinary scene”. (Webb 1846)

Esdaile never got institutional affiliation for practising mesmerism as an objective, scientific method on his patients, nor was mesmerism included in the pharmacopeia. Rather, he was ruthlessly labelled as a quack and no ceremonious dinner was given in his honour when he departed from India at the end of his tenure. James Esdaile left India in 1851 and retired in 1853 after the expiration of twenty years’ contract with the East India Company before going back to Edinburgh. Though there is no written evidence, it is not difficult to imagine the pain of rejection, disbelief and mockery that he must have suffered till his death in Sydenham, Scotland in 1859. In this connection, reference must be made about an article published by Dr. Elliotson in *Zoist* in 1852. In this article entitled ‘Dr. Esdaile’s Return to England’, Elliotson published two letters written by Esdaile to him. However, the article begins with a notice sent to Elliotson from an anonymous friend. It is a brief overview of Esdaile’s medical career with special reference to his wonderful surgical feats accomplished with the help of mesmerism in India. But throughout the notice, there is a steady tone of lamentation at the lack of respect shown to this ‘messiah of the masses’. This notice from *Bombay Medical Times* states that though there was no ceremonious dinner given in honour of Esdaile before his permanently leaving the shores of India, his contribution will be etched forever in the hearts of native Indians who were immensely benefitted by him. Even if he is not appreciated by sycophants who only worship wealth and rank, the notice holds high hopes that Esdaile will find a better reception in Britain.

In this way, mesmerism breathed its last in the institutional quarters of medicine in India. But beyond the rigid walls erected by conservative medical fraternity, it was finding ready acceptance among an influential portion of the Indian ‘elite’ because of its unmistakable resemblance with traditional Indian practices like Yoga and Tantra. So, attraction towards this practice remained embedded within the social matrix of Bengal till it resurfaced towards the last quarter of the nineteenth century when The Society for Psychical Research revived popular interest in the paranormal. In fact, the Tagores of Jorasanko had an open-minded attitude towards mesmerism and many of them had also taken to Theosophy quite seriously. Madam Blavatsky and Col. Alcott were frequent visitors to the Jorasanko residence.

Interestingly enough, Swarnakumari Devi’s nascent interest in mesmerism was mainly in response to The Society for Psychical Research’s revival of interest in the paranormal during

the last quarter of the nineteenth century in England. Initially, her interest in mesmerism promised to be merely a scientific inquisitiveness. In fact, towards the end of the nineteenth century, a scientific, investigative curiosity was created about mesmerism in and across Bengal. Swarnakumari Devi was the most vocal supporter of this practice in Bengal during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. She was encouraged by her husband Janakinath Ghosal, a Positivist and a member of the Theosophical Society, to discard purdah in order to pursue writing and social work. As we already know, Swarnakumari had exhibited literary talent from an early age and was very much a part of the cultured milieu and literary activities at Jorasanko.

Swarnakumari achieved fame as writer and editor of the well-known literary monthly *Bharati* for thirty years. This magazine was founded by Jyotirindranath Tagore in 1877 and was initially edited by Dwijendranath Tagore for seven years. Then Swarnakumari took up the editor's pen for eleven long years. This demanding task kept coming back to her in two phases of eight and two years respectively after that. Each time, she rose to the challenge very capably. During her first and longest phase as editor of *Bharati* (from 1885 to 1896), Swarnakumari developed an interest in mesmerism. She wrote and edited articles on the subject from 1885 to 1894. In 1885, she wrote a three-part series on 'Indriyer Sahajya Bina Moner Kotha Jana' ('mind-reading without sensory assistance'). This series explicates Swarnakumari's stance towards Mind-Reading as heavily tilted towards the scientifically incredible in spite of her declared mission of establishing the scientific validity of the phenomenon. At the very outset of this series, Swarnakumari relates Mind-Reading with India's rich Vedic and spiritual tradition, observing "মনের কথা যে মনে মনে চালিত হইতে পারে, কোন একটা অজ্ঞাতশক্তির প্রভাবে মানুষ যে মানুষের মন জানিতে পারে, এ কথা আমাদের দেশের কাছে নতুন কথা নহে। আমাদের দেশের জনশ্রুতি, প্রবাদ ইতিহাস, শাস্ত্রসকলি, মানুষের এই আশ্চর্য্য শক্তির অস্তিত্বগান গাহিতেছে, সুতরাং আমাদের দেশের জনসাধারণের যদি ইহাতে বিশ্বাস থাকে, তো তাহাতে আশ্চর্য্য হইবার কিছুই নাই।" ("The fact that information can travel from one mind to another due to an unintelligible force, is not unknown to Indians. The rich tradition of folklore, history of idiom and Shastras validate this fact. No wonder, Indians believe in this phenomenon of thought-reading."); (Swarnakumari Dec. 84-Jan. 85 409) (translation mine) She goes on to assert that this inclination was also present in enlightened Europe, but they were hesitant to declare it until the phenomenon could be based upon a scientific foundation. Finally, The Society for Psychical Research in England had been established with the sole motto of probing into the so-called extrasensory phenomena and confirming their authenticity upon rationally verifiable grounds.

It is evident that Swarnakumari is trying to justify her belief in extrasensory communication, which she inherits as a cultural legacy, in the light of western scientific observation and analyses. In this, Swarnakumari is not very different from her European predecessors. She repeatedly refers to the proceedings of The Society for Psychical Research to substantiate her own belief in the so-called marvelous phenomenon of transference of thought through the invisible medium of ether. She quotes from the proceedings of the Society:

That the dispute as to the reality of these marvellous phenomena, - of which it is quite impossible to exaggerate the Scientific importance, if only a tenth part of what has been alleged by generally credible witnesses could be shewn to be true – I say it is a scandal that the dispute as to the reality of these phenomena should still be going on, that so many competent witnesses should have declared their belief in them, that so many others should be profoundly interested in having the question determined, and yet that the educated world as a body, should still be simply in the attitude of incredulity. (Swarnakumari Dec. 84-Jan. 85 410)

Swarnakumari brings in the reference of the utilitarian economist Prof. Henry Sidgwick, one of the founder members of The Society, to validate the so-called scientifically incredible phenomenon. Sidgwick had asserted that if people can only believe in an extraordinary phenomenon on being flooded with a plethora of scientific evidence, then they must attempt to do so through the workings of this Society.

It is important to note Swarnakumari's stance here. She is neither a non-believer in the marvelous, nor willing to be a believer only upon the production of evidence. Being an Indian by origin, Swarnakumari claims that she was born into a tradition of spiritual beliefs and transcendental systems of thought. Her belief in Mind-Reading, thought transference or mesmerism is thus unconsciously or even consciously inherited from her predecessors – as Swarnakumari's defense of mesmerism seems to suggest. She begins by wanting to strengthen the eschatological edifice of a suprasensory phenomenon with scientific evidence. In her second installment of the same series, Swarnakumari reverts back to the Indian yogic tradition and states that the establishment of thought-reading or transference of thought as a scientifically verifiable phenomenon by the Society for Psychical Research only shows the triumph of Indian yoga shastra which has declared from time immemorial that once the mind is withdrawn from outside influences, its power can be increased manifold.

The four-part series on 'Mesmerism' which Swarnakumari takes up the following year, i.e.in 1886, is suggestive of the immense curiosity that this phenomenon had created in Bengal by then. Throughout the entire series, she tries to establish the authenticity of mesmerism over James Braid's notion of hypnotism. Swarnakumari rejects the hard-core, scientific, interpretive explanation of trance given by Braid and registers her faith in Mesmerism, simply on the basis of the evidence gathered by a nascent society for research into the 'paranormal,' that is The Society for Psychical Research. She again opens this series with the bold assertion that the application of will-power to accomplish various extraordinary feats has been known in India for years. But Europe has at last woken up to this realization. Flooded by numerous demonstrations of such inexplicable phenomena, it has finally attributed these marvels to the functions of hypnotism. Yet Swarnakumari asserts that hypnotism cannot explain extra-sensory communication and influence. Only a mesmeric explanation which takes into account the presence of an invisible fluidic medium among various things and beings can adequately justify these extraordinary phenomena. She opens the second installment of this series with a declaration:

“এখানে প্রথমেই বলা আবশ্যিক মানসিক শক্তি অনুসন্ধান-সভা শক্তিজালনা সম্বন্ধে পরীক্ষা করিয়া যে সকল আশ্চর্য-জনক ঘটনা ঘটিতে দেখিয়াছেন যে সকলি প্রায় সাধারণ প্রণালী অনুসারে পরীক্ষা করিয়া; অর্থাৎ মনে মনে ইচ্ছা আর বাহ্যিক হস্তচালনা, দৃষ্টিপ্রয়োগ ইত্যাদি দ্বারা; ব্রেইডের প্রণালী অবলম্বন করিয়া তাঁহারা প্রায় কিছুই কৃতকার্য হইতে পারেননি।”

(It is mandatory to state at the very outset that the marvelous findings of the Society for Psychical Research on Mesmerism regarding transference of thought, manipulation of hands and fixed stare found little success, if at all, by applying Dr. Braid's methods.) (Swarnakumari Jan.-Feb. 86 468) (translation mine)

Then she quotes at length from the proceedings of the society to justify her stance:

Before recounting our more consecutive experiments, we ought to mention that we have tried on several occasions to influence various persons – boys of from 12 to 20 years old in the manner described by Braid, but, hitherto with little success... Braid states that he found the great majority of the persons on whom he operated susceptible to this method. We on the other hand have only had even partial success in one case... But the rest of the phenomena here described were preceded by the condition ordinarily associated with mesmeric influence. (Swarnakumari Jan.- Feb. 86 469)

Swarnakumari ends the second installment of this series in her characteristic manner by warning common people against the tremendous power of mesmerism if the technique is made readily available as a popular scientific practice:

“ইহা হইতে বুঝা যায় যার হাতে এ শক্তি কি ভয়ানক, ইহা প্রবৃত্তি-পরায়ণ মনুষ্যের পক্ষে কি প্রলোভন! এই জন্যই বুঝি ঋষিগণ এ সকল বিদ্যা সাধারণকে শিক্ষা দিতে নিষেধ করিয়াছেন।”

(My account makes it amply clear that Mesmerism is a malevolent force for those who crave power! It was perhaps for this reason that ancient Indian 'rishis' kept this kind of special knowledge to themselves and forbade its dissemination.) (Swarnakumari Jan.-Feb. 86 473) (translation mine)

In the last part of this series, Swarnakumari even states that she has conclusively proved the existence of mental power to her readers by explaining various extra-sensory experiments in terms of mesmerism. The theories of 'sensitivity' and 'reflex action' as expounded by Braid cannot justify the independent existence of mental power to influence others. Only will-power in the form of an invisible energy as believed by mesmerists can explain the wonderful workings of one mind upon another. This power can travel from one individual to another through the imperceptible medium of ether which abounds in the universe and wraps everything in its influence. People have varying degrees of proclivity to respond to this etheric medium; those with greater vulnerability can readily become mesmeric subjects and operators. Experiments of Mind-Reading, thought transference and mesmeric sleep can be easily induced in them. Swarnakumari even goes to the extent of claiming that Braid is a deluded mesmerist who is unaware of his own powers. The fact that he can successfully induce the state of passivity in so many of his patients is due to his tremendous

will-power, not because of the subject's proclivity to resign his or her consciousness. Swarnakumari thus concludes the series by proclaiming her faith in an "agyato indriyatitshakti" ("unknown extra-sensory power"). (Swarnakumari Mar-Apr 86 559) She translates the observation of one of the founder members of the Society, Dr. Myers, in support of her observation:

“এই যে জ্ঞানবান শক্তি – আত্মা – তাহা যে কেবল ইন্দ্রিয়গণ হইতে স্বাধীনভাবে কার্য করিতে পারে এমন নহে, তাহা ইন্দ্রিয়ের অগম্যরূপে কার্য করিতে পারে, এবং ইহা রোগ, যন্ত্রণাদির অতীতরূপে নিজের স্বাধীন নিজস্ব প্রকাশ করিতে পারে, স্থূল পদার্থের মধ্যে প্রবেশ করিতে পারে, এবং স্থূল পদার্থের সহিত ইহার যোগ যেন কেবল একটা দৈবঘটনা মাত্র এইরূপ প্রতিপন্ন করিতে পারে।”

(This cognizant power or 'atman' can not only function independently of sense-organs but also in places beyond their reach, it can express its independent existence irrespective of disease and pain, can enter into solid substances and can project that its connection with the solid, tangible objects is only a passing accident.) (Swarnakumari Mar.-Apr. 86 559) (translation mine)

It is quite intriguing to see that during her stint as the editor of *Bharati*, Swarnakumari also edited two articles, both of which were entitled 'Animal Magnetism' or 'Jantob Chumbakshakti'. The first article was written by the famous Bengali Positivist Krishnakamal Bhattacharyya and published in 1892, the second by Brojendronath Bandyopadhyay, published in 1894. The selection of the articles and the editorial comments inserted by Swarnakumari Devi in these two essays show how biased she was towards mesmerism. Krishnakamal gives a clinical and scientific account of the practice of mesmerism but ends his discussion by preferring the explanation of hypnotism. As a defense, Swarnakumari complements this article with an editorial note emphasizing the importance of mesmerism. She strictly advises her readers not to be taken in by the newly emerging claims of hypnotism, but probe into the findings of The Society for Psychical Research. The last article published in 1894 is not commented upon by the editor. Rather, the subject-matter vouchsafes its publication. In this article, Brojendronath attributes the origin of animal magnetism to ancient Greece, Rome and India. He states that this specialized knowledge was the forte of the Brahmins in India. What Indian sages had known since time immemorial has lately come to the attention of the West. Thus we find that Swarnakumari Devi is an ardent believer in mesmerism or animal magnetism as a product of Indian origin. In spite of her scientific inclination, she repeatedly grounds her beliefs in ancient Indian cultural tradition.

Therefore, it is evident in this essay that though mesmerism began as a scientific method to alleviate pain during surgeries, it gradually took on a supersensory connotation. Whether a doctor like James Esdaile or an enthusiastic scholar and editor like Swarnakumari Devi – no one could ignore the spiritual aspect of mesmerism. It is precisely because of this unexplainable aspect of mesmerism that it never found its place in the pharmacopoeia, whether in colonial Bengal represented by the medical monolith – The Calcutta Medical College,

or in England. Rather, believers in this method were relegated to obscurity, their contributions being systematically erased from the annals of institutional medicine. But the same element of inexplicability rendered mesmerism favourable in the eyes of the colonial Raj where medical wonders accomplished by established indigenous healers were not at all a rarity.

Understandably enough, mesmerism therefore branched out in two directions – *spiritualism*, a branch which accepted the extra-sensory powers of the fluidic medium and *hypnotism*, which limited mesmerism to the bare, therapeutic, subject-oriented medical procedure. Whereas spiritualism blossomed in North America before hitting the same English shores in a new avatar a few years later, hypnotism developed into a widely accepted branch of healing physico-psychical disorders of scientifically accountable origins. In fact, it will not be an overstatement to say that the Indian Section of the Theosophical Society (a part of the Theosophical Society founded in New York in November 1875 by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, Henry Steel Olcott and others) which was chartered on 17th November 1890 and became effective from 1st January 1891, could also be looked upon as India's attempt to hold on to the spiritual connotation of mesmerism much after its death as a medical method.

Michel Foucault talks about notion of the 'actual experience' of knowledge in *The Order of Things*. According to Foucault, all knowledge that falls within the purview of the human sciences after the eighteenth century shows that 'the site of the analysis is no longer representation but man in his finitude.' It highlights 'the question of revealing the conditions of knowledge on the basis of the empirical contents given in it' – which, according to Foucault, repeatedly demonstrates the human capacity for knowledge as that of an 'empirico-transcendental doublet' –whose idea of the truth of knowledge is tied to the liminality of his condition. That is why both Comte and Marx elaborated systems of thought which are regarded as positivistic but are underpinned by eschatological beliefs. Like Positivism and Marxism, Mesmerism never claimed to be a hard science, but unlike the dominant forms of rationalistic knowledge, Mesmerism was subjugated because its discourse directly critiques the empirical status of scientific knowledge. A radical contestation of Eschatology and Positivism, which are ironically and actually embedded in each other, only restores the forgotten dimension of the transcendental in all human sciences– and this is what is consciously emphasized in the controversy over the status of Mesmerism as a science. Sociological positivism which was evidently followed by Swarnakumari, falls short of explaining reality in terms of the empirically verifiable and quantifiable methods of science. It is not surprising that Comte, the father of Sociology and Positive Philosophy went on to talk about a '*religion of humanity*' as their goal. Swarnakumari, knowingly or unknowingly, resorted to this eschatological principle to establish her positivist accounts of Mesmerism, thus reinforcing the ambiguous status of this curative method in Victorian England and colonial Bengal, even though writing in defense of the practice.

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