‘TELL ME TARA WHERE DO I STAND”

(A Bengali short story by Esha Dey translated by Somdatta Mandal)

Nikhil,

My phone is out of order. The arthritis is giving me trouble—can’t walk properly, so I am sending this letter through Bishu. Your students and research scholars often go to College Street. I heard that a new volume of Bamasundari Dasi’s ‘Autobiography’ has been published by Rrakash Dutta Publishing of 5/7A, Shayamacharan De Street. I shall be grateful if you can enquire and get this book for me. There is an International Conference on the 4th of April at Toronto – the theme is “Colonialism and the Third World Middle Class.” I have been invited, so I desperately need the book to prepare my paper. I shall send Bishu again day after tomorrow.

Has Sudeshna settled down at Malda College? Does she still pursue her hobby of writing in Bangla?

Yours,

Subhendu-da,

I had sent an ex-student of mine to enquire at College Street. He informed me that Dutta Publishing at 5/7A Shyamacharan De Street has not published any autobiography by Bamasundari Dasi. But Mitra Prakashani at 6/3B, Shyamacharan De Street has recently published “My Life Story” by Tarasundari Devi. The student wants to know whether he should buy the Tarasundari book instead of the Bamasundari one.

I am really surprised at the topic of your conference. Basically, you belong to European History, so Colonialism was never your area of specialization. And, why do you require the Bama book? Have you abandoned history and dedicated yourself to Bangla literature at this age?

Sudeshna is well settled in Malda. I hear that she is writing a lot of Bangla but I don’t know exactly what it is about.
7/3/99 - Nikhil

Nikhil,

This telephone is driving me mad. It’s still not working. My arthritic pain hasn’t subsided yet. Listen, if Bamasundari Dasi’s ‘Autobiography’ is not available then the other book, Tarasundari Devi’s “My Life Story” will suffice. Actually, we, meaning professors of erstwhile colonial nations, have no other way out except colonialism. Why should people in American or Canada agree to listen to European history from an Indian professor like me? So, surrender yourself to Bengal. No, no, I am not in praise of Bangla literature. I want to use it as an excuse, a pretext for bashing all middle-class Bengali values – the foreigners like this theme very much.

Inspite of my arthritic pain, I have made a rough draft of my paper. I always keep Gramci, Foucault and Derrida ready and handy. Now, once I get this Bangla book, I’ll just fit it in the various slots.

Tell Sudeshna not to waste her time in creative Bangla writing—she should start working for her Ph.D. right now. Her conception of 19th century history is very clear. She can easily work in this area.
8/3/99 -- Subhendu Chakraborty
Nikhil,

Visiting a few places after the Toronto Conference, I came home yesterday to find the phone out of order once again. You will be happy to know that my paper was very well received. It was focused upon the middle-class society in the 19th century under the British Colonial rule and was entirely from a “anthahpurika’s” point of view. So, all the traditional glory of the Bengal Renaissance was totally shattered.

Everyone appreciated my paper, especially Professor Robert Paid from Harvard. I am extremely thankful to you for the book. There was only one drawback. I could not collect much biographical information about Tarsundari Devi in a hurry. I shall have to get hold of it before the paper is published.

When does Sudeshna’s summer vacation commence? Please send me a reply through Bishu.

15/4/99
-- Subhendu Chakraborty.

Subhendu-da,

Your phone is out of order again? Really it is becoming very difficult to live in this city. No wonder our children want to leave for America, Canada, Australia or even New Zealand!

Congratulations for the success of your paper. In the meantime I have received a letter from Sudeshna. Their STD line was out of order. I thought that her letter would be very relevant to you, so I am enclosing it.

15/4/99
-- Nikhil

Daddy,

Our STD line is down, so this letter. There’s great news for you – my book has been published. You remember how every publisher at College Street refused to publish my first novel, “Why Malini is Annoyed”? They had said that there is no market now for publishing angry texts on modern middle-class women – feminism of this kind is passe. If you want to be sold then you have to write novels on Dalits, adivasis, untouchables or even grandmothers. So I wrote one of those grandmother’s narratives. I have requested the publisher to send my author’s due copies to you. I shall see them when I come home for the summer vacation. Oh!, one more thing – don’t be surprised at the title or the author’s name – it is Tarasundari Devi’s “My Life Story.” Isn’t it a pleasant surprise?

17/3/99
-- Sudeshna