

On Sahajpath

Abstract

Sahajpath, an overview Sahajpath consists of four parts of which the first two are written by Rabindranath Tagore and the rest by other writers with him.

The earliest manuscript of Sahajpath was found in the collection by Samir Chandra Majumder. After Thirty-four or thirty-five years from 1302-'03, the first part was published without date, probably in Vaisakh 1937.

It contains alphabets, which through constant practice could be memorized by the students. The writings were accompanied by the sketches of Nandalal Bose; children had the freedom to apply colours to those sketches. The vowels and consonants long with the sketches would create a musical effect and generate a sense of rhythm in children. The description of nature in the first part becomes vibrant with life.

The second part aims at teaching the conjunct consonants. Subject matter also extends from village to cities. The prose pieces depict mainly the practical world which the poems in both parts depict practical and imaginary world. Society has been painted but not loudly. Values, like compassion and kindness have also been delineated.

The style and technique of the Sahajpath created a controversy as to whether it was meant really for children or not, which attracted the Bengali elite class. Lastly, after the demise of Tagore, the order in some poems was disrupted in printing, which was rectified afterwards.



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Introduction

In total 'Sahajpath' is divided into four parts. In the first two parts, the writer is Rabindranath Tagore only and in the rest two, there are some other writers along with Rabindranath. Once, in all the places of West Bengal, the first two parts of the Sahajpath was used for teaching Bengali to the beginners. Though it was familiar from the beginning, it became famous after being prescribed as a text. Since then most of the learned Bengalis understood first and the second part of the Sahajpath by Rabindranath.

Before it came out in a book form, how it was known from a rare copy book known as Majumder Manuscript (Majumder Pandulipi). Originally it was a Rabindra - Manuscript (Rabindra Pandulipi) but since it belonged to the collection of Samir Chandra Majumder, in the lineage of Sris Chandra Majumder, it was known as such. It may be assumed that some parts written in this copy book is the preliminary form of Sahajpath. There 'Dui bābu a ā bose khāe hāwā' is the much earlier form of 'Choto Khokā bole a ā, / Śekheni se kathā kawā' (The little child says a ā, / even when he did not learn to speak). Not only ৱ but ৱ and long ৱ these two old men are contented¹ regarding the gradual (dhīri dhīri) assimilation in their movement. Though it was not so charming as 'Ghana megh bole ৱ / din bado biśri' (Dark cloud says ৱ / The day is very awkward) as later on. Nevertheless the fun contained in the two lines 'Na bole to śonto / āmār nām dantya.'² (Na says listen, my name is dental) must be admitted. Like these whatever else were there are possible to be recognized as the preliminary written But it took much time for the Sahajpath to come out in a complete book form. Long after 1302-1303 Bangābda, at least after 34-35 years Sahajpath was published. It may be assumed from the part of a letter (14th Bhadra, 1335, 'howmuch time it will take to print the Sahajpath?') written by Rabindranath to Prasanta Chandra Mahalanabish that the printing of Sajahpath started before 14th Bhadra, 1335. But due to the absence of the year and date of the publication of the Sahajpath part-I, a doubt regarding its publication still persists. Not only this, there is no date of publication of the first part of the Sahajpath before its eighth reprint in Asharha, 1351.³ Probably due to this reason, two different opinions exist regarding its date of publication. Without delving deep into this

difference of opinions, it can be precisely said; one of the opinions is that at the end of 1336, both the first and the second part of the Sahajpath were published;⁴ the other view is this the Sahajpath came out in a book form in Vaisakha 1337.⁵ Now, the second opinion has been accepted by the majority.

Regarding the first part of Sahajpath, Rabindranath says 'this book is to be read after the Varnaparichay'⁶. By Varnaparichay, we mean verily the Varnaparichay of Vidyasagar. Even keeping in mind, the Varnaparichay of Vidyasagar, the first learner of Bengali language can easily be acquainted with the letters through Sahajpath. It may be mentioned here that eventhough the alphabet with pictures in the beginning of Sahajpath does not contain *ḍa, ḍh, ya, +, ṁ, ḥ, n,* these have been taught in the book afterwards through usage.⁶ Moreover, taking one or more than one letter from the alphabet and bringing two lines in harmony, is received by the learner child first by the ear and then by the mind; afterwards he will learn to read and write the letters through the special practice of those lines very easily.⁷ Mainly for this purpose, the alphabets of Rabindranath's Sahajpath has been decorated by the sketches of the artist Nandalal Basu. Not only that many cases the vowels and the consonants of the alphabet have become lively by keeping a harmony⁸ with other words and rhythm. For example *Śālmudī diye ha kṣa / koṇe boṣe kase kha kṣa*. (Ha kṣa covered by a wrapper / coughing kha kṣa sitting in a corner). The small sentences of the first lesson of the first part without waves like a plain land *'Bane thāke bagh, gāche thāke pākhi / Jale thāke mācch, / Dāle āche phal, / Pākhi phal khāe, / pākḥā mele oḍe'* (Tiger lives in the forest, bird lives in the tree, / fish lives in the water, / fruits are there in the branch, / bird eats fruit, / flies away spreading its wings). Proceeding slowly in this way the sentences change their measurement and become a little bigger. For example *'Bāgh āche ām bane'* (There is tiger in the mango grove) etc. Through such prose⁹ the sense of rhythm of the dormant poet inside the child gets prepared unknowingly. From this lesson, in the successive ones, it is noticed that continuously with the help of *ā, i, u, a, ai, o, ou* and *candrabindu* (nasal) beautiful images are drawn one by one in small and big sentences both in prose and poetry. In the mean time the child is taught the two ways of reading *'kāl chilo dāl khāli'* (yesterday the branch was empty). The pages of the first part of the Sahajpath are filled with some such things as forest, animals, trees, honey bees, honey, natural life woven up with the villages and their people plucking of flowers, fading of the dark night, Motibil (A particular type of lake, called Moti), the description of the small locality veiled in shade, and the rivulet meandering course in Vaisakha; there are also football, autumn with the touch of dew, the mystery of filling the empty branches with flowers, flying in dream spreading the wings, the joy of freedom experienced by releasing the tied up boat at the quay, flower or the light of the lamp or like the various desires of a child.

Like the first part, the second one also does not lag behind. But this time the aim¹⁰ is to teach the conjunct letters and the conjunct consonants and along with that, many times, the previously learnt

contexts are repeated.¹¹ Laving the previous simple form, the sentences tends to be a little complicated. The novelty and variety of the subjects are noteworthy. The 'greater' world, variety of the second part has become complete with towns, semi-towns, Chandannagar at the arrival of Anandababu, the Shillong range far away, the turbulent fall of the river Usri and above all, along with the moving Kolkata. In one point the similarity between many poems of the first and the second part may be noticed. In both the parts the subjects of the poems rise above the material world and want to spread their wings into the imaginary realm and come back again to the reality.¹² In the poem of the eighth lesson of the first part, *'Dine hoi ekmato, rāte hoi ā'* (during the day I remain as I am but at night a different person) and the poem in the eleventh lesson of the second part, *'Ekdin rāte āmi svapna dekhinu'* (one night I dreamt a dream) – in both the poems then is a traverse in a dreamland leaving the reality behind and both end almost in the same tune. The first one *'Ghum bheṅge ceye dekhi bichānāy āchi'* (Naking up from sleep I saw myself on the bed). The second one: *'Dekhi Kolikātāāche Kolikātāte'* (I saw Kolikātā is verily in Kolikātā). Similarly at the end of the poem in the first part, *'Nadir ghāter kāche'* (near the quay of the river) gives information of his father's going to the office or in the second part, *'Nadir ghāter kāche'* (near the quay of the river) gives information of his father's going to the office or in the second part, *'Āmi je roj sakāl hole'* (At every morning I); at the end of the poem the 'I' atlast gets down from the *'bhārā'*, (Which conveys another beautiful meaning, namely an observatory) and the 'I' is reminded of coming back to his own village.

The prose pieces of the second part unlike the poems depict the idea of going from reality to the imaginary world and back to reality again. Basically words were selected for the purpose of teaching language and through the language of prose Rabindranath enlivens the reality to which he has given an incredible form of story. As he is not very loud about the different strata of the society, so also he had not spoken of any imaginary thing. There is no use of denying the fact that the society is constituted of the upper and lower strata and their difference. Therefore it is also baseless to say that everybody in the society enjoys equal status;¹³ he has searched for a generous humanity without damaging the inner nature of the high and low, master and the servant, significant - insignificant, poverty and deceiverfulness and whatever is there. For example, the rich Saktinathbabu during his distress received a warm hospitality from the chief of the woodcutters, and through his refusal to accept money, which Saktinathbabu gave him out of gratitude reveals the selfless nature of the latter. Again, the torture by Durlabhbabu on the poor labourer Uddhav Mondal, Sadgop by cast points to the deep deceiverfulness of the society; but ultimately it has been surpassed by the compassion and kindness of Karunamayee, the aunt (pishi) of the oppressive Durlabhbabu. It is clear that 'in Sahajpath, the social anomalies have not been upheld very clearly. Inspite of the mention of the rich and poor, it has not been said that their relationship is always that of the exorting and the exorted. There is

not the slightest effort in the Sahajpath for creating cast-consciousness in the mind of the children'.¹⁴

Infact nothing has been painted in Sahajpath in a very loud colour. It is also true about the sketches there. The note of the publisher in the beginning of the second part informs that all the pictures are drawn by Sri Nandalal Basu. The pictures have been drawn in lines with the expectation that the children will be able to colour them by themselves, so that they may feel the joy of painting along with that of reading. That is, the aim of the pictures of Sahajpath is to provide joy like its writings. Therefore, as in the writings especially in the poems, the children can traverse according to their sweet will, so also through applying colours to the pictures, they can enjoy the bliss of freedom. Regarding the pictures Rani Chanda blessed with the affection of Rabindranath informs: 'The pictures of Sahajpath are not what we understand by illustration. At that time we used to do wood-cut and lino-cut in Kala-Bhavana. In that technique only, Nandada had drawn the pictures of the 'Sahajpath'.¹⁵ But besides the technique of wood-cut and lino-cut, there are sketches also.¹⁶ For example the picture in the tenth lesson of part-II connected with the poem 'Ākāsh-pāre pūber koṇe' (In the eastern corner of the sky) or more than one sketch in the twelfth lesson prove this fact. In the very beginning of part-I, the pictures that have been presented to introduce the Bengali letters contain n hrasva i; dirgha ī / bose kyay kṣīr khoi (small i and long g ī eat kṣīr and khoi sitting together). The pictures related to this namely the two birds sitting together, facing the opposite sides is not very clear. May be it is not an illustration but how is it related to the two letters is not clearly understood. In another case in connection with the letters ca cha ja jha, ca cha ja jha dale dale / bojhā niye hāte cale (ca cha ja jha in groups moving towards the selling market with luggage), the row of the palm trees though not very clear, is suggestive; even being static they seem to be in motion; they are suggestive like the writings of Rabindranath. It creates more a resonance than understanding.¹⁷ A child may achieve something by finding out its similarity with the picture of Binipishi, Bami and Didi going to the quay in a row. Not only this, there is clarity also; for example, in the first part the picture of the monotonous cry of the ñ khuki (a girl child) or the main picture of the third lesson of the second part "Pāḍār jaṅgal sāf karbār din" (Today is the day of cleaning the bushes of the locality) has become as if vocal. Therefore it may be said that Sahajpath teaches much many things at a time in the language of writing and drawing. The greatest task of these two is to teach that the mind wakes up and starts dancing in joy.¹⁸ Once, without thinking all these and taking the Sahajpath only as a prescribed book, one of the criticisms that stormed against Sahajpath is like this; it does not contain much of social consciousness. 'Mainly it is not in parity with the contemporary social thought and socio-cultural environment'.¹⁹ Whether Sahajpath may be a prescribed book for the children, gave rise to a strong controversy during the eighth decade of the last century. Some said Sahajpath is useful as a prescribed book while the others said the opposite. Many became involved with the subject indirectly

while following this controversy. Infact, there arose a movement in the mind of the Bengali elites regarding Sahajpath.

Though that movement has stopped, still regarding the complain of the social consciousness, it may be said that it is not possible to know the society totally at an age for which Sahajpath is prescribed. 'It is afterwards that one attains the age and intelligence for understanding Sahajpath properly'.²⁰ Hence it will be an injustice to take the Sahajpath as an ordinary text book, that is at an age when it is enough to learn ka, kha, children are initiated through Sahajpath to the joy of literature.²¹ Therefore, 'Sahajpath of Rabindranath is the gateway of literature for the children'.²²

Lastly, I have to say a few words regarding Sahajpath. After the demise of Rabindranath, the rivulet of the first part of Sahajpath is busy in flowing leaving its meandering course and taking a round aboutway. Besides, in the first part from the beginning of the poem 'Ālo hoi / gelo bhoi' (light breaks and fear disappears) to the end that is, from 'Ālo hoi / gelo bhoi' to 'Gurudās kore cāṣ (Gurudas ploughs the field) the chronology was broken unnoticed due to the error in printing. Amitabha Mukhopadhyaya had drawn attention towards it; consequently in 1401 Bangābda it was arranged in the Sahajpath in proper order.²³

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