

Sukhalata Rao: Her Works and Her Times

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Introduction

This dissertation attempts to recreate the life of Sukhalata Rao (1886-1969), an acclaimed children's author, an artist and social activist of the early twentieth century Bengal. This is not a chronologically written definitive biography. Recreating women's life histories posit a challenge for the discipline of Women's Studies mainly because of the paucity of dependable information. Practice of preserving records of women's achievements either in the public or in the private spheres was not a regular phenomenon during early twentieth century. This thesis shows how it is true even in the most elite intellectual circles.

In order to reconstruct the life of Sukhalata Rao, who was active not merely as a writer but an artist and a social worker, one has to take up various personal reminiscences and recollections as primary sources. The blurred image of a woman, as a representative of early twentieth century Bengal, is created through the cracks and fissures of personal, anecdotal and indistinct public records. Sukhalata's works have been seen as a consequence of the times and the milieu which shaped her. This thesis establishes that instead of focusing on merely available hardcore empirical data, women's history must pursue writing a so-called 'biography' from a very different angle. There are and can be various ways or avenues through which to find about and build up an image of a person. This thesis assumes that a character is essentially shaped by his/her times.

Review of Literature

One of the major projects taken up by Indian feminist scholars in the last few decades is that of unearthing women's writings in various languages. Women have been writing and publishing plentifully since the middle of the nineteenth century yet they are conspicuously absent in literary studies or historical records. The first path-breaking collection in this field is Susie Tharu and K. Lalita's two volume work on *Women Writing in India: 600 BC to the Present* published in the early nineteen nineties. It is eye opener study revealing the variety of form and content in women's writing. This book, especially the second volume, opened the gates for the publication of women's wrtings in many parts of India. By the next few decades many auto/biographies of women were also published. Commentaries on auto/biographies of women of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century is one of the most important ventures taken up by the Women's Studies in India is. It is seen that women wrote profusely since the second half of nineteenth century. Women, especially 'respectable' middle class women, known as *bhadramahila*, in Bengal gained access to education which changed their worldviews as well as the world's views towards them. Studies on women in general led to the unearthing of the achievements of individuals. Women became vociferous in the public debates because they were actively participating in events in public sphere. Pen became the tool through which they articulated their opinions. Education was both a destination and also the means through which to reach other ends. Education was not simply literacy – it was much more. Perspectives towards women's education gained a new stature in the beginning of the twentieth century.

A lot of work has been done on women's education in India. To name a few Geraldine Forbes, Aparna Basu, Malavika Karlekar, Meredith Borthwick, Tithi Bhattacharya, Gulam Murshid, Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, etc. have worked on education in general. Anthologies of early Bengali women's writings are, also, being published by people who work on gender within the academia or beyond it. On the other hand study of individual women's participation, in early twentieth century, in other fields from a gender perspective is as yet a relatively new area. Education, however important, was not the only area in which women were participating. This thesis addresses the gap that is there.

As it is very few academic work has been done on history of art in India, leave alone work on art from a gender perspective. This study therefore enters into a new field. Sukhalata Rao was one of the earliest Indian women artists whose work was published in magazines. Yet her name is conspicuous by its absence. Even major art historians in India scarcely know about her works.

Her name, as a social activist, is also missing from all major lists in Orissa or Bengal.

Justification of the Study

The whole gamut of Sukhalata's works has not been dealt with critically by anyone. In a way I have treading on an untouched upon area. Everyone in the nineteenth century was involved with

the issue of women's education either by opposition or by compliance. Here Sukhalata Rao was someone for whom education did not mean merely literacy but education was a means to attain a specific kind of 'cultural refinement'.

This study brings to light that Sukhalata Rao has left her mark not only in the field of education but also in art and social service sector. For most people the name barely rings a bell in the context of children's literature. While writing was her lifelong occupation, painting was her first vocation. People in Bengal are not aware of the work she did as a social activist.

By trying to write about Sukhalata the thesis also poses a problem of writing women's history. It cannot claim to solve the problems but tries to see if other processes can be an option. It is tentative in its approach. Instead of dealing with authentic, available records the sources have been vague, fuzzy, personal memories of people. The effort was to read these misty recollections alongside published articulated visual or verbal letters.

If this thesis is successful then it will only go to prove that even if women's transparent records are absent conspicuously from public archives they can be rebuilt through other processes. They can be translucent but need not be absent altogether.

Sources

This study has used both primary and secondary sources.

I have rescued and collected some rare materials on Sukhalata Rao in earlier occasions which I have analytically used during my research. Private interviews of people who knew Sukhalata Rao were taken in various places, that is to say, in Kolkata and Cuttack. These were the two places where Sukhalata lived during her long span of life. Private letters, written by her relatives, formed another major primary source.

I have had access to some small papers in libraries and archives in India and England which proved to be revealing many facets of the figure I was trying to recreate. Small information gathered from minor references became major points of entry for my research.

Her oeuvres became important points of reference all the time. This included her unpublished or out of print books as well. Libraries in Calcutta were most helpful for the study of the cultural milieu of Sukhalata's period.

Sukhalata's relatives, both parental and in laws, proved to be important sources who provided with many blurred, overlapping, fuzzy but nonetheless critical images for recreating the woman.

Methodology

Following the demands of Women's Studies a quantitative approach to the study was not followed. The study was to a large extent library based. The historical context where Sukhalata needs to be situated is an important part of the study. This involved historical study of her times i.e. late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Apart from the books already in print, the out of print books, often reports and private records served as my primary materials.

Study of private interviews, letters formed a major source through which I gathered the various impressions and images of the person I was looking for. Study of other texts by people of the same family provided me with another major entry into the world of Sukhalata Rao. Even if Sukhalata did not write an autobiography, one of her sibling did, so did her cousin. Others, in the family, not so intellectually potent also wrote snippets in many journals about their illustrious family. I have tried to use all these sources as points of reference.

Where public records are obscure there private recollections become the major entryway to an uncertain terrain. Some of my chapters are dedicated towards establishing this very point. This is why I believe this dissertation makes a crucial argument for writing about women's when public records are absent.

Chapterisation

This dissertation is divided into six chapters. The first chapter *Introduction: In Search of Sukhalata Rao* lays down the problems as to why a definitive biography of Sukhalata Rao is not possible. The first chapter of the thesis is the introduction which narrates about the problems one encounters while trying to write a chronological and authoritative biography of Sukhalata Rao. One of the major troubles I encountered in trying to find information on her was the total lack of authentic information. Whether they are public records, or private reminiscences almost all led to blind alleys. The chapter then discusses that the problem of writing a biography is not exceptional to Sukhalata Rao's case. She must be read in the context of her times and gendered existence. This approach would provide the answer as to why a definitive biography is not possible for women, especially those who lived in the early decades of the twentieth century. The focus must be shifted from Sukhalata's personal life events to her times. Reading her through the times is, therefore, essential to the study. This chapter lays the theoretical foundation to the methodology to be used for the study of Sukhalata Rao's life.

The second chapter *The Formative Years: 1886 -1907* talks about the family and the childhood milieu of Sukhalata Rao. Sukhalata was hugely influenced by the elite intellectual family within which she grew up. The childhood and educational years shaped Sukhalata's ideas which she developed as a mature individual. Her engagement with the social and cultural sphere of Bengal in the early twentieth century is definitely a product of her familial location. Her religious

affiliation to Brahmo Samaj, too, was extremely significant. It is here among her parental relatives can one see the seed that was planted.

Chapter Three: *The Intellectual Milieu: Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Bengal* is a chapter in which Sukhalata is almost absent. The intellectual milieu of Bengal during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is important in the sense that it talks about the time in which Sukhalata existed. If Sukhalata is to be seen as a product of her times then there is hardly any way we can ignore her times and especially the times which was so marked by political and cultural upheavals. Women's work and ideas in this era has particular bearing upon Sukhalata's personality. Not only did she identify with many women in her age, it is also easy to see her as a woman, particularly, of her age. She was one among many such women only possibly more talented than most. It just made her, at times, a path breaker but by no means, the lone traveller.

Chapter Four: *The Years as an Artist: Till the 1930s* this chapter focuses on Sukhalata's contribution in the field of fine arts. A new identity of Sukhalata Rao emerges from this study. This chapter points out how even with all her talents Sukhalata was forgotten because of her gender. She had been kept off record as an artist. People have only mentioned in passing that she could even draw. This chapter draws attention to that fact that this is an understatement of the sort which Sukhalata did not deserve. Her drawing was not merely a mechanical exercise but an intellectual engagement of the highest form. For her, the visual was also a part of her verbal commitment.

Chapter Five: *The Years of Social Service: 1940s* is a chapter which concentrates on Sukhalata's mature years in Orissa. Her work in this field is mostly unknown to people in Bengal. Her name does not appear among the social service workers in Bengal yet she was quite an active worker during her times. Along with her dedication in social work, this chapter, also, tries to explicate how or why her presence in this field was of such a short duration. What necessitated her entry to and exit from public action is matter of conjecture but what can be ascertained is that it was not a mere spontaneous choice. From public archives to personal recollections this chapter tries to make linkages between the personal and the public.

Chapter Six: *Conclusion: Her Works, Her Times* this chapter concludes why this study was important from the perspective of gender. It also glances over how she is remembered if at all. It also discusses about some instances where it is through the written texts that the family members enter into conversations with each other. Their private recollections about each other are displayed in the public realm waiting to be read. The early twentieth century bhadramahila essentially connects to her milieu through her intellect. In this Sukhalata Rao is not alone. She is unquestionably a very talented woman but for all intents and purposes a woman who is a historical product of her era.