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Byomkesh Bakshi of Kolkata and the Sleuth on the Baker Street

Abstract

For 80 years, Byomkesh has been Bengal's favourite literary character, his only competition coming from Satyajit Ray's *Feluda* who made his debut in 1965. However, there is a crucial difference between the two. The Feluda stories were written for teenagers; whereas Saradindu Bandopadhyay wrote for adults. The mysteries that confront Byomkesh quite often hinge around lust, adultery, promiscuity, even incest.

This paper analyses the annals of Byomkesh in the context of the works of the international masters of mature detective fiction, such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Raymond Chandler.

Keywords: Byomkesh Bakshi, detective stories, Feluda stories, Satyajit Ray, Saradindu Bandopadhyay, Bengali literature, Indian English literature.

Byomkesh Bakshi of Kolkata and the Sleuth on the Baker Street by Ananda Das Gupta

I

For 80 years, Byomkesh has been Bengal's favourite literary character, his only competition coming from Satyajit Ray's *Feluda* who made his debut in 1965. However, there is a crucial difference between the two. The Feluda stories were written for teenagers; so Ray had to work within a set bandwidth—no crime could have a sexual angle to it (Ray even complained that this significantly restricted his freedom to plot the stories). Saradindu

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Bandopadhyay wrote for adults. The mysteries that confront Byomkesh quite often hinge around lust, adultery, promiscuity, even incest.

So, the annals of Byomkesh should be viewed in the context of the works of the international masters of mature detective fiction, such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Raymond Chandler. Having read all of Byomkesh, all of Sherlock Holmes and all Philip Marlowe novels by Chandler (and all of them several times), I can confidently assert that at his best, Saradindu Bandopadhyay was as good as anyone in the world working in this genre. Now, sorry, and aside I'm unable to avoid—like Conan Doyle, Saradindu Bandopadhyay also wrote historical novels. I do not know how many of them are available in translation for a broader non-Bengali audience, but they are truly stunning achievements in storytelling, and certainly much better than Doyle's tomes. Like Conan Doyle, he wanted at some point of time to retire his sleuth. Doyle tried it the nasty way—by killing off Sherlock Holmes in the story *The Final Problem*. Public outrage forced him to bring Holmes back to life. Saradindu Bandopadhyay, as he revealed in a 1969 interview, was a much kinder man. He married Byomkesh off (an almost unheard-of thing for detectives across the world) in only his tenth outing, and thought that was the end of it. He did not write another Byomkesh story for 16 years, and settled in Bombay as a writer for Himanshu Roy's Bombay Talkies. But on a visit to Calcutta, he discovered that Bengalis still hankered for his hero; graciously, he returned to Byomkesh and stayed with him till the end of his life.

In the same interview, he worried about Byomkesh—he was now 60 years old (10 years younger than his creator); and though still mentally and physically fit, he would like to retire, but was helpless as long as a vast number of Bengali readers kept wanting more of him. And Saradindu Bandopadhyay could not let them down. This is the other interesting aspect of the

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Byomkesh stories. Unlike many other fictional detectives—Hercule Poirot, for example, would have been at least 110 years old by the time he handled his last case in *Curtain*—Byomkesh ages, marries, has a son, starts a publishing firm with his assistant and chronicler Ajit (he makes a more stable income from this than from his seeking of the truth), buys a house in South Calcutta, and ponders buying a car for his wife Satyabati (note that 'satya' occurs here again). He is very clearly situated historically. For instance, *Adim Ripu* (a loose—and not very accurate—translation would be The Primal Lust), certainly one of the best detective novels I have ever read—irrespective of the country of origin, is set in the days just before and after India's Independence and records the situation in Calcutta at that time. Other than Basu Chatterjee's endearing TV serial—which was extremely loyal to the source material, several Byomkesh stories have been made into films in Bengali, though most seem to have disappointed the audience (including *Satyanweshi* the last film the highly talented Rituparno Ghosh directed before his untimely death). Exceptions are two films made by the multi-faceted Anjan Dutta, and the third one is releasing in two weeks-time (I have seen only the first one, based on *Adim Ripu*, but both films were big hits).

It was the great Ray who first brought Byomkesh to the screen, in *Chiriakhana* (The Zoo, 1967). However, it was a film Ray made reluctantly. His assistants had bought the rights to the Byomkesh novella, but lost their confidence at the last minute, and pleaded with Ray to take charge. Ray was at a bit of a loose end at that time, trying to raise funds for *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne*, so he agreed with what now seems to be an 'all right, what the hell' attitude. To his biographer Andrew Robinson, he said: "I accepted willy-nilly."

Chiriakhana has its moments—there are two murder sequences which are master classes in editing and suspense-building, but it is certainly Ray's worst film. He knew it, and refused to put it on

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the international circuit. He told Robinson: "Whodunits don't make very good films, because of the very long explanation at the end, where the film becomes very static." He said he does not regard *Chiriakhana* as a "true Ray film". He also may not have been well-acquainted with the Byomkesh stories, since in the film, it is Ajit who is married, and Byomkesh is a bachelor (In the very second paragraph of the first Byomkesh story, Ajit tells the reader that he has determined to stay a lifelong bachelor—which he does, and as we know, Byomkesh was a family man). Saradindu-babu was apparently outraged when he watched *Chiriakhana*.

II

During his literary career, Saradindu himself drifted from his original style. His earliest Byomkesh stories are written in a formal first-person style with Ajit narrating, while his later works are more literary, free-flowing in third-person narrative. During the course of his detective career, Byomkesh gets married to Satyabati and has a son. On the other hand, Sherlock Holmes and his chronicler Dr. John Watson are essentially unchanged during the decades they work together (even though we know that Watson was married).

Still, if we want to search for similarities between the two great detectives we should start at the very beginning. The earliest Byomkesh Bakshi stories have some superficial resemblances to the Sherlock Holmes stories. In fact, *Pother Kanta*, the first story featuring Byomkesh was written close to twenty years after Holmes' final case.

Similarities between Byomkesh Bakshi and Sherlock Holmes:

1. Both have featured in adventures that are written up for the public by their less observant colleagues (either Ajit or Dr. Watson). Both detectives show extreme loyalty to their

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friends, but also scold them when they make errors (Reference: *Chorabali* and *The Solitary Cyclist*).

2. Both detectives have faced bumbling, arrogant, but ultimately inefficient police officers from the force in the form of Bidhubabu at Lalbazar or Inspector Lestrade at Scotland Yard (Reference: *Arthamanartham* and *The Norwood Builder*).

3. Both find that the personal classified advertisements are the most informative section of the newspaper. (Reference: *Pother Kanta*, Holmes referred to it as the Agony Column in *The Engineer's Thumb*).

4. Both realize that following the law isn't always the moral thing to do. Both Byomkesh Bakshi and Sherlock Holmes are willing to give extrajudicial justice after conferring with Ajit and Watson, respectively. (Example: *Chorabali* and *The Abbey Grange*).

5. Both have had to take on cases of national importance to avert war or prevent information leaking to enemies. (Example: *Upasanghar* and *The Second Stain*).

6. Both have been involved in murder cases in which a strong-willed female character has lied in order to protect someone that they loved dearly. (Example: Satyabati in *Arthamanartham* and Lady Braceknstall in *The Abbey Grange*).

7. Both have had to lay a trap so that an enemy tried to kill them. Ultimately this enemy got caught after assassinating a dummy. (Example: Anukulbabu stabs a pillow in *Satyanveshi* and Colonel Moran shoots a dummy of Holmes in *The Empty House*).

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8. Both have had to show exceptional sleight-of-hand to replace or swap an item in plain view of others. (Example: the statue in *Seemanto-heera* and the confidential papers in *The Second Stain*).

9. Both the detectives have had to use psychology to the information that they need. (Example: In *Upasanghar*, Byomkesh fakes his death and advertises it to get Anukulbabu to reveal himself. Similarly, in *A Scandal in Bohemia*, Holmes fakes a fire-hazard to get Irene Adler to reveal the whereabouts of an incriminating photograph. Subsequently, suspicions are aroused in both and they flee).

10. Both the detectives have solved a case in which a valuable gem was hidden inside a plaster statue. Both had to break the statue in the final act to recover the gem. (Example: the Nataraja statue in *Seemanto-heera* and the sixth and final statue of Napoleon in *The Six Napoleon*.

11. Notwithstanding similarities in the cases mentioned above, unlike Holmes, Byomkesh did not don outlandish disguises. The needless addition of two such disguises in Ray's *The Menagerie* left me spluttering. It must have broken the author's heart.

    Byomkesh wore a dhoti in the days when dhotis were the chinos of the urban middle class professional Bengali. No, he didn't wear it in the decorative style of the dandified Bengali *bhadralok* of celluloid. He wore it tied simply, with socks and shoes, and he owned it. Any Byomkesh holding his *dhuti* tentatively like a dangerous weapon has failed in this crucial aspect.

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III

Genesis and the "construct" of Byomkesh Bakshi

The advocate-turned author Saradindu Bandyopadhyay was deeply influenced by *Sherlock Holmes*[1] of Arthur Conan Doyle, *Hercule Poirot* of Agatha Christie and *Father Brown* of G.K. Chesterton as well as the "tales of ratiocination" involving C. Auguste Dupin produced by Edgar Allan Poe. He was, however, concerned with how the Indian and Bengali fictional detectives created between 1890 and 1930 failed to exist as anything other than mere copies of the Western detectives. The stories of Dinendra Kumar Ray's *Robert Blake*, Panchkari Dey's *Debendra Bijoy Mitra* or Swapan Kumar's *Deepak Chatterjee* were almost always set in London or in Kolkata which was identifiably the British metropolis.

Initially serialized in the literary magazine *Basumati*, the stories and novels were all eventually published in hardcover editions, the first being *Byomkesher Diary*. In all, Sharadindu wrote 33 stories featuring Byomkesh, one of which remained incomplete due to his death. At first, he wrote in Sadhu Bhasha, but later he preferred Chalit Bhasha while writing Byomkesh. Byomkesh is one of the most popular characters in Bengali literature.

Although the story Satyanweshi, in which Byomkesh and Ajit meet for the first time, is often the first story in most Byomkesh anthologies, the first Byomkesh story written was Pother Kanta in 1932, followed by Seemanto-Heera in the same year. Sharadindu started writing the stories regularly. By 1936, he had written ten stories, all of which were published by the Calcutta publishers Gurudas Chatterjee and Sons in three collections. Sharadindu stopped writing Byomkesh stories for 15 years, during which time he lived and worked in Mumbai, writing

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screenplays for Bollywood films, including *Durga*, *Kangan* and *Navjeevan* (all 1939).

Upon returning to Calcutta in 1951, Sharadindu began writing Byomkesh stories again after friends asked why he had stopped and published Chitrochor in the same year. He further wrote 21 stories, including *Bishupal Bodh*, which was left because of his death in 1970.

Byomkesh meets Ajit for the first time in a mess in central Calcutta in the story *Satyanweshi*. He initially introduces himself as Atulchandra Mitra to prevent others from knowing his actual motives there. Through a series of complicated events, one of which resulted in him being arrested by the police on charge of murder, he ultimately unmasks the criminal. As a result, the mess members are forced to vacate the mess, while Byomkesh takes Ajit to his own mess at Harrison Road, where he entreats him to stay there with him, saying that after living with him for the last two weeks he would find it difficult to live alone. Ajit consents, and since then they live there along with their devoted servant Puntiram, until in *Arthonamortham* Byomkesh marries to Satyaboti who henceforth lives there too.

Ajit narrates all but five of the thirty-three cases which feature Byomkesh. In all these stories, he assists and accompanies Byomkesh in his escapades. Most of the stories are centered on Calcutta, except a few like in *Byomkesh O Baroda*, where they go to Munger in Bihar, or *Amriter Mrityu*, where they go to Baghmari. Byomkesh's opinion about Ajit's intelligence and acumen is somewhat underwhelming, in *Durgo Rohosyo*, when Ajit throws some intelligent light on the mystery, he is very surprised, which prompts him to concede "Can it be that at last you have really developed your faculties!" However, he lets Ajit try to solve the case in his lieu in *Makorsar Ros*, though admittedly it was more due to circumstances precluding him from engaging himself in the case than due to his trust in Ajit's

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abilities; he was busy solving another case concerning some large scale forgery of notes. Ajit however is unable to solve the case.

Occasionally, Byomkesh assigns Ajit some role in solving the mystery: in *Pother Kanta* he lets Ajit go to New Market incognito to procure a letter from an unknown person, though later we find that he followed Ajit all the time. In *Amriter Mrityu*, he asks Ajit to interrogate a suspect while he busied himself in some other affairs. In *Shaila Rahasya*, Byomkesh urges Ajit to follow-up a case till he himself arrives at the hideout of the criminals.

In *Pother Kanta*, Ajit writes that Byomkesh, for all his astuteness and intelligence, is a bit queer. For example, he opines that the most spectacular pieces of news in a newspaper lay hidden not under the headlines, but in the advertisements. Though Ajit refuses to buy this, and can't control an urge to chaff him too, it later turns out that what Byomkesh had told was true, at least for that story. Ajit also writes that the outer appearance of Byomkesh won't do much to suggest anything out of the ordinary, but if he is cornered, he comes out of his shell and then his words and actions become something to be reckoned with. He calls himself a "Satyanweshi'' (or the truth-seeker), and dislikes it when people call him a detective, perhaps to avoid the negative connotations of professionalism likely to be associated with the term private detective. However, Ajit insists that even though Byomkesh dislikes the moniker, he knows very well that he is indeed one.

He often quotes Tagore to explain a certain situation to Ajit; in the later stories we find that the nonsense poems of Abol Tabol by Sukumar Ray too had attracted his interest. He is an avid reader of Mahabharata which we discover in *The Will That Vanished*. He never discloses the actual specifics of an ongoing

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case to Ajit until the very end (*Amriter Mrityu* being one exception), but occasionally drops subtle hints, which however fails to satisfy the curiosity of the latter in most cases. Since Byomkesh isn't interested in cases involving petty thefts or murders as they don't provide much space to exercise his intelligence, most of the times he remains at home idling away his time in newspapers and his personal library. He ascribes this to brilliant criminals being few and far between. He often paces his room relentlessly while cogitating on a mystery, consuming endless number of cigarettes. He knows that sound contribution from the police is essential to solving any case, and hence maintains a cordial relation with most police officers. When this doesn't work out, for example in *Arthonamortham*, finding that the officer in charge is adverse to him, Byomkesh blandishes him to elicit a thorough description of the entire event.

Although he is supposed to determine the culprit and hand him (or her) to the police, Byomkesh refrains from doing so on more than one occasion. In *Adim Ripu*, he lets the murderer go scot-free, stating that even criminals have a right to freedom on the auspicious day of their nation's freedom (the timeline of the said story coincides with the last phase of Indian independence movement) and concluding that the knowledge of his parentage obviates having him to go through any further punishment. In *Rokter Dag*, he lets the murderer off on moral grounds, arguing that the act, while not acceptable in the eyes of the law, works for the greater good and hence he is worthy of pardon. He repeats this act in *Hneyalir Chhondo* and *Achin Pakhi*.

Written long before Satyajit Ray's Feluda series, Saradindu Bandyopadhyay's Byomkesh Bakshi mysteries heralded a new era in Bengali popular fiction. Set in the old-world Calcutta of the Raj, these stories featuring the astute investigator and his chronicler friend Ajit has one major difference: unlike other detectives (Hercule Poirot and Miss Jane Marple in Agatha Christie’s detective fiction), Byomkesh was a family man - in the

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course of his stories, Byomkesh, the Satyanashi fell in love with and finally married his beloved Satyaboti. On another register, we have those crime thrillers in Bengali which do not have the same recognition as Satyajit Ray's 'Feluda' or Sharadindu Bandyapadhyay's 'Byomkesh' series. These crime thrillers were published in plentiful numbers with their grotesquely illustrated covers, cheap quality printing, cheap paper and lowly priced too. They were a huge hit, especially amongst the adolescent age group even a decade ago. The books no longer exist in significant proportions, but they have left a series of questions relevant for cultural study: what made them successful in their good old days; how were the images of the crime, chase, violence and so on portrayed; how did they relate to the tradition of pulp fiction in the west; what were the local inventions of technique in terms of narrating a crime thriller, if any; and how did they imbibe the pulse of their time.

In most of the stories, Byomkesh depends more on instinct and intuition when concrete proof is unavailable. Sharadindu never expresses it explicitly through Ajit; however in *Seemanto-heera* Sir Digindranarayan Roy mentions it while he pretends to make an analysis of Byomkesh's faculties from his appearance only. Ajit visibly is unable to agree with the fact that intuition can supplant material proof, though he acquiesces after Byomkesh does solve the case. In *Bahnni-Patanga,* we see that Byomkesh is somewhat perplexed by the seemingly trivial fact that in a painting depicting Dushmanta stealing a glance at Shakuntala, the artist had chosen to paint the iris of the latter in blue. Based on this fact alone, he constructs the entire case, which we later we find to be accurate.

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IV

"Construct" and Detection Methodology of the Sleuth on the Baker Street

Between Edgar Allan Poe's invention of the detective story with *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* in 1841 and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's first Sherlock Holmes story *A Study in Scarlet* in 1887, chance and coincidence played a large part in crime fiction. Nevertheless, Conan Doyle resolved that his detective would solve his cases using reason. He modeled Holmes on Poe's Dupin and made Sherlock Holmes a man of science and an innovator of forensic methods. Holmes is so much at the forefront of detection that he has authored several monographs on crime-solving techniques. In most cases, the well-read Conan Doyle has Holmes use methods years before the official police forces in both Britain and America get around to them. The result was 60 stories in which logic, deduction, and science dominate the scene.

Sherlock Holmes was quick to realize the value of fingerprint evidence. The first case in which fingerprints are mentioned is *The Sign of Four*, published in 1890, and he's still using them 36 years later in the 55th story *The Three Gables* (1926). Scotland Yard did not begin to use fingerprints until 1901. It is interesting to note that Conan Doyle chose to have Holmes use fingerprints but not bertillonage (also called anthropometry), the system of identification by measuring twelve characteristics of the body. That system was originated by Alphonse Bertillon in Paris. The two methods competed for forensic ascendancy for many years. The astute Conan Doyle picked the eventual winner.

As the author of a monograph entitled "The Typewriter and its Relation to Crime," Holmes was of course an innovator in the analysis of typewritten documents. In one case involving a

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typewriter, *A Case of Identity* (1891), only Holmes realized the importance of the fact that all the letters received by Mary Sutherland from Hosmer Angel were typewritten—even his name is typed and no signature is applied. This observation leads Holmes to the culprit. By obtaining a typewritten note from his suspect, Holmes brilliantly analyses the idiosyncrasies of the man's typewriter. In the United States, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) started a Document Section soon after its crime lab opened in 1932. Holmes's work preceded this by forty years.

Conan Doyle, a true believer in handwriting analysis, exaggerates Holmes's abilities to interpret documents. Holmes is able to tell gender, make deductions about the character of the writer, and even compare two samples of writing and deduce whether the persons are related. This is another area where Holmes has written a monograph (on the dating of documents). Handwritten documents figure in nine stories. In *The Reigate Squires*, Holmes observes that two related people wrote the incriminating note jointly. This allows him to quickly deduce that the Cunninghams, father and son, are the guilty parties. In *The Norwood Builder*, Holmes can tell that Jonas Oldacre has written his will while riding on a train. Reasoning that no one would write such an important document on a train, Holmes is persuaded that the will is fraudulent. So immediately at the beginning of the case he is hot on the trail of the culprit. Holmes also uses footprint analysis to identify culprits throughout his fictional career, from the very first story to the 57th story (*The Lion's Mane* published in 1926). About 29 of the 60 stories include footprint evidence. The *Boscombe Valley Mystery* is solved almost entirely by footprint analysis. Holmes analyses footprints on quite a variety of surfaces: clay soil, snow, carpet, dust, mud, blood, ashes, and even a curtain. Yet another one of Sherlock Holmes's monographs is on the topic ("The tracing of footsteps, with some remarks upon the uses of Plaster of Paris as a preserver of impresses").

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Sherlock Holmes solves a variety of ciphers. In *The "Gloria Scott"* he deduces that in the message that frightens Old Trevor every third word is to be read. A similar system was used in the American Civil War. It was also how young listeners of the Captain Midnight radio show in the 1940s used their decoder rings to get information about upcoming programs. In *The Valley of Fear*, Holmes has a man planted inside Professor Moriarty's organization. When he receives an encoded message Holmes must first realize that the cipher uses a book. After deducing which book he is able to retrieve the message. This is exactly how Benedict Arnold sent information to the British about General George Washington's troop movements. Holmes's most successful use of cryptology occurs in *The Dancing Men*. His analysis of the stick figure men left as messages is done by frequency analysis, starting with "e" as the most common letter. Conan Doyle is again following Poe who earlier used the same idea in *The Gold Bug* (1843). Holmes's monograph on cryptology analyses 160 separate ciphers.

Conan Doyle provides us with an interesting array of dog stories and analyses. The most famous line in all the sixty stories, spoken by Inspector Gregory in *Silver Blaze*, is "The dog did nothing in the night-time." When Holmes directs Gregory's attention to "the curious incident of the dog in the night-time," Gregory is puzzled by this enigmatic clue. Only Holmes seems to realize that the dog should have done something. Why did the dog make no noise when the horse, Silver Blaze, was led out of the stable in the dead of night? Inspector Gregory may be slow to catch on, but Sherlock Holmes is immediately suspicious of the horse's trainer, John Straker. In *Shoscombe Old Place*, we find exactly the opposite behavior by a dog. Lady Beatrice Falder's dog snarled when he should not have. This time the dog doing something was the key to the solution. When Holmes took the dog near his mistress's carriage, the dog knew that someone was impersonating his mistress. In two other cases Holmes employs dogs to follow the movements of people. In *The Sign of Four*,

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Toby initially fails to follow the odor of creosote to find Tonga, the pygmy from the Andaman Islands. In *The Missing Three Quarter*, the dog Pompey successfully tracks Godfrey Staunton by the smell of aniseed. And of course, Holmes mentions yet another monograph on the use of dogs in detective work.

The Sherlock Holmes stories have presented a phenomenon of universal appeal. The master detective employing observation, deductive reasoning, and scientific knowledge has fascinated the young and the old, the rich and the poor. Somerset Maugham has written of the great admiration of Doyle and Holmes by the intelligentsia. Sherlock Holmes has appeared in 60 narratives (56 short stories and 4 full length novels) published between1887 and 1927. The stories have enjoyed enormous international popularity down through the years. Scores of articles, essays, and books have been written analyzing the stories, their origin and the characters of both Holmes and Dr. Watson. A number of "Holmesian" clubs are in existence of which the 'Baker Street Irregulars" is the most famous. President Franklin Roosevelt, a Holmes fan, is reported to have christened the Intelligence Department "Baker Street" during the Second World War. Even in the present space age there is little indication that the public affection for the "Holmesian" lore is about to die out. This current interest is evidenced by literature to be found in a diverse array of publications. The literature can be found in university publications, professional journals, newspaper feature articles, and even as full page color cartoons in the *Playboy* magazine.

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