



Portrayal Of Society In Shibram Chakraborty's Literature

Susmita Saha^{1*}, Dr. Prasanta Chakraborty²

^{1*}Research Scholar, Department of Bengali, Cotton University, Guwahati, Assam, India

²Associate Professor, Department of Bengali, Cotton University, Guwahati, Assam, India

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	<p>This paper examines the portrayal of society in the literature of Shibram Chakraborty, a prominent Bengali writer known for his unique blend of humour, satire, and social consciousness. Writing in the post-First World War period, Shibram Chakraborty was deeply influenced by socialism, humanism, rationalism, Gandhian thought, and communism. His literary works reflect the social realities of his time, including blind faith, superstition, the education system, religious hypocrisy, and the lived experiences of the middle class. Through close readings of selected stories such as <i>Debotar Jonmo</i>, <i>Deshor Modhye Niruddesh</i>, <i>Shikkhadan</i>, and <i>Kolkatar Halchâl</i>, the study highlights how humour functions not merely as entertainment but as a powerful tool for social critique.</p> <p>The paper also explores Shibram Chakraborty's depiction of Kolkata as a living social space shaped by contradictions, modernity and tradition, rationality and superstition, chaos and vitality. His narratives reveal how ordinary people respond to fear, insecurity, and social pressure, often oscillating between scientific reasoning and blind belief. The discussion further shows that Shibram does not impose ideological conclusions on readers; instead, he encourages reflection by presenting social issues through irony and satire.</p> <p>Overall, the study argues that Shibram Chakraborty's literature offers a realistic, humane, and rational portrayal of society, making his humorous writings socially relevant and intellectually significant in the context of modern Bengali literature.</p> <p>Keywords: Shibram Chakraborty, Bengali Humorous Literature, Social Consciousness, Satire and Realism, Kolkata in Literature, Rationalism and Superstition, etc.</p>

Introduction

Shibram Chakraborty (1921–1980) occupies a distinctive position in modern Bengali literature for his unique use of humour as a medium of serious social reflection. Although he is primarily remembered as a humourist, his writings go far beyond mere entertainment. Beneath the surface of laughter and irony lies a deep engagement with the social, cultural, and moral realities of his time. Writing in the post-First World War period, Shibram Chakraborty emerged during an era marked by new realism in Bengali literature, when socialist thought, humanism, Gandhian ideology, and communism began to exert a strong influence on literary expression.

The socio-political context in which Shibram Chakraborty wrote was turbulent and transformative. Events such as the Second World War, the Partition of India, refugee crises, famine, and rapid urbanisation shaped the collective consciousness of society. These historical developments did not always appear directly in his stories; instead, their impact is reflected in the changing mindset, values, and contradictions of middle-class life. Shibram Chakraborty focused on ordinary people and their everyday experiences, revealing their hopes, fears, weaknesses, hypocrisies, and irrational beliefs with sharp observation and subtle satire.

A significant aspect of his writing is his critique of blind faith and superstition, especially in urban society. Stories such as *Debotar Jonmo* demonstrate how fear, insecurity, and social conditioning can transform rational individuals into believers in superstition. Similarly, his works on education, such as *Shikkhadan*, question rote learning and expose the limitations of an education system that prioritises imitation over intellectual growth. Through these narratives, Shibram Chakraborty highlights the need for rational thinking, self-awareness, and social responsibility.

Another major dimension of his literature is the portrayal of Kolkata. The city appears repeatedly in his works as a living, dynamic entity—full of chaos, vitality, contradictions, and humour. Kolkata is not merely a backdrop but an active presence that shapes characters and social interactions. Shibram's deep affection for the city, combined with his critical civic sense, allows him to present both its flaws and its vibrancy with honesty and warmth.

This study seeks to analyse how Shibram Chakraborty's humorous narratives function as a powerful vehicle for social criticism. By examining selected stories, the paper aims to show that his literature reflects a rich blend of realism, satire, and humanism, making his contribution to Bengali literature both socially significant and enduring.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it highlights the social, cultural, and ideological dimensions of Shibram Chakraborty's literature, which has often been narrowly categorised as merely humorous writing. By analysing his selected stories, the research establishes that humour in Shibram Chakraborty's works functions as a serious literary tool for examining social realities rather than as an end. This approach helps to reassess his position in modern Bengali literature as a socially conscious writer deeply engaged with human problems and collective experiences.

The study is important for understanding how social consciousness, rationalism, and humanism are embedded within everyday narratives. Shibram Chakraborty's treatment of blind faith, superstition, religion, education, and social inequality reflects the tensions between modern scientific thinking and traditional belief systems. By focusing on these issues, the research sheds light on the psychological and social forces that shape individual behaviour, especially within the middle-class urban milieu of twentieth-century Bengal.

Another significant contribution of this study lies in its analysis of Kolkata as a social space. The city is not portrayed merely as a background but as a dynamic entity that influences attitudes, values, and lifestyles. The research demonstrates how Shibram Chakraborty captured the contradictions of Kolkata—modernity and backwardness, chaos and vitality—through satire and irony. This helps readers and scholars better understand urban life and its impact on literary representation.

The study is also valuable for literary scholarship because it connects Shibram Chakraborty's writings with broader intellectual movements such as socialism, Gandhian thought, and modern rationalism. It shows how his works reflect contemporary debates on equality, education, and humanity without imposing rigid ideological conclusions on the reader.

Overall, this research contributes to a deeper appreciation of Shibram Chakraborty's literary achievement and encourages further critical engagement with humour as a meaningful mode of social critique in Bengali literature.

Description:

Shibram Chakraborty (1921 - 1980) was mainly known for his humorous literary creations. Humorous Shibram Chakraborty also had a special influence as a socialist beside humour. He played a special role in social consciousness. He was always conscious of people and society. When Shibram Chakraborty started writing, the situation in the country was tense and terrible. Many social issues are included in his writing. Like the Second World War, the partition of the country, refugees, various superstitions, and blind beliefs. The central theme of Shibram Chakraborty's stories is people. The background of his stories is the life history of the middle class. Shibram Chakraborty has exposed the hopes and aspirations, weaknesses, superstitions and blind beliefs, opportunistic meanness and irrational sentimentality, self-deception and hypocrisy of the middle-class people in his stories. Critics' views go as follows:

"Sahityik shibramer jonmoi hoyeche Pratham mahajuddhattor bangla sahityer notun bastabbader jage jokhon bangla sahitye samyabader durdomoniyo pravab shuru hoye geche, shromik darodi o banchitader bedonay manobik prasarito hote shuru hoyeche aar sarbopori gandhibad aar communism. adhyamtikota aar jorobaditar nirikhe vabishyat Swadhin samajer sanskriti o sovyotar bihcar cholchhe..."¹

("The birth of the writer Shibram took place in the era of new realism in Bengali literature after the First World War, when the indomitable influence of socialism had begun to take hold in Bengali literature. Human sensitivity was expanding in response to the suffering of workers, the poor, and the oppressed, and above all, Gandhian thought, and Communism were shaping debates on the future of the culture and civilisation of a free society, viewed in the light of spirituality and rationalism.")

At that time, Shibram Chakraborty created a stir with his idea of socialism, humanity and spirituality. In the same vein, several selected stories are discussed here across a few dimensions.

The story 'Debotar jonmo' (The birth of God), written by Shibram Chakraborty, addresses blind faith and superstition. The stories all about human insecurity and fear (like the fear of epidemics) often lead to the creation of superstitions. A realistic picture of society is portrayed here. He constructed a narrative of how a roadside stone transforms into a deity. The narrator repeatedly trips over a stone while walking on the path. Irritated by this daily occurrence, the narrator picks up the stone and places it by the roadside. However, one day it is discovered that the stone has been planted at the base of a peepal tree. As the narrator passes by each day, he observes the stone gradually changing its form. With flowers and wood-apple leaves, a deity is formally 'born' and worship starts. However, the disease of smallpox played a significant role in this

transformation from a stone to a God. Common people, feeling helpless against smallpox, took refuge in the deity to protect themselves from the disease. We have also seen earning money in the name of religion or God by taking advantage of the ignorance, blind faith, and religious weaknesses of common people in Parashuram's story, 'Shree Shree Siddheshwari Limited'. If the story had ended with the birth of the god, we would have gotten nothing but humour or fun from it. But the outbreak of smallpox brings a different dimension to the story. Moreover, the significance of the story gets a different dimension in the context of Kolkata. Through the incident of the birth of a god with commercial cleverness in the heart of crowded Kolkata, the cultural centre of 20th century Indian and Bengali society, Shibram points a finger at urban cunningness. He shows that, like a hidden stream, there is a rural backward pull inside the city. There is nothing abnormal in helpless, superstitious people bowing their heads to a supernatural god to save themselves from a deadly disease. But when a conscious, superstition-free, science-minded person surrenders to that deity even after knowing that it is a stone, then it seems to us that this too is the result of a psychological urge and socially conditioned blind faith.

On the other hand, it is observed that a business has flourished around that stone-turned-deity. As soon as the 'deity' was born, a group of ascetics (sanyasis) arrived, followed gradually by their devotees. Eventually, a temple was built centered on that stone. The author highlights the superstitions of society through the establishment of a common stone. In this connection, Trilokeshwar Shiva writes as follows:

"...Dinke din nuritar morjada barchhe. Ekdin dekhla gotakotok sannyasi ese astana genrechhe, ganjar gandho ebong bombom shobder thhelay okhan diye nak kan banchiye jaoya dushkor."²

("...Day by day, the prestige of nudity is increasing. One day I saw a group of sannyasis arrive and set up a camp; with the stench of cannabis and the barrage of 'bom bom' chants, it became difficult to pass through that place while protecting one's nose and ears.")

While the sanyasi's earnings and the seeking of refuge in a deity are portrayed through a rational lens, the story concludes with another realistic scene. Despite being science-minded, the narrator could not place absolute faith in modern medical science.

"Ei prithibir, ei jiboner, sudur nakshatralok ebong taar baireo bahudha bistrilo antata jagater kototukui amra jani? Kota byaparei ba baiggyanik byakhya dite pari? Jotoi bigyaner dohai pari na keno, sheshe sei oggeyer simante ese sob byaparikei natamukhe chup kore danrate hoy."³

("How much do we really know of this world, of this life, of the distant realm of stars, and even of the many worlds that may extend beyond it? In how many matters can we truly offer a scientific explanation? No matter how loudly we invoke science, in the end we are compelled to stand silent, with bowed heads, at the threshold of the unknown.")

In the end, despite knowing the history of the pebble, the narrator himself surrenders at the feet of the stone deity. Even after receiving the smallpox vaccine, people were dying; therefore, in the end, there was no other way but to take refuge in God. On one hand, the narrator's knowledge of the deity's origin highlights a scientific mindset, but on the other hand, it shows how he places his faith in God out of fear and as a victim of circumstances.

The socially conscious writings of Shibram Chakraborty compel the reader to think. He does not impose his own thoughts on the reader; instead, he provides them with the opportunity to reflect. His primary objective is to bring the minor details and neglected aspects of society to the forefront of the reader's attention.

The story *Desher Modhye Niruddesh* (Lost Within the Country) focuses on the education system. In the story *Desher Modhye Niruddesh*, Shibram Chakraborty satirizes religion and sings the glory of equality. The two main characters of this story are Harshabardhan and Gobardhan. Harshabardhan and Gobardhan donate one lakh rupees to Haru for performing religious activities. The main objective of providing this money was social welfare; however, it had to be done in a secular manner. Therefore, after considering all aspects, Haru eventually spends the money to build public toilets.

"Jaai korte chai, sarba dharma samonwoy aar hoy na. tachhara pashapashi mandir, maszeed, girja gorle ekdin hoyto maramari lathhalathhio bendhe jete pare. Taai onek vebe chinte ei paykhanai baniyechhi. Sobai asche ekhane. Asbe chirodin."⁴

("What I want to do is not interfaith harmony. Besides, if temples, mosques, and churches stand side by side, one day there may well be fighting and even lathi-charging. So, after much thought and consideration, I have built this public toilet instead. Everyone comes here. They will keep coming forever.")

In other words, if a temple, mosque, or church is established, it will not remain secular. Rather, people of other religions will be deprived of entry. Therefore, it is ultimately decided that whether it is a temple or a mosque, all religious places will have their limitations. Consequently, the decision was made to build toilets because they are completely free from the bonds of religion. In this way, Shibram Chakraborty sought to establish equality and humanity within society.

He discussed various important aspects, one of which is education. Building a society is impossible without proper education. To provide education, an appropriate teaching methodology is required. In the story 'Shikkhadan' (The Imparting of Education), written by Shibram Chakraborty, he satirized rote learning (memorization). According to him, the success of education is, or should be, expressed through practical actions and work. Education is not possible through mere memorization alone. At the very beginning of the story, regarding the problems of education, he writes as follows:

“Shikshar samasya nanabidho. Shiksha debar samasya, shiksha paoar samasya ebong shikshadan korte giye shikshalav kora arek samasya.”⁵

“The problems of education are many: the problem of imparting education, the problem of receiving education, and another problem—acquiring education while attempting to teach it.”

The responsibility of educating an uneducated and illiterate boy named Partha falls upon the narrator. Partha has no mind for studies; therefore, he cannot memorize lessons. Seeing his inability to memorize, the ‘Shikshaguru’ (teacher) adopts a new method and prepares to teach him by having him copy writing. Everyone naturally possesses the curiosity to be able to write their own name. Thus, he is first asked to write his name. Partha then begins to write with deep concentration. After a great deal of hard work, Partha started writing exactly as it was shown to him. However, knowledge gained through imitation is not enduring. Although Partha learned to write, that knowledge was merely superficial and not from the heart. Using his skill of forging signatures, Partha withdrew money belonging to the Bank President and was eventually caught for his crime.

This story teaches us that education does not mean imitation or copying. Education means the transformation of thoughts and the formation of the intellect. Through this story, Shibram Chakraborty wanted to convey that today's education system leans more towards imitation rather than giving importance to the realization of personality. Shibram Chakraborty said as follows:

“Shikshar kono rajpath nei. Sarajibon-e hocche shiksha pabar jonyo. Shikshalav- e amader golokdham, sotti-e; kintu tar pathta hocche golokdhandhar. Se-pather oligoli, ghor pyanch sob-e amar kachhe rahasyomay.”⁶

“There is no royal road to education. One must strive throughout one's life to attain it. In learning lies our Golokdham, truly, but the path to it is a maze. The by-lanes, twists, and turns of that path are all mysterious to me.”

Shibram Chakraborty always questioned the education system. Regarding the method of imparting education, he followed the path of Rabindranath Thakur. A satirical perspective towards the education system is also observed in Rabindranath Thakur's story ‘Tota Kahini’ (The Parrot's Tale).

A large part of the social fabric in his writings is occupied by Kolkata. At the root of Shibram's sharp civic sense and social consciousness lies the great city of Kolkata. Kolkata is intertwined layer by layer in his stories, sometimes as a backdrop, sometimes as the subject. While places like Japan, Italy, Ghatshila, Malda, and Bongaon are mentioned in his stories, Kolkata remains at the centre. Shibram Chakraborty loved Kolkata his entire life. Thus, while writing literature, the warmth of this love and a spontaneous feeling of affection are noticeable.

Various political movements, the Second World War, famine, riots, the Partition of India, independence, the refugee crisis, and numerous changes have swept over the heart of changing Kolkata. Such events do not have much prominence in Shibram Chakraborty's stories, because his stories belong to a different genre. However, the changes in the mindset, ideals, and customs of Kolkata's middle class have left their mark on his stories. Shibram Chakraborty has presented the ways of old Kolkata and modern Kolkata in his works.

Despite the oddity and heartlessness of Kolkata. Kolkata is Shibram's garden of youth, Varanasi of old age. Despite thousands of problems like piles of garbage, potholes, blockades, processions, hanging like bats on trams and buses, traffic jams, beggar problems, food adulteration, manhole problems, etc. Kolkata's intense speed and incessant activity have found expression in the creativity of Shibram Chakraborty in an ever-renewing way.

Shibram Chakraborty portrayed the image of the city in the story ‘Kolkatar Halchâl’. It mentions Kolkata's transport, chaos, and housing. Behind the social conditions of that era, one finds a glimpse of several positive outlooks on life. Not only in ‘Kolkatar Halchâl,’ but the diverse picture of Kolkata emerges repeatedly in various works of Shibram Chakraborty.

In the story ‘Kolkatar Halchâl’, Shibram Chakraborty has presented the landscape of old and modern Kolkata in a new light. To adopt this new approach, he relied on the perceptions of three young outsiders in Kolkata. These three youths are Harshabardhan, Gobardhan, and Kanchan. Furthermore, the author believed that portraying the strange lifestyle of Kolkata and its people is best achieved through the eyes of outsiders. Through the perspective of Harshabardhan and Gobardhan, who arrived from Assam, a different version of Kolkata is revealed. From ‘Kolkatar Halchâl’ we learn that Harsha Vardhan and Govardhan, who arrived from Assam, came knowing about Kolkata's motor cars, big buildings, bioscopes and talkies (sound films). They also know that people in Kolkata are not sociable, and don't keep news of their neighbours. The absence of their Kolkata-based employee at the station makes them believe that truly the people of Kolkata are unsociable. Again, seeing the overflowing people on their rented bus, Harsha Vardhan is forced to change his mind: “I have not seen such sociable people in the world.” They are so sociable that they don't even get peace sitting at home. They only know about husking rice, but here they are mesmerized to learn that hair is cut not by a barber, but in a ‘shop’. Like the houses here, the boys are all ‘branded’. It occurred to Harshavardhan-Govardhan that the easy way to identify the average four or five to fourteen or fifteen children of so many people is by number. The deep social truth hidden behind the impossible laughter of this is that the matter of family planning is merely a paper rule, even in the heart of Kolkata itself.

the other side is reflected in the story ‘Parshir Maya’ (The neighbour's affection). In it, one neighbour comes to speak to the other after nine years, only upon hearing that the latter is leaving their house. The

conversation becomes so emotional that they call each other by the wrong names. The feeling is such that one person's absence is unbearable to the other. Yet, if for any reason the house-leaving gets stalled, both stop speaking to each other again.

They were fascinated by the diverse activities of Kolkata's society and its people. Elements such as the crowded transport, unclean streets, and overpopulation find their place in this story. Although the story depicts these various problems of the city, the characters created by Shibram Chakraborty loved Kolkata purely and unconditionally. The bustling, active life of Kolkata fascinated Shibram Chakraborty time and again. Regarding this, a critic aptly remarked as follows:

"tanr sahitye ei shohorer pranobanta pratikriti tanr samaj chetanari fasol."⁵

("In his literature, this vibrant portrayal of the city is the harvest of his social consciousness.")

Kolkata did not just come as a funny subject in Shibram's stories; in some stories, the unfamiliar form of the familiar Kolkata also flashes across the mind. Harsha Vardhan thought of a banana peel as 'one of Kolkata's vehicles'. One can ride on its back for free and go a long way in an instant. Govardhan's idea is, 'Maybe it's kept for those who cannot go by motor car.' Banana peels lying on the road are a daily scene in Kolkata. Harshabardhan can explain falling by calling Dharmatala 'Dharam-tala' (A place to fall) all he wants. Again, a crowded bus is a familiar character trait of Kolkata. In the story 'Moi Niye Hoi Choi' (Hubbub over a Ladder), a different Kolkata emerges through the conversations and actions of various people centred around a ladder inside a bus.

In this connection, the critic said as follows:

"hasir golpo-o je kokhono samajik o samratik samasya samwandhe amader sochetan korte pare eguli tar-e drishtanta."⁶

("They are examples of how humorous stories, too, can sometimes make us aware of social and imperial problems.")

It appears from the above discussion that various social themes have found a place in Shibram Chakraborty's writings. From blind faith and superstitions to the contemporary education system and even the subject of religious instruction, he has presented these topics eloquently in his stories. Furthermore, a detailed portrayal of the social life of Kolkata, the central hub of West Bengal, has been integrated into his narratives. These descriptions of the diverse social landscape are entirely born out of the author's personal experiences. While depicting society, his stories have not only been enriched with literary flavour but have also become infused with modern rationalism.

Shibram Chakraborty composed life-like literature by focusing on the variety and contradictions of life. His harsh realism, knowledge of human life, and sharp observation always revolved around people. This is why it was possible to identify the inconsistencies and abnormalities of human life. As a result, his stories became full of fun and amusement.

Findings

The study reveals that Shibram Chakraborty's literature, though humorous in form, is deeply rooted in social realism and critical observation. One of the most significant findings is that humour functions as a medium of social awareness, enabling the author to expose superstition, blind faith, hypocrisy, and irrational behaviour without moralising or preaching. His stories demonstrate how fear, insecurity, and social conditioning often overpower rational and scientific thinking, even among educated individuals.

Another important finding is that human beings remain the central concern of Shibram Chakraborty's narratives. Whether dealing with religion, education, or urban life, his focus remains on how individuals respond to social pressures. Stories such as *Debotar Jonmo* show how helplessness during epidemics leads to the creation and commercialisation of faith, while *Shikkhadan* exposes the flaws of an education system dependent on imitation rather than intellectual growth.

The study also finds that Kolkata occupies a vital position in his literary imagination. The city is portrayed as vibrant, chaotic, and contradictory. Shibram Chakraborty captures both the liveliness and the disorder of urban life, revealing how social change affects middle-class attitudes, values, and behaviour. His depiction of Kolkata is born out of personal experience and strong civic consciousness.

Finally, it is observed that Shibram Chakraborty does not impose ideological conclusions on readers. Instead, he presents situations that invite reflection, allowing readers to form their own understanding of social problems.

Discussion

The discussion highlights that Shibram Chakraborty's humour should be understood as intellectual satire rather than light entertainment. His writing belongs to the tradition of post-First World War Bengali realism, influenced by socialism, humanism, Gandhian ideology, and rationalism. These influences are subtly woven into his narratives, shaping his critique of society without turning his stories into political propaganda.

A major aspect of his social critique is the exposure of superstition and blind belief. In *Debotar Jonmo*, the transformation of a roadside stone into a deity reflects how fear and ignorance can lead to the construction of religious authority. The story becomes more complex when even the science-minded narrator ultimately

surrenders to the deity, revealing the psychological conflict between rational thought and existential fear. This duality reflects the broader condition of society, where scientific progress coexists with deep-rooted superstition.

Religion, in Shibram Chakraborty's stories, is often examined from the perspective of human equality and secularism. In *Deshar Modhye Niruddesh*, the decision to build a public toilet instead of religious institutions becomes a powerful symbol of secular welfare. The discussion shows that the author questions the divisive nature of religious spaces and promotes practical humanity over symbolic harmony.

Education forms another critical area of discussion. Through *Shikkhadan*, Shibram Chakraborty criticises rote learning and exposes how mechanical education fails to build moral responsibility or intellectual depth. The story demonstrates that knowledge gained through imitation can lead to misuse, suggesting the urgent need for educational reform. His ideas align with Rabindranath Tagore's critique of rigid education systems.

The portrayal of Kolkata further deepens the discussion. The city is shown not only as a physical space but as a psychological and cultural entity. Through the eyes of outsiders, Shibram Chakraborty presents a layered image of Kolkata, its sociability, congestion, contradictions, and resilience. While large historical events like Partition and famine remain in the background, their impact is visible in changing social attitudes and urban behaviour.

Thus, the discussion establishes that Shibram Chakraborty's literature reflects a balanced blend of realism, satire, and empathy, making his social critique both accessible and profound.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study demonstrates that Shibram Chakraborty's literary works offer a rich and realistic portrayal of society, using humour as a powerful instrument of critique. His stories address a wide range of social issues, including blind faith, superstition, flawed education systems, religious intolerance, and the complexities of urban life. Rather than delivering direct moral lessons, he allows social realities to unfold naturally, encouraging readers to reflect and question.

Shibram Chakraborty's depiction of Kolkata stands out as one of his most enduring contributions. The city emerges as a living organism, shaped by contradictions, struggles, and vitality. His affectionate yet critical portrayal reveals deep social consciousness and civic responsibility. Through everyday incidents and ordinary characters, he captures the changing dynamics of middle-class life in twentieth-century Bengal.

Ultimately, Shibram Chakraborty succeeds in transforming humour into a serious literary mode capable of expressing human suffering, social contradictions, and intellectual inquiry. His writings remain relevant because they address fundamental human tendencies, fear, belief, imitation, and hypocrisy, within specific social contexts. This study affirms that Shibram Chakraborty's literature is not only entertaining but also socially meaningful, intellectually engaging, and essential to the understanding of modern Bengali literary tradition.

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