

Biography of Annada Sankar Ray

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Annada Sankar Ray (15 March 1904-28 October 2002): Novelist, essayist, poet and thinker. He is widely known as the last representative of the intelligentsia of the Bengal Renaissance of the nineteenth century. Annada Sankar Ray was born in a Shakta family of Dhenkanal, a native state of Orissa. His father was Nimaicharan Ray and mother was Hemnalini. His ancestral home was in Kotarang village under Hugli district of West Bengal. They came to work in Dhenkanal and settled down over there.

The ancestors of Annada Sankar were liberal, humanist and secular zaminder. The family was culturally rich and they cultivated literary activities. His grandfather Srinath Ray, father Nimaicharan Ray and his uncle Harishchandra Ray were all devoted to literature and patrons of art and culture. Together with a friend, Nimaicharan translated 'Sri Chaitanya Charitamrita' in Oriya language. Annada Sankar's mother Hemnalini hailed from a noted family of Katak. She was inclined in Vaishnavism. Annada Sankar spent his childhood in a blended culture of east and west.

Annada Sankar Ray started his education in the primary school of Dhenkanal. In 1921, he passed Matriculation examination from Dhenkanal High School and got admission in Katak Ravenshaw College under Patna University. In 1923, he stood first in IA examination of Patna University. In 1925, he stood first class first in BA Honors examination in English Literature from Patna University. While studying MA in English, Annada Sankar Ray appeared in ICS examination in 1927 and topped the list of Indian Civil Service examinees. Then he went to England for training. There he studied and received training in the University College of London, Kings College, London School of Economics and London School of Oriental Studies. In leisure period, he traveled to Switzerland, Germany, Italy and France. This travel experience has been reflected in his writings.

Upon completion of training, Annada Sankar Ray returned home in 1929 and joined as an Assistant Magistrate in Baharampur of Murshidabad district. He served in various positions for about eighteen years from 1929 to 1947, spent nine years of his professional life in West Bengal and nine years in East Bengal. During this period he worked in both administrative and judiciary services. In the ranks of Magistrate and Judge, he worked in Murshidabad, Bankura, Rajshahi, Chittagong, Dhaka, Mymensingh, Kushtia, Nadiya, Tripura, Medinipur, Hugli and Howrah districts of undivided Bengal. After the partition of India in 1947, the term of Indian Civil Service ended, and Annada Sankar served as a member of higher level Indian Administrative Service (IAS) in the administrative and judicial department of West Bengal. Following a conflict with the superior authority regarding political and communal issues, he submitted resignation letter in 1950 and got exemption from the position of Secretary, Judicial department in 1951.

After resigning from job, Annada Sankar settled down in Santiniketan. The sacrifice of Bengali people on 21 February 1952 (Language Movement), who fought for the dignity of their mother language made a deep impression on him. Later in 1953, he organized a historic Literary Conference (*Sahitya Mela*) in Santiniketan and invited the renowned writers and intellectuals of East and West Bengal. Accepting his invitation a group of

litterateurs including Qazi Motahar Hossain, Muhammad Monsuruddin, Shamsur Rahman, Kaisul Haque and others from the then East Pakistan attended the conference. In Santiniketan, 'Sahitya Shabha' (literary conference) was held at Annada Sankar's home in a regular basis, and the litterateurs of the ashram would gather there. Besides this, he hosted many scholars from home and abroad in his residence. As a result, an international atmosphere would prevail by the presence of the scholars of different countries with diverse culture and language. During his stay in Santiniketan, Annada Sankar was an active member of 'Visva-Bharati Karma Samiti'. In the late nineteen sixties, he came to stay in Kolkata for family cause and settled down there permanently.

Annada Sankar was a man of versatile genius. He appeared as a writer of Oriya literature at the age of twenty. He wrote his first poem in Oriya language. In his early life, he published a hand-written magazine in Oriya titled *Prova*. Though he was skilled in Bengali, English, Oriya, Sanskrit and Hindi languages, ultimately he chose Bengali as the medium of his literary writings. Annada Sankar came in touch with both Indian and European literature in the library of his home and college. In school, he got the opportunity to read the magazines and journals, such as: *Shishu*, *Sandesh*, *Mouchak*, *Sabujpatra*, *Prabashi*, *Modern Review* etc. At the age of thirteen, he became the subscriber of the magazine *Epiphany*, published from Oxford, and his article would publish in the same magazine.

The magazine *Sabujpatra*, edited by Pramatha Chowdhury was the inspiration of Annada Sankar Ray to be a writer. Rabindranath Tagore and Pramatha Chowdhury were the two major contributors of *Sabujpatra*. Their philosophy of life and literary style made deep impression on Annada Sankar's literary spirit. On the other hand, Tolstoy was his role model. Tolstoy's devotion to truth and Rabindranath's love for beauty made him attracted by them. He translated the story of Tolstoy- 'Three Questions' in Bengali, when he was sixteen years old, and it was published in *Prabasi* in 1920. The topic of his first original writing in Bengali language was on Women Rights and Independence (an appraisal of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's essay *Narir Mulya*), which was published in the distinguished journal *Bharati*. He also wrote articles on similar topics in Oriya language. Besides, Rabindranath himself got impressed to read the article of Annada Sankar on his drama 'Raktakarabi'. Annada Sankar's first published article *Tarunya* (Youthfulness) was appeared in the journal *Bichitra* in 1928, which gave him a footing as an essayist. The travel narrative *Pathe Prabase*, based on the experience of his Europe trip made a significant breakthrough in his literary career and he established himself as a writer in Bengali literature. *Pathe Prabase* was published serially from 1927 to 1929 in the journal *Bichitra*, edited by Upendranath Ganguli. At the same time, his diary *Europar Chithi* (Letter of Europe) was published in the magazine *Mouchak*. Annada Sankar did not belong to any literary group, though he wrote for the magazines *Kollol*, *Kalikalam* and *Parichay* on request of the respective editors. He had a close connection to the writers of *Kollol*, *Kalikalam* era and the pioneers of *Buddhir Mukti Andolan* and *Shikha Group*.

Annada Sankar Ray enriched Bengali literature through his prolific essays, novels, short stories, travel narratives, rhymes, poems, plays, letters and autobiographical essays for about seventy years reflecting his life-long experience. He wrote 22 novels. His first published novel is *Aagun Niye Khela* (Playing with Fire-1930). He wrote the first epic novel of Bengali literature published in six volumes entitled *Satyasatya* (True on the Surface) chronologically named as: *Jaar Jetha Desh* (1932), *Aggyatobash* (1933), *Kalankaboti* (1934), *Dukkhamochan* (1936), *Martyer Swarga* (1940), *Apasaran* (1942). Other prominent novels of Annada Sankar are: *Asamapika* (1931), *Putul Niye Khela*

(1933), *Na* (1951), *Konya* (1953), *Ratna O Srimati* in three volume (1st vol.1956, 2nd vol.1958, 3rd vol.1972), *Sukh* (1961), *Bishalyakarani* (1967), *Trishnar Jol* (1969), *Raaj Atithi* (1978) and *Krantadarshi*, published in four volume (1st vol.1984, 2nd vol.1985, 3rd vol.1985, 4th vol. 1986). His 6-volume epic novel 'Satyasatya' brought a different trend of intellectual novels in Bengali literature. In the vast canvas of this novel, he focused on the complexity of modern life, social, philosophical and political ideas and opinions, modern concept of conjugal life, and a greater perspective of time and space. His universal observation, consciousness regarding the transformation of civilization and humanistic outlook are the inheritance of Rabindranath Tagore. He followed this trend in the novel *Krantadarshi* too. This epic novel completed in four volume surveys the history of nineteenth century from an Indian perspective. It contains the course of events of particular time period, such as: the advent of Second World War to August Movement, the Great Famine of Bengal in the 1940s, the triangle politics of the British and Congress-Muslim League, Hindu-Muslim riots, Partition of India, Quit of the British Raj and the killing of Mahatma Gandhi by the Hindu Maharashtrian. Annada Sankar was the pioneer of 'epic novel' in Bengali. He acquired the concept of 'epic novel' from *Jean Christophe* of Romain Rolland. The technique of Annada Sankar's novel is Monolithic, and multitude of perceptions is his special characteristic in the novels. In addition, he wrote a number of short stories. His remarkable compilation of short stories are: *Prakritir Parihas* (1934), *Du kaan Kata* (1944), *Hasonsakhi* (1945), *Monpaban* (1946), *Joubanjvala* (1950), *Kaminikanchan* (1954), *Ruper Dai* (1958), *Galpo* (1960), *Katha* (1971), *Kahini* (1980), *Shreshtha Galpo* (1984) and *Galposamagra* (1999).

Annada Sankar's literary creation is multifarious. His prolific writings crossed the time both in style and his inner vision, characterized by his multifaceted thoughts and ideas. His prose writings are enriched with diverse topics like history, theory of literature, philosophy, society and culture, politics and the events of contemporary world. As an essayist, Annada Sankar was the perfect successor of Bankim Chandra and Rabindranath. In spite of being a writer of Rabindra era, his style was different. He was the symbol of liberal thinking, idealism and virtuousness. Throughout his life, he wrote against the partition of India, riots and communalism. His essays are the synthesis of imagination and rationalism, love and conscience, devotion to native country, universal thinking and his scientific attitude.

His mentionable essays are: *Tarunya* (1928), *Aamra* (1937), *Jeebanshilpi* (1941), *Ishara* (1943), *Binur Boi* (First part-1944), *Jeeyan Kathi* (1949), *Deshkalpatra* (1949), *Protyay* (1951), *Notun Kore Bancha* (1953), *Adhunikata* (1953), *Sahitye Sangkat* (1955), *Kanthaswar* (1956), *Rabindranath* (1962), *Prabandha* (1964), *Khola Mon O Khola Daroja* (1967), *Art* (1968), *Gandhi* (1970), *Pran Raksa O Bangsha Raksar Adhikar* (1970), *Shubhoday* (1972), *Banglar Renaissance* (1974), *Shiksar Sangkat* (1976), *Kando Priyo Desh* (1976), *Prem O Bondhuta* (1976), *Lalon O Tnar Gaan* (1978), *Chitta Jetha Bhaishunya* (1978), *Bangladeshe* (1979), *Satkahon* (1979), *Tolstoy* (1980), *Swadhinatar Purbabhas* (1980), *Jaatiboira* (1981), *Shiksar Bhabishyat* (1981), *Sanghatir Sangkat* (1984), *Sanskritir Bibartan* (1984), *Shreshtha Prabandha* (1986), *Juktabanger Smriti* (1990), *Jano Bhule Na Jaii* (1992), *Binur Boi* (First and second part jointly-1993), *Sahityiker Jabanbondi* (1996), *Setubandhan* (1996), *Nabboi Periye* (1996), *Bidagdha Manas* (1997), *Muktabanger Smriti* (1998), *Jeeban Jouban* (1999), *Rabindranath, Pramatha Chowdhury O Sabujpatra* (1999), *Notun Kore Bhaba* (1999), *Sahitye Sangkat O Anyanya* (2000), *Aamar Kachher Manush* (2001), *Shatabdir Mukhe* (2001), *Aamar Bhalobashar Desh* (2001) etc. In advanced age, his creative, artistic and exquisite

essays got new dimension endowed with sense of justice, morality, rationality and conscience.

The collection of Annada Sankar's rhymes are significant in the context of diverse topics. In early life, he started writing rhymes requested by Rabindranath Tagore. Later on, Buddhadev Basu inspired him to continue it. The themes of his rhymes contain social, political issues as well as the ordinary things, including the small creatures of animal kingdom. Through the rhymes, he pointed out the inconsistency of personal and social life of human being with intense irony, simple humour and genuine fun. He uplifted the neglected folk rhymes (Chhele Bhulano Chhara) to the level of aristocrat literature. Among his rhymes, the most significant one is 'Khoka O Khuku' ('Baby Boy and Baby Girl-1947). It has been tuned by the famous composer Salil Chowdhury and sung by many artists. His painful reaction of the Partition of India has been reflected sharply in this rhyme --*Teler shishi bhaanglo bole/ khukur pare raag karo/Tomra Je Shab Buro Khoka/ Bharat Bhenge Bhaag Karo. Tar Bela?* Many of his rhymes became popular song tuned by the eminent composers. The last rhyme he composed vocally was copied by Surajit Dasgupta. It was published in the Autumn volume of the magazine *Sandesh* in 2002 titled 'Oirabat'. Annada Sankar introduced Limerick in Bengali poem. He is the pioneer of diversification in modern rhymes. Collections of his famous rhymes are: *Urki Dhaner Murki* (1942), *Ranga Dhaner Khoi* (1950), *Dalim Gachhe Mou* (1958), *Shali Dhaner Chnire* (1972), *Ataa Gachhe Tota* (1974), *Hoi Re Babui Hoi* (1977), *Ksir Nadir Kule* (1980), *Hattamalar Deshe* (1980), *Chharasamagra* (First ed. 1981), *Ranga Mathay Chiruni* (First ed. 1985), *Binni Dhaner Khoi* (1989), *Kolkata Panchali* (1992), *Chharasamagra* (Second enlarged ed. 1993), *Saat Bhai Champa* (1994), *Jadu E To Bara Rango* (1994), *Kheyal Khushir Chhara* (1997), *Dol Dol Duluni* (1998) etc.

In between 1922 to 1926, Annada Sankar wrote 14 poems, 22 essays, 1 short story titled 'Swapna' and a number of letters in Oriya language. All these writings were published in the magazines 'Utkal Sahitya', 'Sahakar' and 'Sabita', and later on compiled in a book titled *Sabuj Aksar* (1966). He was associated with the Oriya literary group named 'Sabujdal'. His name is included in 'Sabuj Yug' chapter of Oriya literature. Moreover, the first three chapters of an Oriya novel titled *Basanti* (1931) was written by Annada Sankar. His contribution in Oriya language is being recognized and discussed with due respect.

Annada Sankar Ray wrote in English language also. Most notable writings are: *Bengali Literature* (1942), *Flight and Pursuit* (1968), *Yes, I Saw Gandhi* (1976), *Companion on the Road* (Translation of poems-1976), *A Writer Speaks* (1977), *Woman and Other Stories* (Translation of stories-1977), *An Outline of Indian Culture* (1978), *Aspects of Indian Culture* (1983), *In Retrospect* (1989), *Tolstoy Goethe and Tagore* (1999), *Selected Short Stories* (Translation of stories-1999).

Annada Sankar delivered innumerable speeches on literature, culture, society, education and politics. Some of the speeches are compiled in books. He delivered a few Convocation Lectures in North Bengal University (14 December 1971), Jadavpur University (29 December 1978), Visva-Bharati University (7 April 1989), University of Kalyani (9 May 1989), Kolkata University (17 February 1993) and Rabindra-Bharati University (7 Ma7 1994). He gave these lectures in English and did not translate in Bengali, also did not want his speeches to be translated.

In 1930, Alice Virginia Orndorff, a learned woman of Texas came to India to pursue her study on music. She came in touch with Annada Sankar Ray through the writer Bhabani Mukhopadhyay. Later on, Alice and Annada Sankar got married. During those days, Annada Sankar's pseudonym was 'Leelamoy Ray'. Rabindranath named Alice as 'Leela Ray'. Leela Ray had a great influence on Annada Sankar's life. She was also an author with literary talent, was skilled in various languages and earned fame as a translator. During his work and stay in East Bengal, Annada Sankar had received a clear vision about the society, culture, economy, land system and religious culture of this region. He was keen to Bengali language and compassionate to the Bengali speaking people throughout his life. After the liberation of Bangladesh, Annada Sankar visited Bangladesh two times as a state guest, first time in 1974 and then in 1996.

Annada Sankar Ray is recognized as the best author of post-Rabindra era. He is one of the famous thinkers of contemporary India. His process of thinking is universal and idealist. The experience of Europe brought new dimension in his literary thoughts. His life was an artistic harmony of reality and art, and hence his attitude was both mystic and rational. As a result, his writings are at the same time literary and social, contemporary and universal, subjective and objective, bold and mystic. He got the inspiration of pure art from Rabindranath and Tolstoy, on the other hand, Gandhi's influence made him committed to the people and society. His religious belief was also different. He was a monotheist, accepting the essence of all religions. In the book 'Jeeban Jouban', written at his late age, he mentioned about his philosophy of life. He considered himself as a 'Non-conformist'. He did not follow the customs of traditional religion; rather he had respect for all religions, which he defined as 'Monotheistic Eclectic Hinduism'. He was honest, conscientious, a great humanist and above all, an exceptional genius. He cherished secularist attitude until his death.

Annada Sankar Ray was the founder member and Fellow of Sahitya Akademi in West Bengal. He was the pioneer and Chairman of Paschimbanga Bangla Akademi since its inception. Annada Sankar received various awards for his literary contributions. In 1979, Kolkata University conferred on him 'Jagattarini Award' and Visva-Bharati honored him with 'Deshikottama'. He was awarded Honorary D.Litt by Bardwan University, Rabindra-Bharati University and Jadavpur University. He also received 'Sahitya Akademi Puraskar' (1962), 'Ananda Puraskar' (Twice-1983 and 1994), 'Vidyasagar Puraskar', 'Shiromani Puraskar' (1995), 'Rabindra Puraskar', 'Nazrul Puraskar', and the prestigious 'Zebunnisa Award' of Bangladesh. Annada Sankar died in Kolkata on 28 August 2002.

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