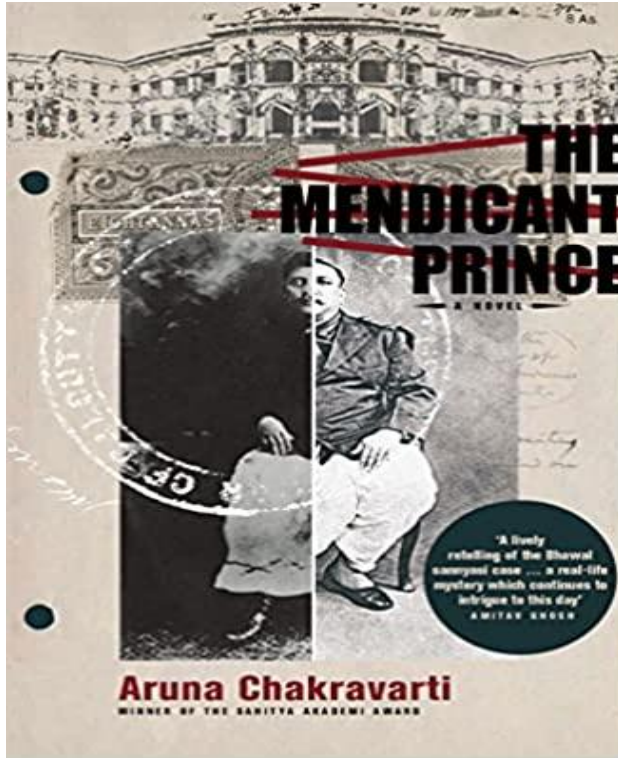


Aruna Chakravarti. (2022). *The Mendicant Prince*, New Delhi: Picador India, 296 pp. ISBN-10-9390742382



*The Mendicant Prince* is an intriguing tale of dual identity and inexplicable quirks of fate. Though claimed to be “a novel” by the author Aruna Chakravarti (1939-), it is the retelling of the very famous “Bhawal Sannyasi Case” that narrates one of the most extraordinary legal cases in Indian history. It is an epic story of war within a household which spills out into the social life of colonial Bengal; and beyond, into the administrative and legal fabric of India during the heyday of nationalism; and then beyond that again, into spirituality and philosophy, legend and folklore, theatre, and cinema. The story of the case is quite well-known but needs to be summarised here to discuss it in the present context.

In the winter of 1909, Ramendra Narayan Roy, the ailing second prince of the Bhawal zamindari, one of the largest and richest estates in Eastern Bengal, proceeded to Darjeeling with his wife Bibhavati, brother-in-law Satyendra Nath, and a retinue of officials and servants, after being advised a change of air by his

physicians. Three weeks later, a telegram from Satyendra Nath arrived at the Bhawal estate, carrying news of the prince's demise and subsequent cremation. Soon peculiar rumours started circulating around Bhawal and the surrounding town. Some said that the prince was poisoned, while others suspected that his body was taken to the burning ghat but not actually cremated. There were also whispers about an incestuous relationship between Bibhavati and her brother.

The story takes a bewildering turn when, twelve years later, in 1921, a sannyasi appeared in Buckland Bund at Sadarghat in Dhaka and settles there for a while. Although he did not offer an identity for himself, soon residents began to identify this half-naked and ash-smearing sannyasi as none other than Ramendra Narayan Roy, the Second Kumar of Bhawal – the man believed to have died twelve years earlier at the age of twenty-six. In due course many more people recognised him and took him to Bhawal in 1922. Ramendra displayed enough familiarity with everything in the *rajbari* (palace), but the family refused to recognise him. The members of his family insisted consistently that Ramendra had died in Darjeeling in 1909. The people who had brought him to the *rajbari* also found it difficult to establish his real identity as he himself did not make any effort in that direction. Later, under pressure from the people, the sannyasi finally disclosed that he was indeed Ramendra Narayan Roy, the owner of one-third of the share of the Bhawal raj. The family immediately dismissed the claim and declared that the sannyasi was an imposter and asked the government to protect them from this “naga sannyasi.” Ramendra's wife, who lived in Calcutta, also consistently refused to recognise him as her husband.

When all efforts for an amicable settlement failed, Ramendra Narayan Roy filed a title suit at the Judge's Court in Dhaka in 1933 where the so-called prince and some family members faced off against Bibhavati and her brother, aided by the British Court of Wards who were keen on maintaining ownership of the zamindari. Many exhibits were produced in support of his identity, including photos, paintings, marks on his body, letters, and statements of acquaintances. Most exhibits proved that the sannyasi was actually Ramendra Narayan Roy, and the learned judge finally passed his judgement on 22 December 1937 identifying him as the co-sharer of the Bhawal raj. However, his wife Bibhavati appealed to the High Court. The High Court upheld the judgement of the district judge. The defendant made a petition to have the case referred to the Privy Council in England, but the High Court turned it down. The breathless legal drama that ensued culminated in an incredible series of events, permanently altering the course of the estate's history. The case would rivet popular attention for several decades as it was unwound in courts from Dhaka and Calcutta (now Kolkata) to London.

Ever since it ended in 1937, the “Bhawal Sannyasi” case caused a sensation and its proceedings mixed with all conceivable gossips were covered in all the

contemporary newspapers. Leaflets, pamphlets, and ballads were printed to satiate the curiosity of the people. “Bhawal Sannyasi” became the subject of songs and ballads, plays, jattras (moving theatres), and movies for many years. In 1975, the director Pijush Basu fictionalised the famous case story and made the Bengali film *Sannyasi Raja*, starring the matinee idol Uttam Kumar in the lead role. In 1977, it was even made into a Telugu film called *Raja Ramesh*. Coming to more recent times, in 2018, Srijit Mukherjee remade the film based on the same story and called it *Ek Je Chhilo Raja*.

Coming to the print media, in 2002, Partha Chatterjee published the well-researched book, *A Princely Imposter? The Strange and Universal History of the Kumar of Bhawal*. This narrative history tells an incredible story replete with courtroom drama, sexual debauchery, family intrigue, and squandered wealth. The story he tells unfolds alongside decades of Indian history. Its plot is shaped by changing gender and class relations and punctuated by critical historical events, including the onset of World War II, the Bengal famine of 1943, and the 1946 Great Calcutta Killings (or the Direct Action Day of 16 August 1946). And by identifying the earliest erosion of colonialism and the growth of nationalist thinking within the organs of colonial power, Chatterjee also gives us a secret history of Indian nationalism.

In 2003, Murad Fyzee’s *A Prince, Poison, and Two Funerals: The Bhawal Sannyasi Case* came out in English. That the interest in the case remains unabated is proved once again when Aruna Chakravarti retells the same story in 2022. In the acknowledgements section she clearly mentions that almost all the facts she used in her book were sourced from Partha Chatterjee’s work which is more scholarly and provides an exhaustive bibliography of English and Bengali books written on the subject.

Though calling her work “a novel,” Chakravarti’s narrative technique is unique. Without giving it a very scholarly garb, she nevertheless gives us all the details of the case. She divides the book into two sections. In Part One, she juxtaposes different points of view through different characters in twelve separate chapters. In Part Two, we have fifteen separate chapters of different length that lead the story to its logical end with Dhara Debi’s narrative in 1946 in Kolkata. As a non-descript woman from a poor family, she was made to marry the *mejo kumar* who was thirty years older than her. Her happiness as the Queen of Bhawal was extremely short-lived and lasted just a little more than three years as her husband died of a heart attack while he was mobbed by crowds while they went to visit a temple.

Instead of considering it as a rehash of a well-known story, I strongly recommend this novel to all kinds of readers – those who like historical fiction, family intrigues, and court room drama too. I found it unputdownable.

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