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THE GENEALOGY OF DETECTION IN BENGALI LITERATURE: FROM VEDIC THOUGHT TO THE SATYANWESHI

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Abstract

This paper traces the long and layered evolution of detection in Bengali literature, situating the modern detective figure within a broader indigenous intellectual and narrative tradition. It begins by examining early forms of "detective consciousness" in Vedic texts, where inquiry, doubt, and the search for hidden truth emerge as foundational modes of thought. Moving through classical Sanskrit narratives and vernacular traditions such as folktales and *mangal-kavya*, the study highlights how practices of inference, disguise, and revelation were integral to storytelling long before the emergence of formal detective fiction. The paper then considers the transformative impact of colonial modernity, particularly the introduction of Western models of policing, rationality, and narrative structure, which shaped early Bengali detective writing in the works of authors like Priyanath Mukhopadhyay and Panchkori Dey. It further explores the expansion and popularization of the genre through writers such as Dinendra Kumar Ray and Hemendra Kumar Roy, who adapted and reimagined detective narratives for diverse readerships. The study culminates in an analysis of Byomkesh Bakshi, created by Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay,

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whose identity as a *satyanweshi* (seeker of truth) synthesizes philosophical inquiry with modern investigative practice. By mapping this genealogy, the paper argues that Bengali detective fiction is not merely a colonial import but a culturally rooted form that integrates indigenous epistemologies with global narrative conventions.

The origins of detective consciousness in Indian intellectual tradition can be traced back to the hymns and speculative passages of the Rig Veda. Although these early texts are not concerned with crime or investigation in the modern sense, they reveal a deep engagement with questioning, causality, and the search for hidden truths. Rather than offering definitive answers, Vedic thought often privileges inquiry itself as a mode of understanding. The Nasadiya Sukta (Hymn of Creation, 10.129) exemplifies this spirit through its strikingly skeptical tone. Instead of presenting a fixed account of creation, it raises a series of probing questions:

> "Who really knows? Who can declare it?
> Whence was it born, and whence comes this creation?
> …He who is in the highest heaven,
> perhaps he knows—or perhaps even he knows not."[1]

This passage foregrounds doubt, ambiguity, and intellectual exploration, suggesting that truth is not always immediately accessible but must be approached through inquiry and reflection.

In this passage, the hymn does not assert a definitive origin of the universe, rather, it emphasizes uncertainty and the limits of knowledge. The repeated questioning—who knows? How did creation happen? —demonstrates an intellectual approach grounded in investigation rather than belief. This enduring emphasis on probing the unknown and interpreting the unseen forms a crucial philosophical foundation for the later emergence of detection as both a method and a literary form in Indian, and eventually Bengali, traditions.

Thus, the roots of detection in Bengali literature lie not in policing or crime-solving, but in a much older and deeper philosophical pursuit of truth. Long before the emergence of the modern detective as a figure associated with law enforcement, Indian intellectual traditions—visible in texts such as the Rig Veda—had already cultivated a mode of inquiry grounded in questioning, interpretation, and the search for underlying reality. This tradition privileged 'jnana' (knowledge) and 'tattva' (truth) over mere acceptance, encouraging a critical engagement with the unknown. Thus when this epistemological impulse later found expression in Bengali literature, it did not simply transform into stories of crime detection; rather, it evolved into narratives centered on uncovering hidden layers of meaning—whether moral, psychological, or social. The detective, therefore, emerges less as an agent of the state and more as an intellectual figure, one who deciphers signs, interprets human behavior, and seeks coherence in apparent disorder. This is most clearly embodied in the figure of Byomkesh Bakshi, who identifies himself not as a detective but as a ' satyanweshi',

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or seeker of truth. His investigations often transcend the mere resolution of crime, delving into the complexities of human motives and ethical dilemmas. In this sense, Bengali detective fiction preserves continuity with earlier philosophical traditions: the act of detection becomes an extension of the age-old quest to understand reality, rather than a narrowly defined procedural task.

The origins of the detective narrative in the Indian context may be traced back to the Rig Veda, where we encounter the figure of Sarama. In this early mythic episode, Sarama—a divine female hound—is entrusted by the gods with the task of locating their stolen cattle, taken away by a group of outsiders known as the Panis. Through her perceptive abilities and determination, she discovers the hidden location of the cattle and leads the gods to their recovery. Although not a detective story in the modern sense, the narrative contains essential elements of detection: loss, concealment, pursuit, and eventual revelation. Sarama's role becomes especially significant when one attempts to construct an indigenous genealogy of the detective figure independent of Western influence. Unlike later colonial and postcolonial models shaped by European traditions, this early instance foregrounds a distinct paradigm. The modern image of the detective—often defined by hyper-rationality, detachment, and a certain masculine authority—owes much to Western prototypes. In contrast, Sarama challenges this model by presenting the earliest "detective" figure in Indian tradition as female. What is particularly striking is the nature of her investigative method: her success derives not solely from logical deduction but also from instinct, intuition, and a sensitivity to hidden realities. These qualities complicate the rigid association of detection with exclusively "masculine" rationality and instead suggest a more integrated epistemology in which intuition and intellect coexist. Moreover, Sarama emerges from a cultural milieu in which the feminine was not marginalized but held a central, generative role. This perspective resonates with Ashis Nandy's formulation of the interplay between *purusha* (the masculine principle) and *prakriti* (the feminine principle) in shaping ideal human consciousness[2]. Within this framework, the detective figure in Bengali literature can be understood not as a derivative of Western masculinity but as part of a broader indigenous tradition that accommodates—and indeed values—the feminine within structures of knowledge and inquiry. Consequently, even later Bengali detectives, however modern or rational they may appear, can be read as inheritors of this deeper cultural logic—one that resists strict binaries between reason and intuition or masculinity and femininity, and instead envisions their synthesis in the pursuit of truth.

In later Sanskrit and vernacular traditions, elements of mystery, concealment, and problem-solving become far more explicit and narratively developed. Texts such as the Katha Sarit Sagara, along with a wide range of regional folk narratives, are replete with episodes involving riddles, disguises, mistaken identities, and cleverly concealed truths. These stories do not present a formal 'detective,' yet they demand from both characters and readers a process of interpretation, inference, and intellectual engagement—skills that lie at the heart of modern detective fiction.

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For instance, in the Katha Sarit Sagara, characters frequently rely on wit and reasoning to uncover hidden realities. In several episodes, disputes are resolved not through direct evidence but through careful observation of behavior and logical inference, reflecting an early form of proto-detective reasoning. As one passage suggests, "Wise men infer the unseen from the seen, as fire is inferred from smoke"[3]Such moments foreground the idea that truth is often concealed beneath appearances and must be deduced through indirect means. Regional folk traditions in Bengal further reinforce this pattern. In numerous oral tales, clever protagonists solve riddles or expose deception through intelligence rather than force, where the testing of wisdom through enigmatic questions becomes a recurring motif. The act of answering correctly is not merely a display of knowledge but a means of accessing hidden truth, making the resolution of riddles analogous to the solving of a mystery.

In medieval Bengal, literary forms such as mangal-kavya and folk ballads continue and deepen the long-standing narrative interest in concealment, deception, and eventual revelation. These texts, though primarily devotional in tone, are far from being simple or linear narratives. They frequently incorporate episodes where truth is hidden beneath layers of disguise, illusion, or misunderstanding, and must be gradually uncovered. In the mangal-kavya tradition—especially in texts like Manasamangal—the idea that truth is concealed beneath deceptive appearances is central to the narrative structure. The goddess Manasa rarely reveals her power directly; instead, she works through misfortune, disguise, and indirect intervention to test human devotion, particularly that of Chand Saudagar. For example, when Chand refuses to worship her, Manasa does not confront him openly. Instead, she brings about a series of calamities—the destruction of his ships, the death of his sons—forcing him into a position where he must gradually recognize her divine authority. The truth of her power is not immediately visible; it is revealed through suffering, signs, and eventual realization.

This indirect mode of revelation is reflected in lines such as:

"দেখিয়া না দেখে চাঁদ, মনেরে করে গর্ব,
অদেখা শক্তির কাছে হারিল শেষ সর্ব।"[4]

(Chand sees, yet does not perceive; in pride he trusts his mind,
Before the unseen power, he loses all in the end.)

Here, the emphasis falls on the inability to perceive truth despite visible signs. The narrative suggests that reality operates beyond what is immediately apparent, and only through experience and reflection can hidden truths be grasped.

"তার ভয়ে বিন্দু সকল পলাই তারসে,
যাহার মাথায় দেখে তুলসী পাতা হস্তে।"[5]

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(Out of fear, all flee in terror;
whoever is marked, is seized and judged.)

Such passages highlight a worldview in which appearance and reality are not identical, and truth must be inferred rather than directly observed. The resolution of the narrative—Chand's eventual acceptance of Manasa—comes not through force, but through a gradual process of recognition. In this way, Manasamangal cultivates a narrative logic similar to that of later detective fiction: the truth is hidden, clues are embedded in events, and understanding requires the ability to interpret beyond the surface.

Before the emergence of the modern detective in Bengali literature, the role of uncovering truth, resolving disputes, and identifying hidden wrongdoing was often performed by figures such as the kazi (judge), bicharok (adjudicator), or wise courtiers. These figures functioned as proto-detectives, operating within a moral and judicial framework rather than a professional investigative one. In texts such as 'Itihasmala', attributed to William Carey, we encounter one of the earliest narrative instances of crime resolution in Bengali prose. The story of the Brahmin and the stolen money illustrates how the *kazi* employs indirect reasoning rather than direct evidence. By ordering his men to stab the ground, he creates a psychological trap rather than conducting a physical search. The real purpose is not to recover the money through force, but to provoke a reaction from the guilty party. The milkman's spontaneous comment reveals his knowledge of the crime, thereby exposing him. This method closely resembles later detective techniques—particularly the use of behavioral cues and psychological inference to identify the culprit.[6] Similarly, popular figures like Birbal, Nasreddin Hodja, and Gopal Bhar frequently appear in stories where wit and intelligence are used to unravel mysteries or resolve complex situations. These characters do not rely on systematic investigation; instead, they depend on: Sharp observation of human nature, Use of trickery or staged situations, Logical deduction mixed with humour. Thus, long before the appearance of characters like modern literary detectives, Bengali narrative traditions had already developed a rich repertoire of truth-seeking figures. The *kazi* and similar characters demonstrate that the foundations of detection in Bengali literature were laid not in colonial modernity alone, but in a much older culture of wit, justice, and interpretive intelligence.

The modern detective genre in Bengali literature takes a more defined and recognizable shape during the colonial period, particularly in nineteenth-century Calcutta, which functioned as the administrative and intellectual hub of British India. The introduction of British legal and bureaucratic systems fundamentally altered indigenous modes of justice and inquiry. New institutions such as organized police forces, codified legal procedures, and forensic practices (including early fingerprinting methods) reshaped how crime was understood, investigated, and narrated. Detection, therefore, began to move away from moral or intuitive judgment toward a framework grounded in empirical verification and institutional authority. Within this changing context, Priyanath

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Mukhopadhyay emerges as a pioneering figure. A notable series titled *Daroga'r Doptor* (The Office of the Inspector), written by Priyanath Mukhopadhyay, comprised as many as 206 stories, the first of which—*Banomali Das'er Hatya* (The Murder of Banomali Das)—appeared in April 1892. These narratives are largely biographical in tone, presented in a plain, unembellished style that records incidents of everyday crime with a matter-of-fact realism. Unlike later fictional detective stories, they lack dramatic sensationalism or carefully constructed suspense. The central figure in these accounts is not an independent sleuth but a state functionary, firmly embedded within the colonial administrative system. His investigative role is closely tied to official duty, and his accountability to the institution is consistently fore grounded. It is only in later developments of the genre that the detective emerges as a more autonomous figure, free from bureaucratic constraints. The characteristic traits associated with figures like Sherlock Holmes—such as intellectual detachment, eccentricity, and a certain nonchalant independence—had not yet become part of the Indian detective's persona at this early stage.

Roughly at the same historical moment as the rise of *Daroga'r Doptor*, another significant yet lesser-discussed development in early Bengali detective writing was the work associated with Kaliprasanna Chatterjee, who compiled and published narratives attributed to Barkatullah, often regarded as one of the earliest Muslim detectives represented in Bengali prose. These accounts, though not as widely circulated or systematically preserved as those of Priyanath Mukhopadhyay, are important for broadening the social and cultural scope of early detective literature in Bengal. Barkatullah's character reflects the incorporation of diverse voices within the emerging genre, demonstrating that the practice of investigation and crime narration was not confined to a single community or institutional framework. His stories, like other early detective narratives, emphasize practical intelligence, situational reasoning, and familiarity with local social contexts rather than the later stylized methods of fictional detectives. The role of Kaliprasanna Chatterjee as compiler is crucial here, as it indicates an early effort to document and circulate such investigative narratives within the Bengali reading public, thereby contributing to the gradual formation of a more inclusive and heterogeneous detective tradition in colonial Bengal.

Between 1890 and 1930, Bengali detective and crime writing witnessed significant expansion through the contributions of several authors who helped in shaping the genre in its formative phase. Writers such as Nagendranath Gupta, Harisadhan Mukhopadhyay, and Dinendra Kumar Ray produced a wide range of mystery and adventure narratives that blended elements of crime, suspense, and popular entertainment. Their works often moved beyond the strictly documentary tone of earlier police accounts and introduced more structured plots and imaginative storytelling. At the same time, the fascination with police life and investigative work continued in texts such as *Shey Kaaler Daroga Kahini* (Stories of the Daroga from Yonder Years)[7]by Girish Chandra Basu, The text consists of episodic accounts of criminal investigations, particularly focusing on pursuits of dacoits and "thug" criminals. These stories are not fictional in the modern sense but

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resemble memoir-like narratives, where the emphasis lies on real incidents, field experience, and the challenges of maintaining law and order in colonial Bengal. As noted in later scholarship, Basu's work "is mostly focused on his experiences and adventures as a thug/dacoit chaser," highlighting the practical and action-oriented nature of early police writing.

Dinendra Kumar Ray is most frequently celebrated for his "Robert Blake" series—a collection of adapted English mysteries that introduced the Bengali public to the archetype of the urban, professional sleuth—his story Hatya Rahasya (1915)[8] offers a significant departure from this model. In this narrative, Ray pivots from the masculine, street-level modernity of London or Calcutta to the interiority of the domestic sphere. The investigator in *Hatya Rahasya* is not a professional agent of the state, but a housewife. Her entry into the world of crime detection is prompted not by civic duty, but by emotional urgency: the need to exonerate her husband, who stands accused of murder in Benares This "domestic sleuth" operates within a strictly female world; the victim, the suspects, and the eventual killer are all women, creating a narrative space where the *bhadramohila* (gentlewoman) can navigate investigative challenges without fully rupturing Victorian and Bengali codes of modesty. Unlike the cold, deductive reasoning of Blake or Holmes, this protagonist relies on intuition and intimate social knowledge. Her success is framed as a triumph of "wifely devotion" (pativratya), ensuring that her transgression into the male- dominated field of law and order is sanctioned by patriarchal values. Ultimately, Ray's work suggests that within the colonial Bengali context, the "mystery" was not merely a puzzle to be solved by science, but a social rupture to be healed through domestic virtue.

The writings of Panchkori Dey mark a pivotal early stage in the development of Bengali detective fiction, often cited as one of the first instances where the genre moved into the realm of pure fiction in Bengal. While Dey frequently drew inspiration from Western sources, he was instrumental in domesticating the genre, providing his stories with local settings and cultural nuances that resonated with a growing Bengali middle-class readership. A quintessential example of his style is found in the narrative Hatyakari Ke? (Who is the Murderer?)[9]. The story features the recurring detective Debendra Bijoy Mitra, whose investigative persona offers an intriguing variation on the Holmesian archetype. Unlike the action-oriented Sherlock Holmes, Debendra Bijoy is often characterized as more akin to Mycroft Holmes—a "stationary" detective who relies primarily on rigorous intellectual analysis and pure deduction to resolve puzzling crimes. Though some critics point to a lack of complete structural originality due to his reliance on adaptations, Dey's work remains historically significant. He effectively blended Western plot complexities with indigenous social elements, successfully preparing the literary ground for the more fully developed, iconic Bengali detectives of the mid-twentieth century.

The works of Saralabala Dasi, one of the earliest female contributors to Bengali detective fiction, present a complex and paradoxical engagement with gender and narrative form. Her

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detective Shekhar, is clearly shaped by European influences, resembling the hyper-rational and intellectually superior figure of Sherlock Holmes, yet distinguished by his withdrawal from government service due to a dislike for routine, choosing instead to function as an independent consulting detective guided by his own principles. The stories are narrated in the first person through the voice of an admiring observer rather than the detective himself, anticipating a narrative technique that would later become central to Bengali detective fiction. However, despite her position as a pioneering female author, Saralabala's writing reveals a marked disdain for women, as seen in *Gharichuri* (The Theft of the Watch), [10] where Shekhar deduces from a piece of handwriting that it belongs to a woman and dismisses it as clumsy, further reinforcing his superiority through condescending remarks about feminine habits such as the use of scented paper. These ironic dynamic highlights how the authority of the detective is constructed through the marginalization of the feminine, suggesting that intellectual power is aligned with masculinity. Saralabala appears aware of the need to craft an awe-inspiring male figure and, in doing so, treats the slighting of women as a necessary narrative strategy, revealing both her contribution to the development of the genre and the gendered assumptions embedded within its early formation.

Another major force behind the growth of Bengali detective fiction was the institution of the Kuntalin Prize by Hemendra Mohan Bose, the technologist and perfumer known for producing the popular fragrances Kuntalin and Dilkhosh. The prize encouraged the writing of detective stories and played an important role in sustaining public interest in the genre during its formative years. Many award-winning narratives emerging from this initiative helped shape both the conventions of detective fiction and the evolving figure of the investigator in Bengali literature. Among the recipients were Saralabala Dasi, one of the earliest female writers in the genre, as well as Rajani Chandra Dutta and Dinendra Kumar Ray. At the same time, specialized periodicals devoted exclusively to detective literature also began to appear. One notable example was Goenda'r Golpo (Detective Story), a monthly magazine published by Ambika Charan Gupta, in which he serialized his own detective novel Swarnabai. Together, such prizes and magazines created a vibrant literary culture that nurtured the popularity and continued development of detective fiction in Bengal.

Hemendra Kumar Roy played a decisive role in revitalizing Bengali detective fiction by pivoting toward children's and young adult literature, where mystery was seamlessly blended with adventure, humor, and education. He created some of the genre's most enduring characters, most notably the adventurous duo Bimal and Kumar—often accompanied by the comic policeman Sundarbabu—as well as the professional detective pair Jayanta and Manik. While Jayanta and Manik embody logical investigation and methodical reasoning, Bimal and Kumar represent a more adventurous model of detection in which courage, travel, and practical intelligence are equally vital. This shift allowed Roy to expand Bengali detective fiction beyond the confined urban settings of earlier crime narratives, situating his plots in distant landscapes such as Africa, Java, Burma, and Ceylon. For example, in Ogaadh Joler Rui Katla, Roy depicts a villain who uses a blowpipe brought

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from Borneo; however, Bimal is able to identify and counter the weapon through the expertise gained from his own travels. Similarly, in stories like *Jakher Dhan*, adventure and treasure-hunting are combined with mystery, danger, and clever problem-solving, making the narratives especially attractive to younger readers. Roy's fiction thus transformed the genre into a medium that entertained while simultaneously informing readers about foreign locales, unfamiliar customs, and new technologies. His recurring use of companions and comic contrasts—particularly the capable heroes set against the often-confused Sundarbabu—introduced a lively sense of humor and teamwork.

In contrast to the pedagogical and refined tone of Hemendra Kumar Roy, a more sensational and action-oriented "pulp" tradition flourished through the works of Sasadhar Dutta. His most famous contribution was the creation of Dasyu Mohan (Mohan the Outlaw), a protagonist modeled on the legendary Robin Hood. Unlike the traditional detectives who operated within the strictures of the law, Mohan was a "dacoit-hero" who used his wit and physical prowess to fight against social injustice and colonial oppression. The series was immense in its reach, producing over two hundred titles that captivated a massive audience before coming to an abrupt end following the author's death in 1952. By introducing a lively sense of humor, high-stakes drama, and the figure of the charismatic outlaw, Dutta broadened the appeal of detective fiction, moving it toward a more populist and anti-establishment narrative form.

The figure of Byomkesh Bakshi, created by Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay, represents a crucial turning point in the history of Bengali detective fiction, where the genre moves beyond imitation and popular entertainment to attain literary depth and cultural rootedness. First introduced in *Satyanweshi* (1932), Byomkesh consciously rejects the label of "detective" and instead calls himself a *satyanweshi*—a seeker of truth—thereby expanding the scope of detection from the mere resolution of crime to a broader philosophical and ethical inquiry. Unlike earlier figures shaped by colonial policing or Western models such as Sherlock Holmes, Byomkesh is deeply embedded within the social fabric of Bengal; his cases often arise from domestic tensions, property disputes, and moral ambiguities within middle-class life. Narrated by his companion Ajit—whose perspective provides both immediacy and reflective distance—the stories skillfully combine suspense with psychological insight and social realism. In Pather *Kanta (1932)*[13], a seemingly trivial object becomes the key to unraveling a complex web of deceit, while Arthamanartham (1933)[14], explores the corrosive effects of greed and material desire. Later works, such as Chiriyakhana (1953)[15], display even greater narrative sophistication, where themes of identity, disguise, and marginal existence intersect, making the story as much about human complexity as about crime itself. Byomkesh's method is distinguished not only by logical deduction but also by a keen sensitivity to human motives, allowing him to interpret behavior, relationships, and silences as crucial evidence.

What further distinguishes Byomkesh within the literary landscape is his evolution as a character. Unlike the static, eccentric genius typical of many Western detectives, he develops over

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time—marrying Satyabati, assuming familial responsibilities, and aging through the decades. This domestication situates him firmly within the Bengali bhadralok ethos, rendering him both relatable and culturally specific. At the same time, Sharadindu's prose—marked by clarity, restraint, and narrative precision—elevates the detective story into a refined literary form capable of subtle social critique. His works engage with themes such as urbanization, moral decay, and the shifting values of a society in transition from colonial to post-colonial modernity. Thus, the literary importance of Byomkesh Bakshi lies in his ability to bridge the divide between popular genre fiction and serious literature. Through this figure, Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay not only indigenized the detective form but also transformed it into a medium for exploring truth in its ethical, psychological, and social dimensions.

The evolution of detection in the Bengali literary imagination reveals that it is far older and more layered than the modern genre might suggest. What begins as a philosophical impulse toward questioning and inquiry in the speculative hymns of the Vedic corpus gradually takes narrative form in traditions that privilege interpretation, inference, and the uncovering of hidden truths. From figures like Sarama in early mythic narratives to the kazi, and the witty problem-solvers of folk literature, the emphasis consistently remains on discerning truth beneath appearances rather than on institutionalized crime-solving. With the onset of colonial modernity, this long-standing epistemic tradition encounters new structures of law, surveillance, and rationality, giving rise to the formal detective figure in Bengali literature. Early texts such as those of Priyanath Mukhopadhyay and the adaptations of Panchkori Dey reflect this transitional moment, where Western models are absorbed and reshaped within local contexts. Subsequent developments—seen in the works of Dinendra Kumar Ray and Hemendra Kumar Roy—expand the genre's scope, incorporating adventure, pedagogy, and popular appeal, while also experimenting with narrative form and readership.

The culmination of this genealogy is found in Byomkesh Bakshi, the satyanweshi created by Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay, who embodies a uniquely Indian synthesis of detection. In Byomkesh, the act of solving crime is inseparable from the ethical pursuit of truth, reconnecting the modern detective to its deeper philosophical roots. His investigations are not merely procedural but interpretive, grounded in social reality and moral complexity, thereby restoring to the genre a depth that resonates with its earliest manifestations. Thus, the history of detective fiction in Bengali literature is not a simple story of Western influence or generic evolution, but a continuum of intellectual practices that link ancient inquiry with modern narrative form. Detection, in this context, emerges as a cultural mode of knowing—one that persistently negotiates between reason and intuition, the visible and the concealed, the empirical and the ethical. The satyanweshi stands not at the end of this journey, but as its most articulate expression, reaffirming that the search for truth has always been central to the literary and philosophical traditions of the region.

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