

BUDDHADEVA BOSE: A TRIBUTE

Buddhadeva Bose in Noakhali and Dhaka, Or A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man

FAKRUL ALAM

BUDDHADEVA Bose was born in Comilla on 30 November 1908, the son of Bhudechandra Bose and Benoykumari. Buddhadeva's mother died twenty-four hours after his birth because of tetanus. Within a year his father remarried. Consequently, the infant was with his maternal grandparents from the day of his birth; in effect, they became his parents.

Buddhadeva's family was from Biktampur, but he spent the first thirteen years of his life in Noakhali, where his grandfather worked, and the town and its raging river are among his earliest memories. As a child, Buddhadeva learnt Sanskrit and English from his grandfather and almost everything else, for the old man preferred to teach his grandson himself rather than send him to school, something for which Buddhadeva would always be grateful. However, Buddhadeva claimed to have learnt Bangla almost entirely on his own through his reading of its major writers. Nevertheless, the first poem that the precocious writer wrote as a nine-year old was in English, and was dedicated to the colonial-style house that he and his grandparents lived in but had to abandon because of the marauding Meghna. He later recalled that the first stanza of this poem was as follows: "Adieu, Delony House dear, /We leave you because the sea is near, /And the sea will swallow you, we fear/Adieu, adieu". Why did he write the poem in English? The only explanation the older Buddhadeva could offer was that he had not yet been exposed to Rabindranath and had not then tasted the sweets of Bangla literature. But all his subsequent verse would be written in Bangla. Despite his ever-increasing mastery of English, he wrote in his mother tongue with a dedication and a passion that would make him one of the greatest Bangla poets of the twentieth century.

Soon Buddhadeva was sending off his Bangla compositions to periodicals all over Bengal. By the time he was thirteen he had published a piece in a Dhaka magazine. It was at this age that he first discovered Rabindranath, love for whom was one of the constants of his life, even though it would never drive him into bardolatry. Although shorter, thinner, and weaker than most

boys of his age, and self-conscious because of a tendency to stammer, the young Buddhadeva began to be respected in Noakhali town not only for his literary achievements but also for his acting ability. Strangely enough, he seemed to be able to deliver his lines on stage without any problems. But more than anything, he wanted to excel in writing, and therefore found himself more and more drawn to the masterpieces of world as well as Bangla literature for inspiration as well as succor.

When Buddhadeva was fourteen his grandfather brought him to Dhaka. Buddhadeva would stay in the city for only nine years, but he considered them to be the formative ones of his life. At first he stayed with his grandparents in 23 Rankin Street. Soon he was sucked into the literary activities of the city, and initiated into the pleasures of *adda*, a lifelong addiction for him like tea. Already, he had acquired a reputation for formidable learning, especially in English. As the once-famous economist Bhabatesh Datta had written about the teenager Buddhadeva, who had then enrolled in Collegiate School, "I heard from my uncle that a boy had come to our neighborhood someone who was quite a prodigy...widely read, and quite adept already in writing verse-essays-plays...his English and Bangla composition books had overwhelmed his teachers. The Headmaster of Collegiate School, Khan Bahadur Tassadeq Ahmed, had already become devoted to the boy". For the school magazine he had contributed a story in English titled "Joie de Vivre" that had made him controversial. The teacher in charge of the magazine considered it to be obscene; however, the admiring headmaster declared it to be fit for publication.

Already, Buddhadeva had become the editor of a little magazine, a handwritten one, and composed with the indefatigable energy and love of literature that would make him perhaps the most famous editor of Bangla periodicals. Still in school, he also published his first, slim, book of verse, *Mormobani*, and dedicated it to his ailing grandfather who would soon die of throat cancer. Buddhadeva and his grandmother then began living with her brother Nagendranath and his wife Ushabala. It is in their house that he appeared in his school-leaving examination. But even before he had matriculated, he had

taken part in the Bengal Literary Conference organized in Munshiganj, where the novelist Sharatchandra was also going to do a reading. Perhaps because of this reason, Buddhadeva was struck by stage fright, and started stuttering during his reading, and had to have someone else complete it on his behalf!

In 1925, Buddhadeva's matriculation results came out; he had stood fifth in Dhaka Board, disappointing himself immensely since it would mean that he would be deprived of the best scholarship. He had scored 99 out of 100 in mathematics, but in English, his favorite subject, he had done poorly, at least by his own standards. Apparently, some pedant of an examiner had concluded that the script he had before him was the work of someone either "mad or too precocious." But Buddhadeva's conclusions about the grade he had gotten were different; he had been condemned for having the temerity to quote stanza after stanza of English verse in his script, something not to be tolerated in a schoolboy from East Bengal! Later that year, Buddhadeva published his first poem in the famous Bangla periodical, *Kollol* in 1925, which had already noticed *Mormobani* enthusiastically.

In 1926, Buddhadeva, now an intermediate student in Dhaka College, moved to a tin-roofed house built with his grandfather's savings in Purana Paltan. The lonely Noakhali boy had now become most sought after companion in Dhaka. Evoking the almost deserted area of the city in brilliant prose in the essay titled, "Purana Paltan," he would later describe the way he fell in love with it and his pleasure in such moments as the coming of the monsoons in this part of Dhaka. This year, he saw Rabindranath for the first time when his idol came to the city for a week at the invitation of the University of Dhaka. But though he had composed a commendatory verse to be read out in Rabindranath's presence, Buddhadeva had it recited by someone else, no doubt in order to avoid the embarrassment of lapsing into a stutter in front of his hero.

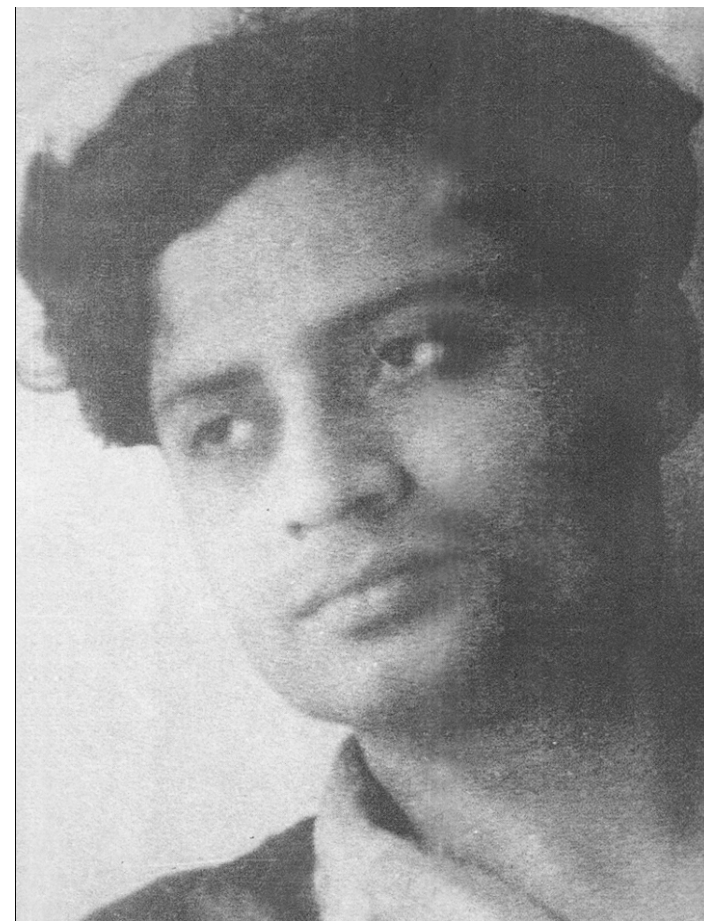
That same year *Kollol* published a short story by Buddhadeva that attracted attention for its morbid elements and once again made the author vulnerable to charges of obscenity a sure sign that he was heading towards literary modernism in fiction. When Rabindranath

seemingly took sides against Buddhadeva in the ensuing controversy, the eighteen year old did not hesitate to counterattack and take on the Nobel laureate himself despite his unwavering devotion to the great poet's work.

Becoming second in the Dhaka Board intermediate examination boosted the decision Buddhadeva had taken by this time to devote himself totally to literary pursuits. Taking advantage of the generous scholarship he merited because of his results, the eighteen year-old now ventured to bring out *Progati*, another of his hand-written attempts at periodical publication, in print form. The first issue came out a month before he entered the University of Dhaka's English department as a first year B. A. (Honors) student in July 1927. Along with his friend Ajit Datta, Buddhadeva was able to bring 12 issues of the periodical in the first year, managing to attract writers who had by that time become celebrities such as Nazrul Islam as well as the almost-unknown-but-destined-to-be great Jibanananda Das, Bishnu Dey, and Jasimuddin. But *Progati* was not the only periodical he was seeing into print then; surprising himself in addition to others, he won an election in Jagannath Hall and became the literary editor of its magazine, *Bashontika*.

Stepping out of his teens in 1928, Buddhadeva published his first novel, *Shara* in serial form in *Progati*. This year Buddhadeva was present in a famous literary conference organized in Santiniketan where Rabindranath spoke against the perverse element in recent Bangla literature. Buddhadeva responded to the speech in an essay published in *Progati* where he not only accused Rabindranath for taking the side against modernism but also wrote enthusiastically on behalf of the new movement stirring in Bangla literature. This year was also memorable for Buddhadeva because of his encounter with another of his idols, Nazrul Islam. He characterized Nazrul as "an event" and confessed how like many others he fell in love with the man's greatness at first sight and how the rebel poet could enthral anyone with his appearance, behavior, and genius anytime, anywhere!

By this time, Buddhadeva had become quite legendary himself. Pratibha Basu, destined to be his wife, and famous in her own right in Dhaka then as a singer, has



recalled in her brilliant memoir, *Jibaner Jalchabi* how she was rebuked by an acquaintance for not being able to recognize "the most famous boy of the city, despite being a Dhaka girl!" She recalls, too, that he and the *adda* that took place in his house, was known all over the city and that his genius was already a truth widely acknowledged amongst those who kept themselves informed about new developments in Bangla literature. The University of Dhaka had recently awarded him a prize of 250 rupees a huge sum then for an essay competition. As the editor of *Progati*, too, he had become a celebrity, even though the periodical did not survive its second year of publication because of financial problems. His fame kept increasing also because *Kollol* kept publishing something or the other by him till it too expired, despite its greater popularity, for a similar reason. A number of his plays had also been staged by then. Moreover, in 1930 alone, he had brought out three books: a novel, a collection of short fiction, and his first major book of verse, *Bandir Bandana*. Finally, Buddhadeva had acquired almost mythical status in Dhaka by this time because of the double "first" he received in his B. A.

(Hons.) and M. A. examinations, receiving grades that remained a "record" for a long time.

Nevertheless, in 1931 the twenty-three year old Buddhadeva suddenly abandoned Dhaka. Why did he leave the city and the security it would have offered someone of his reputation and opt for the uncertainty of Kolkata? One reason was that most of his friends had already left the city. Another was that the frequency of the communal riots was upsetting him. Also, the city had started to appear to him too provincial and temperamentally he had become too cosmopolitan! The megalopolis allured him, as Paris did Joyce, or London Eliot, or Paris Hemingway. The modernist sensibility could only sustain itself in seeming exile the great cities of the world, and wasn't he destined to spearhead Bangla modernism? On an autumnal day in 1931, then, he left Dhaka forever for Kolkata. The young artist had ended his apprenticeship and was now ready to assume center stage in Bangla literature at the dawn of Bangla modernism.

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Buddhadeva Bose: choosing a pen in Madison

One day in 1957 when the usual three-week campus shutdown was nearing an end at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, Noazesh Ahmed (a scientist, photographer and environmental activist in Bangladesh), reading a book on the pier, noticed a distinctly Indian gentleman walking towards him with unusual steps. It was Buddhadeva Bose, in the United States as a visiting professor in comparative literature at Indiana University at Bloomington. His itinerary included spending a few weeks at Chicago and Madison, where he would lecture on Indian literature. Here is an account of what happened between them.

I was happy to note, he seemed glad to have met somebody from Dhaka. He addressed me in Bengali by the affectionate "tumi" and used my nickname, which I had told him/oh. He asked me if I could spare some time to take him round. Needless to say, I considered it a privilege to be asked.

The first thing he wanted me to do was help him buy a fountain pen smooth-writing, large one. He was quite fed up with standard-sized pens. All too often they ran out of ink when his writing was in full flow. Wisconsin was the home of the famous Parker and Schaeffer pen companies, so he was sure he would now be able to buy a pen that would give him full satisfaction.

I accompanied him on the pen-hunt. We went to a large department store that had a wide range of fountain pens on display. Bose's expression displayed a childlike delight at the sight, and he eagerly tried out nearly all the models on the scratch pad on the counter. Unfortunately, none of them was quite what he was looking for.

I'd been acting as Bose's spokesman with the salesgirl, as his spoken English, which was neither like standard British English nor like standard American English, did not make for easy communication. Bose asked me to explain that although many of the pens wrote smoothly, none had a large enough ink reservoir.

The salesgirl became nonplussed when I relayed the message. Clearly, this was not a problem she had faced before. She said there weren't any more pens that she could show.

Just then Bose's eyes lit up as they fell on a large pen in a display case. He wanted to try that one out; it was a massive writing tool, in a different league altogether from the pens we carry about in our pockets.

"Oh, you mean that jumbo?" exclaimed the salesgirl. She let Bose try it out, but shook her head and as he mumbled expres-

sions of satisfaction declared that unfortunately it was not for sale. It was a special jumbo pen of which a small number were manufactured specifically for the purpose of display. But Bose's heart became set on the jumbo, which exactly answered his needs.

I tried to explain to the salesgirl that my companion was an eminent poet in our part of the world, and by catering to his whim a great service could be done to modern Bengali letters. But why should insular America care for Bengali literature? Luckily I had in my pocket a copy of the special Indian issue of *Poetry Chicago* which was guest-edited by Bose. I produced it and drew the salesgirl's attention to Bose's name on the title page. Since the journal was clearly American, she was impressed. But as there was nothing she could do to help, she called the manager.

Another round of explanations followed, and *Poetry Chicago* was again flourished. The manager would have liked to help, but... Then he had an idea. He phoned his head office and described his predicament. Then as he listened to whatever his superior was saying a smile played over his lips. He put the phone down and, beaming, said to the salesgirl, "Gift-wrap the jumbo, we're presenting it to Mr. Bose, with our compliments."

I heaved a sigh of relief. Bose was happy as a singing bird. He left me and went to his room.

That night, as I was dozing off the phone rang. It was Bose. "Johor," he said excitedly. "This is really a wonderful pen. I've written such a lot today, yet it hasn't run out of ink. I've written three poems, and masses of stuff on the *Mahabharata*."

The latter, as readers may guess, were notes for what eventually became a celebrated critical work on the great epic.

The next day I asked Bose, "Did you know what time you called me?" "No, why?" "It was one in the morning." "Really?" "Not that I minded."

Indeed, I was happy to have played a small role in facilitating his writing.

As the new academic year started students and faculty came flocking back, among them my girlfriend Deborah Goldberg, a student of comparative literature and a promising poet as well; at seventeen she had had a poem published in the prestigious *Atlantic Monthly*.



Amiya Chakraborty with Buddhadeva Bose

It is the familiar road taken by "modern" poetry. I am not exactly clear on who drinks gin. But to merely dress up in new forms poems about Kolkata itself an ancient practice is not the expressive purpose of 'Notun Pata'. Here a truly new light has washed up against the shore, in many cases the light of trams:

the red-light glow of Tollygunge trams
crosses over from the darkness

Here the tune that reaches us casually is that of the *kokael* (cuckoo), not simply that of the traffic, even though the context in which the cuckoo's melody is heard is urban, is of the city. Kolkata's nights spring to life with a finely-drawn hand:

It is night.
At last the vagrants' screams have ceased.
Now it is still;
Except when the silence is bruised
by the swift traffic on the distant road.
And the clock ticks---
Time's never-ending, dimly-heard heartbeat.

Here the "dimly-heard" is aptly placed: the rhythm of a desolate night. And then in an utterly irrelevant way:

Suddenly a cuckoo
sang out from the bosom of the night.

All this mix is Kolkata. Just as the night is the cuckoo's song and the vagrants' screams, so too thoughts about the day is coloured by the discord between the various times of the day. Noon's battles in the city are waves of dissatisfaction lashing at the stone railings:

Noontime
outside the wind boils over,
the rainless skies bleached.
...within my breast
the howling of a thousand hungry hounds.

Translated by Khademurristam

Frogs

BUDDHADEVA BOSE
(translated by the poet)

The rains have come, and the frogs are full of glee.
They sing in chorus, with voices loud and lusty,
They sing in primeval joy:
There is nothing but fear today, neither hunger nor death.
Nor the wanton stones of fate.

Cloud-like the grasses thicken,
And in the fields the clear waters stand,
And the carefree hours of the day
Are passed in insolent singing.

In the sensual rain there is ecstasy of touch.
How luscious is the mud, how young, how soft!

They are neckless, though their throats are swollen;
They are embodiment of the song's seventh pitch.

O what sleek bodies—cloud-like, yellow and green!
Eyes staring upwards in glassy transparency,
Like the somber stare of a mystic
Seeking God, in deep meditation.

The rain has ceased, the shadows aslant.
Hymn-like rises their singing, solemn in silent skies.

As the day pants and dies, the loud shrillness faints,
And the darkness is pierced with a sleep-begetting monophonic screech.

It is midnight. We have closed our doors and are comfortably in bed.
And the stillness is broken by a single tireless voice.
It is the final sloka of the mystic chanting.
The croak, croak, croak of the last lonely frog.

Adda at Naktala: snapping toes and loud laughter

CLINTON SEELY

... while I was in Calcutta during 1969 and 1970, Jyoti ... welcomed me warmly and constantly into his always open home. It was at Jyoti's 202 Rash Behari Avenue that I found my first and lasting place of *adda*—the life-blood of social and intellectual intercourse in Calcutta. *Adda* is translated as a combination of "bull-session," "kaffee katch," and "soiree," but the actual nature of the beast is accurately conveyed by none of the above semi-synonyms. There are some who believe that *adda* is unique to Bengal. Jyoti's father-in-law, Buddhadeva Bose, was even motivated to write an article describing what an *adda* is. And it was at Buddhadeva's new place in Naktala, a neighbourhood to the extreme south of Calcutta, that I found my second and equally stimulating *adda* locale. Often the two spots blended into one. *Kavita* magazine, without a doubt the most significant Bengali poetry journal of this century, had been edited by Buddhadeva from 202 Rash Behari Avenue. And once in a while Buddhadeva would return to visit his son-in-law and family there. But more frequently we all would congregate out at Naktala for a rousing evening of *adda*. With Buddhadeva and his lovely wife Protiva and their family ... and all their friends, I spent some of the most enjoyable times of my life.



I can still see him, in his particular chair, in the sitting room of his Naktala house, not quite like the *baithak-khana* parlours of old that were separated off from the rest of the inner quarters of the house, for often we could easily look at the dining table in the next room where the family, myself included from time to time, would take their meal. Dressed casually in pajama and punjabi, he would sit perched in his armchair, on one tucked-under leg, upon which the other leg balanced and extended out in front of him, bouncing, the ankle flexing, his bare foot skimming the painted concrete floor, audibly snapping his big and second toe as, utterly gleeful, he would let out with his infectious laugh, loud and unself-conscious. Though we, Pappa (Bose's son), myself, and others, might have been there from five, six, seven o'clock on, he did not appear but remained working at his desk in his bedroom. Then around nine or so he would complete his writing for the day and join us, and join in with a whiskey and water, just one, and the *adda* would shift into high gear for the next hour or two, until I and others would have to leave to go to the Garia terminus to catch the last bus back to Ballygunge and parts elsewhere in Calcutta. Or, if we stayed too long, which we sometimes did, and missed the last bus, we might spend the night at "Kavitabhavan." Buddhadeva—my friend and mentor by happenstance for a period of my life—died in 1974, far too young, still in his sixties. I missed him then; I miss him yet ...

Clinton Seely is the author of *A Poet Apart: A Literary Biography of the Bengali Poet Jibanananda Das (1899-1954)*. The above is taken from his 1999 article "Translating Rat Bore Brishir: Re-living through letters".

The Kolkata of Buddhadeva Bose: hungry hounds and Tollygunge trams

AMIYA CHAKRABORTY

An extract from Amiya Chakraborty's review of Bose's sixth book of poetry, *Notun Pata* (New Pages), 1940, published in Amiya's *Shreshtho Probando* (Moula Brothers, Dhaka, 1998).

... I am sitting in Puri reading *Notun Pata* --- and perhaps I'll wind up quoting lines about the sea; I saw Lake Chilka glittering in the other poems. That in this province Buddhadeba Babu has stepped out far ahead of the others is not something that is my intention to prove, since his poetry's clear message is that he has seen with his mind's eye our earth, its soil, mountains and waters. Observations about earthly forms dominate the narration in the second section of the book. Everybody is well aware that the material, physical world is not an easy subject to tackle; its blue waves float away the traveller, the highest peaks challenge him, his head made to spin in ditches and ravines--- strength in the fingers is needed to extract poetry out of all this. In the 'Everest' poem, the adventurous spirit has attempted to reach the heights, and though he has not managed to scale the peaks, the poet's mind sees

vision-blinding light, and
creation-effacing darkness, decrepit days who has glimpsed it
and then

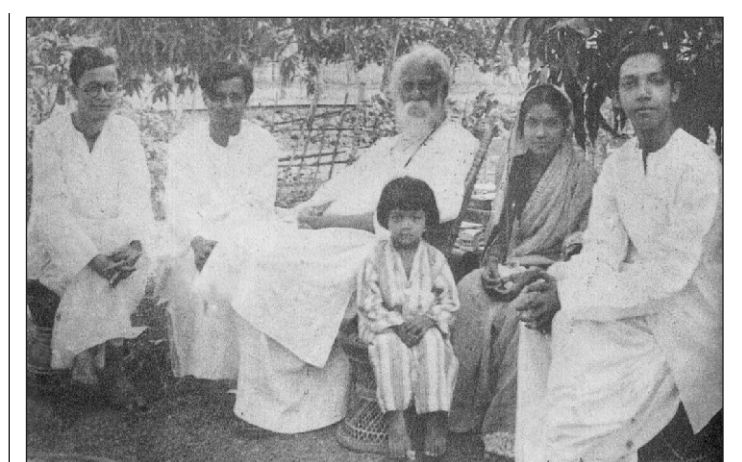
incorporeal, unskelatal Kolkata, shaded,

where man is trapped in

infinity's enormous wheel like blind fishes in nets,
the universe's window closed.

To go further would be to risk inconsistency. The closed universe of *Notun Pata* arrives early in the book's first section:

On the road is a frantic pace. In offices, maidans, restaurants, work, play, addictions, the gambling at the end of the bone-wearing workweek, gin, afternoon siestas, all are unclear, bounded, the whole city in a fainting fit.



Santiniketan, 1934. From left: Samar Sen, Buddhadeva Bose, Tagore, daughter Minakshi, wife Protiva Bose, Kamakshi Prasad Chattopadhyaya

The Daily Star Literature Page wholeheartedly supports the Iraqi people in their hour of peril. We absolutely condemn the unprecedented aggression launched by the Anglo-U.S. coalition. We are sure Buddhadeva Bose, had he been alive today, would have done no less. It is a gruesome spectacle, this brutalization of a poor, underdeveloped, brown nation by two of the world's most economically and militarily powerful, white and supposedly 'civilized' societies. This, dear readers, is neocolonialist and neopercolonialist racism at its most open and savage, and it is obvious that accountable behaviour, democratic values and a sense of well-being are absent not just in Baghdad and Riyadh, but in Washington D.C. and London.