

Literature

ah yes! the poetic life...

KAISER HUQ

Belal Choudhury, Belal bhai as he is known to everybody, came to prominence in the late fifties and sixties as a poet. Since then he has also been a prolific prose writer and essayist. For anybody interested in Dhaka's literary life, it is impossible to come and stay here, to write in this city without hearing of him. Or bumping into him.

I was on one of my frequent afternoon visits to Shahed bhai's--Shahed Quaderi, elder brother of the poet Shaheed Quaderi--when the latter dropped in with Belal bhai. It was 1973, and Belal bhai was the prodigal come home after ten years in Kolkata. A filmstar handsome, soft-spoken, trim thirty-five year old, he smiled shyly as Shahed bhai, who had recently been to Kolkata on a writers' delegation, expatiated with characteristic aplomb on his friend's celebrity in Kolkata. Sunil Ganguly had bravely declared in a feuilleton that the city was under the suzerainty of three young men--himself, Shakti Chatterjee and Belal Choudhury. The three of them brought out the literary journal *Krittibas*, mouthpiece of the writers of the '60s, and like their contemporaries elsewhere delighted in the old game of *epater le bourgeois*. There's a more outrageously Bohemian lifestyle, a more loosely hung mode of writing, compared to the High Modernists of the previous generation, of whom

three stalwarts, Buddhadev Bose, Bishnu Dey and Amiya Chakrabarty, were still remarkably productive. Belal bhai had the enviable reputation of hobnobbing with both generations. How he got to such a position, fully recounted, would make an engaging picaresque tale. I hope it will one day come from the pen of Belal bhai himself...

Two recent memoirs throw interesting light on Belal bhai's

evening drew on they repaired to a watering hole in Khalasitola which was a haunt of Kamol Kumar Majumdar, their senior by two decades or so, but as much of a bohemian as they, and the fashioner of a Bengali fictional prose as fastidious as Ronald Firbank's.

Spoilt by the refinement of Western alcoholic beverages during his year abroad, Sunil Ganguly was not equal to the challenge of country liquor, and

pulling, allowing a glimpse of the surroundings. He was inside the boundary of a graveyard. Not far away was a clutch of women at variance; the abuse they exchanged was such that men use, alluding to the sexual habits of the mothers and sisters of their enemies. Ganguly shouted to them for help. They came up. One had a hirsute upper lip, another the face of a wildcat, a third carried a pat of cowdung in one hand, had a look and, unsurprised, went back to their squabble. Ganguly finally managed to lift the flimsy door off the floor a bit and wriggled out underneath it, tearing his pricey American pants in the process.

The windowless shack was Belal bhai's secret lair. He had rented it dirt-cheap and used it whenever he wanted some private space. He found it ideal for quiet reading and writing. Add to this the fact that it was tucked away in an obscure graveyard and just off Park Circus, which was close to the nub of the city....

Among the Kolkata poets of the '60s Benoy Majumdar probably projected the starkest vision of man as a plaything of imperious drives and desires. I first came across him in the Hudson Review in a handful of fine translations by Jyotirmoy Datta. An image of ineluctable passion in one of these ("can a leopard unspun its leap in mid-air?") hasn't ceased to haunt my imagination. Buddhadev Bose, it is worth noting in passing, rated Majumdar above the other young poets of his generation.

He (Benoy Majumdar) was obsessed with the Nobel Prize, which he believed would one day be his. Interestingly, Belal bhai tells me that this is an obsession quite common among Bengali writers, some of whom have gone to the extent of commissioning translations of their works and sending them to members of the Swedish Academy....

Kolkata years. One is Abdullah Abu Sayeed's *Bhalobashar Sampan*, which records the author's meeting with Belal bhai in Kolkata. The other is Sunil Ganguly's *Ardhek Jiban* ("Half a Life"), first serialized in *Desh*, where the author's first meeting with Belal bhai becomes the occasion of a bizarre episode. Back from a sojourn at Iowa University, Sunil Ganguly first met Belal bhai at the Coffee House, in the company of the city's up and coming literati. As

soon passed out.

He woke up next morning in a tiny bamboo shack, stretched out on an uneven bed. Something sharp sticking into his flesh revealed itself as the corner of a book. In fact, beneath the sheet there was no mattress, but a collection of books laid like tiles. There was no other furniture in the shack. Ganguly decided to get out, but to his chagrin found the door of the rickety bamboo matting locked from the outside, though it parted a little when



Illustrations by Sabyasachi Hazra

Though not a close friend, Belal bhai knew Majumdar well, and has interesting stories to tell about him. Majumdar's is an obsessive personality prone to periodic crack-ups, which necessitate institutionalization. The fact that his mental turmoil finds its way into his work makes him the Robert Lowell of Bengali poetry (of course he is a much more limited poet than Lowell, being obsessed with basically one theme: sexual passion). He was obsessed with the Nobel Prize, which he believed would one day be his. Interestingly, Belal bhai tells me that this is an obsession quite common among Bengali writers, some of whom

have gone to the extent of commissioning translations of their works and sending them to members of the Swedish Academy....

Not long after, the Bangladesh independence war broke out and Kolkata had to play host to a motley crowd of Bangladesh exiles--politicians, writers, media people, students... Belal bhai has a pithy paragraph about decadent exiles, "there is a well-known red-light district in Calcutta and some of our friends in the police told me that quite often somebody from 'Joi Bangla,' usually well-heeled well-connected or enjoying some status, were arrested for

some fracas or another and brought to the Battala Police Station. Some exiles seemed to have all the resources and the time for such revelries." Belal bhai once quipped that the history of our war of independence would be incomplete without an examination of the files at the Battala thana.

Somewhat ingenuously, Belal bhai comments that very seldom were freedom fighters seen in Calcutta. Well, those of us who were engaged in the business of trading shots with the Pakistanis did hear about the excitements of Calcutta but didn't feel inclined to go in search of them.

The war ended almost as

suddenly as it had begun. Belal bhai stayed on in Kolkata for another year and a half, then moved to Dhaka in response to maternal appeals. He married, raised a family, and suffered the shock of being widowed. Fortunately for us all he has continued to be a prolific man of letters. He has reminiscenced about his colourful life in numerous articles and essays, but it is high time he got it all down between two covers!

Taken from 'Portrait Of A Legend: Belal Choudhury' in Six Seasons Review, combined issue nos. 3 and 4, February 2003, published by Mohiuddin Ahmed, University Press Limited, Dhaka.

BETTER THAN WRITING POETRY

SUNIL GANGAPADHYA (translated by Farhad Ahmed)

Better than writing poetry is I am going to write a poem the thought
Itself more dear
From dawn I potter around completing chores, as if by cleaning the room
Time's fragrance will prepare it
Silence will guard the door, the sky will have to yield
the silkiness of woman's breasts, and then the writing
Like diamond glints the black poetry-writing notebook
sits scattered all over the table
I whistle, cigarette on my lips, look for matches
In my heart a joyous wind: ah! now a poem, a brand-new poem...
Yet I write nothing
The pen rolls away, I lie down with a thud, stare lovingly
at the blank white wall, gradually the poem's
dreamsong thickens, whisper to myself: I'll write
I'll write what's the rush
If somebody wants my writing I say of course, *bhai*, I'll give it tomorrow, of course
And tomorrow races towards the day after, or the day after that, or next Monday
And some say unmusically so much writing of
prose and fiction
no time for poems
I guess? Eh?
Without replying I half-smile in an aside
In the empty room from distant blue skies
through the open window enters
a beloved breeze
All those unwritten poems hug me
Tightly, leave, then come back,
Rather than not be, half-in-bloom, amorous bickering
is something they love.

Sunil Gangapadhya has written many novels and volumes of poetry. He lives in Kolkata.

...and poems about poets and writing poetry...

POP PORTRAIT OF A POET

KAISER HUQ

Crying as a baby
you learnt all about assonance,
and all about alliteration
as you stammered into speech.
The moon in June taught you to rhyme.
That was the beginning

of your end.
You always get your figures wrong,
count nine fingers on your hands
when your spirits are low,
eleven when they are high.
For lack of mechanical aptitude
you can't commit
the rape of the lock
and must ask a passerby
to unlock your door for you.

Newspaper editors don't like the way
you dance on their pages
and disturb the flatness of their prose.
Publishers always manage
not to pay you in full.
Intellectuals shut their doors in your face



for you rob their precious ideas
and turn them into birds.
Girls who fall in love with you
fall out faster
than you can write a poem.

And yet, as you wander about
in filthy, floppy trousers,
hair anarchic,
eyes out of focus,
biting dirty fingernails,
though your pockets have as many holes
as there are stars,
though your heart skips every other beat,
though your wife won't cook your dinner,
though politicians won't buy your slogans,
though students read your poems in paraphrase only,
though your clean rhymes hide dirty thoughts,
though poetry is never as good as a thriller,
you look great,
you're groovy.

Kaiser Huq teaches English at Dhaka university. He is currently at the School of Oriental and Asian Studies, London.

Salman's Secret Diary

KHADEMUL ISLAM

"An Iranian foundation has raised its reward for killing Salman Rushdie to \$2.5 million, firing its first shot at efforts by Iran's moderate president to distance his government from the bounty...The increase in the bounty was announced in the headline jomhuri Islami newspaper, which reported Ayatollah Sheikh Hassan Sanei, the head of the 15 Khoradad Foundation, as saying that anyone who killed the 'apostate' writer could claim the reward, including non-Muslims and his bodyguards." --The London Times, October 12, 1998

Dear Diary,
Just saw on telly that fatwa pot has gotten bigger. Plus now kosher for unbelievers to dispatch yours truly to the Great Chutney Factory in the Sky. Immediate pain betwixt nether cheeks, right in the center of my divided soul.
Rang PEN, who responded limply about some press release protesting provocation. Phone lines to Rushdie Defence Committee dead. Scanned first-run editorials and noted pallid condemnation of latest upward revision of headhunting loot. Buzzed the Foreign Office, but some baadmash (Nigel? DPhil? Oxon?) on duty wearily told me to bugger off.

Dear Diary,
Sleepless night longing for samizdat press.
Nobody called. Only Martin Amis, who snorted relax, amigo, half mil more wouldn't get a

Kabuli to drop his shalwar these days, much less a contract rubout. Felt better. Phoned Sontag, who sniffed across the Atlantic: Really, Salman (she pronounces it Sal, as in Sal Mineo, and Man, as in second syllable of woman) half a mil is a quite low signifier, zero, funtoosh, nada, cootch behar.
Has the world gone loco? Is Deepak D. Pack? Are chick magnet days over? Will arse heal?

Dear Diary,
Woke up when bed turned into giant silver spittoon.

Wondered during hash-fueled walk around Bloomsbury (Help Makepeace! Help Virginia!) : Hmmm, how much really is half a mil? 'Fraid not much anymore, kaffirboy, stockbroker boomed, world has grown fatter since l'affaire.
Damme! This is the Occidental scene for you. Fresh spasms in the chasm.

Dear Diary,
Tossed and turned like Ali Baba on a roller coaster.

Still no calls. Finally rang Stoppard, who stage-whispered listen Summum, lit London is masala-grinding, sniggering that half mil is Kiss of death. Whispers that honeymoon with West el finito. Free publicity and Booker short lists vanishmo. End of road, of narrative, of con-trapuntal moieties. Khatam-shud, old chap.
How dare they? Camel offer! Cowdung cakes! Cheetha crap!
Have taken burra peg of naswar, the snuff that lowered

the collective eyelids of my hukka-sucking, empire-losing forebears. Home Office cackledkk a assomeding about...lo budget...the...hav e togo bed.

Dear Diary,
Sawed wood like uberjinn on Seconal.

Went (no, walked there, sans fright wig and Jaguar palanquin) to dinner party where topic surfaced only after dessert, after Julian Barnes and the mayor's pet peccadilloes. Was discreetly pitied: Sull, least the beastly toads could have done is upped ante, at least, by two million.

Talk drifted to probable ayatollah inability to grasp workings of current financial markets, inflation rates, etc., and thence to practical difficulties of integrating Islamic banking practices to modern postcapitalism. Also speculation about poor returns on undiversified investment portfolio of Khordad Foundation. Went ape. Swore like Sindbad the Sailor. Stormed out.
Arse pangs sharper!

Dear Diary,
Funky dreams about being adrift in Sea of Murmura.

Have decided to pray--going for broke, doing too much, aiming said arse at the stars--for fatwa sticker shock. Which direction Mecca? Rather good question that. Nobody noticed whole dang novel w as an attempt to answer it. Need prayer mat. Perhaps dust off grandfather's cheesy number with fiery Al-Aqsa dome, rolled



"Ain't gonna go medieval on your arse!"

What to do, nah? Bloody cheeky little feringhi tiffinwallah!

Dear Diary,
Sleep as evasive as publishers.

Was weepily pulling beard when Mehta called and chummy-chummed. Yelled switch, Sulaiman, switch from the mono to the poly dudes, we Hindus are red hot this year. Also wanted minimum six book burnings on two continents. Only then will book sell, baby. Countered that Kerala must count as separate continent, baby. M purred okay, then requested if possible to ignite parts of Tajikistan. Replied of course, easier than making a mullah see red. Agreement reached in principle.

Have laid off kif, behind swinging back to form.

Dear Diary,
Finally changed into fresh pyjamas! Broke out the Cuban ceegars!

Dived into a mongrel--O heaven-ly hybridity, O beauteous bastardry--meal of papadam cherry pie aloo bhaji French toast. Recasting the Mahabharata as sleaze-epic in Babu English. Ram chasing bhistee boys in chaddis. Sita snogging swamis on island of Sri Lingam. Tentative title of book: Devi Does Delhi.

Heh heh heh...no, must stop grinning like stupid ass!

E-mail from the author: children of 1971

To: dseditor@gononet.com
From: Afsan Chowdhury
Subject: Message for Khademul Islam, Literary Editor
Mime-Version: 1.0
Content-Type: text/plain; charset="us-ascii"; format=flowed

Dear Literary Editor,

I have read the review of my book of short stories by Manosh Chowdhury in your literary page and feel exhilarated... He chose to engage with the book and has provided an excellent example of how an insightful and thorough review is able to become a literary act itself. In a land where almost no serious reviews are done, Manosh has done the unusual. I thank you and the reviewer.
I do agree with him that my language can be dense but my story *Shay Ebong Tar Podojugal* (1984) was like a return to literature after a decade of exile in political imaginations...though I admit that after having read Kamal Kumar Majumdar a few years later, I find much of Bangla prose rather pale. My stories were/are about ordinary people in extreme situations and certainly not in control. If the Naxalite motif represents a history which had rapidly become a past and the people were falling like derelict leaves, the prostitute is also facing an extreme present and has no control. Manosh makes my case better than I do of people facing history and memories. We are children of 1971 and what followed afterwards, and I think we shall never escape it. Or don't wish to. It would be self-indulgent to go on further except that in the story *Bhara*, the brother who has been sprung from jail by his kid sister... initially looks down on her for being a commercial sex worker. But ultimately a transition takes place and he by committing the murder for money also becomes 'hired' like her.
Having read the review I feel deeply for the many fine writers of Bangladesh who are not served by a reviewer like Manosh Chowdhury. In so many ways, this review itself is more significant than the work that is discussed and so many writers would find such pleasure in such an intelligent analysis.
I think the Star literary page has already become one of the most interesting pages of the paper. An editor can influence what is written in a literary genre, which is possibly the highest possible goal to aspire and one day achieve. Someone may get close.

Best wishes
Afsan Chowdhury

Editor's Note: Last week's issue neglected to mention that Manosh Chowdhury's review was translated into English from Bangla. And with regard to Afsan Chowdhury's observation that more such reviews are needed, we shall certainly attempt to do so. However, we operate under severe constraints: reviewers willing to review Bangla books for an English literature page are as scarce as green leaves in autumn.