

## Postmodern Bangla Short Stories: the arrival of the departure (Part IV)

### The Little Magazine Explosion

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There are at least six hundred Bangla little magazines throughout West Bengal and Tripura, apart from those in other states of India and in other countries. Though the West Bengal government wants them to be registered, a real little magazine, by its very nature, cannot be registered. Lifespan and number of issues of most of the magazines are negligible, varying between one-issue, one-time affair to irregular issues continuously for forty years. But self-life in certain cases are incomprehensible, much more than large number of books published each year. This has led to a little magazine library boom and connoisseurs collecting specific issues. Subrata Rudra and Satya Guha are reported to be using their collections as beds and sofa sets after placing covers on them due to lack of space. None of the governmental institutions, including national and state libraries, Shahitya and Bangla academies or universities have any arrangements or inclination to preserve such a huge micro-cultural production. The job was taken up in 1978 by an individual, Sandip Dutta, who started a Little Magazine Library and Research Center at Tamer Lane, and has filled up his entire family home with innumerable little magazines, being received by him almost every working day.

This phenomenon of little magazine explosion, and the scope for their preservation, has been a major contributory factor in the proliferation of postmodern Bangla short stories. In a way the magazines embody the flux of Bangla reality and relativity, and contest centers of authority and imposed canons in their own sphere. The ethics of the postmodern is that little is better than big. Little magazines are micro-level power formations. Micro forms, because they are so unhindered by rules and contexts, and therefore so open to so many indefinite interconnections, are superior to totalising macro-forms. Until the little magazine phenomenon exploded, Bangla literature was controlled and canonised by a Kolkata-based governing class, despite the tremendous subaltern impact of *Hungryalists* and anti-canon war cry of *Neem Sahitya* and *Shastravirodhies*. Little magazines keep themselves activated as a decentering process. The fringes of urban and semi-urban locales, as well as rural West Bengal, swarm with the culturally dispossessed, and most of the little magazine editors and their contributors come from such social segments.

Six hundred little magazines, ranging from the sixteen-page

*Sahitya Setu* edited by Jagabandhu Kundu to the four-hundred page *Bibhab* edited by Samarendra Sengupta, fortnightly to annually, edited by innocent teenagers to experienced eighty-year-olds. And two thousand fiction writers. Most of the magazines publish both poetry and short stories, and even novels and drama. However, certain magazines exclusively publish short stories and analytical essays relating thereto, such as *Tibra Kutha*, *Golpo Guccha*, *Ubudas*, *Anyabhumii*, *Notun Golpo*, *Golper Kagoj*, *Golpo Mela*, *Anarjo Sahitya*, *Sahasrabdo*, *Golpo Sarani*, *Anyo Golpo*, *Golpo Ekhani Dibaratir Kabya*, etc.

When the little magazines started appearing one by one, initially they were mouthpieces of particular groups trying to do something new, and members of one group were not allowed entry into another group. There were group rivalries and muck-raking for some time. But these filmy screen covers broke down quickly as it dawned on the editors that an exclusive serious readership has emerged devoted to little magazine literature, and that little magazines were no more stepping-stones for lucre-sniffing, aspirant authors. They were enabled to accept heterogeneity of Bangla life, and recognize its syncreticity. The little magazine groups realised that for them there was no more space for collectively negotiated and collectively proclaimed rules and canons; no more manifestoes, group actions, brotherhood of ideas, joining forces and closing ranks like in earlier literary movements. Now the world of little magazines itself was called The Little Magazine Movement. Contributors were free to write in any magazine they preferred. Samaras Dasgupta, associated with this new phenomenon, established a *Chotto Golpo Academy* at Asansol.

In the above perspective, magazines exclusively devoted to the short story became a necessity in order to publish narratives with their foci upon the centrifugal tendencies of current social transformations and their dislocating character; narratives that saw the self as dissolved or dismembered by the fragmenting of experience; narratives that understood current transitions in epistemic terms or as dissolving epistemology altogether; narratives that regarded co-ordinated political engagement as precluded by the primacy of contextuality and dispersal, especially after Naxalite failure and subsequent disillusionment created by a senile Left Establishment; narratives that articulated the powerlessness of

the Bangla individual digitalized as a voter; narratives that handled terrors of urban life and totalization of rural life as a result of the nerve-shattering intrusions of abstract systems. Of its own, the short story went beyond modernist confines. The magazines were not bound by any market or had to face such pressures as public demand. They broke free from, and de-created, the prisons of inherited words, diction, syntax, forms and stories in order to discover fresh realities. They helped cross-fertilizations of the narrative voice by enabling authors to employ contrastive merging of standard language and local dialects. They allowed free play of historicism as a means of destabilizing orthodoxies of micro-level patriarchies. They nursed construction of sentences without the use of verbs, and intermixture of elite diction with subaltern expressions. They gave full freedom to authors to interpolate analepsis and dexis within the story as frequently as the author preferred.

However, the craft was not as easy for the little magazine authors as it appeared to be. It was very difficult for an author to get rid of the fictional reinforcements supplied by the ruins of the colonial academic system lorded over by quasi-Marxist babudom, wherein metaphysical positions from Greek to Cartesian philosophy laid traps at every step. But the little magazines have tried to dismantle the suzerainty of time, the Western phantom framework within which most short story anthologies are confined.

Instead, they have re-installed space, as a result of which one gets opportunities to read stories written by authors who do not vagabond around newspaper offices and coffee-house tables at Kolkata, as they reside far away from the metropolis and do not write much. The academic jargon called 'art' is relevant only in time and irrelevant in space. Installation of space proves the hollowness of the popularity of off-repeated names, which in time are marketable brands, uncalled for in little magazine world, where *feel good* (as in feeling good about a story) is not the measure of analysis of text.

The semiotics of mapping as an actual expression and fulfillment of forms of Kolkata-centric metropolitan domination make the imagined, conceptual and geographical spaces of little magazines very important. The little magazine which could define such a space imagined, conceptual and geographical combined in *Ishpater Chithi*, published from what is called the Rahr area, covering the mining and industrial belt of

Asansol, Durgapur, Kulti, Chittaranjan, etc. Edited by Prithwish Chakraborty, the magazine published 714 ethno-spatial short stories between 1971-1999 which created possibilities of discursive self-determination at the periphery. The Kolkata-centric system of literary power authorizes certain representations to proliferate, makes every effort to block, prohibit and invalidate the representations of fiction writers of the Rahr area. For example, those associated with *Ishpater Chithi*, such as Udayan Ghosh, Biman Chattapadhyay, Birendranath Shasamal, Moti Mukhopadhyay, Propid Das Sharma, Samaresh Dasgupta, Rabindra Guha, Nanda Choudhury, Manab Chakraborty, Pratim Sarkar, Mrinal Banik, Ashok Tanti, Prafulla Kumar Singha, Parthajit Bhakta, Arunkumar Chattapadhyay, and Subrata Mukhopadhyay. The Kolkata-centric literature have been constructing a heavily circumscribed system of images and categories of thought for which the non-metropolitan ethno-spatial discourse not only creates cultural and political threats, but even may be seen as an attack on the vernacular market and customer values.

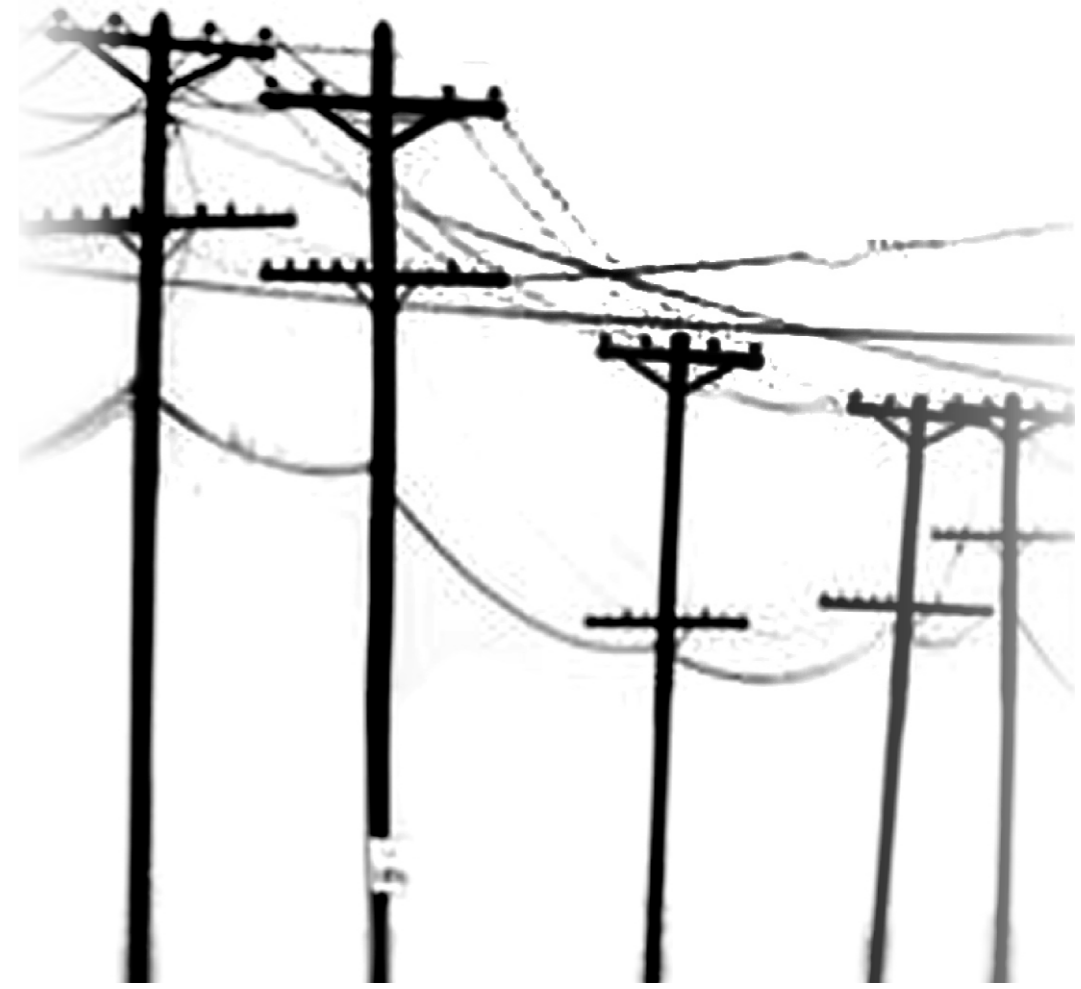
Kolkata-centric metropolitan language has evolved a metropolitan culture, which has negligible connectedness with micro-level Bangla life. Micro-level dialects, which non-metropolitan authors have interjected into their texts, are replete with cultural meanings. Metropolitan language spawns non-ethnic cultural attitudes. The majority of postmodern fiction writers do not contribute to periodicals which are not little magazines, do not get their books reviewed other than in little magazines. Almost all short story magazines have their own publication wing. The short story collections published by them in limited editions are sold generally at district-level annual book fairs and a few avant-garde outlets like *Shilalipi* near Kalighat at Kolkata. These outlets function as spaces where micro-level counter-discourses get knitted into a pluralist discourse; spaces which are outside the power belt of metropolitan, centrist, homogenizing episteme. All little magazines are actually the inbetween spaces which carry the burden of the meanings of Bangla culture. Such spaces are momentary and impermanent by nature, but are continuously engaged in re-inventing themselves, a reality of complex web of relationships that cut across gender, religion, caste, class, dialect, geography and generations. A few little magazines even have their own small printing press, such as

*Mahadiganta*. The cultural space of six hundred Bangla little magazines is a vast, borderless region with their own discourses and discursive practices which circulate without definable boundaries.

The increase in the number of little magazines and non-commercial fiction writers have led to a pastiche of the colonial genre of short story. The narrative structure is called *anu golpo* or micro-story. Since the conclusive twist had been made essential by modernist short story writers and academicians, the *anu golpo* or micro-story made fun of the colonial genre by articulating only the twist and making the rest of the narrative irrelevant. There is no build-up to the ultimate twist or a linearity ending up in last-minute shock to prove universality of human discourse, the doctrine of eternal truth floated by monocentric, imperialist, totalitarian epistemes. *Anu golpo* is different from the incident-oriented, brief short stories which fiction writer Bonophul mastered. *Anu golpo* dismantles the modernist definition of short story. The text disorders the order so that the reader is reminded that experience cannot be accurately reconstructed and reproduced. The speed and scope of the text are extremely rapid and hyperkinetic. It is a text for the very reason that it know itself as text.

#### De-narrativisation and De-canonisation

...short stories which started appearing exclusively on the pages of little magazines in the aftermath of the three movements (*Hungryalist*, *Shastravirodhies* and *Neem Sahitya*), more and more interjected micro-level dialects spoken in West Bengal, disproving the centrist metropolitan myth of universalism, as they staged discourses to the voices of those constituted as the Other. Their emphasis shifted on articulating the multi-ethnic margins of West Bengal. It was a matter of taking hold of hitherto unnoticed, actual micro-level cultural power, of the language, systems of metaphors and regimes of images that the modernist authors designed to silence in their fictions. The modernists, including Samaresh Basu (1924-1988), who himself rose from non-metropolitan slum and worked as a Communist Party activist among jute mill workers, rested his fictions, even when he strayed into magazinist, consumer-friendly populism, upon the ethico-discursive principle of usurping the signifying and representing functions of the margins, overriding their hybrid, pluralist, multicultural and non-universal



reality.

The three literary movements had provided a cultural riposte to the modernist imagination of a unified destiny of mankind, an imagination which expunged particular and local narratives in its drive towards universal rationalization and technological progress. The post-movement fictions went beyond the riposte. The authors were confronted with a reality in which those who talked against the concept of private property had started on a spree of owning nursery schools, nursing homes, buildings, bungalows, cinema halls, cold storages, taxis, buses, trucks, etc.; criminals were selling utopia, peddling status quo; village bosses were stealing electricity; roadside villages were mushrooming with midnight robbers; non-Bangla criminal ghettoes were frighteningly increasing in urban centers; Tagore's Vishwabharati and Santiniketan were in spiritual ruins; 40 per cent of Kolkata people were living in dirtiest shanty slums; political outfits were redefining 'slums', 'starvation death', 'crime', 'lockup death', 'proletariat', etc. through lexical maneuvers; helpless, people were resorting to lynching of anti-socials due to connivance of politicians with criminal elements. The final blow came when the eyes donated by the Marxist thinker and an architect of land reform, Binoy Choudhury, were allowed to rot in a flask after removing them at his death.

In the above hyper-real scenario, the text of fictions

started getting inextricably entangled in the lives of their characters, in their interpellated matrix of identification, and in the conflation of the multiplicity of the narrator himself/herself. They carefully nurtured a bifocal vision of human experience, resulting into an obsession with the provisional, which has been identified as one of the defining characteristics of postmodern literature. Such narratives emanated from a disruptive temporality of enunciation as opposed to the homogenous serial time, highlighting the tensions between multifariousness and homogeneity.

However, during the post-movement periods, even till the end of 20th century... certain fictions maintained an abstracted stasis that had been nursed by progenies of post-Partition diasporic families who thought that in the bourgeois/proletariat binary, they were on the proletariat side, which logically led to the absurd conclusion that every ethnic middle-class West Bengali was bourgeois, and therefore, the geographic and cultural space should be blamed. Though it has petered out now, there had been a bloom of *blame fictions*, an instrumental textuality through which the author or the narrator created a non-blamable, sanctimonious position for himself, living within the protection of the fixation. When the reader removed the palimpsest layers of the short story, he/she encountered a situation in which what was absent became as important as

what was there; encountered an ambivalent geographical and temporal location; an intersection of narrative, autobiography and immediate history. These short stories transformed the narrative to almost a snapshot of counter-biography or assemblage of broken mirror-memoir. Little magazines which functioned as platforms for such short stories were *Dandwashook*, *Manusher Baccha*, *Bijnapan Parba*, *Shobdo Shabdik*, etc., and the writers were Robin Ghosh, Sumantra Chattapadhyay, Sisir Guha and others.

The most influencing factor for the stunted growth of prose has been Sagarmoy Ghosh, the editor of weekly *Desh*, who had the knack to identify the growing literary market segments and the upcoming fiction writers who had the potential to write in the language of the consumer. He picked up such authors when young, and blazoned them relentlessly on readers who remain glued only to vernacular newspapers. We do not yet have prose writers comparable to Fyodor Dostoevsky, James Joyce, Franz Kafka, Marcel Proust, William Faulkner, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, William Burroughs, Salman Rushdie or Gunter Grass.

(concluding installment next week)

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Subhash Mukhopadhyaya 1919-2003

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(Poems translated by Surabhi Banerjee)

#### Eclogue

The sun in the fields, I've heard  
Weaves golden fantasy,  
The moon sees her face  
In the mirror of the lake,  
The heart dances in mild breeze.

Here I am in a village  
Hardly any sign of life there  
Starving peasants, no corns  
Cunning moneylenders all around.

Everyday on meandering streets  
I see hordes of travelers  
Feasting in alms  
Distant city in their dreams.

It's no use frittering  
Your heart in funeral grounds  
It's tough to survive, O friend  
It's better to hold an axe  
Let the foe test its sharpness.



#### Red Red Day

You're the face of my procession!  
The one I've been looking for  
all my life.

I discovered the stranger  
as I returned, on the lamp  
illuminating the entire room.

By day you spurned me  
At dusk you called me in  
I never got a shade in the  
scorching sun  
The blue sea burnt in that fire  
I wipe my eyes--  
Are you a dream?  
Or an illusion?

Embrace me with your iron arms  
Let the frozen tears thaw  
Give love its land of nativity.  
I prepare the malice-bow.  
Days are gone.

Why didn't you show up--  
Why did you blow off the world?  
In anger, all alone in a gale  
the thunder tears up the sky?  
Somebody heard us on the  
horizon  
Straddle the seven-coloured  
steed.  
You are light,  
I've set out, along the ridges of  
darkness  
To bring the red red day.