SHORT STORY

Asura Pond*

FAKIR MOHAN SENAPATI

There was only one pond in Gobindapur, and everyone in the village used it. It was fairly large, covering ten to twelve *bati*s, with banks ten to twelve arm-lengths high, and was known as Asura Pond. In the middle once stood sixteen stone pillars, on which lamps were lighted. We are unable to recount the true story of who had it dug, or when. It is said that demons, the *Asura*s, dug it themselves. That could well be true. Here is a brief history of Asura Pond, as told to us by Ekadusia, the ninety-five-year-old weaver.

The demon Banasura ordered that the pond be dug, but did not pick up shovels and baskets to dig it himself. On his orders, a host of demons came one night and did the work. But when day broke, it had not yet been completed: there was a gap of twelve to fourteen arm-lengths in the south bank, which had not been filled in. By now, it was morning, and the villagers were already up and about. Where could the demons go? They dug a tunnel connecting the pond to the banks of the River Ganges, escaped through it, bathed in the holy river, and then disappeared. During the Baruni Festival on the Ganga, the holy waters of the river used to gush through the tunnel into the pond. But, as the villagers became sinful, the river no longer did this. English-educated babus, do not be too critical of our local historian, Ekadusia Chandra. If you are, half of what Marshman and Tod** have written will not survive the light of scrutiny.

There were fish in the pond. You might well remark, "Of course, where there is water, there are fish. There is little need to note this." But your objection is not, strictly speaking, logical. Although sugarcane and jaggery, body and bone, always go together, there exists no such necessary relation between water and fish. If there did, you would find fish inside the water pitchers in our houses. It is not in our nature to base what we write on vague guesswork. We shall provide irrefutable proof that there were fish in Asura Pond. Consider, if you will, the three long-beaked crocodiles lying immobile, with their mouths open, on the south side of the pond. They were there every day. Why were they in the pond? What did they live on? Did anyone see them grazing in the fields like cattle? Or did they follow the path of nonviolence, like the Jains? Needless to say, since they were alive, they must have been eating something. What could this "something" have been? Long-beaked crocodiles are also known as fish-eating crocodiles. Someone might contend, "True, they were eating fish, but they could very well have been getting fish from somewhere else." Of course, fresh and salted fish were in fact sold in the market, but no one ever saw the crocodiles carrying money and going there. When the fisherwomen came to the village to sell fish, village women gave them rice in exchange. But we can swear under oath that we never saw crocodiles obtaining fish in exchange for rice. Thus, it is proven beyond doubt that there were fish in Asura Pond.

There is another equally irrefutable proof to support this contention. Look over there! Four *kaduakhumpi* birds are hopping about like *gotipua*s, like traditional dancing boys. The birds are happy and excited because they are able to spear and eat the little fish that live in the mud. Some might remark that these birds were so cruel, so wicked, that they get pleasure from spearing and eating creatures smaller than themselves! What can we say? You may describe the *kaduakhumpi* birds as cruel, wicked, satanic, or whatever else you like; the birds will never file a defamation suit against you. But don't you know that among your fellow human beings, the bravery, honor, respectability, indeed, the attractiveness of an individual all depend upon the number of necks he can wring?

Some sixteen to twenty cranes, white and brown, churn the mud like lowly farmhands, from morning till night. This is the third proof that there are fish in the pond. A pair of kingfishers suddenly arrive out of nowhere, dive into the after a couple of times, stuff themselves with food, and swiftly fly away.

artwork by amina

Sitting on the bank, a lone kingfisher suns itself, wings spread like the gown of a memsahib. Oh, stupid Hindu cranes, look at these English kingfishers, who arrive out of nowhere with empty pockets, fill themselves with all manner of fish from the pond, and then fly away. You nest in the banyan tree near the pond, but after churning the mud and water all day long, all you get are a few miserable small fish. You are living in critical times now; more and more kingfishers will swoop down on the pond and carry off the best fish. You have no hope, no future, unless you go abroad and learn how to swim in the ocean.

The kite is smart and clever; it perches quietly on a branch, like a Brahmin guru, and from there swoops down into the pond to snatch a big fish. That lasts it for the whole day. Brahmin gurus perch on their verandahs, descending on their disciples once a year, like the kite. Forty or fifty arm-lengths from where the cranes were feeding, the pond is covered with water hyacinths and various kinds of creepers and plants. In the midst of these, water lilies, like young Hindu daughters-in-law, blossom at night; during the day they fold themselves in and hide their faces from view. But the water hyacinths, like young unmarried girls, gaily toss their heads about, day and night, without shame, without a care in the world. The *rata*lilies bloom at a further distance in the pond. They are like educated Christian "ladies"; they have parted company with the water lilies, but have not yet joined the lotuses.

In the middle of the pond, no water hyacinths are to be found, because goddess Budhi Mangala visits this part of the pond every night. The lotus flower is the darling of Indian poets; it is the abode of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, and the seat of Saraswati, the goddess of learning. Furthermore, Lord Brahma's birthplace is graced with lotuses. So naturally, in our village goddess Budhi Mangala has the monopoly on this holy and beautiful flower. Once a villager swam out into the pond to pluck a lotus. The goddess got his feet entangled with creepers, dragged him down, and drowned him. Since that day, no one has dared to even glance at the lotus flowers in the pond.

There were four bathing ghats in Asura Pond, but only three were used. No one went to the ghat on the south side of the pond, except when someone died and funeral rites were performed. This ghat was a frightening place; even during the day, you would find no one there. And who would venture there at night? Close by grew a large *aswatha* tree, where, as everyone knows, two terrible demons lived. They were often seen sitting in the tree at night, stretching their legs out into the middle of the pond. We do not know the names of the persons who had seen these demons, but the story is nevertheless true. There were also eyewitness accounts of several kinds of ghosts, who fished in the pond, especially on dark rainy nights, lighting fires here and there. The washerman's ghat was on the east side; two washermen were busy washing clothes. It is said that you know if a village is neat or untidy by looking at its washerman's ghat. Cartloads of dirty clothes were piled up like sacks, and four washerwomen were engaged in boiling and drying clothes. The weavers' ghat was at the northwest corner of the pond; women gathered there in large numbers, since it was close to the village, giving it the look of a haat, a country market. Just because we have used the word 'haat', do not for a moment think that things were bought and sold there; we call it a haat because there were a lot of people, producing a great deal of noise. The gathering at the ghat became very large when the women came to bathe before cooking their daytime meals. If there had been a daily newspaper in Gobindapur, its editor would have had no difficulty gathering stories for his paper; all he would have had to do was sit at the ghat, paper and pencil in hand. He would have found out, for instance, what had been cooked the previous night, at whose house, and what was going to be cooked there today; who went to sleep at what time; how many mosquitoes bit whom; who ran out of salt; who had borrowed oil from whom; how Rama's mother's young daughter-in-law was a shrew, and how she talked back to her mother-in-law, although she married only the other day; when Kamali would go back to her in-laws; how Saraswati was a nice girl and how her cooking was good, her manners excellent.

Padi started a brief lecture as she sat in the water cleaning her teeth. The sum and substance of it was that no one in the village was a better cook than she. She went on tirelessly, pouring out much relevant and irrelevant information. A few pretty women went on rubbing their faces with their sari end, in order to look even prettier. Lakshmi's nose, adorned with a nose jewel, had already become red from too much rubbing. Sitting at the water's edge, scrubbing her heavy brass armlets with half a basketful of sand, Bimali was engaged in a long tirade against some unnamed person, using words not to be found in any dictionary. The gist of it was that somebody's cow had eaten her pumpkin creepers last night. Bimali proceeded to offer some stinking stuff as food to three generations of the cow owner's ancestors, going on and on about the fertile soil in her back garden: the wretched cow had not merely devoured the shiny pumpkins that grew there but had destroyed the possibility of it producing many more such delicious pumpkins. With the help of several cogent arguments and examples, she also demonstrated that this cow must be given as a gift to a Brahmin, otherwise a terrible calamity would befall the owner. If a violent quarrel between Markandia's mother and Jasoda had not suddenly erupted and put an end to all the talk, we could have gathered many more such items of news.

Jasoda was sitting in the water cleaning her teeth. Markandia, a five-year-old boy, who was jumping about and muddying the water, happened to splatter her. Jasoda stood up, screamed at the boy in foul language, and cursed him with a short life--whereupon Markandia's mother rushed in and shouted back at Jasoda in matching language. in the end, Markandia's mother was vanquished; she slapped her son, picked up her pitcher, and, grabbing Markandia's hand, retreated resentfully. Markandia began to howl, baring all his teeth, and on this note the great battle at the ghat ended.

The sound of thunder lingers long after lightning flashes. The quarrel was over, but talk about it continued. The middle-aged women formed one group and the older women another, one group siding with Markandia's mother and the other with Jasoda. For our part, we are entirely behind Jasoda. After long deliberation and rigorous analysis we have come to the conclusion that Markandia was the cause of all the trouble. He was definitely the villain; his crime was unpardonable. You may scold him, thrash him, or do whatever you like with him--we will stand by you. After all, as you know, water is life, and everyone used water from the weavers' ghat for drinking. Markandia dirtied this water. Would you consider this a small crime?

Now about twenty women arrived at the ghat to bathe. They all stepped into the pond, sat down, and started cleaning their teeth. Mil-white spittle from their mouths floated about in the pond, along with the bits of reddish stuff they scraped off their tongues. We hesitate to describe what else was floating there, since all the women had just relieved themselves in the nearby fields. Even Jasoda would admit she herself had done the same. It is a time-honored practice, not a crime, and therefore there is no reason why it should not be written. Once someone joked that for every pitcherful of water women carried from the pond they discharged a quarter back into it. That may be true, but we have no way of verifying it. More women, carrying bed linens, arrived and began washing them in the ghat; some washed their children's dirty clothing in the water. But, we are sure none of them made the water filthy by jumping about in it, like Markandia had. Unless you do that, how can the water become dirty? Therefore, considering all the evidence, we conclude that Markandia's crime was definitely of a very serious nature…

*An extract from Fakir Mohan Senapati's novel *Six Acres and a Third* reviewed below.
**British colonial-period historians.

Letter from KARACHI

Of palm and cactus

MUNEEZA SHAMSIE

A few days ago, I received a new English poetry collection *Body Loom* by M. Athar Tahir in Lahore. He is a bureaucrat, scholar, poet, translator and calligrapher. His publications include books on Pakistani art: my favourite remains the sumptuous *Calligraphy and Calligraphy-art.* His poetry collection begins with a poem "Dot" which both a celebration of Creation and the skill of a calligrapher's pen. The volume includes sparse elegant poems on landscape, nature and seasons, but my eye instinctively fell on the title 'Karachi'. I thought … aha, what better way to start this column? But his view of *"this sea-edge/ city, sprouting beyond comprehension* did seem a bit gloomy.

I began to look at English verses written by Karachi poets including 'A Better Man than I: Six Poems for Kipling' by the erudite Salman Tarik Kureshi. The poem appears in Kureshi's collection *Landscapes of the Mind* and includes the lines:

Rudyard, where I live now --
the southern town of Richard Burton and Bartle Frere --
pulsates with the throb of a commerce
different to yours

Its currency
is frozen prawns and colour television ……

The noise is of jet planes and motor cycles
and the clang of a bellbuoy on the swell;
the reek tells of diesel oil and the fish harbour
and food cooked in the shacks
of the poor

This is a loud
city of palm and cactus
where a beachless sea is shut behind
a wall of unrounded rocks.

This August, while the city struggled with unprecedented rains, floods and power breakdowns, the weather was cool and breezy and the trees, lush. In the midst of this, was a major literary event: the visit of Zulfikar Ghose, expatriate poet, scholar and critic. A sizeable audience gathered at the Beach Luxury Hotel to hear his illuminating talk on literature followed by a poetry reading. The function was organized by OUP, the publisher of Ghose's: *Selected Poems* (1991) He read new poems including "Nusrat" an elegy for the qawwali maestro; while the multilayered "In Essex" about a train journey typifies Ghose's preoccupation with mortality, illusion and time. He writes:

and for a few miles the landscape mimics
a sentimental picture of pastoral charm,
a moment's regression to a presumed

more peaceful time--the horses feeding
outside a barn as if in preparation
for a journey to Smithfield or Covent Garden

or the heavy-uddered Guernsey cows
profoundly ruminant while two dogs run
around them senselessly--there is in that
quick exposure while the eye opens and blinks
barely thrice an affirmation, however delusional,
that this present world is really as unthreatened

as any imagined fairy-tale epoch--

Ghose is a soft-spoken, informal man with a quiet humour and a passion for literature and cricket. He was born in Sialkot in 1935, moved to Bombay in 1942 and migrated to Britain in 1952. He says his British education forged him as a writer but his literary ancestors include Bocaccio, *The Arabian Nights*, Proust, Becket, Joyce, Virginia Woolf.

Ghose is an early example of the diaspora writer who defines himself through literature and story-telling. He is vocal on the tendency to categorize writers into an ethnic slot and says all that matters is language and form. There are autobiographical and metaphysical elements in his eleventh novel, the intricate *The Triple Mirror of the Self,* an exploration of migration and exile across four continents. The narrator's search for his core, his essential self, takes him backwards in time to his Bombay schooldays and his early Punjab childhood The book begins and ends with mirror images of the Andes and the Hindu Kush.

Ghose has taught at the University of Texas in Austin since 1969. He is married to a Brazilian artist and won great acclaim in the 1970s for his historical trilogy *The Incredible Brazilian.* These novels and his others about South America display a clear sub-continental resonance. In Pakistan, he is best known for his 1967 novel *The Murder of Aziz Khan,* which touched a deep chord and revolved around a proud Punjab farmer destroyed by a group of ruthless industrialists: this was also the first cohesive, modern English novel by a writer of Pakistani origin. In those days, Ahmed Ali and Shahid Suhrawardy dominated Pakistan's English language scene: Taufiq Rafat (perhaps Pakistan's best English-language poet) and Zulfikar Ghose were new voices. Today there are several dynamic young writers on the horizon.

This August, the Pakistan Academy of Letters announced its annual literary awards in each of Pakistan's literatures. To my great delight The Patras Bokhari Award for the best English book was given to *Broken Verses* by Kamila Shamsie - my daughter! Last year the winner was the poetic *Maps for Lost Lovers* by the expatriate Nadeem Aslam. The academy has also brought out a series "Pakistani Literature" consisting of English translations, but there is also a separate section for English-language writing which is very welcome. Otherwise there exists this strange literary apartheid between English-language writing and other sub-continental literatures. There rage these passionate debates about the 'authenticity" of English as a creative vehicle, particularly by diaspora writers. To me, all these diverse voices are part of the whole.

As I write this, Karachi is settling into Ramazan and we wait with bated breath for the president's memoirs.

Muniza Shamsie has edited three anthologies of Pakistani English writing. She is a regular contributor to *Dawn* newspaper, *Newsline and She*, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* and *www. LitEncyc.com*.

Book Review

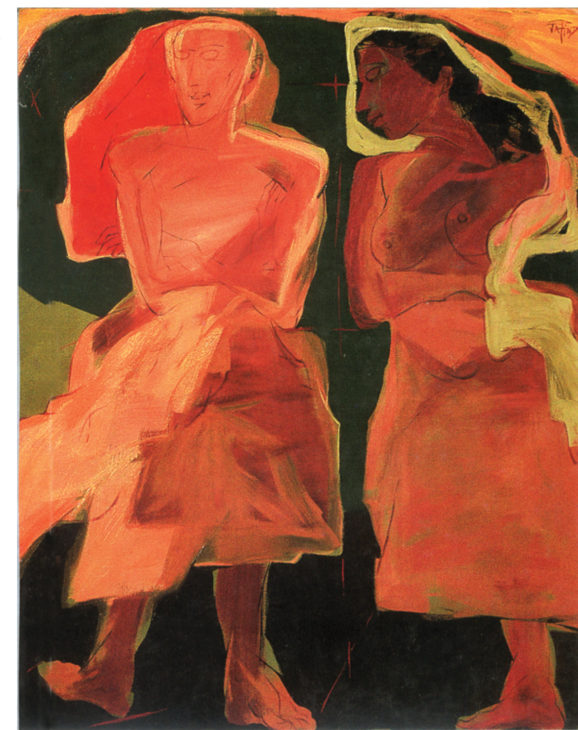
Well-honed satire and irony

FARHAD AHMED

Six Acres and a Third (Chha Mana Atha Guntha) by Fakir Mohan Senapati, translated from the Oriya by Rabi Shankar Mishra, Satya P. Mohanty, Jatindra K. Nayak, and Paul St. Pierre; Delhi: Penguin Books; 2006; pp. 222; Rs. 250

Power is an insidious thing; the roles of oppressor and oppressed keep changing at different historical moments. In the midst of our annual celebrations over our victorious fight for Bengali against Pakistani colonialism, we tend to forget that it too stands historically accused of 'linguistic colonialism' against the Assamese and the Oriyas. Bengali, arriving in the wake of British colonial occupation, threatened both language and gave rise to fierce movements that had a profound impact on subsequent Assamese and Oriya nationalism. Even the names associated with Bengali 'high culture' at the time, even the legendary Tagores, were not immune from linguistic chauvinism. Lakshminath Bezbaruwa, born into a prominent Assamese family who was a well-known Assamese activist/writer, has left us with such an account in his autobiography. He married a granddaughter of Debendranath Tagore against the wishes of his own family, the probable motive for disregarding his orthodox family's wishes--he informed them of his decision at the last possible moment-- being perhaps the bewitching cultural aura of the Tagore family. Yet, after the marriage "under the leadership of Robi Kaka (Rabindranath Tagore) the Tagore family started impressing upon him (Bezbaruwa) the superiority of Bengali to its 'dialect', Assamese." His subsequent fight for the Assamese language, in opposition to the imposition of Bengali, is recorded to have "sorely disappointed his famous in-laws." (Cited in Sudhir Chandra's *The Oppressive Present,* New Delhi: OUP; 1992).

It was in this torrid political atmosphere--Orissa was occupied by the British in 1803--that Fakir Mohan Senapati, the father of modern Oriya literature, grew up. He was born Braja Mohan Senapati in 1843, but was given the appellation 'Fakir' in honour of two Muslim saints whom his grandmother believed saved him from an otherwise fatal childhood illness. Senapati was a leading figure among the band of other Orissa writers who organized both local and national resistance against Bengali encroachments on Oriya language, literature and culture and British colonialism. He established one of Orissa's first presses, founded and published various magazines, and organized Oriya literary societies. He came to writing comparatively late, and in all wrote four novels, two volumes of short



stories and the first modern autobiography in the Oriya language, *Atma Jiban Charita*. By the time Fakir Mohan Senapati died in 1918, he was known both *Katha Samrat* (emperor of short stories) as well as *Vyasa Kabi* (language poet).

Senapati's participation in such struggles clearly shaped his artistic vision. It made him write, in the everyday colloquial Oriya language that in itself was a form of protest against cultural authority, against traditional economic exploitation and social discrimination, along with the then-newer depredations of British colonialism. His fight was for the common man. All this is in evidence in his novel *Chha Mana Atha Guntha*, now brought out in this excellent English translation titled *Six Acres and a Third*.

On the face it, the book is about a land dispute. A crooked zamindar, Ramachandra Mangaraj, dupes the poor weaver Bhagia and his wife Saria out of their land, and later gets his just desserts by being framed by the equally crooked officials of the-then new colonial system, imprisoned and beaten to death in jail. But Fakir Mohan Senapati's novel is more than the simple-minded blast of the lesser artist, with flattened perspectives and characters-as-caricatures, at the various iniquities of the zamindari system and colonialism. *Six Acres and a Third* instead is rich brew, with Senapati's assault on a variety of deserving targets hinging on well-honed satire and irony, on subtle indirectness and obliqueness. To this end, he fashioned what has to rank as one of the most engaging characters in the literature of the Indian 'vernacular' languages, a sly, subversive, worldly, sometimes dissembling and winking-at-the-reader, slippery, funny, ironic narrator. It is a voice that endlessly digresses, which does not even get to the main 'plot' till the middle of the tenth chapter, that narrates in one sentence (sets up the authority figure), only to undercut it at the next moment (exposing the authority figure as a fraud and a fake). This voice enables Senapati to cast his net wide, and capture--lightly, with surprising sharpness--the whole physical, sociological and religious setting of Oriya rural society, and home in on the evils of the caste system and the Brahmins who fed on it, on the cultural ignorance of Anglicized babus and the rapacious petty officialdom established by the colonial state, on the zamindari system with its henchmen *daroga*s, commissioners, *peshkar*s, and magistrates, on the deadening rituals of *shastra*s and *sutra*s, and even on colonial ethnography and classical Indian imagery.

Though written over a hundred years ago, reading the novel is a modern experience. In the context of present-day Bangladesh, the relevance of Senapati's blistering critique of social and economic corruption --corruptions of the soul really--has not only not withered, but seems to have gained in power and freshness. Putting down the book, one has to wonder what he would have made of today's cast of MPs, ministers, bureaucrats, politicos, student leaders, contractors, *dalal*s, et cetera, all those in a chain from the village parishad chairman to the capital city's governing fat cats battening themselves at the expense of the rest of the country's citizens and sleeping easy at night.

We need Fakir Mohan Senapati, or his kind, today in our national literature.

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