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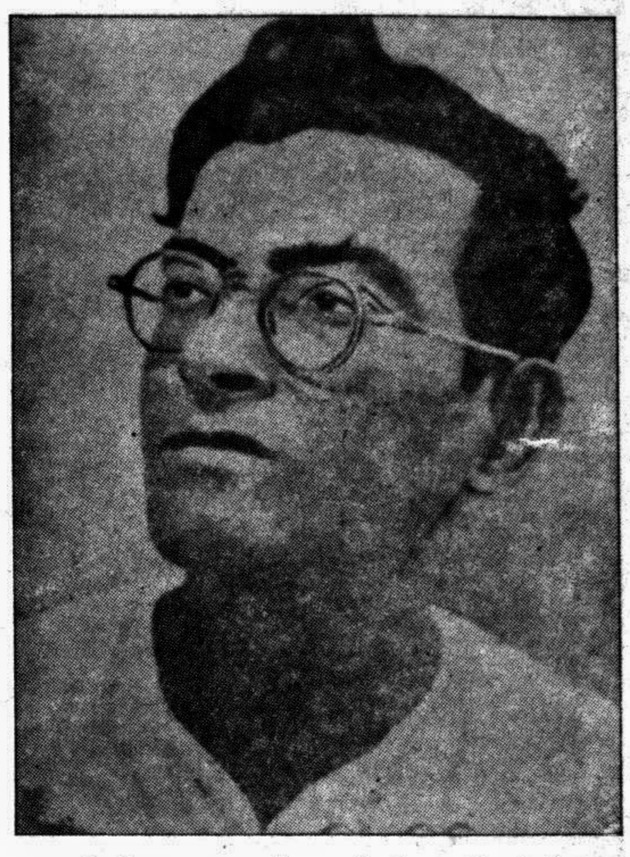
ANNIVERSARY

Today, the 19th of May, is the eighty-seventh birth-anniversary of Manik Bandyopadhyay, one of the major fiction-writers in the Bengali language. Born in 1908, he marked his debut by writing a story called 'Atasi' in 1928, in response to a challenge he had thrown to his friends. Over a period of more than two decades, Manik wrote as many as 40 novels and 192 stories including a good number of poems and essays. The Daily Star takes this opportunity to mark his birth-anniversary through presenting an article on Manik accompanied by one of his stories rendered into English by the author of the following article.



Manik Bandyopadhyay : Some Issues and Concerns

by Azfar Hussain

THE emergence of the modern Bengali novel is largely indebted to the three *great 'Bandyopadhyays'* — Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay, Tarash-ankar Bandyopadhyay and Manik Bandyopadhyay. There are certainly scores of reasons for believing that it was Bankimchandra who first laid the foundations of the Bengali novel; that his narrative zest, art of characterisation, and sense of structure initiated a vigorous, unkillable tradition of fiction in Bengali literature. But, then, for a feel of the fullness of whatever accomplishments and achievements one can possibly see in the area of Bengali fiction, one cannot but go back to the three *Bandyopadhyays* mentioned above.

Bibhutibhushan, for example, came up with a mode of writing which could sufficiently accommodate a fictional world rooted in the life and history, in the images and experiences of common, ordinary men and women we still find in rural Bengal; his was a world where the internal but intense lyrical energy of life's struggle was brought out in a language that was transparent, poetic, simple. Tarashankar's own kind of poetry is also what we can barely miss. His keen sense of sequence, his dramatic imagination, and his flair for realism marked his own stylistic entity. But, in Manik Bandyopadhyay, interestingly, we not only find *Bibhutiesque* concerns with the subaltern classes — poor farmers, day labourers, fishermen, weavers, blacksmiths, potters, beggars, etc., all of whom were rooted, roughly speaking, in the feudal mode of production in rural Bengal, and the unavoidably stark, real images and experiences of poverty, but we also find in Manik *Tarashankaresque* sequentiality and poetic quality to varying degrees. This is, however, not to say that Manik was not different from Bibhuti and Tarashankar as such. The point here is actually this : Manik accommodated things both 'Bibhutiesque' and 'Tarashankaresque' in an essentially Manikian way, but also moved further beyond them, expanding the space of possibilities hitherto inhabited by the Bengali novel. In Manik's world, newer concerns mounted over the man-woman relationship, man's existential and social struggles, his psychological complexities, his linguistic problems and deficiencies, his politics of resistance, etc. — concerns which were not intensely dwelt on in fictional terms by writers coming before Manik or by his contemporaries. Here, in the present essay, we will try to look into some of these concerns. But, before we go on to do it, a few words about the life and works of Manik Bandyopadhyay may be useful.

2 : Life and Works — A Sketch

Manik Bandyopadhyay was born in Dumka, the capital of Saontal Pargana, on May 19, 1908 (Jaistha 6, 1315). His father, Harihar Bandyopadhyay, was an officer in charge of land survey and settlement in Dumka. Manik's paternal residence was originally located in the village of Malpadia in Bikrampur, Dhaka. His mother Niradasundari Devi came from the village called 'Gaudia' situated close to Malpadia. One sees that this village — Gaudia — appears as a strong novelistic setting in some of Manik's works, particularly in his famous novel called *Putul Nacher Itikatha* (The Story of a Puppetshow), published in 1936 alongwith other two much-talked-about novels, namely, *Padma Nadir Majhi* (The Fisherman on the Padma) and *Jiboner Jatilata* (Life's Complexities).

Manik's original name was Probodhkumar Bandyopadhyay. But, as Manik's sister-in-law (elder brother's wife), Amiya Bandyopadhyay, informs us in a piece called 'Smaran Kori' (Remembrance) : "He was christened Manik right in the room he was born in, because of his dark complexion and brilliant, beautiful face, and that name — Manik — remained unchanged and prominent throughout his life". The number of brothers and sisters Manik had stood at 13 — seven brothers and six sisters, and Manik was the fifth son of his father. So, it was in a large family that Manik was growing up. Interestingly, in some of his stories, Manik tried to deal with internal complexities stemming from such large families.

In 1924, on May 28, when Manik was only twenty, he lost his mother. In 1928, he passed the Matriculation Examination, and in 1926, he did his I Sc from Bankura Mission College, scoring a first division. Later, he got admitted into Presidency College for undergraduate studies in Mathematics, but did not complete his studies for the B Sc degree.

Manik's aptitude for mathematics was no doubt excellent; but, then, his preoccupation, inordinately passionate as it became, with literature precluded the possibilities of undertaking and completing a formal course of studies in mathematics. True, he never lost his fascination for mathematics, and went to the extent of postulating partly *a la* Bukhanan and partly *a la* Ezra Pound that there was a close relationship between mathematics and literature, as if the Pythagorean expression of $C^2=a^2+b^2$ may be poetically experienced, and the differential calculus can be fictionally worked out. In fact, as Manik himself once maintained, he was trying to do a different kind of mathematics in fiction. He said in his *Galpa Lekhar Galpa* (Stories of Storywriting) : "There is nothing like mathematics. What complexities! What hair-splitting rules and formulae! And Chemistry and Physics? Well, they are nothing but new poetry, where there is no scope for flippancy, sloppiness, sentimentalism".

What, indeed, Manik felt about mathematics and science at the beginning of his writing career can certainly be applied to the novelistic style he had been struggling to evolve and forge. Never a slipshod and sloppy writer, Manik believed not only in the art but also in the science of writing. Ezra Pound once said, "poetry is inspired mathematics!" And, for Manik, it was fiction which was certainly so. In this sense, Manik never lost his contact with mathematics.

The magnitude of Manik's *oeuvre* certainly precludes the possibility of glib, outright characterisations of this writer, although a great deal of traditional Manik-criticisms do not fail to exhibit preoccupations with labels and epithets to characterise him as such. Sarajmohon Mitra, one of our contemporary Manik-critics, justly points to this tendency by saying that while to some, Manik is "the most controversial novelist in Bengali literature"; to others, he is "one of the successors of *Kallol*"; to still others, he is "very original, very historical"; to some, he is non-pareil in his sense of 'realism' in Bengali fiction. And, as we know, a horde of 'Marxist' critics, while only abusing and delimiting the rich possibilities of Marxian aesthetics, have gone on to find nothing more than 'social realism' in Manik's novels and stories!

In 1928, Manik wrote his first story called 'Atasi' whose genesis can be interestingly attributed to an incident of betting that Manik heroically notched up. It was a noisy afternoon when one of Manik's friends said that editors nowa-days did not want to publish new writers; that they were only interested in reputed ones. Manik came up with the reply : "I bet they will show interest in me. I will show you within three months that my story is published." In response to this challenge, Manik wrote a story, and became a writer. His 'Atasi' was published in *Bichitra*, and since then, he remained passionately involved in writing both stories and novels, a spate of which not only made literary critics and editors sit up, but also consolidated his position as one of the most powerful and prolific Bengali fiction-writers in this part of the world.

Manik wrote as many as 40 novels. The number of stories he wrote is likely to exceed 192. He also wrote poetry, and a volume of his poems was published only recently. There, of course, he did not stop; for, what more he came up with included non-fiction prose and occasional essays, and some post-editorials. He used to write diaries — rather scribble diary-notes — revealing yet another real world bristling with internal, private, psychic complexities. So far, twelve of his diaries were published. Also, a number of letters he wrote to his friends, relatives and editors, including a series of private notes he scrawled, were recently published. It is interesting to know that Manik, with considerable care, wrote a sustained note on 'Epilepsy' which, for example, began with this line : "important idea regarding the cause of epilepsy — over-activity of the brain". Did not Manik try his hand at drama? Yes, he did, and wrote one. He also wrote some juvenile stories and novels; the first collection of such stories was brought out after his death.

Yet, Manik is primarily known as a short story writer and novelist. Some of his major volumes of stories include: *Atasi Mami o Annanya Golpa* (Aunt Atasi and Other Stories, 1935), *Pragaitihasik* (Primeval, 1937), *Mihi o Mota Kahini* (Tales Long and Short, 1938), *Swarisrip* (A Creeping Animal, 1939), *Bau* (The Wife, 1943), *Paristhiti* (Situations, 1946), *Aj Kal Parshur Galpo* (Stories of Today, Tomorrow and the Day After, 1946), *Khatiyan* (The Ledger, 1947), *Feriwallah* (The Huckster, 1953), *Lajuklata* (Touch-me-not, 1954). His stories, written over a period of more than two decades, evinced his thematic, formal and structural struggles leading to a language and a world-view which not only accommodated the process of man's *being* and *becoming*, but also continuously indicated man's potentials for change. For him, life was not a given quantity to be merely linguistically representated; but, also, it was something to be changed, revised, moulded, broken, constructed.

Now coming to Manik's novels, one can say that Manik was able to show promise and possibilities in his very first published novel called *Janani* (Mother), published in 1935 — the same year when his first volume of stories was brought out. In this novel, Manik intently zoomed in on a lower middle-class family caught in the squalid round of daily struggles microcosmically mirrored in the character of a mother. Though *Janani* was Manik's first published novel, it was not the first one. In fact, his first novel called *Dibaratrir Kabya* (Poetry of Days and Nights) was published a little later in 1935. This novel, dealing primarily with the theme of fantastic love, came as a sharp contrast in tone, tune and text with *Janani*. The year 1936 saw the publications of those three great novels, more-talked-about and more-referred-to than any other, namely, *Putul Nacher Itikatha*, *Padma Nadir Majhi* and *Jibaner Jatilata*.. Given the novelistic breadth and expanses, linguistic and structural experiments, deft deployment of stylistic strategies and resources, and above all, creation and realisation of his characters, each of these novels — particularly *Putul Nacher Itikatha* and *Padma Nadir Majhi* — took Manik to a height that has ever since demanded our struggle for readings and rereadings. But, there are other novels which are quite, if not more, significant; these include, for example, *Sahartali* (The Suburbs, 1940), *Dhara-Bandha Jiban* (Routine Life, 1942), *Darpan* (Mirror, 1945), *Chihnna* (Signs, 1947), *Adayer Itihas* (History of Compensation, 1947), *Chatushkon* (Four Angles, 1948), *Jiyanta* (The Living, 1950), *Sonar Cheye Dami* (More Precious than Gold, 1951), *Chhandyapatan* (Disruption, 1951), *Pashapashi* (Side by Side, 1952), *Arogya* (Recovery, 1953), *Paradhin Prem* (Shackled Love, 1955), *Halud Nadi Sabuj Bon* (The Yellow River and the Green Forest, 1956) and *Mashul* (Compensation, 1956).

It also needs mentioning here that Manik joined the Indian Communist Party in 1944, and remained a member of this party until his death. Because of his political affiliation, and his commitment to communism and Marxism, Manik had to lose a number of publishers and so-called friends.

Manik Bandyopadhyay died on December 3, 1956 at the Nilratan Sarker Hospital in Calcutta. He was then only 48.

3 : A Story and an Alternative Reading

So far we have tried to come up with nothing more than a sketch — more appropriately, a thumbnail sketch — of Manik's life and works which, however, demand a more comprehensive treatment that is almost impossible here. But, then, what I intend to do here is now propose a reading of one of Manik's earlier but most celebrated, most Manikian stories so as to have a feel of his fictional mode and temper in microcosm, at any rate. The story is called "Atmahatyar Adhikar" (Suicide as a Right). True, conventional Manik-criticisms have so far concentrated on Manik's plots, characterization, dialogues or language, attitudes, points of views, dramatic and narrative qualities in his major novels and stories including the story in question, in mostly categorical terms. My purpose here is not to establish any category as such, but to observe only those areas mostly lost sight of in such criticisms, and indicate very briefly some of the essential fictional preoccupations of Manik in passing.

As we see, 'suicide' is mentioned in the very title of the story. Is it then a story about suicide? Yes, in the story, suicide does not take place, unlike those suicides one can see in contemporary Japanese stories, or in existentialist fiction, or in Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky. Suicide, here, is not an action *per se*, but it is a process, and one can take this as a *Manikesque* trait : he is sometimes more interested in the process than in physical actions.

As one goes through the story, one feels that suicide, even if it does not take place, is established as a right in itself. But, it is not true that everyone has got this right. But, 'Nilmoni' has earned it from the kind of life he leads. Nilmoni, one of the principal characters of the story, can speak of his hard-earned right, namely, suicide, in bold and unambiguous terms : "It is unnecessary to live, not only today, not only tomorrow, but also moment-by-moment". Manik makes this realization explicit at the expense of conventional suspense. Nilmoni can certainly exercise his right by committing suicide at any given point of time; but; then, he does not, only to show and prove that it is his own right. Thus, the story tends to be one of an exclusive — not universal — rights. Such a conception of right in this fashion is unique indeed, and of course, genuinely Manikesque!

Now, let us turn to the opening of the story, and then move. The first line of the story — naked, bare, brief, pointed, consisting of four words and constituting a single paragraph — says emphatically that it is in the rainy season that they suffer *most*. Who are they that thus suffer? They in-

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The Story of Rice

A Short Story by Manik Bandyopadhyay

THE night was dead silent. The path going through the village was empty and desolate.

The *Sanyasi* went plodding on; the path he took was sandy and soft, though earlier he had not noticed it. It immensely pained him to have to simply imagine that he should walk three miles from the railway station to reach 'Saalti', and that he should trek for hours another four miles towards 'Palashmati', his village. He felt frail and weak; his waist and knees began to ache, while in his mind was mounting the fatigue of his entire body. He, of course, had initially thought of spending the night at the railway station itself. He had thought he would lie flat on his back under the shade of the station soon after taking tea from a four-paisa pot, and start for home only at the crack of dawn.

But he was a man of caution and circumspection. His imagination was strong, too. His calculation readily convinced him that he would have to walk a total of seven miles, rain or shine — it did not matter whether he should do it at dawn or dusk. So, if he was to take the edge off his hunger by drinking the pot's tea on an empty stomach and then catch a few hours' sleep in the night, it would only ultimately drain all his energy left, and thus make it all the more difficult for him to walk — to walk s-e-v-e-n miles! He also thought that he might wake late in the morning, and that it would certainly delay him in arriving home before noon. He had managed to collect some rice weighing seven *seers* and a half only. But, this rice would be simply useless for his hungry family's indispensable lunch at home, if he showed up late.

His ready calculation was, however, accompanied by an irresistible flight of imagination. 'Who knows how many of them are by now simply dead!' 'And who knows how many are now dying!' The *Sanyasi* continued to imagine, 'perhaps someone has meanwhile reached such a state of dying— it must be Sona *boudi*. But, even at midnight, just a handful of boiled rice can save her — spare her a perpetual staggering on the border between life and death; yes, even limpingly, she can stage a comeback to life — yes, she needs just a bowl of boiled rice! Then she can fight again. But, if I delay even for a few hours .... '

Unthinkable!

With him, the *Sanyasi* was also carrying a small quantity of chick-peas. He, therefore, chewed some, and then drank tea, finally setting his foot on the way. The moon had hardly waned then; it had lost only four lunar days. So, plodding his sandy and soft way homeward in the huge moonlight made it impossible for him to feel pain to his heart's content. 'Oh god, what a magnetic pull — this is called home!' 'Perhaps, all of them, even Sona *boudi* herself, have died off — they are now mere ghosts!'

The village called 'Saalti' was known to have a pack of noisy dogs. Their relentless growls at passers-by kept the sleeping, silent midnight ever alive and awake. But, these dogs had never chased or bitten anyone; they had only barked desperately, with all their might. Yet, those who passed by could not but feel a shade scared, at least; some of them held the stick in hand as tight as they could, some even aimed the stick point-plank at the barking dogs. The *Sanyasi* did not have a stick of his own. He, however, managed to get one, having lopped it off from one of the fences of a broken, derelict house. But while he passed through the village with a stick in hand, he did not hear a single dog growling with its proverbial desperation. Only a dog or two very feebly indicated its or their presence in a few lifeless, broken syllables of snarls which soon reached into the silence of the night.

While trying to come to terms with the snake-cold news of men and dogs dying and lying side-by-side or fleeing together from the same village, the *Sanyasi* 's febrile feelings registered a sudden sense of alarm. This actually happened after he had passed through the village. Here, now, there were only fields and swamps on each side of the path. He was almost caught off balance by a sudden stumble, and hence, he had to stop with a startle, when he seemed to breathe somewhat desultorily. He then looked around, and the feeling of getting dwarfed by the wide expanses of the bright, solitary landscape became transparent in the huge moonlight. This feeling — one of intimidation — seemed to shrivel, wrinkle up his mind, as if the mind became a physical object. Oh God, even with eyes open, everything was turning out to be a blur!

Before he had a fall as a result of some giddiness, the *Sanyasi* had somehow managed to sit down on the path, while placing his head in his palms. For ages he had not eaten to his heart's content; he had only cracked up to a frazzle by hard toil, and always felt the gnawing pains of hunger. Earlier, he came over all giddy like this sometimes; but, then, this dizzy spell soon went away.

After this compelling pause, he stood up and again took the path homeward. All on a sudden, he felt with a sense of intimidating wonder that his body lost all its weight, that he was balked of all burden. Even that small packet of rice weighing only seven *seers* and a half, accompanied by whatever quantity of chick-peas he had, lying hitherto on his shoulder, had all disappeared. But where could they go? Where could they fall? A part of the line of bones down the middle of his back now seemed to have the bizarre creeps. His circumspection and imagination all turned plumb blunt. He lost even the slightest ability to be a little hopeful, the ability to think that he might have dropped the packet on the path where he had to sit down owing to giddiness.

Now, it was not the walking that he could do. He only began to carry his body, in reverse direction, like someone making a corpse stand and walk. It did not take long to make his great find, that is, to fetch the packet lying lonely on the path, but his mood did not change at all, as if nothing happened. He only sat motionless beside the lost-packet-now-found, then released a deep breath stuck inside, and relaxed for a while.

While he was approaching the village of Palashmati, the *Sanyasi* felt that he was perhaps once again entering Saalti — the village he had left far behind. Then, he saw the same derelict house from whose fence he managed to have a stick to save him from the barking, if not biting, dogs of the village. Yes, the house he found while entering Palashmati was utterly broken; it did not have even a tiny remnant of a fence. It was 'Kana' Banchha's house. The very first sight of this house gave one the impression that it was empty, lonely, ghostly.

'B-a-a-nchha!'

He did not respond. But, the *Sanyasi* forged ahead. The dimly audible snarls of some pallid dogs came to his ears. But, the *Sanyasi* could not afford to fritter away his time determining which houses were empty, and which ones were not. He thought he would go home straight. He would rather see who remained alive at his home and who did not. While passing by the new pond of Bamoonpara, he seemed to hear someone asking 'who's there?' But, the *Sanyasi* remained silent. A sharp rustle of something four-footed moving on the dry, fallen leaves accompanied by a pungent, rotten smell was coming from the mango-orchard of the Ghoshals. One could now reach his three-roomed, tin-roofed house walking past the three houses of the next *para*. He could not do anything over the last eight years to repair his old house. Nearing his house, he suddenly found that those signs of fences built around vegetables and plantain-trees had now all rainshed. And those two bamboo-trellises for supporting bottle-gourd plants and pumpkins had also disappeared.

The *Sanyasi* felt somewhat happy to see such absences. He thought those fences and trellises must be now burning cracklingly in an oven. In other words, something was surely being cooked at home. Perhaps, thought he, everyone was still alive; none died yet. Everyone — sons and daughters, old and young — had managed to live even in the face of death constantly threatening!

'Man *da*!'

Sanyasi's voice was not so loud.

'Man *da*!'

There was no response.

'Subal *kaka*!'

Again, no response.

'Sukh *pisi*!'

Again, no response.

The *Sanyasi* paused for a breath.

'Sona *boudi*!'

Again, no response.

'Sona *boudi*!' 'Sona *boudi*!'

He shot forth a long piercing scream. But, his voice was only drowned in a crash of stronger silence. Suddenly his eyes fell upon the lock which was dangling from one of the rings of the door. The other ring, broken as it was, was about to be detached from the door itself.

In one of the two rooms located inside, the lock was put on the chain of the door, but the chain, too, was broken; it was dangling, half-uprooted! The door of the other room was left open.

There was none at home. The rooms were all empty. All had fled away, locking the rooms. 'Have all left?' Having put his packet of rice on the *verandah* of his room, the *Sanyasi* now began to use his reason and imagination, his characteristic strengths, so as to come by some clues to the whole situation. Since all of them did not die, was it likely that they fled? What about Sona *boudi*?

While he was thinking of, speculating about, brooding over, all possible clues, and also dozing off, he suddenly fell headlong from the *verandah*, and died in his courtyard silently and quietly.

Translated from the Bengali by Azfar Hussain