



fiction

The Bride on The Train

by Andaz

ONCE, DURING THE BRITISH India days, I was travelling by the Assam Mail train from Rajbari to Calcutta, to get myself admitted into the St Xavier's College for an Honours course. It was war-time (WW-II), and the train was packed. On the opposite track a troop train had halted, with swarms of beggars between the tracks pleading for a handful of rice; and declining biscuits, cakes, bananas, and slices of bread offered by the Allied soldiers. It was the beginning of the Great Famine of 1943.

I managed to push myself into an Inter-Glass compartment, and luckily squeezed into a small space on the bench seat. Soon the compartment was overflowing with the standing passengers, with hardly any space left even for tiny body movements — packed like sardines, as they say.

The metallic noise of the speeding train soon lulled the passengers into resignation and silence at the long journey which lay ahead, and we tried to make the best of the uncomfortable positions in which we were sitting or standing.

It was after some time that I noticed a *sari* in front of me. I looked up and saw a new bride in ceremonial clothes

standing right before me, alongside the groom, and other members of the wedding party.

I was silently debating within myself whether to get up and offer the seat to the young and shy lady. However, at the next stop, the gentleman sitting on my right got down, and the bride was persuaded to take the vacant seat by my side. She sat down, with the husband hovering over her, and the mail train was soon speeding to the next destination.

Along with the other passengers I also started dozing. Due to the rattling of the rails and the swaying of the bogie, I had to open my eyes now and then. Soon I noticed that a passenger, obviously a *sannyasi*, standing in front of me, was glaring at me intently, obviously, for some reason, not pleased with me.

It took me some time to realize the situation. The girl, who was also dozing, had involuntarily stooped her head, and it was resting on my shoulder.

The husband also took in the situation, and shook the bride from time to time to make her sit straight and rigidly, with her head up. The exercise lasted for a short period, and the her head would continue to droop onto my



shoulder from time to time. I was in a predicament — any movement on my part might be misunderstood. In fact it was not possible for me to make any movement, so tightly we were all packed in.

It did not take me long to make up my mind to stand up and offer my seat to the husband. But before I could do so, the bridal party got down at a wayside station before reaching Calcutta. It was a great mental and physical relief for me.

Travelling has its mini-adventures, with a great deal of the element of uncertainty thrown in. Once I had seen a Bengali movie, in which the central theme was located inside the waiting room of a railway station, the chance meeting of two perfect strangers, a young man and a young woman, which changed their future lives.

Travelling has its adventures, misadventures, and snafus (situation normal all fumbled up, which as a better word in Bengali, *ghapla*). This situation did not fit under any of the three categories. What would you call it? I wonder what the bride on the train thought about the whole enforced situation. Anyway I wish her well. But I can never forget the bride on the train.

remembrance

Sombhu Mitra: The Pioneer of New Bengali Theatre

CRITICS GENERALLY AGREED with the late thespian Utpal Dutt's view that there was no theater personality in India coming within miles of him. And once Amal Palekar, a perceptive actor of Bombay film, said in an article that "it is like listening to a classical maestro. He has every single note at his command."

Sombhu Mitra died quietly at the age of 82 in Calcutta early May 19 and was equally quietly cremated, as per his wish, three hours later at 5.30 a.m. sans fuss, sans flower wreaths, sans ceremony.

He is survived by daughter Shaoli, herself an established stage artiste moulded on the lines of her late mother Tripti, a consummate actress who, along with others — set designer Khaled Choudhury, lighting wizard Tapas Sen and exceptional performers like Maharsi Manoranjan Bhattacharya and Gangapada Basu — had been an asset for Bohurupee, the path-breaking group Mitra founded in 1948 after breaking away from the Communist Party-controlled Indian People's Theater Association (IPTA).



Thrice decorated with major honors (Magsaysay, Padma Bhushan and Kali-

das Samman) as also a recipient of Deshikottam from Visva-Bharati University at Rabindranath Tagore's Shantiniketan, Mitra remains an inexhaustible source of inspiration even after bidding adieu to the footlights 19 years ago.

A versatile genius — artiste, dramatist, director and thinker — his reputation as a thespian went unchallenged for over four decades. His death, according to the Sangeet Natak Akademi, is "an irreparable loss."

Film star Soumitra Chatterjee said: "I am too stunned." Vice-Principal of Rabindra Bharati University Pabitra Sarkar remarked, "If Tagore is regarded as a major playwright today, the credit goes to Sombhu Mitra. Actor Bhisam Sahani described him as a great personality." Kunal Roy, currently heading Bohurupee, stated that "he was a great teacher ... he will be remembered for revolutionizing the delivery of dialogues."

In terms of personal qualities, Mitra had no peers. The hard school of professional theater taught him the value

of basic training; eclectic reading sharpened his sensibilities; social awareness gave him the right perspective; and an analytical mind and capacity for sustained work made him a natural leader. A fine physique, aquiline nose and a remarkable, if slightly nasal, voice completed his profile.

A man synonymous with drama in Bengal and India, Mitra actually took over from his glorious predecessor Sisir Bhaduri to carry the work forward to a larger audience by adding new dimensions and thoughts to production of plays. And the first flowering of his directorial debut came in the shape of 'Nabanna,' written by Bijan Bhattacharya in the wake of the infamous Bengal famine of 1943 and produced in the following year by IPTA.

The play, highlighting poverty, exploitation and collapse of moral values, and performed by inspired amateurs without the help of artificial sets, took society by storm and wrote a refreshing introductory chapter for a New Drama Movement.

After drifting away from IPTA, irked

by party diktats, Mitra directed Tulsī Lahiri's 'Chhenra Tar,' based on the same grim subject of famine, in 1950. This too exhibited meticulous preparation and control. In 1951, a dramatized version of 'Char Adhyaya,' the nearest to a political novel (at least outwardly) Tagore ever wrote, put Bohurupee firmly in a pre-eminent position.

'Dashachakra,' an adaptation from Ibsen's 'An Enemy of the People,' followed and then came 'Raktakarabi' in 1954, a high watermark of achievement in the history of Bengali theater. For the first time, one of Tagore's main symbolic plays was given theatrical shape of haunting beauty.

Bohurupee boasts of a long list of productions. The best among them — 'Char Adhyaya,' 'Raktakarabi,' 'Putul Khela' (Ibsen's Doll's House), 'Baki Itihas' (written by Badal Sircar), 'Raja' (Tagore), 'Raja Oedipus' (Sophocles) and 'Aparajita' (a dazzling example of Tripati Mitra's histrionic power) — would rank among the most memorable. Among other bright spots were 'Bisarjan,' 'Barbar Banshi,' 'Tringsha Shatabdi' and 'Pagla Ghora.' This group

looked upon theater as a collective creation. It shifted the emphasis from "people" to the more basic "drama."

In his long career, Sombhu Mitra acted in a wide variety of heroic roles in the plays of Sophocles, Ibsen and Tagore but also portrayed ordinary men. In early '80s he once emerged on stage in the role of Galileo. To all characters he brought his own brand of loyalty and reverence for human dignity.

His forays into films earned him laurels too. He played the protagonist in 'Dharti ke Lal' (1945), directed by Khwaja Ahmed Abbas. His short poignant role in '42, a Bengali film, is unforgettable. 'Jagte Raho,' known as a Raj Kapoor film, was scripted and directed by him and Amit Moitra. It won the Grand Prix at Karlovy Vary in 1957. Its Bengali version was 'Ekdin Ratre.'

In 1985, Sombhu Mitra made his last appearance on stage for a remake of 'Dashachakra,' first made in 1962. Thether lovers of Calcutta stood in queues for three days and nights to get tickets for the show.

India Abroad News Service.

poems

Beuteous Bengal

by Jivanananda Das



I'll come again to the banks of the Dhanshiri, to this Bengal
Perhaps not in human form — perhaps as a white-breasted shankhachil
or a yellow-beaked shalik.

Perhaps as a morning crow I'll return to this autumnal land,
Wafting on the fog's bosom I'll float into this jack-fruit shade.
Perhaps I'll come as a duck — my red-webbed feet the string of bells
on a girchild.

My days will pass floating in the fragrance of the aquatic kalmi plant.
I'll come again to Bengal's rivers, fields, farmlands,
To the green wistful shores of Bengal lapped by Jalangini's waves.

Perhaps you'll look up and behold the evening breeze blow beautifully,
Perhaps you'll hear the owl calling in the shimul branches.
Perhaps a little boy will be scattering parched rice in some grassy yard.
In the muddy Rupsha waters some youth will be rowing
A boat with torn white sails; perhaps you'll see the white stork,
Breasting the many-hued clouds as it heads home in the darkness.

Look for me and you'll find me amidst these multitudes.

Translated by Fakrul Alam

Name Naming

by Nuzhat Amin Mannan

Many mammals wouldn't become
a wet nurse

Or know anything about
a prostitute, a femme fatale
a fallen woman, a vamp, a siren,
the loose woman.

The virgin. The mother.
Chastity and fertility
equally worshipped.

Many mammals wouldn't know
Surrogacy, that womb renting was possible.

Who could she be?
A tease. A victim of rape.
A bimbo, wallowing perhaps
A shrew screeching
A nanny seeing everything
An anorexic craving something.

Heard of a Rudali:
female mourner who sells tears for money?
Or a Sati, living
stepping into the pyre?

A witch. A feminist
Some are burned. Some are unsettling.
Some pro-choice person gets ready for
an abortion.

Wife, harem-woman, concubine, widow,
barren woman
and endless innuendoes

Supermodels revealing
Zenanas containing.

One, many, some, all

The Postcolonial

by Azfar Hussain

That was no mere description.
A middle-aged professor, his bald
reflecting the grey of the dusk, rescued
a medieval romance from his ghostly
scrawls; an old woman, her lips
betel-red, peeped out of your notebook.

Did someone throw dust in my eyes
that I could see only a shadow
stolen by the light of the evening?
But you, in your pose
professional enough,
pointed your index finger at her,
with your sentences neat; your accents
perfect, your concerns with the marginal
impeccably voiced. You also recounted your
Harvard days in transparent detail.
Then you analysed, step-by-step,
the politics of the map, punctuating
your conclusion with a hiccup or two.

As you moved towards
accommodating me
in your penultimate footnote,
I yawned. The evening then was trying
to enter the lecture theatre. But you
did not let him in. Your words were
bursting volubly like grains of paddy
in the heat of another argument.

I yawned, and could see the air
weaving its little circles near my nose,
your tour continuous in my history
conjured the ghost of my grandfather
who had on his back a deep wound
like a flower; you said, a dark rose.

Then you turned, changing your posture,
and looking for a term; it clicked,
as you called it 'postcolonial',
cooking my raw history
for your special dinner.

