

SHORT STORY

VESHAM PAAVANNAN

(Translated by V. Surya)

THE shadow moving in the doorway cast a tell-tale reflection on the computer screen. It was the boss. I did not turn. I was concentrating on the job. Every now and then he kept turning up, contaminating me with his fear, and then going away. Errors were adding up just because of these distractions. Correcting them took many extra hours.

I realised he was still standing there. Out of respect I turned and smiled in his direction. Instantly he was near me, with his harried eyes. His face was bathed in perspiration, although it was cool inside the room.

'Will you be able to complete it?' On his face were lines of doubt. He was wringing his hands. This just has to be finished somehow. Before tonight. It's a question of reputation for the printing press, really. The first job that's ever come to us from the government, from the Leader himself. It's our success in this that's going to decide all our future prospects.'

I got up from my chair. 'Definitely it can be completed. Please do not worry,' I said, to reassure him. In his frightened eyes a tiny light glimmered and went out. Feeling like having a smoke, I left the room.

I was a foreigner, who had come to work in this country. My proficiency in the language and the degrees I had acquired had been useful. In addition, I had some certificates testifying to a mastery of computers. They were enough to get me a job. The boss's anxiety was not hard to understand. This was the first order placed with him by the government, and he had got it on the strength of recommendations that he had personally obtained from several individuals, links in an invisible chain. The work would embody all these

relationships. Delay would destroy them. To earn the displeasure of any of the links would be to earn one's ruin.

Thinking of this was what brought on so much trembling.

Thought at heart he had faith in my capacity to complete the job, he clung simultaneously to his doubt and tormented himself.

In all there were five hundred odd pages. They were written by the Leader himself. That nation's history. Writing was a pastime for him, just like politics. The book was a treatise explaining the centuries-old history of his race

and of the nation, and its culmination in the Golden Age of his own rule. Celebrations for his birthday, the release of his book, and the commemoration of the first anniversary of his coming to power were all to be conducted on a single day.

Having had my smoke, I started to work again. I remained continuously at the computer, yielding myself up so utterly to the work that I became red-eyed. A few dozen pages remained to be keyed in. In order to speed up the work, more than three-quarters had already been sent to the camera and plate-making departments. Until all the plates had been prepared, run in the machine, the sheets cut and sewn together and the covers stuck, there could be no rest.

I worked all that night. My eyes burned. The letters fell all muddled on the screen and I kept sorting them out. Darkness alternately seized my field of vision, and withdrew from it. The letters looked like dim stars. I rubbed my eyes and continued. The fingers refused to obey the brain's commands. Strange hands seemed to be pressing me down. I slumped on the desk and slept off.

How many hours I lay like that I do not know, but when I woke up it was dawn. I looked at the still turned-on screen and panicked. Breathing deeply I sat up straight, got up and opened the door and went outside. Rain was falling. The spray soothed my hot eyes.

The boss's car swept in through the water, lavishly swooshing it around. He got out. 'Have you finished?' came the question, even as he was climbing the steps.

'Only six or seven pages more. That's all.'

'Ayyo,' he said. Again, fear and trembling in his face. I was ashamed to tell him that I had dropped off to sleep in exhaustion.

'Don't you know that they have to be packed and dispatched this evening? Tomorrow morning is their function. You say it isn't even finished yet! What's to be done? Tell me!'

'Within two hours it will be finished.' I entered the computer room once again. He went to the printing section.

In a little while the phone rang. It was those people, of course. They started asking about the book. The boss spoke appealingly to them, his voice humble and subdued. 'Quick...

The Front

quick,' he said, creating a flurry of panic. Everyone began to apply themselves once again to work.

Next moment the electricity went off. The boss groaned, 'Ayyo,' and put a hand to his head.

The mind went numb. My first thought, after a while, was: it's quite normal, they've just shut off the power because of the rain; it will come back. But by then he'd already moaned 'Oh God... Oh God' a hundred times at least.

He had no wish to cause any further suffering to a mind already in such anguish. But my inner voice kept telling me that even if the power did come back, the job could not be done. Yet I nodded my agreement, and the others concurred. The boss had

everyone's presence. 'Incompetent management!' he said. Once again there were phone calls, and like a trained parrot the electricity department kept saying the same thing over and over again. To all those from the government, the boss gave submissive replies. He even invited them to spend the night at the press. Once the power was restored, the job could immediately be resumed and completed. That was his plan.

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the inside. No one outside must find out anything about it. The secret must be kept.

It felt as though a burden had been suddenly lifted. Preparing ten books took half-an-hour -- sewing the pages together, sticking the covers, drying them out. We packed them up attractively. He invited me to go with him to deliver them, and we went and handed them over.

'Secret... Secret!' they warned, as they saw us off.

We attended the book release ceremony at ten o'clock. A demon of a generator was spewing out enough electricity to set the hall awash with light. At intervals of one foot from each other stood security guards



artwork by A. S. Amin

to go to lunch. The boss's laments, his anguished face, were distressing to watch. Our belief that we could finish the job also began to diminish little by little. I contacted the electricity department on the telephone. The entire city had a blackout, there was a breakdown at the power station, and it was difficult to estimate how much time the repairs would take -- this was the information given out. It pushed us right to the brink of hopelessness.

Cars began to arrive from the Leader's house. With a woebegone face the boss answered their queries. They looked at the half-finished work and left. At that point, only the covers of the book were ready. In the evening the Leader's private secretary himself turned up. He cursed the electricity department in

food sent in for everyone. He stayed back with us that night.

Daybreak. Apart from the eyes burning as a consequence of having stayed awake all night, nothing had been achieved. The electricity had not come back. Again we telephoned the electricity department. They said the breakdown had not been attended to. Just as we sat back, disheartened, government cars arrived with the Leader's private secretary and a high police official. They took the boss to a separate room and said

something to him in low tones. The boss just wagged his head. Immediately the visitors left.

The boss called me, told me their scheme. Blank white pages must be put between the already printed covers. Just ten such books would suffice -- 'books' from the outside, blank pages on

holding automatic rifles. An elder statesman ceremonially released the book, and the Leader's mother ecstatically accepted the first copy. Camera and video lights flashed on the dais. As the book's printer, our boss was presented and swathed in a 'golden shawl'.

The Leader rose, the picture of humility as he bowed before the assembly. Tremendous applause. Sounds of acclamation. It took ten minutes for the hall to settle down.

The valedictory speeches commenced. The first was the vice-chancellor of a university. A sonorous voice, it twisted and turned, rose and fell. Adept at bestowing the appropriate vocal stress on every word, he was especially accomplished in the art of praising the Leader with befitting emphasis. He went on

and on, piling on praise after praise about the book's excellence. He declared that he was quivering with eagerness to translate it immediately into English and thus place his mother tongue within the purview of the world's acclamation.

The minute after the book took shape in English, he said, the Nobel Prize would run up and knock on the door.

The next was a poet. Patriotism, he said, was embedded in the book's many lyrical passages, and he quoted examples, flourishing the book we had produced. Next, a professor came up and evaluated the Leader's work of research as superior both in quality and in cogency to any of the research being done at universities. Then came a famous social worker. Delighting in the cool savour of panegyric upon the tongue, he said the Leader had strung together historical events with an utter lack of bias, and that his style of writing bespoke his humanism. More speeches followed: by a writer who had received the title of 'Monarch of Words', by the leader of the women's wing of the party, and by the director of publicity. Word after word of eulogy, followed by applause... The whole hall lay in a trance.

I was shuddering all over. The words they used to distort the truth bewildered me. When they held up the book and displayed its cover, I really began to have a doubt myself. Was it actually what we had produced, or was it something else? I wanted to cry out to the crowd: O great and honoured public! This is not a book. It's just blank paper! But I was an outsider. What could I do? I whispered to the boss, but he was greatly enjoying the farce, and he shook his head as if to say, 'Don't say anything.' The panic and bewilderment that had plastered themselves upon his face for two days had completely disappeared. 'Look at the people around us,' he told me. Every one seated there was in an identical state of mind, in a thrill of devotion, eyes stark and staring.

'Isn't this a fraud?' I asked secretly in his ear. 'The look the boss gave me seemed to say, Ada, you little boy! Gently leaning across, he told me -- in my ear, 'This is the history of this nation.'

And in a furtive voice he added, 'We, too, have connived at it.'

(Pavannan is a well-known writer in Tamil. V. Surya is a poet/translator.)

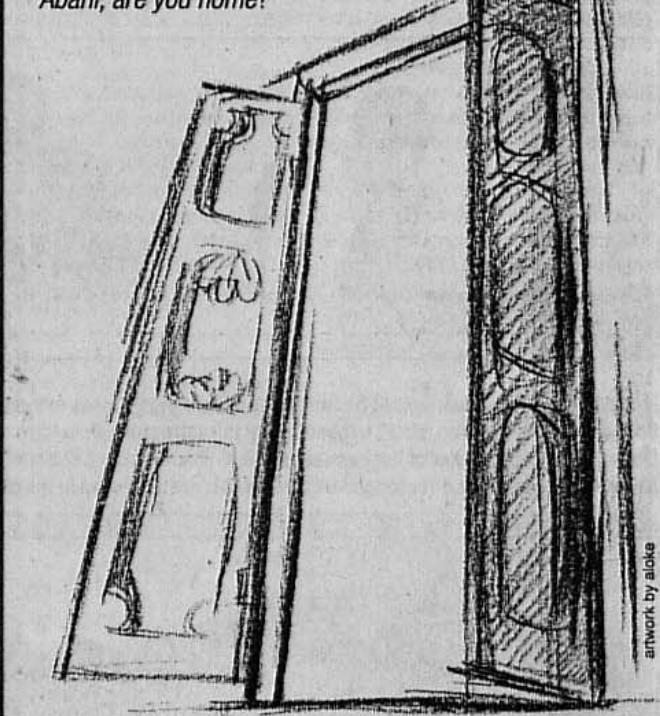
Abani Are You Home

SHAKTI CHATTAPADHYA
(translated by Sonia Amin)

Bolting the door the neighbourhood sleeps
I keep hearing a nocturnal knock---
'Abani, are you home?'

Rain falls here twelve-month long
Here the clouds graze about like cows
The sulking gray-green drain-moss
Grips the door---
'Abani, are you home?'

With a chipped heart, I drift off to sleep
Amid the stretches of a far-flung pain.
Suddenly I hear a nocturnal knock---
'Abani, are you home?'



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Honeymoon

AMITAV DASGUPTA
(translated by Khademul Islam)

Short T-shirt.
When she raises her two hands over her head you can see
her belly-button.

Lips of Benaresi saffron.

Terrific body.

Who was the one who named her--Honeymoon!

She doesn't walk; dances.
Seems to be---wriggly darting fish!
In the wind a snappy rumba
Right left front back
Turns on all sides in the flick of an eyelash.
The cupped dream of the skinny youth next door
Setting the city on its ear---Honeymoon!
Amid the smell of burning tires
A three-brick stove, the arc of the flame
No sooner the handful of
Unhusked cooked rice reaches the mouth
That Kolkata's footpaths clap and shout out--

Fantastic! Fantastic!



Khademul Islam is literary editor, The Daily Star

BookReview

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BookReviews

Artistic Expression of the Poor

SAJJAD SHARIF (Translation by Farhad Ahmed)

Pranmahi Bangamata by Simon Zakariya; 2004; Uttaran, Dhaka; Cover and Photographs by B. K. Shohag; 176 Pages; Tk. 150

ANTONIO Gramsci once wrote that any signs of conscious effort by the poor is invaluable to the inquisitive and keen historian. In the same breath he also warned that in order to understand these signs one has to study them rigorously. But it is an vastly difficult task to simply collect the sheer amount of material necessary for it. Simon Zakariya's *Pranmahi Bangamata* is a reminder of Gramsci's dictum. However, we will return to Gramsci shortly; first, we must deal with Simon who is present before us. It must be acknowledged that he did not attempt to narrate the history of the poor in this book. And even if Simon claims that what he collected in this book are the materials for exactly such a history, that claim too can be dismissed with a smile and a gentle wave of the hand. What he has done, however, is bring us the glad news that the soul of the poor of Bengal is alive and well and singing. Though the poor are a class and a category created by the rich, it is evident they have not yet surrendered their hold on forms of artistic representation of themselves, the continual expression of their souls. And essentially this news itself is a kind of poetry.

It is in pursuit of this lively, artistic soul that Simon Zakariya has tirelessly criss-crossed Bangladesh--from Kushtia to Kishoreganj, from Jhenidah to Bheramara. It is not an entirely new territory. Researchers in the past have already informed us that there are roughly seventy separate methodologies of such expressive poetry and song (*bhabcharcha*) still alive in Bengal at present. Simon has presented us a handful of those. And in them we can see the traces of the ruptures that we have engineered in our history.

What form does the consciousness of the poor take? What art is theirs? To quote Gramsci again, 'scattered stories and tales' -- because the poor have never achieved the status of a 'state'. The opposite has happened: the 'state' has been born on their backs. They are never its masters, but always its subjects. Even in revolt, even when they awaken and rise up. Never do the fragmented pieces of their consciousness cohere into a whole. The poor man feels himself to be forever apart; calling on God seems a mistake. Which is why religious sentiments have long been a dominant part of the consciousness of the poor. It is these sentiments which are at once his ally and yet feed his sense of separateness, form the constant dialectic of his daily life and sense of revolt.

What has been captured in Simon's presentation of their dance-song-thought is in many ways amazing. It is nothing new to discover syncretism, that the mix of Hindu, Buddhist and Islamic religions have given rise to new myths, have renewed and reconstructed the older forms of narrative and thought. But it is only the beginning. We keep getting news of this blending and mixing together of religions. And every once in a while there are even startling examples of the fusing together of ancient, blood-spattered historical fissures. Such is the heady trance of the consciousness of the poor, the many conflicting streams of feeling and thought that go into its making.

For instance, one sees it in the songs of Manik Pir. Hindu Kanu Ghosh's mother gets very annoyed on seeing Manik Pir, a Muslim, begging at her doorstep early in the morning. She expresses her annoyance by behaving rudely towards him. This greatly angers Manik Pir, whose curse then makes lakhs of Kanu's cows die. Kanu searches out Manik Pir, and after pleading with the pir, saves his cows. This is how Manik Pir establishes his greatness over Kanu. It doesn't escape anybody's attention that Kanu is none other than Krishna--note the 'Ghosh' title and his profession as a milkman. It's obvious that Islam is the winner in this story. On the other hand, in the kirtan of Ramchandra Mohanta, something new emerges when Islam meets up with ancient traditions. Where a pair of bulbuls fly from the courtyard of Persian Sufis to the world of Ram-Laxman-Sita:

Bhomor o bhomori jugol hoiya koriteche moha-ananda/Cholo jaibo mora aamra dujonay Ayodha nogoray/O mata koushollay'r kolaytay prokash peyechen oi na mohanjibji chand

In Simon's book, however, it is the poetic duel between Nazrul Bayati and Abul Sarker which surpasses everything else. Alternate readings facilitate the stripping away of layer from a hidebound, ruling-class religion, and we see new forms of Bengal's thought and feeling gradually becoming clear. Happily so we witness this self-expression, a consciousness bursting the bounds of time and space.

But Simon himself obstructs the permanence of this happiness. It's sometimes difficult to understand his language, where words can drift off into meaninglessness. Here and there the reader stumbles, as

interspersed within the narratives are overenthusiastic, romantic commentaries by the author, and which at times threaten to overwhelm the narratives themselves. Good editing would have removed these errors.

The above nevertheless are external problems. The book's problems go deeper. There are many debates on how popular art forms of song-dance-drama disseminate. There are tortuous debates on how to represent the specific consciousness of the poor. These debates have beginnings, but no endings. Gayatri Spivak has taken historians to task on whether it is at all possible for the ruling class to make the poor speak with their language systems and tools. And yet, despite such uncertainties and limitations, research goes on in this area, the art, the life, the history of the wretched of the earth. Footprints found on such journeys are carefully collected. Others attempt to read the voice of the poor captured in the official documentation of the ruling class. Simon does not involve himself with these gray areas. In fact, one gets the firm impression that he is entirely satisfied with his work.

And here we would want to consult Claude Levi-Strauss's *Myth and Meaning*, where the anthropologist has warned us that it is impossible to establish the inner meaning of a folk tale from the way we normally read various articles. To quote his words on the subject:

'It is not possible to comprehend a folk-tale the way we read the thesis of a novel or magazine, verse after verse, from left to right. We have to understand it from a holistic point of view; we have to realise that it's not possible to express the meaning of a folk-tale through a single event; one has to understand it through numerous events, although these events may be interpolated at various moments of the tale. For this reason, we will have to read folk tales not only from left to right, but also from upwards to downwards.'

Of the eight 'turns' or plots (*pala*) that Simon presents, six are straight narratives. For the benefit of the reader it was essential that there should have been a vertical reading of these. Simon has simply given us these plots in a continuous, linear form. Especially in his long introduction, by simply describing these narratives one after the other, he has failed to provide us with a framework with which to evaluate them, a framework in which the fundamental outlines of the expressive face of Bengal's poor appears. This over-reliance on linear description, frankly, makes his writings lose its point. There is no particular gain from the reader's perspective.

Still, we do want to embrace Simon Zakariya for his effort, for his relentless travels through our markets, bazaars, fields and roads in search of the consciousness and art of the poor. As I have said before, the very act of even bringing such news constitutes a kind of poetry. Only through a 'permanent' victory would it be possible for the poor to free themselves from their practical slavery. With this will come the full flowering, the liberation, of their consciousness. To reach that goal, it is first necessary to describe their fragmented sense of self. The future lies that way.