

SHORT STORY

SAARVAAKAN (translated by V. Surya)

When we reached the National Store, there were no customers at all. That was one convenient thing about Natesan's shop. No crowds, no jostling. Black, green, and red hard-boiled sweets, rubber balls, pencils, affordable pens, bottles of variously-coloured ink, soaps and combs (Natesan didn't stock mirrors), lotions for before and after shaving, and for turning grey hair into black, heaps of notebooks,all these and many other things waited for someone to buy them. Usually, though, we were the only ones who went there and stood around.

'Come in, come in!' Natesan would say, smiling. It was no display of betel-stained teeth. His teeth were shining white. He didn't have the betel-chewing habit. Cigarettes, yes. Even that was outside the shop. Drinking, dancing girls, gambling, racing, herbal 'cures', politics, art, language, religion--he had no fixation of any sort. It was just him and his shop.

Could come into his shop and buy whatever they wanted. Cash down, of course. But anybody he knew well could even get goods on credit. When we went there, though there was always the welcoming 'Come in, come in!', he never asked us what we wanted. He knew that usually we had no money. And he knew that if we did want anything, we would ask. That day mischief was dancing in Natesan's eyes, and the impish smile on his face was like colour rippling on water upon which oil has been spilt. We entered the shop, Sivaprakaasam, alone, pausing to spit into the gutter. Smilingly calling out 'Come in, come in!', he ducked under the counter and brought out an object, flourishing it like a magician. 'Let's see if you can tell me what this is,' he asked.

This unusual behaviour knocked me off balance for a moment. Before I could collect my wits and ask, 'What is it?' Rengan reached out and took the object. At first we saw nothing remarkable about it--just the usual sort of shop-scales, until Rengan held it up and 'weighed' it. Instead of a single plate on each side, one of its sides had three plates, one below the other. I could not understand it at all.

'I'll give you each two sweets, if you tell me what this is!' Natesan encouraged us. Sivaprakaasam and I soon gave up. Rengan alone spent a little time examining that strange triple-decker balance and thinking about it. Maybe he still liked sweets, though he was already forty. Finally, he too said, 'What's this! So wonderful!' in a bemused tone, as though he were speaking not only to Natesan but to the world in general.

Natesan was delighted. 'Never mind! Even though you don't know what it is, take some anyway!' he said, putting his hand into the jar and holding out some 'pappamint'. Rengan took two, and I took one, just to be polite. Sivaprakaasam declined. He had the 'sugar disease'. Diabetes. He ate no sweets, no rice even.

'Just take some, 'pa! There is no sugar at all in such sweets!' urged Natesan, but Sivaprakaasam was resolute and countered, 'Take my share yourself.'

Natesan neither took his share nor Sivaprakaasam's. Maybe he wasn't so crazy about sweets which have no sugar in them, or maybe it was just his economical mind, thinking, why waste two paise? He scooped them up and dropped them back into the jar. And then, because we begged him, he disclosed the mystery of the triple-decker balance.

'Supposing,' he said, 'three customers turn up at this store and demand the

Fantasy

same article at the very same time? Well, I just weigh it out on this gadget one single time and satisfy all of them! Saves time, saves labour! How about that for an idea?' he asked proudly.

I've seen Natesan's shop from the day he set it up. Not once have I ever seen as many as three people in it together, much less clamouring for the same article at the same time. Yet I kept my mouth shut. Why ruin his enthusiasm? Rengan couldn't contain his surprise. 'Our Natesan, thinking ahead like this?' he exclaimed, when this character came to the shop.

The fellow looked neither like a sanyasi, nor like a family man. Must have been around forty. The muscles fairly bulged on his stocky body. Long, black hair sprang from his head and curled on the nape of his neck. His thick eyebrows were stuck on his forehead like hairy caterpillars. His eyes glittered like black diamonds. On his cheeks, he had hoarded two weeks of beard. Bare-chested, a scanty four-cubit veshti, carelessly gathered and tucked up, revealed his legs. Only God knew if the veshti had faded to its present dirty hue form saffron or if it had ripened to that shad from an original white. From his shoulders down to his wrists, he was liberally smeared with whitewash. On his forehead was a large kumkumam dot.

His eyes emitting sparks as though they were Deepavali sparklers, this man walked into the shop and ordered, 'A kilo of sweets, please! Quick!' His voice rang out like a temple bell.

'Five rupees a kilo,' said Natesan calmly, not budging, and looking the stranger over from head to foot.

'All right, all right, give it quick!' The man groped at his waist, untied a knot and brought out a five-rupee note, filthy and folded into eight. Without opening the folds, he held it out.

Natesan unhurriedly took the note from him and placed it on the counter, took out the triple-decker balance and removed two of the decks. Then he placed a kilo weight on one plate, gathered some sweets and dribbled them on the other plate, closely watching the needle as though he were measuring out gold. When he was about to put them into a paper bag, the fellow hissed, 'No need for a bag, just put them on a piece of paper!' his

eyes leaping out like a forked snake-tongue. Grabbing the piece of Tamil newspaper in which Natesan had wrapped the papparmint, he strode briskly towards the clocktower.

Drawn by curiosity about what he would do next, Rengan, Sivaprakaasam and I hurried after him at a little distance.

The municipal clock tower stands in the centre of the town bazaar, about a hundred and fifty feet from Natesan's shop. As it is not the kind of clock that shows the date, it is hard to tell when exactly it stopped. It always shows twelve o'clock, and twelve o'clock was what it showed then, though it was dusk, the time for lighting lamps. Around this centerpiece of our town bazaar, there is a narrow stretch of bare ground, convenient for people to stand about and chat in little groups of four. If they go a little farther away, they are sacrificed to the birds, who shower trajectories of droppings on them.

Standing on the small platform beneath the clock tower, the papparmint-man was thrusting one or two sweets into the hands of everyone nearby. They stared. 'Eat it, eat it! It's the Lord's gift!' he told them, as he freely distributed the sweets from Natesan's store to yet more people.

Within half a minute the news that a stranger was standing near the clock tower and handing out free sweets had swept over the whole bazaar. The crowd was just like that sacred verse about 'a flood pouring into low-lying ground'--it swelled and surged towards the clock tower. Rengan and Sivaprakaasam and I were pushed by several elbows and shoved by as many buttocks until we found ourselves at the fringe of the swarming horde. Drowning out the cawing of the crows overhead were cries of 'Saar! Mittai, saar!'

Till that very day I had no idea that the people in our town had such a fondness for sweets. At Natesan's store, it was only children who came once in a while to buy them. I had never seen adults stampeding and falling over themselves like this. Here were grown men, in dazzling white shirts and elegantly bordered veshtis, shirtless fellows in faded veshtis, and others in terylene banians; some with watches on their wrists, or silver wristlets, or evil-eye-repelling black threads, some with grey moustaches,

some baldies....A toothless old woman who sold murukkus, and her young grandson, who acted as her agent. Women all dressed up for an outing in shiny nylon blouses with nylon zari, clutching their babies. Bird-shooting gypsies. All sorts of people who had come to buy beedis, cigarettes, plain and coloured soda, and little naked boys and girls who wove in and out between the several pairs of legs. Before we could even blink, an enormous human swarm had materialized, raising a 'Gnoi-!-!-!' like the hum of honeybees.

The peppermint-man lifted the paper with the remaining sweets high above his head, like Hanuman holding aloft the mountain on which the life-giving herb is supposed to have grown. In one leap he was on the platform, his eyes flashing like live coals and emitting sparks even at that distance.

'Quiet!' he roared, 'Do as I say and everyone will get some!' instantly the humming, ululating mob was silenced. A thousand faces lifted a thousand chins and gazed at him. In the blue neon light of the municipal lamp they all looked breathless, eager and bright green.

'All of you fall down and worship Lord Clocktower here!' came the command from the holyman.

For a moment, the crowd stood stock-still, like erect corpses. Then it shook itself and came to life, crashing forward like a pack of cards, they fell down with their faces on the feet of those in front, their feet touching the faces of those behind them. Upon dog-pig-cow-horse dung, upon gobs of spittle and urine stains, upon banana skins, empty cigarette packets, and beedi stubs, upon the dust of the street and the tracks of countless feet, men and women, young bulls and old codgers, utterly without distinction among themselves, with their eyes closed and their palms folded, united by this religion, they all threw themselves down upon each other's bodies, prostrating themselves, face down.

'Hari Om!' intoned the holy man who was no holy man, shaking the paper with candies. A mittai shower fell on the backs of the crowd. Like bees from a wrecked hive the prostate hordes half rose and whirled around. With a mutter, they sighed and belched and shook themselves. Boys and men, young girls and old hags, Tamils and Telegus, Hindus and Muslims, Christians, and atheists, they all pecked and scratched, rammed and butted each other in their avid search, picked up sweets from the dirt, snatched them from one another, smacked their lips over them. Then they turned to look at the man who had flung them these treats. But he was gone. As soon as he had shaken out all the mittais from the piece of paper, he must have slipped behind the clocktower and run off.

In five minutes, the crowd melted away just as it had collected. We went back to the National Store. Natesan, who had been standing on the street to watch the fun, went back inside his shop.

'Did you see that?' he chuckled, 'Looks like a lunatic, isn't it? But he's harmless. Hurts nobody!' Taking out the five-rupee note left to him by that buyer of sweets, he carefully opened out the folds, pressed and patted it down once with his forefinger and put it into his drawer.

'Yes, yes,' we all agreed. Sivaprakaasan got up to spit in the gutter.

Saarvaakan is a noted Tamil short story writer. V. Surya is a well-known translator whose book of Tamil short stories, A Place To Live, was published by Penguin India.



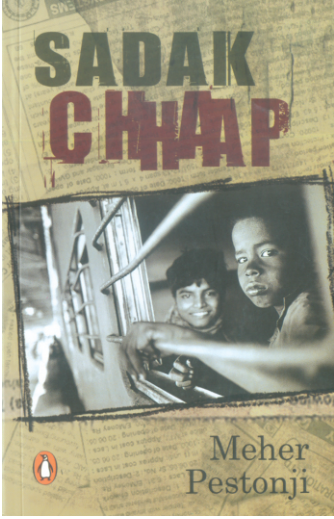
MENKA SHIVDASANI

If there is one thing that newcomers to Mumbai find most disturbing until they get used to living in this city, it is the sight of half-naked, unwashed children on the streets. You meet them everywhere--thrusting their hands through your car windows, plucking at your shirt to get attention, sometimes even spitting on your face if you refuse to part with some alms.

These children are not merely victims of their own poverty and a wealthy society that simply doesn't care; sometimes they are victims even of their own beggar communities--of parents who see the little ones simply as one more pair of hands to beg with, of gang leaders who break the children's bones just so that they can evoke more sympathy--and thus more money--from passersby. The racket is well entrenched, and most Mumbaikars simply learn to look through these kids and walk on. A diplomat I once knew tells of the time he was nursing a beer at the Mondegar in South Mumbai,

watching a woman with a babe-in-arms. He decided that on his way out he would give the woman some money. An hour or two later, while he was still at the pub, he was astounded to see another woman take the place of the first one. "It was like the shift changed," he said later, and never again gave a beggar child money. Instead, he took to carrying biscuits so that the child in question could get something to eat.

Over the years, the cause of street children has received much attention. Meher Pestonji, Mumbai-based activist and writer, says that when Mira Nair's film *Salaam Bombay!* was released--that was in 1988 - there were just five non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working with children; now there are more than forty. Meher herself has worked with some of them, writing newspaper articles about street children since the mid-eighties, campaigning extensively for their rights, and being deeply involved in the case of the Anchorage Shelter in Mumbai, where children were reportedly subjected to



sexual abuse by the British national who ran the home. Meher, who was friends with the scriptwriter of the film, Sooni Taraporevala, also got to know the key character of *Salaam Bombay!* who would come to her home regularly to watch television serials and tell her about life on the streets.

Now, the author of *Mixed Marriage and Other Parsi Stories*. Pervez: A Novel, and a play, *Piano for Sale* has written a book called *Sadak*

Chhaap. Published by Penguin, the novel draws from the stories she has heard over the years, from the children themselves, and from the people who have worked with them. It's a work of fiction, but firmly grounded in the hard reality of their lives. The subjects she weaves in include the struggle for survival, drug abuse, adoption, paedophilia and various other issues that is the lot of the street child. Some of her NGO friends, Meher says, told her that at first they found the title pejorative (*Sadak Chaap* is Hindi for Stamp of the Street), but later retracted, since there's no mistaking the stamp of the street on these children--it is like the smells and the sounds are all part of their skin. Meher has been doing some readings from the book in the city lately, and though they certainly aren't the sort of hyped-up affairs that, say, a Harry Potter or even a Shobha De launch would merit, the book has drawn some attention. There is vibrancy to the story--the same energy that you would find in a street child--and many moments that make you smile. There is also a great deal

that is moving, because you know that while this is a fictionalized account, every bit of it is grounded in the truth. A baby abandoned at a railway station, a 10-year-old surviving on petty thievery, pre-teens expertly dealing in the tourist sex trade, these are things that Mumbaikars would find unsurprising as they rush to catch their crowded local trains.

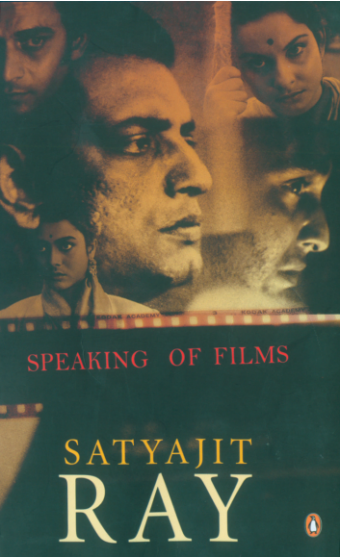
Meher's story centers around the nimble-fingered Rahul, whose life is transformed when he finds a baby wrapped in a newspaper; he appoints himself the baby's 'father', taking on a responsibility well beyond his years. But crime, loneliness and abuse are never far behind on Mumbai's streets and Rahul finds himself on an unrelenting roller-coaster. "I wanted to leave the reader a little uncomfortable," Meher said, when she read the first chapter to a small but absorbed audience at the PEN office on September 22. "I wanted this to provoke some thought, not a false sense of catharsis." In fact, this was why she chose the form of a novel. "The audience for a work of non-fiction

is different; it would have been more like a thesis, reaching out to people who already know. I'd have been sourcing information from the same people and the same people would have been reading it. Hopefully, this novel will reach people who are not as informed, but who would be more sensitized after reading it, and have the power to do something. Sometimes people don't even know what to do, if they see, say, a child bleeding on the street. I would like to use my skill--if I have any--to go beyond having a book do well, and make a difference to those I write about." This is not a transformation she sees happening in a hurry; as she says, "change only happens in ripples."

To write this novel, Meher has culled from her own work over more than a decade, while the actual writing of the novel took eight months, which she spent at a hill station close to Mumbai. The effort seems to have been worth it; this is one book that touches close to the bone.

Menka Shivdasani is a poet who has published two volumes of poetry, *Nirvana at Ten Rupees and Stet*.

Book Review



Speaking Of Films, Satyajit Ray (translated by Gopa Majumdar); Penguin India: New Delhi; 2005; pp. 220; Rs. 275

FARHAD AHMED

Exactly fifty years ago, in 1955, the

release of *Pather Panchali* heralded the arrival of a master in the world of cinema. Over the next forty years. Satyajit Ray (1921-92) came to be regarded as one of the world's finest film-makers ever--Time Magazine had him on its cover of the world's top ten directors of all time. Today, more than a decade after his death, he continues to be South Asia's, and Bengal's, most respected name in international film circles. In 1992 he was awarded the Oscar for Lifetime Achievement as well as India's Bharat Ratna.

Apart from his achievements as a director, Ray was also--perhaps appropriately so, as the son of Bengal's Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll rolled into one, Sukumar Ray--a prolific writer in Bengali of novels, short stories, and essays on cinema. Now Gopa Majumdar's translations in *Speaking of Films* brings together Ray's most memorable writings on film and film-making, which originally had been published in Bengali as

Bishay Chalachitra. Aside from the subject matter, Ray is bracing to read simply for the clarity and authority of his sentences and expressions--qualities that have been amply preserved in the translation by one experienced in the job. Ray discusses a wide array of subjects: the structure and language of cinema with special reference to his adaptations of Tagore and Bibhuti Bhushan Bandopadhyay, the appropriate use of background music and dialogue in films, the relationship between a film-maker and a film critic, and important developments in cinema like the advent of sound and colour. There are many things here in these critical essays and writings that can be extrapolated by artists working in other mediums for good effect. The brevity and simplicity of Ray's writing style should not be equated with simplicity of thought: he brings years of experience to bear upon a couple of sentences, an

accumulated hoard of wisdom in a few lines, as when he writes that 'Experience matters a great deal in working on a film's background music. Even when one has a fairly good idea of the theme or mood of a film, it is not easy to know which instruments should be played in a particular scene, or which melody, rhythm and tempo should be used to best effect. That is the reason way, even now, mistakes and lapses occur when composing the music for a film. There is plenty left to be learnt, especially in a place like Bengal where people's lives, their clothes, their speech, even the houses they live in do not have a clear and distinct character, everything is a great medley.' That 'great medley' is quintessential Ray.

Ray is never boring; in fact, if anything, can be a little too crisply waspish, and certainly could be combative when goaded to the point of exasperation by all-too-un-knowing critics, as in his very firm 1964 riposte to a certain Mr.

Rudra who had held forth a tad too orotundly on *Charulata* in the pages of the magazine *Parichay*. But Ray can also be wholly, and slyly, charming, as when he writes with obvious affection--effortlessly displaying the great artist's percipient eye for detail and obsessive involvement with his/her work--about the people he worked with: 'The man who was cast in the role of the headmaster in a village school in *Aparajito* had never done any acting, but had been associated with films for a long time. Subodh Ganguli had worked in his youth as an operator in various cinemas, handling the machines used to run the films. Later, he learnt to work in a laboratory and eventually became the director of the chemical laboratory owned by New Theaters. A special feature of the films produced by New Theatres in its heyday was neat and sleek photography. There is no doubt that Subodh Ganguli deserved some of the credit for it. After

leaving new Theatres he joined Aurora Company. I met him in the office of this company. His appearance, and his old-fashioned clothes (they followed a style popular in the nineteenth century), made me offer him the role of Apu's headmaster. He gave me a beaming smile and agreed at once. 'Is it a comic role?' he asked. "I have often looked into the mirror and imagined myself to be Charlie Chaplin!" Ray displays a similar light touch in a priceless profile of Chabi Biswas (of *Jalsaghar* fame) which has the vintage actor leaning out at a dangerous angle from a verandah in order to properly conduct a village band.

In conclusion, while some of the material is for the advanced cinema buff or film-maker, the rest can be enjoyed by the average movie-goes, and especially the Bengali Satyajit movie fan.

Farhad Ahmed is a freelance writer/translator.

Masks

RUMANA SIDDIQUE

I hate masks

I think the human face divine

Then why I ask

Is there a mask over mine?

Rumana Siddique teaches English at Dhaka University.

Some simply can't

NAEEM HASSAN

(translated by Mijarul Quayes)

Some can, and some simply can't.

Teeming crowds of men at Babubazar Ghat

Scattered and indistinct like the stars at night

Boats lined up like stacks of betel leaves

at the quay

Quite into this aggressive business

Of plying across the river

Here at Gopinath Dutt Kabiraj Street

Ishwar Das Lane or Distillery Road

And even in the blind alley at the other end

There is the relentless huff-puff everywhere

seven days a week

The haze of smoke from the stoves, the grinding of grains

For some the mundane, a habit winnowed

and refined with passing clouds

Some can, and some honestly can't.

When a glaring, siesta-less noon stalks ceaselessly indoors

And in the yard leaves fall off the bough

He leaves the clatter of the smithy's tools and machines

The shops and hooch-huts in Dholai Khal

And treads a narrow path that goes far away

Some really can, some others simply can't.

Naeem Hassan is editor of the literary magazine *Nirantar*. Mijarul Quayes is an occasional writer/translator.