

SHORT STORY

TAPAN BARUA
(Translated by Sabreena Ahmed.
Abridged for publication)

'Sabbe satta sukhlita bhavantu'
(May all beings be pleased and happy)

Ah, the Eyes have seen it all! It is a pleasure for them to see the world; they enjoy immense Bengal's beauty which has the greenish hue of sea plants. Ah, such splendid green! Without a single black spot on it, without any sign of grief or remorse. Again-- "A bird's nest in the eyes/Watches life's colour and circus." Indeed it's all a circus! The flow of past events we call history is written in one way at one time; other times it is recorded very differently-- is this the way history is written?

Location-- the last train station in the south of Bengal. It was called Dohazari. Perhaps the British rulers had laid the rail lines during the world war. The rail line crossed the wide Karnafuli river at Kalurghat to extend 30 miles beyond it and come to a stop at Shankhya river. Since there was a river near the station, there had to be rows of mountains beyond it. Green forests capped the distant mountain tops, and the white of clouds and blue sky blended together to make it seem even more blue. In front of this mountain kingdom lay waves of small hillocks. In there was the grave of an unknown saint. No, here no one burnt incense or lit a sacrificial fire, here no one played drums. Hoping for a little shade, the grave's mound was covered with a flimsy thatch roof supported by four wooden pillars. The whole day the wind passed through it. There was a big *Koroi* tree in a corner of the hillock. Montu Mahajan, wanting to build a two-storied wooden house, had been eyeing it. One

day his men cut down the tree and brought it home. The woodcutters of Noakhali then chopped wood for 20 days. While the big planks were floating on the pond water, Montu Mahajan suddenly saw the saint--in a dream. He forbade Montu to build the house.

But a thief turns a deaf ear to the scriptures! A big building was raised on the new ground. It was just like Jorashanko mansion of the Tagores. One midnight the new house of Mahajan caught fire and spread within minutes! Soon nothing remained except ashes.

A few days had passed since mad Manik's wife died. Manik spent the whole day roaming here and there. The saint came to meet Manik one night. He said: "I have shade, I have the breeze, what I need is some light in my house."

From that day on the people of the village could discern from afar a small glowing spot on that hillock. That glow served as a beacon for pilgrims lost at night. In rain, in bitter cold--every night Manik climbed up the hillock with his flickering lamp.

Time-- it's 25 or 30 years after the War of Liberation. No, no one was shouting "Yea azadi jhuth hai. Larke lenge ..." (This freedom is a lie. We'll fight for it.....). But on the other of the Sankhya river the crackling of AK-47s could still be heard. No, no bridge had been built over the Sankhya yet, let alone the Asian Highway. Therefore no dream-blue fantasy train roared on to Cox's bazaar. No steamer made waves on the blue waters of the Naf river!

Character--The man got down in Dohazari and stepped on the path to the village. Behind the station, by the enormous wooden government godown where the huge elephant used to

be tied--that's where the path to the village started. This man lived on the north-eastern side of the village, in a house located on the way to Jamjuri.

If one proceeded keeping temple-ashram on the right there was a big pond. Bimal Babu's house was right by it. It had been a dream of his and he had built it with the earth dug out to make the pond. Elites of this area tended to follow this practice. The house was roofed with orange tiles. If anyone opened the window, the breeze came into the house like friends bearing the fragrance of sweet-smelling flowers. Bimol Babu had his own flower garden--many native and foreign flowers bloomed here. He had had businesses in the town of Mandalay in Burma, presently Myanmar. In 1965, General Ne Win ordered all foreigners to either become citizens or else leave Burma. Bimal Babu had decided to return to his homeland. Now he felt that he had made a mistake. Binodini was Bimal Babu's wife. She had a round, fair face for which the village folk called her "Ranga Baudi".

Now there was great discord in the house. Mother and son were engaged in a bitter squabble. The son Babu worked at a jute factory in Chandpur and visited the village twice a year. This time he had come sporting a huge moustache.

The mother said, "Babu, your moustache is hideous. Shave it off!"

The son was stubborn--he would not shave off his royal moustache. He's gotten too big for his boots-- Binodini thought. That night she felt like killing him with a single stroke of the boti. This wish of hers had been hidden under countless sobs during these past years. She looked at the corner of the room where she had hidden the sharp



artwork by apurba

boti. Binodini had told her husband to get her this customized boti from Dohazari. The big iron boti blade was shaped like a peacock's crest and fixed on a wide wooden beam. Sprinkling a mix of sand and betel-nut tree bark on the blade, whenever she had the time Binodini used to hone it. Day by day the boti blade grew shinier--it even seemed to grow a fang to strike instantly. During festivals, weddings and funerals the neighbours would come by to borrow the boti-- "Ranga Baudi, please lend me your peacock-boti, I have to gut fish."

In the morning Binodini brooded as she slowly honed the blade with the sand from the rail line: Wouldn't it have been better if she had taken Dhatura poison or jumped into the Sankhya river. She then heard the sound of footsteps inside the house. Like most mothers she too had dreamt of basking at noon in the winter sun with her little son in her lap while sitting in the shade of the haystack. He would grow up to catch the Dohazari train to

Potia College--just as Apu had done, leaving behind his mother, in *Pather Panchali*.

This dream was shattered the day the Pakistani military had entered the village. Like maggots on a carcass, like locusts in America--they had poured in from all sides on that monsoon day. It was raining heavily that day. The river Sankhya, its two banks, the green homesteads all around, the faraway mountains--everything was blurred by the rain.

Every day at dawn all the young men and women used to run away to the hills to hide. They had gone there on that day also. But an intense rage, or perhaps the trance induced by rain had kept Binodini at home. The neighbourhood was deserted. The only sound was that of the incessant rain. Her paralyzed and mute brother-in-law lay alone on the first floor of the house. Binodini used to take care of him. He would lie on the easy chair the entire day praying for death to come and take him

away--a "grrr" sound rising from his throat.

Binodini was sitting on the elevated veranda, eating bean seeds fried with a pinch of turmeric and salt. Her eyes were on the surface of the pond. The white rain-fairies had just landed on the water and they glides on its surface as the wind blew them from one side to the other. Suddenly Binodini saw a mustachioed man holding a rifle in front of her. The ice cut-out of a soldier in the white mist of the rain. A bayonet fixed to the end of a Chinese rifle.

She could not believe her eyes. Wasn't Punjab very far away? The next moment she snapped out of the trance and jumped up to run into the empty room. Where could she hide? She ran from one room to another. No, there was no place to hide. Her own safe home seemed like a monster's cave. Ah, wasn't there a Chinese prince to ride in on horseback and say: "This is my sword, you rogue! If you advance one more step..."

Binodini ran up the wooden stairs to the first floor. She clasped her brother-in-law's numb feet: "Thakur, save me!" The Punjabi came from behind and snatched her away. Tears rolled down from the brother-in-law's eyes, while from his throat came the "grrrrr" sound.

Dear reader, don't expect any kind of Kurosawa's Rashomon-like technique here. Or some kind of cyber scene. Even though Binodini was not some incomparable beauty she could not save herself that day. Because wasn't history advancing due to the limitless greed of some dwarves and fundamentalist mullahs? And didn't the Punjabis say "Bengali women have such long hair, they eat fish, what wonders they are!")

Didn't the Punjabi get such direct orders from Washington, Beijing and Pindi? "Traitors! They want to turn this country into Hindustan! This people are not Hindu? So what? Are they Chinese?"

On the green bosom of the Bengal, one Punjabi had sown the seed for another Punjabi.

Binodini loved to raise potatoes. She had asked Bimal Babu and chosen a small piece of land near the hillock. Planting, watering, tending the seedlings--she herself took care of the whole thing. When the potatoes were dug out on winter afternoons, Binodini would be beside herself with joy! Round potatoes at the end of the green plants lay hidden underneath the earth. Each of the potato looked like a baby's face, joyously laughing. The tenant farmer Khaleque would hold them up and say, "Look, Ma, look at them, a dazzling brown, just like the children of sahibs."

When Babu was in his teens he used to play with the neighbourhood children on the dusty path. Among other games they also played 'war' games. Fair, taller than the rest, Babu was the obvious candidate to play the role of the Punjabi. Growing up, somewhere along the way his "Babu" nickname vanished without a trace. His name became--"Punjab"! Babu somehow came to know about the real story behind his new name. He left school. Every day he would wake up at dawn and leave for the forest with the woodcutters. He would return in the evening with the heavy loads of wood. Binodini used to cry in silence. She wondered why she had not strangled her newborn son to death. Or why she had not jumped into the waters of Sankhya.

One day Babu got on a train in Dohazari station and

disappeared. He did return to the village after a few years. But he did not speak much with anyone and wandered in the forest. Once in a while he would disappear. Binodini heard from someone that Babu got a job in the jute factory at Chandpur. Now Binodini thought: Why not put an end to this problem. What's the use of carrying this burden. The blue mountain beyond the horizon, the waves of the Sankhya, the fragrance of the flowers, the potato field, the sparkling waters of the big pond, the golden paddy fields--let everything be the same. I am the one who should go away. Every son cannot be like Apu. Some sons become Punjabi.

Tears streamed down Binodini's cheeks.

Dawn was just breaking. The rays of the sun had yet to leap over the mountains and fall on the village. Only a few houses had opened their doors. The serene air of dawn was filled with the fragrance of flowers. Mousumi and Ritu, two teenaged brother and sister, had stepped out to steal flowers--the baskets made of coconut-cane hung in their hands. They screamed at the top of their voices when their footsteps fell on Bimal Babu's courtyard.

Rivulets of red blood had spread over the fresh white courtyard and drawn a huge alpona.

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RUBANA

We walk around Park Street and are spotted. Ah...there goes a Bangladeshi wearing the VIBGYOR shades. Our shoes smell of Bangladesh, our clothes give out an air of Bangladesh. Our idiom and style mostly beyond it all. With our identities standing out amidst the crowding thousands we wear our country a little too loud for comfort. Since we attracted such attention and since they kept looking at us in Kolkata I had temporarily stopped looking back--the city was no more the favorite cup I'd liked ordering at the 'Café-Coffee day'. I complained about hotels being expensive, transport costs being too high, protests happening too often. What, then, was keeping me here? Apart from the lovely archives and the research, what else was there in this land?

Oh yeah....women here actually walk back home at midnight and reach in one piece. But then times can also be hard and trying. Leasing an apartment had been a nightmare for me. In spite of a valid visa and a credible business card, I still had a tough call. No one would lease an apartment to me. Who was I? Where was I from? A woman who would be living alone? They gaped at me in utter surprise. The stares got to me. The questions crept up my spine one by one. By the time, they were done, my my spondylosis and fibromyalgia hit hard; my nerves were shot. The latter, in particular, made me run through the entire Park Circus area one humid morning looking in vain for my ancestral home, still there with the iron gates bragging of my Dada's initials: HA. Every time they asked me about my background, I wanted to scream and say that my father studied at St. Xavier's, my grandpa was "District Judge of the undivided Bengal"(that's how Papa put it), that I belonged to this part of town as much as they did. That my father spoke fluently in Sanskrit, had sung on Akash Bani, that my aunt danced in Lady Brabourne at a time when art was forbidden territory for women....

Times had changed and I had assumed that I was better off not mentioning any of this to anyone. I simply wanted to run back home, to my very own Dhaka, separated by boundaries of politics and passion.

But the mule in me stopped me from advancing my airline reservation. My better head and bitter heart engaged in a serious dialogue for almost twenty-four hours and decided against fleeing. After all, my Indriya had been exiled by my Manasa. After I reversed my impulses to return to base, for the first

time I listened carefully to a Sanskrit scholar who told me over his Mahabharata reading that *ghrina* equaled 'fortitude' and that contrary to common belief, the dictionary did not have 'hated' set against that particular word. I also learnt that *prolubdha* did not mean 'greed'--it meant 'lust'. There are many such discoveries that kept me back in this city, a couple of which are worth sharing.

Days in Cal are unbelievably long. I work better. I skim through books, pick only what I need. I spend hours looking at books and magazines. Kolkata transposes me, eager to get away from the hugely comfortable life I have back home, to the world research scholars inhabit. It allows me to have bhelpuri by the street side, dare walk in the rain, sport the grime and dust and make it to a street a couple of miles away by foot.

Anonymity is guaranteed--no one knows me here, no questions are asked. As long as I am taking care of my own needs and no other pockets are being drained, no one bothers about my existence. But when it comes to spending, the old West Bengali tradition of asking the guests to eat only at the very end, right before they are leaving, is still very much there. I remember my disappointment at having been asked to go Dutch for a movie I wanted to watch with my Kolkata friends. Hadn't I taken them out to dinner a couple of times last month?

From this perspective, Kolkata feels like a laid-back version of the West. It's the 'I' that matters, the very cautious 'I' that goes to work every morning by tram, the very hard working 'I' that puts in a straight ten hours at the office, trying to impress the boss, the 'I' that comes home tired to a mum who waits with a bowl of rice and vegetables. It is the same, old, middle class 'I' of West Bengal which stands apart from the rest of Asia. West Bengal has a style set in a populist ideology. All the voices in this part of India have a distinct strain in them that warns every individual against overspending, of being reckless, of wanting to show off the latest acquisitions in the form of saris, jewelry, and brand-name accessories.

This is something that we Dhaka-ites, its elites, haven't learnt so far. In spite of having struggled to make every dime that our generation has, we seem to be only too eager to blow our last penny away. Our rooftop parties cost a fortune. Being seen in parties is also a greater expense. One has to be socially fashionable. Iron or starch has nothing to do with our wardrobe as most of it is brand new, while in Kolkata, the kids go natural. Couple of

Anamika Khannas, or Ritu Kumars, or Satyapaul cater to those whose tastes run towards flashy colors and tastes, but the rest sing a simpler tune. Kolkata can't afford to look rich. That isn't the style of West Bengal.

My children don't like visiting me in Kolkata, sharing my meals and hopping into yellow cabs. Talking of meals...hmmm....my breakfast: fresh fruits, and a glass of milk, if lucky with muesli or flakes. Lunch consists of *shingaras* with a cup of tea. Evening comes with a six o'clock reminder of weight watching and I humbly have my plate of veggies and dal, at times with paratha/roti. Yes, I have an egg once a week and meat once a week, too. This is what I have been having for the last four months. Lest you mistake me for an ingrate, let me offer you explanations. My 80-year-old host, out of a loving concern for yours truly, raised issues related to health and diet. Having been brought up to pay heed to *murubbis*, I instinctively do the same in Kolkata and was silent when my spaghetti bolognese was disallowed, and the *dal-roti-bhaji* fleet came marching in to the table top. While the anti-pasta campaign of the household rose by degrees, I quietly looked at my melamine plate and did justice to the serving because by 6:00 pm, I was dying of hunger.

The hot water wouldn't work, but could summer be far behind? I wouldn't need warm water in March, would I? So I moved on with an un-tiled bathroom, the very Amma-ish 60's bedroom with printed curtains and a hyper-bright bedspread. But I have to admit that my host's house is cleaner than many of our houses back home. The linen may have been an eighteenth-century one, ready to be auctioned off at Russell Street for a rupee or two, but it was still clean. They were washing the sheets to death! The broken basin was sparkling clean, making me wonder if the place smelled of clean horror somewhere else.

But here even the humblest of homes have book shelves and even rusty tape-recorder-cum-players. Here, in the internet cafes, the kids talk about school, sports, and the silver screen. Here, girls go denim and dupatta at the same time.

Here it may not just be a matter of being stingy. Here the style is also different. Or perhaps it's a blend of both.

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AZFAZ AZIZ

At this year's boi mela, besides Humayun Ahmed and Mohammad Zafar Iqbal (reviewed here last week), journalist-writer Anisul Hoque's titles and a couple by Mohit Kamal, a psychiatrist, were on the bestseller list. Six titles by Anisul Hoque and two by Mohit Kamal hit this year's Boi Mela. I chose Anisul's novel *Alo-Aondhakarey Jai* (Somoy Prakashan; 200 pages) and Mohit's short story collection *Chandmukh* for this review.

Anisul Hoque's novel revolves around Abul Kalam Azad, or Azad, who loses his eyesight at the age of 10, initially ascribed to a severe bout of typhoid and subsequent maltreatment by a village quack. He is the only brother of four sisters, two of whom are also blind like him. But medical specialists later determine that the blindness was due to genetic causes as a result from inbreeding since their parents were first cousins rather than typhoid.

After living in a black world with a hopeless future, Azad's mother's determination to put her son on a strong footing in life sees his enrolment in a Salvation Army school in Dhaka for the visually impaired, where he has learns Braille. Subsequently he takes admission in a secondary school in Brahmanbaria, which is one of the few in the country that admits visually impaired students. During his stay here, he encounters his first traumatic obstacle from the education system which bars him for sitting the junior scholarship exams as the district education office has no arrangement for that yet, although the boy is at the top of his class. Azad has to suffer many more such disappointments in his life. After finishing his secondary schooling, his determination sees him enrolled in the Notre Dame College in Dhaka.

As the story unfolds it incorporates a number of burning issues of this time, particularly our society's failure to help the physically and mentally handicapped to lead normal lives, and the closure of Adamjee Jute Mills that sees thousands of families including Azad's losing their sources of livelihood. Azad's father was a butcher and used to run a thriving meat-supplying business in the factory complex, where he also bought a house for his family. The

Books from the Ekushey Boi Mela: On Anisul Hoque and Dr Mohit Kamal

sudden closure of the mills turns the family, like many others, destitute and uprooted from the locality where their children were born and spent their childhoods.

After graduating from the Notre Dame College, Azad first takes admission at social science department of Dhaka University and then transfers to the English department. Adamjee Jute Mills and his father's business are still in operation and their family is quietly well-off. It was during his first years at the university, in 2002, that the government closes down the mills, according to the writer, as per the prescriptions of the IMF and World Bank, and Azad's family faces a bleak future.

The novel, however, details grossly at this point by switching to a populist romantic mode. It starts by depicting Azad as a handsome young man who attracts women of all ages like moths to a burning lamp. A few farcical love affairs follow, after which the story finally ends with an episode where Azad settles down with a singer who is also visually impaired, though a little less than him.

Well, all's well that ends well. After these sentimental charades, Anisul Hoque manages an ending that encourages deprived people like Azad and his fiancé to continue to fight for their rights. So, if one ignores the cheap romancing that may be endearing to the naïve, reading the novel is worthwhile for the socio-economic issues it grapples with.

Apart from *Mayaboti*, which the writer terms a 'psychological' novel, a new genre invented by him, this February Mohit Kamal also came up with *Chandmukh*, a collection of 25 short stories. Frankly, claiming certain of these stories as literature is an insult to the tradition of two centuries of Bangla fiction. Even the lowest-grade writers of the 19th and 20th century would surely turn over in their graves from shame if they knew that these sort of books are nowadays considered popular Bangla literature. It also amazes one how this doctor-turned-infantile-storyteller pompously calls his fiction 'psychological' when he hardly goes beyond describing glamorous heroines or handsome heroes, narrating some events centering on calf loves culminating in sex (mercifully without any graphic description), and the pain-stricken behaviour of jilted lovers and cheating spouses. Nowhere does he demonstrate the quality of psychology he boasts of--of going deep into the minds of the characters and

analysing them. Either he is naïve or thoroughly unaware of the art of true fiction.

Except for only a few numbers, the sole theme of Mohit's stories is love and sexual affairs and resulting complications. Excepting a few stories about young married couples, this theme he illustrates mainly by portraying unmarried young boys and girls ranging from teenagers to those in their twenties. He previously attempted to write two science fictions, though they were aborted. I am at a loss how to categorise the 21st story in the collection named *Chokhachokhi*, (Meeting of eyes). I have not encountered a more inane prose piece in my life.

The title story *Chandmukh* does not deserve the distinction. One is forced to presume the name was probably chosen as it seemed more attractive than the rest of the story titles, because, to be truthful there are four pieces in the book that have achieved some sort of literary quality. Those are 1) *Chaarpath Jaukhan Bhangte Thakey* (When everything around starts to collapse), which depicts an old schoolteacher on an island who finds, like the water that has been devouring his household, the land he has passed his life on, his son's marriage to an upper-class girl from another district is also drifting apart, drowning his ties with his inheritors; 2) *Bish* (Poison), in which a schoolgirl suspects, gets verification from a doctor, and begins a journey to revenge the murder of her father by her mother and her secret lover, who bled the man to death by shredding his thighs and legs with blades in the name of curing him of an imaginary snakebite; 3) *Kandale Tumi Morey* (You have made me weep), which is a three-part novellette-size story, too long to give its summary here; and 4.) *Jyotsna Ratey Baariechhi Haat* (I am offering you my hand on this moonlit night), where a young girl accidentally finds out the licentiousness of her rich businessman father. To avenge the

wrong done by her father to her innocent loving mother, she whimsically marries a poor cousin on the condition that he must never touch her body. But the young man falls in love with her and desires her, to satisfy which he makes the girl drink a glass of sedative-mixed milk and then consummates the marriage. The girl finds out the scheme in the morning and abandons the husband, whom she has been considering as nothing more than a tool to hit back at her father. But she conceives and the child in her womb changes her attitude towards life, about the natural bond between men and women, and eventually she returns to her husband to share her life with him.

Other than those four stories and another named 'Lottery', as I have already said, the remaining ones have love/sex affairs and their psycho-social complications as their sole subject. So why is the book so popular, especially among young readers? The answer to that perhaps lies in the fact that traditional values, norms and patterns of relationships between men and women in our society have been changing gradually but radically for quite some time and that Bangladeshi writers have not explored adequately the woes, pains, sufferings, traumas, social, inter- and intra-personal complications this new situation is generating. And that is why, despite its literary inferiority, the case stories told in a short-story form succeed in attracting so many readers as to have made it one of the bestsellers of the Ekushey Boi Mela gone by.

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Second Daily Star Anthology

The Daily Star literature page, in order to promote English-language writing among Bangladeshis, will publish an anthology of non-fiction writing. Bangladeshi writers/authors/translators, plus our readers, are invited to send their contributions for consideration. Themes and contents must deal broadly with Bangladesh, or with Bangladeshi life, whether here or abroad. Submissions should be limited to 2500-3000 words, though this condition can be relaxed in the case of outstanding efforts. High-grade translations will also be considered. Translators should send in the original Bangla if they are to be considered. Submissions should be sent electronically as Word attachments to starliterature@thedailystar.net or by snail mail to The Literary Editor, The Daily Star, 19 Karwan Bazar, Dhaka-1215. All submissions must be clearly marked 'For Anthology' (in case of electronic submission on the subject line). Only Bangladeshis need submit. We specially welcome submissions from outside Dhaka, as well as humorous pieces dealing with the lighter side of life. The last date for submission is May 15, 2007.

--The Literary Editor