NON-FICTION

The Sky Above and the Grass Below

SHOHINI GHOSH

In the year 2003, I was invited to a dinner at Delhi's India International Centre. I came face to face with a woman my age Land we began talking. We both said that we found each other very familiar and yet we couldn't recall where we had met. Were we in the same school? No, we weren't. Were we in the same college? No, we weren't. Did we meet when we were both studying abroad? Certainly not. Then where had we met? "I know for a fact, that we have met before," she said. There was something uncannily familiar about her so I said, "I know that we have spent a lot of time together." Then suddenly, it fell into place and we both asked, "Did you play cricket in Bibekananda Park? "Of course, I did" we both exclaimed. "So that's where we met!!"

In the seventies and early eighties I grew up in Hindustan Park, a neighborhood in South Calcutta. My mother had spent much of her growing-up years in Hindustan Park so my sister and I had heard of this place even before we had moved in from North Calcutta. Hindustan Park became better known when Jyoti Basu, whose house was centrally located in the area, became Chief Minister of West Bengal. As he consolidated his position in successive elections, the house became bigger and the various hangers-on around the premises increasingly acquired an air of self-importance. The rapid transformation of the house led one wit to write graffiti on the walls that read:

Opore bhara, neechey bhara Moddhye khane shorbohaara

(A tenant upstairs, a tenant downstairs

Lives in between the proletariat.)

Hindustan Park was the target of both anger and envy for the rest of Calcutta because, as a VIP neighborhood we rarely suffered power cuts. So during the city's worst experiences of 'load shedding', Hindustan Park was an idyllic pool of light in a city of literal darkness.

One day I came home and told my mother that one of my girl friends had said that I shouldn't be wearing boyish clothes all the time. My wardrobe was all wrong, she had said. My mother said, "They have obviously not heard of tomboys. Don't you remember George from Enid Blyton's Famous Five? Tell them you are a tomboy." Then Pratima di, our downstairs neighbor, told me, "Don't be silly and call yourself a boy. You can be a girl and still do all the things that boys do." I had never heard anything so sensible in my life. Pratima di was my mother's contemporary and I should have addressed her as mashi (aunt) but we ended up calling her "didi" (elder sister). Her son, who we called Ajit da, was our childhood hero. He was good in studies and was a badminton champion in his university. He played cricket well and seemed to excel in everything he did. It seemed to me that in our quiet and unambitious neighborhood, it was only Ajitda who seemed to have a life.

My first lesson in cricket had come from Ajitda. He taught me how to grip the bat and the correct stance to take in the crease. It was nothing like what my father had taught me. My father clearly knew nothing about how to play the game. But how could anybody comfortably hit the ball holding the bat as Ajitda taught me? What



was the purpose of such a contrived posture? Why couldn't you just hold it like a stick and swing it around any way you wished? This 'correct grip' led to my being clean bowled several times. It was Ajitda who told us that a women's teams had been formed at Bibekananda Park and that if I was really interested in cricket, I should join the club and learn the game properly.

The following Sunday, I accompanied Ajitda to Bibekananda Park in South Calcutta. I was struck by what I saw when we reached. I had never seen so many women in white flannels playing cricket. There was a batswoman at the net and other women were bowling to her. A man whose physique was scandalously un-atheletic was coaching them. He was genial and diminutive with the hugest belly ever. Everyone called him Debuda and Ajitda introduced me to him. Debuda asked me to bowl. Thankfully, if there's anything I did consistently well, it was bowling. It turned out to be one of those good days when I was able to maintain a good line and length. Debuda was thrilled and Ajitda was very proud. As we walked back home, he patted me on the back and kept saying that I had bowled very well. I felt happy and humbled.

Meanwhile, the street matches continued right in front of our houses. We were so possessed by the game that it hardly mattered that the ball was regularly crashing into the neighbor's house. Then one day, my mother joined the neighbor in scolding us. The cricket ball had hit goddess Saraswati and she had taken a tumble. I may have felt bad for a few minutes, I can't remember.

I was now visiting the nets regularly. One day, during a mock match, I bowled out the captain of our team who was totally taken aback. She was an excellent cricketer and couldn't believe that this slip of a girl from nowhere had uprooted her middle stump. She remained at the crease and continued to stare uncomprehendingly at the raised finger of the umpire. Then it was my turn to bat and the captain insisted she bowl to me. The balls were hurtling towards me and I felt terrified. "Keep your eyes on the ball," Debu da kept shouting, "If you keep our eyes on the ball, you'll see a football."

Now, what the hell did that mean? I played too many on the back foot even when it wasn't short pitched. Then I nicked one to the wicket keeper. The captain and I became very good friends later and not only did we play together but we hung out, visited each other's homes and watched movies.

The grip and stance that Ajitda taught me was fast making sense. Now I couldn't understand how people could ever hold the bat like a stick. Debuda had asked me to concentrate on forward defensive, I played backward defensive well but seemed to misjudge the length when it came to playing forward. I was deeply embarrassed one day when I was playing on the streets of Hindustan Park and a man started hollering from a rickshaw. It was Debu da returning from Gariahat after buying vegetables with his wife. "Put your foot forward and keep your eyes on the ball. Understand?" he shouted as he trundled by. Everyone, including my father who was taking a walk, had stopped to watch. It became less and less embarrassing as this peculiar encounter became more and more frequent.

I soon discovered that I loved net practice but hated matches. I was opening batsperson and a medium pace off-spinner in the team. Now, here's a secret I never got to share. I hated matches. It was more about winning or losing than simply enjoying the game. The pressure to score runs after every shot took away the pleasures of playing strokes. I would often forget to take runs and this was certainly inconvenient for a team that was playing to win. It was worse if we had to field in the second half. Then we were not even allowed to eat a good lunch. I much preferred net practice. It allowed me to play and correct my mistakes. Under Debu da's goodnatured tutelage, I began to understand what it meant to keep your eyes on the ball. When I did manage to keep my eyes on the ball consistently -- there were many days that I didn't -- it did turn into a football. It seemed bigger, slower and much easier to hit. What an amazing thing that was!

I didn't have any cricket gear of my own except an old bat that I polished with turpentine every week. But that wasn't good enough for the net. I could only shadow practice with it in front of the mirror. Debuda had asked me to practice my back lift endlessly as I had knocked down the wicket with my own bat a couple of times. The gloves and pads that made my early batting days an inconvenient nightmare were now beginning to become indispensable. Playing without method seemed madness. As a result, playing on the streets was beginning to lose its charm as it now seemed random and arbitrary.

But the news that I played regularly for a club was beginning to spread through our neighborhood. One day I was buying something from Nabin's shop when an elderly lady, who was also buying provisions, exclaimed that she hadn't realized that I was a girl. "And do you know how well she plays cricket?" said Nabin proudly, "She plays at the club in Bibekananda Park." The lady patted my back.

But all was certainly not well for women's cricket. The Ananda Bazaar Patrika group had launched a new sports magazine called Sportsworld. I had decided to unsubscribe Sportsweek and replace it with Sportsworld, as Mansur Ali Khan Pataudi, my favourite cricketer, was its editor. One day, a letter from Shillong appeared in the magazine saying that women shouldn't be playing cricket because the very idea was ridiculous. The letter was a description of

how absurd women looked when they played cricket and then argued that such travesty should indeed be stopped. Encouraged by my mother, I wrote back a passionate defense of women's cricket adding that I suspected the hostile letter writer had never seen women play. The fellow wrote back to say that indeed he hadn't seen any woman play and nor had he any intentions because everybody knew women playing cricket was a ridiculous sight! On this rather persuasive note the editor, without a single line of refutation, decided to close the debate. How I wished Nabin from the grocery store had been the editor of Sportsworld.

So Sunday mornings were reserved for cricket practice at Bibekananda Park. Both the boys and girls played in adjoining nets. There were several young men like Ajitda who took interest in women's cricket. They bowled so that we could practice batting or batted so that we could bowl. They would hit the ball hard and high so that we could take turns to catch it. For some strange reason, everybody was required to shout 'Lebbit' before catching the ball. Someone later explained that it was to prevent all of us from rushing to take the same catch and knocking each other down. So whoever was best positioned to take it was supposed to tell the others to "Leave it". That made sense. But when too many coaches began teaching us, Debu da firmly put an end to it. Thank god for that as some of us were getting really confused. Then there were young men whose interests were not limited to just the game. One member of our group was a budding actress. Her lack of skill at the game was amply compensated by the aura of glamour that surrounded her. An overprotective father notwithstanding, she had managed to acquire a band of willing tutors. These incidental developments did not make Debu da very happy but he battled on with the rest of us.

I loved to collapse on the grass at the end of the practice and stare up at the sky. I grew up imagining that I would always be enveloped by so much sky above and so much grass below. Very often, other team members would join me in lounging around. Sometimes we would cross the street to eat the alloo dum that the Lake area was famous for. Then we would go home to return the next weekend. The person I met many years later in Delhi was often a companion on these restful jaunts.

Having finished my school, I was ready to move to Delhi for my college. I had never thought that what would be hardest to leave behind was cricket in Bibekananda Park. In fact, the separation from the game was so painful that I decided never to talk about it. Of course, I never missed the matches. But I missed everything else. With cricket I lost an entire world. Sometimes, the world comes to me as phantoms in restless dreams. Sometimes, I see the ball coming towards me and turning slowly into a giant red football. At other time, I seem to miss it. Sometimes I play a stroke perfectly and I can hear Debu da ask, "Are you feeling good about it?" I never know what I will see in my dreams. But I do know that when I wake up I will see no sky above or grass below.

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Amid Violence

cultural and educational projects. With the

MUNEEZA SHAMSIE

akistan is still reeling from the shock, violence, uncertainty, accusations and counter-accusations that have followed Benazir Bhutto's horrific assassination. Shortly before her return to Pakistan in October, she had submitted the manuscript of her book Reconciliation: Islam, Democracy and the West to HarperCollins. Six hours, before she died her friend Mark Siegal had sent her an e-mail her to say that the publisher was very pleased with it. The book is now being rushed into print and will be released in February. There is also much demand for the new, revised and updated version of her 1988 autobiography Daughter of the East which was published shortly before her return to Pakistan in October.

As political commentators, expatriate Tariq Ali and the late Eqbal Ahmed have frequently looked at Pakistan and its history, as well as regional and global relationships. Both Ali and Ahmed have been extensively interviewed by the the American broadcaster and journalist David Barsamian, the founder of Alternative Radio

www.alternativeradio.org. The interviews with each have been published as books and are quite riveting. As I have mentioned before, late Eqbal Ahmed was incredibly prescient; while Ali, once a radical left wing student leader and now a broadcaster, journalist and novelist, is more controversial but provides analyses interwoven with rare historical details and entertaining personal anecdotes.

I was really sad to have missed Barsamian

in Karachi where he delivered the Eqbal Ahmed Memorial Lecture. As luck would have it, on the same evening, I was involved in an OUP literary event on Pakistani English Literature. This consisted of readings and a panel discussion. Fawzia Afzal-Khan, the Pakistani American poet, academic and actor gave Pakistani audiences their first taste of performance poetry during which she used music, song, masks and backdrop sounds from a CD to recite her poems. She also spoke of the need to give Pakistani English literature a greater cognizance and paid tributes to Taufiq Rafat's pioneering poetry. Poet Kaleem Omar spoke of Rafat as a mentor, friend and poet and read from his own work too, as did poet Adrian Hussein. However Hussein's biting criticism of Rafat and also of the Booker shortlisted The Reluctant Fundamentalist by Mohsin Hamid generated much debate. I had rather liked Hamid's novel and read extracts from it, as well as Trespassing by Uzma Aslam Khan and Broken Verses by Kamila, while discussing fiction trends. Asif Farrukhi, the translator and Urdu short story writer, made some pertinent comments on the choice of language and the importance of translation.

Our event was held at Karachi's new 'happening' venue, a café called The Second Floor, or T2F. The brainchild of Sabeen Mahmood, it adjoins her consulting firm Beyond Information Technology Solutions (b.i.t.s) which she co-founded. Her romance with the computer began as a teenager. She also describes herself as "a blogger and a peace activist" and is involved in many

help of the South Asia Foundation and some money from an expatriat uncle, she set up Peace Niche, a non-profit NGO to 'transform Karachi' by providing a cultural outlet which would generate a social change through a public discourse: T2F events have snowballed to include films, literature, arts, science, music and politics. The café is decorated with paintings and posters, has a small book corner and serves beverages and snacks until midnight. The pine-coloured furniture is easily re-arranged for cultural events/talks and can seat around 100 at full capacity, T2F's first event took place last summer with a reading of contemporary Urdu poetry by Zeeshan Sahil who has written some very moving and powerful poems on Karachi's urban violence. These Karachi poems are included in his new collection On The Outside, elegantly translated by Tehmina Ahmed.

As always, the winter saw a number of ex-

pats visiting family and friends, regardless of troubled times. It was a rare treat for Karachi audiences at T2F to see Sara Suleri Goodyear, who is a professor of English at Yale. She read the title chapter from her famous creative memoir Meatless Days which recaptures her Lahore childhood and reclaims memories of her sister Ifat and their Welsh-born mother, both victims of hit-and-run accidents. About three years ago, she wrote her second memoir Boys Will Be Boys, as an elegy to her late father, journalist Z A Suleri. Dominated by his full-blooded personality, it also introduces her American husband, Austin Goodyear, who died shortly after the book was published. She has written a groundbreaking book in post-colonial literary criticism The Rhetoric of English India which covers almost two centuries from Burke and Hastings to Naipaul and Rushdie to explore how words have tried to cope with uncertainties to define perceptions and ideas about the sub-continent. Sara also carries a strong consciousness of her bilingual inheritance and in distant America, has nurtured her love of Urdu: she has now cotranslated a selection of Ghalib's verse which OUP will publish soon.

T2F held another very enjoyable evening with novelist Uzma Aslam Khan. She lives in Lahore with her American husband, the novelist David Maine. She read from her new novel The Geometry of God, which is set in the Punjab and tells of a rare pre-historic discovery there by woman paleontologist. Central to the novel is the conflict between science and religion during the regime of Ziaul-Haq, which banned teaching the theory of evolution, I look forward to reading it, having greatly enjoyed her previous novels The Story of Noble Rot and Trespassing.

The art publication Nukta held a moving memorial at T2F for the distinguished artist Ismail Guljee and his wife Zarro, who were both murdered brutally a few days before Benazir. Their bereaved son, the artist and sculptor Ameen Guljee spoke on the occasion, as did Nukta's editor Niilofar Farrukh and artist Naz Ikramullah Ashraf.

Muniza Shamsie has edited three anthologies of Pakistani English writing. She is a regular contributor to Dawn newspaper.

On Namwar Singh and Allen Ginsberg: Delhi Part 4

KHADEMUL ISLAM

The late afternoon sunlight slanted onto the mahogany floorboards.

I had marvelled at those floorboards at Ajeet Cour's FOSWAL office-cum-home in the Fort Siri area. While the ground floor office and basement were tiled, the two upstairs floors--sprawling spaces for holding poetry and musical recitations plus private living quarters--had wooden floors, perfectly fitted panels. I had been up there before during the daytime, but now as dusk approached, the floor was burnished to a warm beaten gold by the dying rays of the sun. Perfect for the sweet tussles of make-out evenings, for Cole Porter and Duke Ellington. Or Sinatra and Tony Bennett:

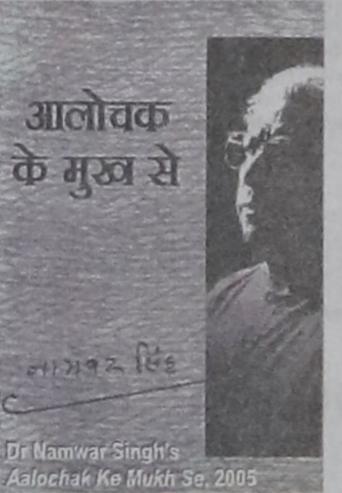
You must remember this A kiss is still a kiss A sigh is just a sigh The fundamental things apply

As time goes by ...

Dr. Namwar Singh, distinguished Hindi Marxist literary critic, academic, editor of the highly regarded Hindi journal Alochona and a leading voice in the Progressive Writers Association, was due to drop by for a chat. I had come to attend SAARC'S folklore festival (December 2007) and then had stayed back to meet with Indian publishers, writers and academics. "Daru," Ajeet Ji said now, bringing out a bottle of Scotch, "Namwar likes a little bit of it now and then." I smiled. 'Daru' was Punjabi slang for firewater and used by most Delhi-ites, except in Westernized drawing rooms, where they asked you what 'drinks' you'd like. In Ajeet Ji's home, however, I was in the world of vernacular speech, whether of books or plain folks.

Hindi literature first came to me courtesy of Satyajit Ray, whose Shatranj Ki Khelari at some cine society showing, back at a time when wheezing red doubledecker buses on Dhaka streets was a common sight, had been a revelation! What a cast--Sanjeev Kumar, Saeed Jaffrey, Victor Bannerjee, along with Shabana Azmi throwing lonely, sexually frustrated Begum Sahiba fits-and what a story -- two aristocrats playing chess and chewing paan against the 1856 backdrop of British colonial chessboard scheming for control of Awadh. It had made me search out the story's author, who turned out to be somebody named Premchand. Who, I then learnt in very short order, was the father of modern Hindi fiction, the writer who gave birth to the Hindi short story and the realistic novel. After that, whenever I could find English translations, along with Urdu fiction I also read Hindi writers: Ajneya, Nirmal Verma of course, Krishna Sobti, Ramakant, Hemantu Joshi, Uday Prakash. There were others too, post-Premchand generations who had veered away from social realism and anger towards desolate urban landscapes and existential angst in the Nai Kahani (New Fiction) movement in modern Hindi literature. It was on Premchand and the Nai Kahani group that Namwar Singh had first made his critical reputation.

At the April 2007 SAARC writers' conference for the first time I saw Indian writers, poets, critics and academics who were superstars in the 'regional' languages, but who in my South Asian English world came through muted by translations. One of them was the stork-like figure of Namwar Singh in his spotless white kurta and dhoti. Since a literary editor's job meant tracking through journals and newspapers, I would come across him occasionally in the Indian dailies. He was a throwback, Old Left, somebody who had lived through the Indo-Soviet era of ideological friendship only to witness the collapse of the Soviet Union, to see the old revolutionary dream of a classless society give way to an India enamoured of the United States, where the ideal of revolutionary change had fragmented into the thousand disparate agendas defined



by NGOs, civil society, human rights associations, feminists, minorities, antiglobalization, anti-World Bank and anti-neoliberalism movements, etc.

-- the Party not as vanguard of the proletariat but as harried arbiter of a thousand competing 'justice' lobbyists. Out was 'struggle', in was neon-lit consumerism.

But Namwar Singh and his friends fought on in many a public forum, speaking out against the BJP, against communalism

progressive causes, saying that the time had come for writers to speak on behalf of human 'conscience' and 'democracy'. One story about him had stuck with me, a report in the The Hindu newspaper about a conference of the Progressive Writers Association protesting vociferously against the Gujarat massacre and the RSS, against Manmohan Singh's bazaarvaad (market economy) as well as the murderous American and British occupation of Iraq. "April" Namwar Singh had said quoting Eliot much to the relish of his audience, "is the cruellest month." I too had smiled at that. And wondered, what was it about T S Eliot, the Anglophile monarchist arch-reactionary, that attracted the Old Guard Left? Even Samar Sen, poet and founder-editor of the Naxal-leaning journal Frontier, had confessed to such a seduction in his autobiography Babu Brittanto: "Yeats, Eliot and Pound made a deep impact upon the Bengali highbrow intellectuals of our time; especially Yeats, the 'pure' poet. I was more addicted to Eliot. Whenever I read Bengali poetry these days, I am reminded of his sentence 'poetry is not a turning on of the emotions'...." (translation Ashok Mitra).

and the Sangh Parivar's 'Hindu fascism', marching for

In person, in fact Dr Namwar Singh, despite the austere look and general air of cool intellectualism, proved to be a warm and friendly conversationalist. I and Ajeet Ji and Dr Singh spoke in Urdu and Hindi. His Hindi enunciation was clean and clear, no doubt due not only from decades of taking classes at JNU, but also from a certainty of beliefs. I could see why he was in high demand as a speaker. There was nothing of the stereotypical puritanical Bolshevik Marxist literary critic in him, all gaunt dialectics and living by the railway lines, still cursing Lech Walesa for the Gdansk shipyard revolt that started the decline of the Soviet Union's East European empire. I did not let on at all that I had some idea about him and his work--this was something I tended to do with the Indian writers and academics I met. I had found that it made them freer, led the conversation along unexpected paths.

But this evening the lush light of the floorboards had shifted me into a different gear. Now I just wanted a simple adda with the man, not heavy duty conversation about the Urdu-Hindi divide, about politics, or Bal Thackery, or Lukacs' On The Theory of the Novel. No, not that, not now!

So we chatted about Benares, where he had grown up and studied, and a little about Allahabad, a center of Hindi literary activities. Then he mentioned Allen Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky's visit to Benares when the two had come to India in 1961-62. Both of them, he went on to say, lived upstairs in the house where he then was living, and both had riotous, insomniac habits, unmindful of clothes or 'normal' sleeping hours or bathing too often. You're joking, I said, those two actually lived upstairs from you in Benares? It seemed plain fabulous to me. Allen Ginsberg's

contact with the Krittibas poets had indirectly influenced not just Calcutta's 'Hungry Movement' poets, but had also brought Beat sensibility to Indian English poetry, and had left a distinct imprint on it. Ginsberg's jottings, drawings, doodles, and poetic impressions are all there in his book Indian Journals:

"Benares: First nite out walking ---...Cows (11) wandering in Manikarnika ghat at midnite under full moon, eating the rush ropes of the corpse-litters left behind on the sand near the woodpiles on which corpses wrapped in white cloth are burning... High bright ringing of bicycle rickshaw bells on empty streets at midnight, the rickshaws racing down the inclined street curving past stores answering each other's bell rings...."

No, I'm not joking, Namwar Singh said, those two actually lived upstairs of me. So what were they like? Oh, I had to flee sometimes, he answered, the smell and smoke of ganja and hash would drift down so heavily downstairs, the whole house would reek of it constantly. Then the morphine and other stuff! And Ginsberg and Peter were, you know....(I nodded, I knew, yes, very gay), quite demonstrative about their love for each other, which some in Benares found a little too outre. A little stung, for I had



grown up on Ginsberg's poetry, I protested: "But they were good people." And to my surprise, Namwar smiled a warm smile and gently nodded his head. Yes, he agreed, they were--" acchay aadmi thay,"--both of them were good souls, anarchic poet and artist. Good people, he murmured again. Now I really warmed up to him--the Hindi academic, a Marxist, an Benarasi-Allahabadi Indian if there ever was one--and he had looked past the drugs and the homosexuality (in that day and age), past the raggedy dress and outrageous behaviour, past the

disruptions they had inflicted on his daily life, to sense something gentle and true in the poet and artist. Not for a second had he thought of morally judging those two Westerners. True to an ancient Indian tradition that held it to be sacred, he had no problems with madmen. And Ajeet Ji was right, he liked a 'little' daru--Namwar Singh was a one Scotch man.

Later, after our chat came to an end, and I had to leave for the India International Center, for its bar and a little more daru in memory of all those sunlit times now gone like fumes in the air, Namwar Singh dropped me off at a taxi stand. I thanked him and the car drove off, his erect figure silhouetted in the back window. Night had fallen over Delhi, dark and cold. Time for crooners over. Now it was Midnight Train to Georgia, by Gladys Knight and the

He's leavin' on that midnight train to Georgia Said he's goin' back to find the simpler place and time

I'll be with him on that midnight train to Georgia I'd rather live in his world than live without him in mine

He kept dreamin' that someday he'd be a star But he sho' found out the hard way that dreams don't always come true...

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