

NON-FICTION

Little Cruelties

HAROONUZAMAN

One Thursday, the weekend I usually long for, when I was readying myself for a family get-together, my cell phone vibrated. It was Fazal, who had been my classmate at Dhaka University in the early eighties and who had been a frequent visitor to my house in Libya when we were there as expatriates. He said that he was dying to see me and would like to come over with his family that evening. Since we were supposed to go out, my wife Sufia had already changed into something formal. As I put off our visit, she changed out again back to the casual blue sari she had been wearing. Even though there were no visible signs of reaction, I could sense a touch of resentment in her as she said: "You could say that we had a party. Why do we have to compromise always? Why?"

I did not know it either, but barring a few occasions, it was a familiar pattern in my behaviour. Was so-called sophistication, or politeness, a weakness that people exploited? I didn't know.

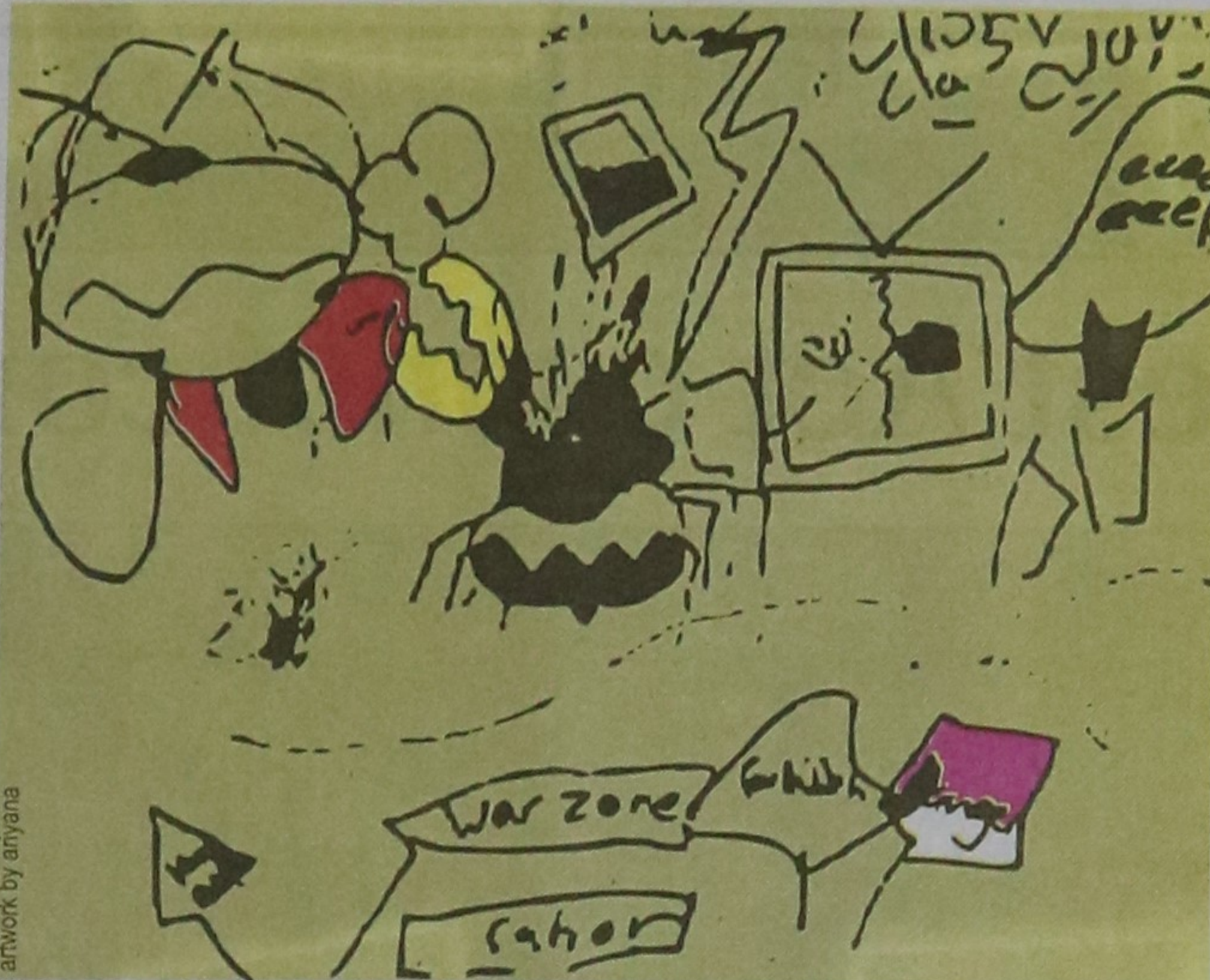
Her enthusiasm dented, Sufia concealed her frustration and went to the kitchen, as she always does, to prepare snacks for the guests. Our *bua*, who was settling down to watch her favorite soap on NTV, irately trudged past Sufia into the second kitchen to chop some onions and be ready to help Sufia in case she needed it. Meanwhile, I tossed the sofa cushions in right places, re-ordering an already spick-and-span living room. Rumor had it that Fazal's children were the Kids from Hell; it was also well-known among his friends that wherever his kids went, they left behind a trail of destruction. Fazal's "bad parenting" was talked about among his friends, with aspersions cast on his inability to perform his duty as a father. With all that background information at the back of my mind, I was tense as I paced back and forth in the car park, waiting for their arrival. While I was wondering whether Fazal could find the place, the cell phone vibrated once again: "Dost, I am near the BOL office. Tell me which way I should go."

"Just some yards ahead, take the left lane that cuts from Road 35, and then straight on till you stop before a six-story building."

"I got the lane."

"Baas, now you just drive straight ahead."

Yes, I see a car coming. Is it you?"  
"It is. Okay."  
Seconds passed by, and the car honked before the closed gate. Gesturing vaguely, he along with his wife and two kids got down from the car. While Fazal and I exchanged greetings, with lots of "shala" and "haramjada" thrown in, one of his boys started to throw a tantrum: "Shour'er bachha, I will kick your butt."  
"Ammu, look what he has done to me," said Salem, the younger of the two, drawing his mother's attention to the small chunk of dirt on his buttocks where his elder brother had landed a kick. Quarreling over a handball, the elder one had pushed Salem hard to make way for him to dribble the ball like a pro footballer in the patio. Just as their slightly animated mother pressed the door chime, and before I ushered Fazal into the room after the two kids and their mother, Sharif, the elder one, kicked the ball straight into the ceramic pot stationer under the door-side mirror, breaking it into pieces. Pain shot down my spine as I saw the clay-made flower vase smashed into smithereens. To my utter dismay, however, Fazal, merely glanced at it. He then looked around and said, "Fatafati flat. Dost, how much?"  
His admiration did not elicit any "thank you" response as I was seething with anger. I was even more surprised when Sharif's mother caressed her son's back and says: "Lokhhi chele, don't do like this. Chachu will be mad." I felt like slapping her powdery face, made redder with blush-on, but I had to restrain myself as she and Sufia hugged each other accompanied by baby talk: "Bhabi, you look beautiful. What's the secret?"  
"I've put on *Lajja, bhabi*. Also, you have become slim. What's your secret?"  
The rest of the conversation was giggles and whispers. In the living room Fazal, a bubbly sort of a person, however, tried to liven up an atmosphere turned somber by the incident. I was actually counting seconds and minutes and muttering prayers for them to leave, though, in an effort to masquerade what was going through my mind, I kept wearing a smile on lips. Misreading it thoroughly, Fazal got somewhat animated and said: "Dost, get me some *maal*."  
"When did you start? I thought you are a virgin."



"Was. Not is."  
"Any brand?"  
"Anything goes."  
"Scotch?"  
"Anything. I am just crazy now. Get it, man." While Fazal reclined into the cozy comfort of a single-seat sofa, I went to look for the bottle of Teachers that Nasim, another friend of mine, had brought over a couple of days before to lunk me out of a depression that I'd been sunk in that day. Finding the half-empty bottle missing from behind the bookshelf where I had concealed it, straightaway I took recourse to the wisdom of Sufia, who, with a cryptic smile, made the disclosure: "It's in the deep freeze."  
As I fetched it hurriedly, she said: "Why hide it from me? I know what is happening where. It's my household."  
Happy at this revelation and feeling elated, Fazal and I drank a toast from narrow glasses filled with Scotch. He gulped down drink after drink, and in a drunken stupor, generously used curse words-- 'Shala' and 'Haramjada' and worse--while

conversing before getting completely blotto. I feared I was in for trouble. No sooner had I sensed that feeling that he puked on the Persian carpet that Sufia brought to Dhaka all the way from Qatar. Minutes later, Fazal was stretched out on the sofa.  
"Sorry, *bhai*. He always does things like this." Fazal's wife pricked her husband's cheek with her varnished nails and said: "Get up. Let's go."  
The rest was a scene enacted by lots of other players as Sufia and I looked on as bystanders. A *daruan* and Fazal's mustachioed driver carried him off to his car, followed by his two hyper-active kids and wife. While Sufia, *Bua* and I were struggling to clean the carpet, the car zoomed past the gate into the sodium-lighted street of Gulshan. It was around midnight by the time we three could bring some sanity to the proceedings. The carpet was stacked in *bua's* bathroom, the living room floor mopped twice, pieces of the broken ceramic vase dusted away, and finally, a bottle of lemo-scented air fresher sprayed into the air.

With the Fazal episode over, some days went by without much ado till on Saturday last week I became a party to some more cruelty before the KFC at Gulshan Avenue, a street dotted with eateries and banks, both local and foreign. Though it is meant to be a residential area, in fact, the concept of area zoning faces challenges in Dhaka--a post-modern concept, indeed! At lunchtime, along with other harried and hungry people, I was waiting in line at a food joint when a young mother, one naked child in her lap and another clinging to her legs, arrived there and stretched out her hands for help. The tired and hungry children whined as their mother made vain attempts to calm them. The line got longer but barely moved, and as the children's cries rose to high-pitched screams, everybody, including me, stared irately at the helpless mother. Right at that moment, one really loud yell from one of the kids echoed through the restaurant, prompting an indignant response from someone in the queue. A whiskered man, probably in his forties, was the first one to react: "Shut up. *Chillachilli bondho koren*." A young man chimed in with another piece of cruel advice: "Damn shit. *Bhagen*."  
"Koi jamu?" the tired and hungry mother responded softly at one stage.  
She couldn't answer her own question. Neither could the customers. Even though, many of the customers were parents themselves, they treated her like a criminal. Being a parent myself, had I not committed a crime by allowing the cruelty of others? Although I did not pass any remark, it would be unfair to say that I did the right thing by remaining silent. I could have or should have bought some food for the children, or at least I should have given the woman some money so that she could buy some food for the children. If not, I could have easily left the place to avoid the cruelty being acted out and endorsed by the silent majority in the line.  
While returning to my home, I witnessed some more cruelty. As I trudged back in rain to my flat at Gulshan, I was beckoned at by a young woman, one of the 'street people' our society leaves to fend for themselves, huddled before the entry of Gulshan's Azad Mosque. She was swaddled in a dirty, scorched-looking blanket, clutching a cheap vinyl bag packed with her belongings. Three

teenagers, talking and laughing loudly, approached her from the lane opposite to the mosque gate. Clad in jeans, with a pony tail, one of them, whirling a keychain, went close to the woman and said: "Chol, *onek kichu pabi*." The woman kept muttering "Allah, Allah..." which grew in frequency as they kept extending their invitations to her. The woman stared at them helplessly like a wounded animal surrounded by hunters. As Providence would have it, the rain started to pour down, and the third voice said: "La howla." And then having had their fun, they all ran past the mosque into the main Gulshan thoroughfare and got into a waiting CNG. I returned home, soaking wet, and passed a troubled night.  
I came across more heartlessness while jogging in the morning at Ramna Park. This spring, I watched thin saplings put out tiny leaves and tall grass being mowed in the park. Last Wednesday, as I reached the park, I was flustered at seeing how it had been abused. Instead of using the park for recreation, while jogging I saw a car being cleaned, the contents of the ashtray and the litterbag of the car being dumped inside the gate of the park in front of the official Prodhannontri house. Some steps forward, I found some juveniles spraying paint from cans to write political slogans and graffiti on the white-distempred wall near the children's enclosure. Yellow and blood-red roses and *surjomukhi* flowers which are planted in rows surrounding the open space in the middle of the park had been picked off. Near the waterfront restaurant people had left litter, including crumpled bags, paper plates smeared with ketchup and paper cups half-filled with Coke on the tables, amid empty dented Lemu, RC, and Virgin cans on the ground.  
Back at home, as I huddled in the warmth of my family, I wondered why we all allow and contribute to the supply of these endless daily cruelties. Wasn't there enough of it already?

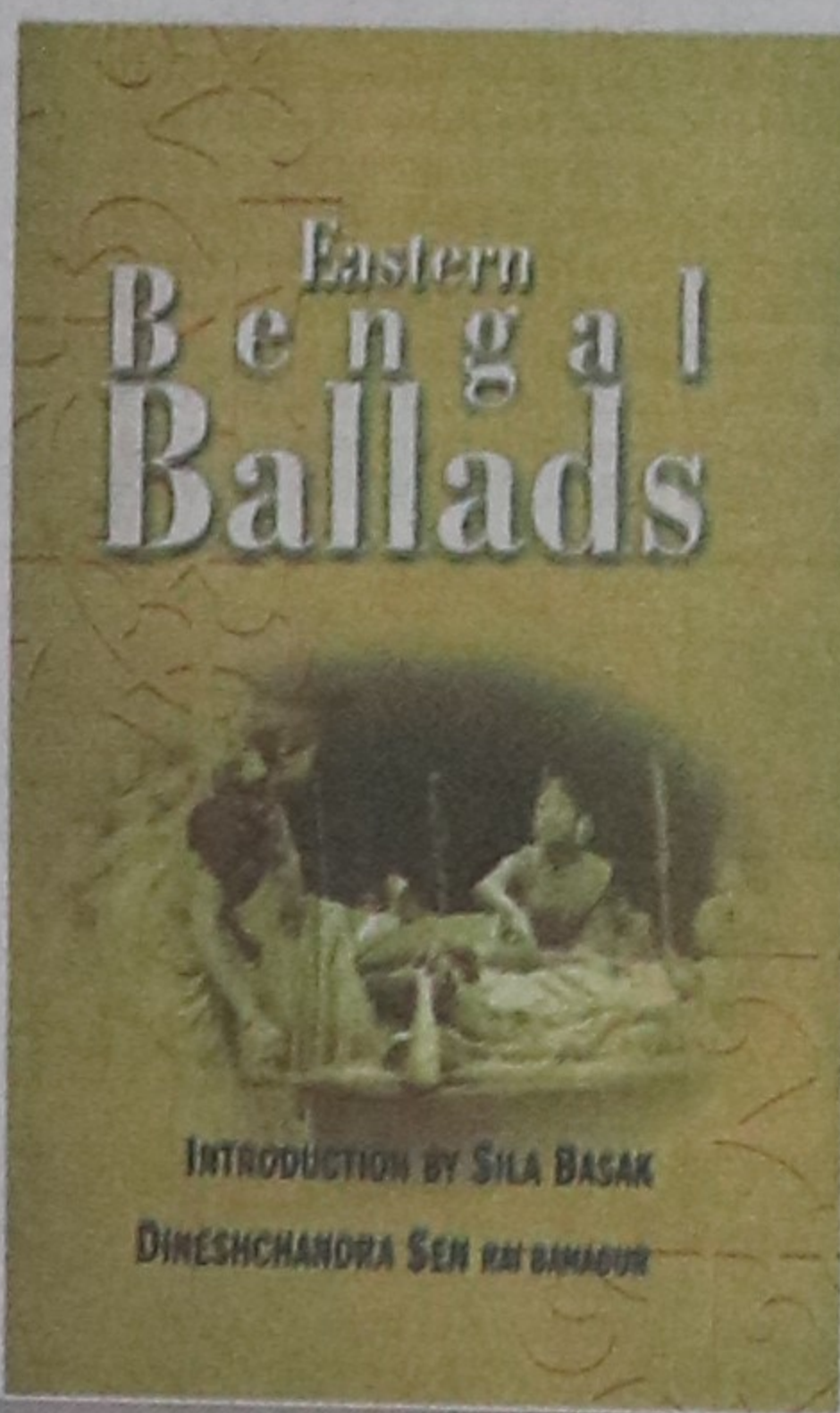
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A folklorist supremo: Dinesh Chandra Sen

FARHAD AHMED

Dinesh Chandra Sen (1866-1939) was an antiquarian and esteemed scholar who wrote the first history of Bengali literature and conducted pioneering work in Bengali folklore. He helped set up the Bengali department at Calcutta University, where he was Ramtanu Lahiri Professor. He was a tireless researcher, compiler and collector of Bengali folklore, chiefly in the form of East Bengal's *gitikas*, or folk ballads. Among his prodigious and original contributions to Bengali folklore is the four-volume *Eastern Bengal Ballads* with its priceless collection of a total of fifty ballads. The first volume of the series contained what has famously come to be known as the Mymensingh *gitikas*.  
Dinesh Chandra Sen's name, however, is not familiar to most readers today. In fact, even back in 1975, his grandson Samar Sen (poet and ex-editor of the '60s Calcutta left-wing *Frontier* journal) wrote that "(My grandfather's) tireless dedication to Bengali language and literature, his stupendous labours, his travels often on foot over long distances in the cause of research...all this now is all but lost in the depths of oblivion."  
Which is a great pity. It is a feeling that grows when we actually read his books. His books have long been recognized as foundational in the study of Bengali folklore, and his penetrating study of the origins of Bengali language remains a milestone of devoted research.

Why delve into folklore? A striking answer was given by Tamil folklorist and poet Ramanujan in his essay "Who Needs Folklore?": "For starters, I for one need folklore as an Indian studying India. It pervades my childhood, my family, my community. It is the symbolic language of the non-literate parts of me and my culture...In a largely non-literate culture, everyone--poor, rich, high caste and low caste, professor, pundit or ignoramus--has inside him or her a large non-literate subcontinent."  
It is this connection with one's childhood and community in terms of an undying symbolic language that these ballads provide, even in these English translations of what was originally published as *Purba Banga Gitika*. A modern day reader, cannot help but be struck how Dinesh Chandra Sen's introduction to these ballads in these volumes remains, seventy odd years later, a



"At this moment with her clothes all wet after bath, Kajalekha entered the temple."  
Kajalekha, p. 203

"In the old modern literature of Bengal which bears the mark of Sanskrit influence on it in a striking manner we find Muhammadan words, i.e., words of Persian or Arabic origin, scrupulously avoided. The writers avoid these exotic words even as an orthodox Brahmin avoids the touch of a Muhammadan after his bath. This grim orthodoxy is extremely to be deplored. The Muhammadans form a very considerable portion of the population of this province, and the majority by far of this population belongs to Eastern Bengal. These people are bound by sacred ties of religion with the people of Persia and Arabia and have to study their literature, theology, law and philosophy. The Muhammadans of Bengal are obliged to read their scriptures written in these classical languages and in this way they get themselves familiar with Arabic and Persian words. Though as children of Bengal, Bengali is certainly their mother-tongue, they have as much right to import Arabic and Persian words to it as the Brahmins have to introduce Sanskrit words. The classical languages of Arabia and Persia, no less than Sanskrit, have words of peculiar force and appropriateness which may be imported to our vocabulary with advantage, and this is the most natural course also. Though we try to avoid Arabic and Persian words in written Bengali, which we have made as exclusive as a Hindu temple, we have not been able to exclude such words from our current speech. Dame Nature cares neither for theology nor for orthodoxy and has always her unrestrained course. In our current speech even the women of orthodox Brahmin families, whom we take to be the most fastidious types of intolerance, use these words of exotic origin in their every-day conversation, yet curiously we avoid them scrupulously in our written literature, and thus give offence to our Muhammadan brethren who by way of revenge sometimes try to alienate themselves from all interest in the literature of Bengal which they brand as essentially Hindu in character. I must always say that such orthodoxy is suicidal to the interests of both the sections of our population."

marvel of lucid language, old school scholarship and staunch championship of the Bengali language over the ossified Sanskrit forms and usage. It was the latter's overwhelming influence on Bengali language and literature that had rendered it, according to Dr. Sen, "somewhat exotic and artificial." But these *gitikas*, he said, "are pure Bengali and there is hardly any obtrusive Sanskrit element in them," where instead of "long and monotonous accounts of

mornings and evenings with a catalogue of flower-plants, not omitting the butterflies and the bees sucking honey from them," we get "rural bards (who) do not sit down with the resolve to describe Nature and say something fine," but instead whose "poems mirror life...in which the simple but high life of the Bengalis is portrayed with fine poetic touches."  
Dinesh C Sen, noting that "these ballads were sung...generally by Muhammadans and low-caste Hindus," brought to the task of compilation and research the appropriate values of a broad humanistic, secular and liberal outlook. These values at times put him at odds with the narrowly orthodox Calcutta literary establishment of his times, with the latter prone to stating that 'Muslim Bangla' was somehow not the real McCoy (see inset for one of the most lucid articulations of the opposite viewpoint that anyone will ever read).

These volumes of *Eastern Bengal Ballads* as well as his ground-breaking *The Folk Literature of Bengal* have been re-issued by Gyan Publishing House (New Delhi, 2006), spurred on by Sila Basak, a folklorist associated with the Kolkata Asiatic Society, who has added her own introduction to them. It is somewhat staggering to note the care lavished by Dr Sen in terms of proof-reading and copy-editing, a thoroughness that is also on display in his massive *The Origin and Development of the Bengali Language* (Delhi: Rupa & Co). Pages and pages, sheets and sheets, acres and acres of print with nary a typo, misspelling, or misprint!  
Obviously Dinesh Chandra Sen was a scholar of the old school, who set, and met, standards in original research, writing and publishing that we in our vaunted modern age can only aspire to. Critics, armed with modern-day excavation methodologies, have taken him to task over certain aspects of periodization and authentication relating to the *gitikas*. Referring to these Samar Sen wrote, "Pundits have gone into his factual errors with a toothcomb. But Bengali literature would have been only so much more enriched had they possessed the tiniest fraction of his staunchness and dedication."

Truer words have not been spoken, and I, for one, after reading Dinesh Chandra Sen, am firmly on the side of Samar Sen and his grandfather!

Farhad Ahmed is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star

Kali O Kolom (Jaishtha 1415 - May 2008)

KHOKON IMAM

On this centenary birth year of Manik Bandhopadhyaya (born 19 May, 1908 died 3 December, 1956) the issue of *Kali O Kolom* under review has three lead articles on him, with Kamruzzaman Jahangir detailing the novelist's development by following the path of his novels, and noting the salient features about them, including Manik's innovative use of language. Here it might be interesting to point out that one of the noticeable features about this article is Kamruzzaman's own linguistic style, with its wide-spread and no doubt deliberate use of English words within his Bengali text ('internal', 'lifestyle', 'serious', 'style', 'total', 'develop', 'specific', etc. spelt in Bengali), and which may be signifying the renewing of English as a source of loan words for our mother tongue. Among other interesting pieces are two poems by long-dormant Shahid Quadri (*Apnara Janen* and *Biplob*), and *Kali O Kolom* is to be congratulated if it succeeds in nudging this New York-based poet towards greater productivity. The other thing of specific interest is the translation of a Sajjad Zahir short story from his *Sajjad Zahir Ki Muntakhib Tahrir*, a collection of his writings. Readers today may not know much of him, but Sajjad Zahir was one of the founding members of the Progressive Writers Association during the '30s, which left its mark on all Indian vernacular literature. He was also one of the contributing writers of the famous *Angaray* collection of Urdu short stories published from Lucknow in 1932, which provoked the blood-wrath of conservative Indian Muslim society



then.  
Among the other short stories 'Kriakhetra' by Balram Basak is intriguing, while a laudable attempt has been made to translate Li Tzu Peng's poems into Bengali by Titas Chowdhury. A fascinating article on the flowering of bamboo groves and the subsequent rat infestation and famine conditions ('*Basher Phul*') has been written by Mohammed Zafar Iqbal, who usually contributes the science pieces for the journal. It is all the more extraordinary given how little attention our mainstream media has paid to this event, and no doubt Zafar Iqbal's piece will go some way in redressing this oversight. There are articles on art and drama, and yet again, a lovely travel piece by Moinul Sultan in Laos. The journal's readers forum has encouraged debate on the Bengali language, with this issue's notable opinion--on the pros and cons of 'standard' Bengali--being voiced by Sajjad Kabir. Two book reviews should also be mentioned, one on Zakir Talukdar's collection of short stories *Matrihonta O Onnannya Galpa* by Humayun Malik, and on Khandakar Ashraf Hossain's collection of poems entitled *Tomar Naam ai Bristhi* by Kamrul Hasan.  
At the end, it should be pointed out that readers wanting to know more about the contributors to the journal are thwarted in their desire since *Kali O Kolom* does not publish contributor bios. Perhaps it is high time the journal's guiding lights rectified this deficit.  
The cover art is by Tayeba Begum Lipi.

Khokon Imam is a poet and illustrator.

Kolkata-Culture

TASLIMA NASRINE  
(translated by Rashid Hasan)

A concert at Rabindra Sadan, Amjad Hossain's playing at Nandan, A play at Shishir Mancha, something at the Academy too. Stand at Kolkata's hot-shot culture spot and sip a hot-shot cup of tea. Look around, search for known faces, nod when you see one Say Hi, what news of you. Stand just so beneath the stairs or the tree so that everybody notices you. That you're a culture spot regular, they see, That even after the ten-to-five you're here for culture, they note, That despite domestic troubles culture you are close to, they realize, So that they see your cotton punjabi, bag slung on shoulder, appreciate the sari

So they see your sing-song, your pretty-poem face  
See your theatrical curls, your filmi air  
That you're the damn Big Daddy of all culture, they do see!

Walk-flaunt so that your audience comes to know  
That yes, you too own an Ambassador or a Maruti.  
Laugh-pling so they know no grief's ever lodged in your heart,  
So they understand, you reside in a posh area  
That you don't live in one of those execrable slums  
Where huddle the city's ten lakh souls.  
Glide forward one more step, lean close to somebody, imagine kisses on you  
Kisses that raise goosebumps which means that you are not one of those  
sorry ten lakh.

Rashid Hasan works at an NGO.

