

SHORT-STORY

Panda

SUSAN ASHE

She sat back on her haunches and seemed to be scratching herself. The scientists, who had her under surveillance, were worried about her, for, though she was in cub, she was thin and disinclined to eat. Now, spurning a small clump of fresh bamboo, she sniffed the air. As if scenting something disagreeable, she lumbered off into the densest part of the undergrowth.

At midnight the moon rose, revealing that the bamboo forest was little more than a large grove in a dying landscape. But the night's brightness seemed to reanimate the panda. Hungrily she tore at a few leaves, then, after a moment, unable to swallow her mouthful or sickened by it, she retched and spat out a green wad of half-digested matter.

Hours passed. In their homed-made lair, scientists set up equipment to try to record the panda's nocturnal habits. A cry of pure savagery - the snarl of an ounce - came from the craggy mountains behind the forest. The men shivered. But the panda only lifted her head. In the pied light of the moon, her eyes were bruised with melancholy. One of the scientists scribbled in his notebook, trying to express a notion which had come to him that her clown's colours made the panda's solitude more unbearable than ever. But he cancelled the sentence because the idea seemed fanciful.

Unseen, the panda headed out of the forest. When she reached the snowline she appeared to double in size and then to split, and it became evident that somewhere along the way she had been joined by a male. Together, the two animals made tracks through the snow, their flanks and their ringed eyes dark against the surrounding whiteness.

Around dawn, they came out onto a narrow ridge. Ahead of them, the mountains reared in a wild jumble of peaks and precipices. For some moments the two animals stood outlined against a greyish-mauve sky, then vanished into the landscape.

Nearby, a team of photographers and their guides were searching for the pandas. Each day they picked up the trail and followed it until nightfall. Each night, the pandas woke and marched until dawn. As yet, the team had not come in sight of the animals.

The guides were afraid. They knew that the female panda had eaten her latest cub and that the two adults were making for a cave high in the mountains, where they would die. Nothing could be done about this; it was the way of pandas. In the cave, angry at being followed to their secret place, they would turn back into demons. Then they would disguise themselves as pandas and come down the mountain and terrorise the village. Everyone knew, including the demons, that it was against the law to kill pandas. The animals



artwork by amina

would maraud without fear.

"The pandas are starving," the woman photographer said to the guides. "They are going to die. That's why they are making for the cave."

"Yes," the chief guide said. "They will die but they will be reborn. It is the destiny of pandas."

"Pandas do not molest man or cattle," the woman said. "They eat only bamboo. The bamboo is dying. The bamboo always dies. It may be that it is too late to save any pandas, but with our photographs we must try."

The guide saw that these photographers could not tell the difference between pandas and demons. He fell silent.

"Take us to the cave," the head photographer said. "Then the two of you can go down and join the rest of the party at the snowline. If we are not back in four days, you must come up and look for us."

One of the guides pointed to a dark smudge on a rock face and said it was the pandas' cave. Once, caught out in a storm, he had sheltered there. The cave was full of panda bones. The photographers thanked the guides. They left, dropping out of sight behind the steep angle of the mountain.

The next day, the photographers climbed towards where the guide had pointed and set up a tent. Then they entered the dark cave. The team leader, a tall thin man, shone a torch, muffling its beam with his fingers. "Look at that," gasped the other man, a shortish fellow with a beard. The others followed his pointed finger. In the depths of the cave a

magnificent heap of white and black-brown fur lay motionless. Two pairs of eyes gleamed in the darkness.

"God, aren't they beautiful," the woman breathed. "I can't bear to think of them lying there until they die."

"Couldn't we feed them?" the bearded man asked.

The tall man shook his head. "They wouldn't eat. And even if they don't die now they'll soon starve anyway." The three fell silent. After a while, the bearded man said, "How long do they have?"

"About a week," the woman said. "Then wolves will get them."

"So it could be any day?"

The woman nodded. "They're very weak or they would never have let us get so near."

Slowly, the bearded man advanced into the cave. The pandas watched him. He crept forward. Stretching out a hand, he touched the flank of the male animal.

The female twitched an ear. "She's still alive," the woman whispered. "Come on, let's get started."

At the mouth of the cave, the tall man and the woman busied themselves with their cameras. From time to time, the bearded man put his gloved hand to his face as if he could not bear to see the dying animals. All morning the woman and the thin man moved about, shooting from every angle. In the afternoon, outside, they took shots of the scenery. When the weather began to close in, the three made their way down to their tent under a sky purple with snow. Inside, the tall man heated

water over a stove and dropped bouillon cubes into three tin mugs. Filling the mugs, he handed them round.

"We shall have to stay put," he said and, rummaging in a bag, he pulled out some sausages. "We've got enough food for about five days. The storm can't last that long."

The other two sipped their soup. "I can't bear it," the woman said after a while. "Those superb animals."

"I don't understand why they came up here," the tall man said. "The guide thought there was enough food in the forest for one pair but that these two, the only ones left, seemed to have given up."

"If an animal were starving, wouldn't it eat whatever it could get hold of?" the bearded man asked.

"I don't think so," the tall man said. "It wouldn't know it was food."

"This reminds me of that time in the Kalahari when we came across the old Bushman couple," the woman said.

The tall man's face clouded over. "They knew what was going to happen to them. It was their custom. This is not at all the same thing."

"What was going to happen?" the bearded man asked.

"They were too frail to keep up with the tribe," the woman told him. "So the others built them a shelter and gave them an ostrich eggshell full of water. The old people just lay there. They knew lions would soon get them."

The wind had been rising steadily, and the woman had to shout.

The bearded man raised his voice. "What did you do?"

"We offered them food, but they didn't seem to notice. It was as if, because the tribal custom said they had to die, death was the only thing they could see. We put them in the truck and headed for the nearest town."

"So what happened to them?"

"They died on the way."

"Then you never got your picture."

"What picture?"

"The one of them being torn apart by lions." This time the silence was jagged.

The thin man began to fry the sausages. "You're in this too," he said. "These pandas are going to die, and we're just here to record the event." The bearded man did not listen. He was pulling string after string of sausages out of the bag. Struggling into his snowsuit, he stuffed the sausages down inside the jacket. Then he fastened his hood and plunged out into the snowstorm.

"For God's sake!" The thin man threw himself after his friend.

"Don't be a fool," the woman said, pulling the thin man back inside. As she spoke, a gust struck the tent, almost tearing it apart. The wind raked itself up another notch, and a desolate shriek came whistling down the

mountains.

The storm blew for six days. When it subsided, the sun came out. It fingered its way into the cave, where the she-panda opened her eyes. Her ears twitched, and then she took a deep breath. With a supreme effort, she heaved herself to her feet and crept to the mouth of the cave.

The snow was dazzling. The contours of the land had vanished. The female panda took a few steps, her nose low. With her last gram of strength, she began to dig. Deeper she went, and deeper. A face gleamed up at her. The panda sniffed, lowered her muzzle to the man's chest and began to tear at his red suit.

The heat of the dying body had kept the sausages from freezing, and now the panda's hot breath warmed them. She tore into them. Finding nothing else on the stiff scarlet corpse, she made her way towards the buried tent, following her faultless nose. Here, she ate her fill of sausages, tearing them out of the fastened kitbag. Then, catching the last string in her teeth, she set off back to the cave.

The male had barely the strength to open an eye, when the she-panda dropped the sausages in front of him. For a while he sniffed at them, just as he had at the dying bamboo. Then he too began to eat.

Some hours later, the pandas lumbered back down below the snowline. They ambled on for several days, stopping only to eat a couple of goats that had been penned up in a mountain hovel. The herdsman ran off, gibbering with fear.

The pandas made their way down the mountain until, above a village, near a stream, they found a dry niche among the rocks. Here they rested. That night, they went down to the village and ate a cow, a cowherd, and a dog. Then they disappeared back up to their den.

By the end of two months, the pandas were fit and healthy. As well as some sheep, they had eaten a woman and her old father, who had gone out together to find what was preying on their animals. The female panda was in cub.

Some time passed before news leaked out, because the villagers - knowing they were dealing with demons - were not surprised at what had happened. They refused to answer questions but attempted to appease the demons by staking goats out on the hillside.

It was decided by the authorities that bandits had done the killings. Or jealous neighbours. A couple of villagers were marched off. The she-panda was sighted again. The scientists saw her eating bamboo shoots. She slept much of the time, they reported. But this was the way of pandas.

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Kali O Kolom Srabon 1416 - July 2009

KHOKON IMAM

The current volume of *Kali O Kolom* pays a timely tribute to the great 1930s Marxist poet and art critic Bishnu Dey, who was a close friend of Jamini Roy. In fact, unless I am entirely off the mark, in a couple of the collection of marvelous photographs - one in which the poet is seen with Louise MacNiece - accompanying the eleven articles on him can be spotted some of Jamini's works. Among the pieces on Dey, I found interesting Mahmud Al Zaman's *Kobi Bishnu Dey O Bangladesher Muktiuddho*, though to an extent the title promises a fraction more than it actually delivers (since it does not deal directly with the poet's life or activities in relation to the actual nine months of war and struggle). It is also interesting to contrast it with the valuable reprint of a collection of 19 of the poet's letters to Rajshahi University professor Abu Bakr Siddiqui ranging from 1966 to 1986. In letter number 11 dated 29/1/1972, two months after independence, Bishnu Dey writes that "the first round of bloodshed has come to an end. Now is the time for yet another struggle, a struggle for peace and which we all are hopeful about, and where the test will be even more severe, won't it?" It makes one wonder exactly what Dey thought of the 1971 war - perhaps that it was a national liberation movement of the petit-bourgeoisie which should lead to a greater 'people's movement' - something that has always seemed to me to be the 'revolutionary' claptrap held sacred by middle-class Maoist study circles. Bishnu Dey's poetry however heralded something genuinely new in Bengali poetry, as did his incisive art criticism, the latter detailed by Hasnat Abdul Hye in his *'Chitrashomalok Bishnu Dey'*. As some of the writers succumbed in underlining sporadically in the other pieces, which at times seems to be a competition of who can write the more obtuse literary criticism, Bishnu Dey effortlessly rose above what Dinesh Chandra Sen once termed as *'puchchanagrhita'*: the blind adherence to trails laid down by predecessors.



Among the short stories Zakir Talukdar's *'Atto Pokkho'* captures the reader with its remorseless - this is one writer who never shies away from the realities of life, and whose vocabulary and turns of phrases have by now been perfected to match his bleak vision - portrayal of one Ruhul Quddus, son of a peon, who has to look after his mortally sick, and gruesomely unclean, father in a hot, smelly, airless room. In the Science section regular contributor Mohammed Zafar Iqbal's essay titled *'Shakti'r Nobayon'* on renewable energy makes one think that he should write, and explain in his typically lucid manner, the effects of Tipaimukh Dam on Bangladesh, which despite all the media reports remains largely unexplained in scientific terms to many among us. The poem *'Sundarbaner Dinlipi'* by Iqbal Aziz is quite charming, immersed in the rhythms of fresh and saltwater tides. There are two graceful in-memoriams, one of Ustad Ali Akbar Khan, and the other a very interesting one on Indian playwright-activist Habib Tanvir, who had spent time learning tradecraft with Bertolt Brecht in the late 1950s in East Berlin, by local theater's leading light Ali Zaker.

Rabiul Hossain reviews artist Atiya Islam Annie's solo show while Zahid Mostofa brings us close to one comprising of 19 artists. Rafiqunnabi alias Ronobi gives us yet another idiosyncratic and utterly delightful piece on a Bangladeshi artist delegation's tour of South Korea, and Seoul. He has a piquant, Bengali sense of humour that he lets loose through his pen, a sense that can sometimes be seen in the way his 'Tokai' goes to sleep on a hard bench beneath a Dhaka sky. Bengal Foundation should take him more frequently on tours, with the condition that he write about them later for *Kali O Kolom* readers. Lastly are the drama and book reviews, of which the review of Jyotiprakash Dutta's *Shomoy Bholay Na Kichu* is a thoughtful look at how a Bengali writer of the 1960s has interleaved his fiction with his life. Or vice versa. Depending on how much the reader thinks the lives we lead are actually a fiction we write in our heads.

The cover art is by Golam Faruk Bebul titled *'Bhonger Taar Protichobi - 3'*, a composition in acrylic, and which had previously won a Bengal Foundation award. Bebul, who has an MFA from Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Arts, is currently associated with teaching at Rajshahi University's Charukala department.

Khokon Imam recently retired from work at an NGO.

On Cricket Books, Dadas and St Xavier's...

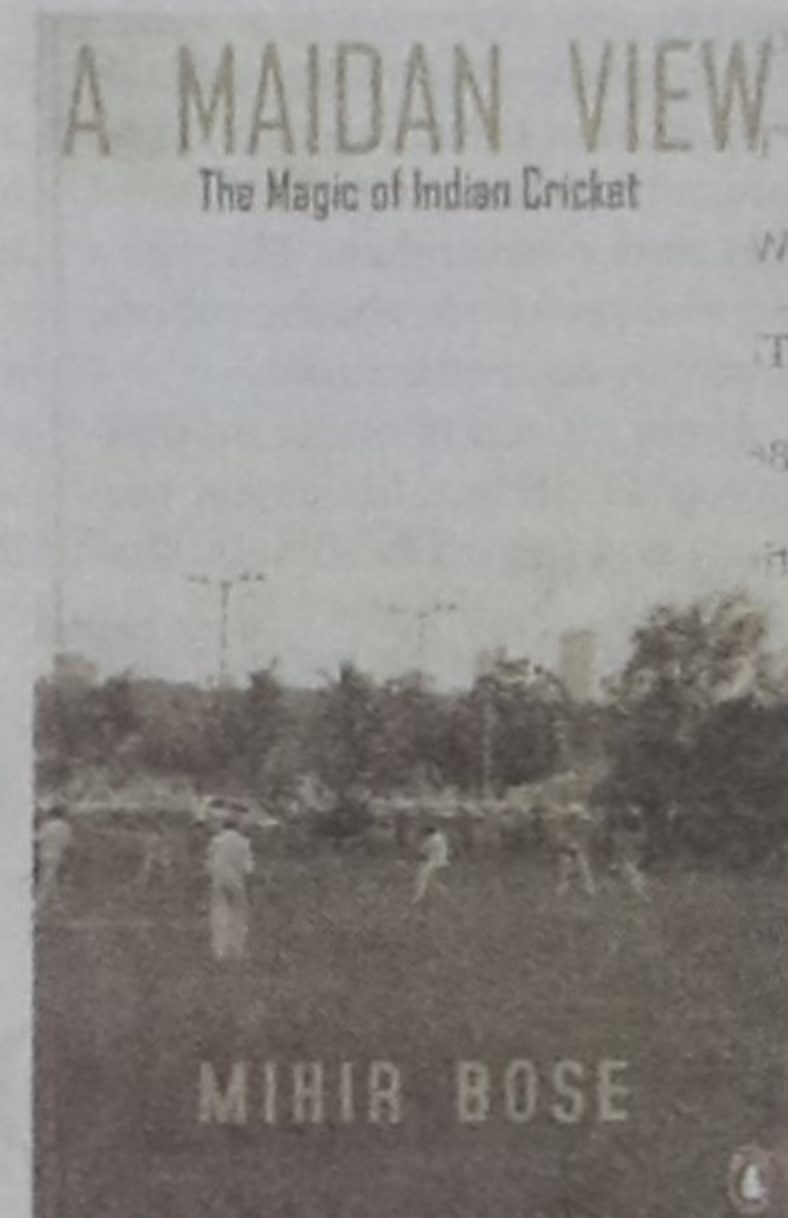
KHADEMUL ISLAM

After a hiatus of nearly three years I've started reading cricket books again. It was Sujit Mukerjee who started me off with his *Autobiography of an Unknown Cricketer*, which I picked up for a song at a Nilkhet bookshop. I enjoyed it so much that an urge to again read cricket books descended on me like monsoon rains on Dhaka stadium. The last one I'd read was *Pundits from Pakistan* by Rahul Bhattacharya, on India's historic 2004 tour of Pakistan. Poor Rahul, who came to Dhaka on a promotional tour, where inane questions by Bangladeshi sports journos at the book launch reduced him to mumbling clichés on sub-continental cricket. Somehow, it put me off cricket books.

Sujit's tautly worded drive woke me up from the slumber. From the cricket books lying in a pile in my room I picked up Rahul's book and read it again. Lovely stuff - a first-rate piece of writing on Partition angst and reverse swing bowling. This time I did note that Rahul was a Bengali, something I wouldn't have cared about during the first go-round. But Sujit's *Autobiography* had sensitized me to Bengalis writing on cricket. Rahul, though, was from Mumbai, where he had attended St. Xavier's - his author blurb went: "Rahul Bhattacharya was born in 1979, and was a part of a St. Xavier's College team that comfortably failed to carry forward the legacy of Gavaskar and Ashok Mankad." Hmmm, I thought, another Bengali with an English cricket book to his credit. And one that by far was the best one out of India in a decade.

The next book in the pile turned out to be Mihir Bose's *A Maidan View: The Magic of Indian Cricket* (first print 1986, second 2006). Bose? Hmmm, yet another *dada*! Mihir I found out is presently BBC's sports editor and has penned quite a few books on Indian cricket. *Maidan View* is utterly absorbing, Indian cricket seen through a historical-sociological lens. This is not at all as boring as it sounds, since the writing is so deft that I forgot what a dense and thorny subject the book dealt with. It's basically a collection of twelve interlinked essays, among which 'Middle India and the Cricket Raj' is a brilliant sociological study through the prism of cricket of a Brahmin, newly affluent Indian class, inclined at times towards Hindutva and with a gauche love of one-day cricketing 'tamashas'. Another piece, 'The Gali, the Maidan and the Mali,' is a beautifully written, warm portrait of the Bombay of Mihir's childhood as well as of the spaces where Indian cricket gets started. 'Khel Kood as Cricket' rolls up its sleeve to sling into a comparative analysis of Nirad C Chaudhri and the Marxist West Indian author-god CLR James in terms of their critiques of the Empire that is like nothing I've read before. There is a fine essay on Sunil Gavaskar, and while reading it I was startled to find that Mihir Bose too went to school at St Xavier's, when 'Sunny' was there in shorts! So Rahul and Mihir, both Bengalis, both top-grade cricket writers, and though decades apart both products of St. Xavier's...well, well, who would have thought...

Why were the *dadas* writing such good cricket books all of a sudden? Were they trying to make up for lost glory? I picked up *Twentytwo Yards to Freedom: A Social History of Indian Cricket*. By Boria Majumdar, Majumdar! Again a Bengali! The book was a distillation of his doctoral thesis at Oxford. Trust a *dada* to do an Oxford PhD on cricket, when any other self-respecting Indian would have rather shaken hands with a Laskar hood, but that's another story...Boria on Bengal's cricket is fascinating. For example, the Marylebone Cricket Club, founded in 1787, was thought to be the oldest cricket club, but Boria unearthed a 1780 Hickey's Bengal Gazette mentioning "the gentlemen of Calcutta Cricket Club..." thereby establishing CCC as breasting the tape ahead of the MCC. Of course it was sahibs only then. So Bombay has a hallowed place in Indian cricket historiography since it was that city's Parsis, starting around the 1830s, who were the first *Indians* to play cricket. That was because Parsis felt themselves, like the English, to be a community apart, and wanted to join the elite club of flannelled fools. The Bengali bhadralok, on the other hand, took up cricket from 1870s onwards because he wanted to beat the colonizers at their own game, an anger



fueled in part by the imperial typecasting of the Bengali male as effeminate. Funny enough, the earliest recorded match in Bengal that included 'natives' was in Dhaka in 1876, an account of which is in Muntassir Mamoon's *Dhakar Tukitaki*. All the 'native' players then were Hindus. Muslim Bengalis, stuck in madrasas and mudflats, do not figure much in Bengal's cricketing tradition or history. In 1947, with the mass migration of Hindus to West Bengal, cricketing talent left too. East Bengal became East Pakistan, and Bengali Muslims for the first time seriously stood on a batting crease, only to face the bouncer of colonial neglect by Pakistan. Despite some good years, the Dhaka League then, with its Independence Cup matches, was a poor cousin to West Pakistan, where Indian Muslim players such as Kardar and Amir Elajah from Bombay and the Mohammed brothers, Wazir and Hanif, from Junagadh had crossed over to renew an old tradition. When Bangladesh emerged, there was no real cricketing history or tradition to build on, which is why that tale of one Bengali, Raqibul Hasan, being chosen to play for Pakistan is told so often. The Bengali Muslim is probably the newest to organized cricket in the subcontinent, and from this historical perspective, Bangladeshi cricketers are subjected unfairly to quick praise or quicker criticism.

Kolkata was the center of Bengal's cricket activity in colonial times, flourishing from 1900 to 1930. Then, due to a host of reasons, it died. The supportive Maharajas of Santosh, Natore, and Cooch-Bihar passed away, the British were leery of giving stadiums and clubs to *anushilon*-terrorist-breeding Bengal, popular passions shifted to football, and the advent of the Marwaris along with the rise of rural Muslim politicians destroyed the bhadralok cricket-supporting financial base. All this happened as the larger picture changed too, as political power shifted away from Calcutta to Delhi, away from Subhash Bose and C R Das towards Gandhi and Nehru, with Mumbai consolidating itself as Indian cricket's stronghold. After independence the trend continued as the Left began its surge in West Bengal, which cut it off from the center in more ways than one, and throughout the 1950s till the 1980s, outstanding Bengali cricketers - from Shute Banerjee to Shyam Sundar Mitra to Gopal Bose - only played in isolated Test matches on a token basis.

Till the arrival of Sourav Ganguly! And the *dadas* suddenly began to walk and talk proudly; a Bengali now was India's cricket captain. And its most successful one, to boot!

Funny thing is, he attended St Xavier's school in Kolkata...

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