

SHORT STORY

Discovery

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Translation: KAISER HAQ

WE'D been seeing this for ten years now. The same old house, with the same old lawn. At midday the place looked haunted. Or maybe it looked like a museum. No sign of any human presence. Sometimes the branches of trees creaked in the wind. Sometimes a *shalik*, unable to keep its balance on a tall wind-shaken branch, let out a gratuitous screech as it took wing.

The lawn had a few flowering bushes, as well as a few hedge plants and a few wild creepers. This clearly indicated that the owner was a man of taste, but also quite apathetic. No doubt he was interested in having a garden, but he was unwilling to take the trouble of maintaining it. I had seen him from a distance, but never exchanged a word. The gentleman himself wasn't forthcoming and down the lawn I thought he might at any moment strike up a conversation on some slight pretext or the other which is what usually happens between neighbours.

Perhaps I should have taken the initiative myself. At least that's what I had contemplated at the outset. But my other neighbours dissuaded me. "You'll be insulted for no reason at all," they said. "You're bound to get snubbed."

"What's the reason behind the man's haughty aloofness?" I asked Rouf Shaheb, a practising lawyer who had been living in the locality for twenty years. He said with a laugh, "I don't know about being haughty, but surely he hasn't ever seen such an unsocial person. He won't mix with anyone, he is indifferent towards everyone."

After that I had the kind of suspicion that was natural in those circumstances. "Must have a lot of money," I said, "or else how does he get by?" No one had such information, though. But he must have something or the other: at least a small business, perhaps a wholesale dealership. A rich father at least, or a wealthy family background. Rouf Shaheb of course kept saying, "No, no, if he had relatives we'd have seen them by now. I don't think he has anyone in the whole world."

Anyway, whatever the owner of that lonely house might think, it was probably no longer a secret that we didn't like him. We had never had any eye contact with him. His eyes were hidden by sunglasses. His hair had started greying. He was over forty years old, perhaps close to fifty.

I had always observed him from the balcony of our first-floor flat. At that distance one couldn't make out much. It wasn't easy to read the expression on his face. Often it seemed that this world hadn't been kind to him, and so he was consumed by silent resentment. Or, maybe, he had suffered many shocks at the hands of people close to him. Hence such disgust towards all, and the terrible reluctance to lead an asocial, self-absorbed life.

Sometimes I wondered why we were so obsessed with him. While he was indifferent to us all, his life went on quite smoothly. Why did we begrudge him his strange life? Unbeknownst to us, we were consumed with an irrational envy for his solitary existence. It seemed he was getting on quite well. He had nothing to do with anybody.

He had no friends, hence there was no chance of a falling-out. No relatives, hence no liabilities. An untroubled, carefree existence. Not like our lives at all.

Everything was touched upon in our regular evening chats at Lawyer Rouf Shaheb's place. We drew up the balance sheet of good and bad in the world. We analyzed human character not a single trait was left out. Our discussion faltered only when we came to the gentleman next door. We didn't even have enough information to slander him. Maybe for this reason we bore him a secret grudge. It was impossible to drag him into any part of the conversation.

Manzur probably took it hardest. He was considerably younger than the rest of us, and for this reason his enthusiasm was also greater.

He sprang to his feet and announced, "I can expose the mystery!"

We looked at him in eager expectation. "How?" we asked. "How will you do it?" "It's quite simple. If I can strike up a conversation with him, I'll be able to get at all the secrets. I have a feeling the man has a crime hidden in his past."

"But he avoids talking to anyone." "Don't worry about that," Manzur said with a smile.

Manzur was not the first to speak with such confidence. But far from getting into a conversation, the man even shied away from anyone trying to approach him.

I could have mentioned this and shaken Manzur's confidence. But I deliberately kept quiet, and Manzur took his leave.

After that the evening gatherings at Rouf Shaheb's became charged with the anxious expectation of penetrating a profound mystery.

Manzur didn't turn up the first two days. He came the next day.

"Well, did you get to talk to the man?" we asked.

"No."

"Why?"

"Couldn't meet him."

It seemed that Manzur wished to avoid the subject. He left abruptly, on the pretext of pressing business.

There was no sight of him for days on end. He worked as a chemical engineer at the Olympia Sugar Mills, and had to go on frequent official tours. We thought that was the reason behind his absence, and might not have given it further thought.

One day, I was sitting on the verandah in an absentminded mood when I heard footsteps on the stairs. Presently there was a knock on the door. When I opened the door, the person I saw standing there caused boundless astonishment.

It was that mysterious gentleman, whom we had so far seen only as a shadowy figure in the distance. He didn't have his sunglasses on today he had in fact left them behind.

"Do sit down," I said. "It's sheer good fortune that you have come on your own to visit me."

The man didn't seem quite normal.

"No, no, I won't sit down," he said. "What's the point of building an acquaintance after all these years? At least ten years have gone by just like that. I came for another reason."

"Please sit down," I insisted.

"Can you tell me where I'll find your friend Manzur Shaheb?" he asked.

I hadn't seen Manzur for many days that was the plain fact. "We used to meet quite often, but he hasn't been visiting us for some time now. Would you like me to pass on a message?"

My visitor smiled wanly and said, "No, no, it's nothing urgent. Just a passing thought."

He seemed to be on the point of getting up. I virtually forced him to keep seated. "Since you are here you might as well have a cup of tea," I suggested.

To my surprise he didn't demur. Between sips of tea I commented, "You hardly ever go out."

"Yes, that's true. But you'll see me from now on."

My excitement couldn't be suppressed, and he noticed it perhaps, for he said, "No doubt you are terribly curious about me."

I began to hem and haw.

Making a move to get up, he said, "It's a long story I'd only be imposing on you. I'd better be off."

The gentleman took his leave.

After a couple of months on official tour, Manzur turned up at one of our evening gatherings.

We crowded round him. "Upon my word," I cried, "your medicine has worked. The other day he came on his own to ask after you."

I had thought such flattering words would please Manzur. But it was just the opposite. He seemed strangely indifferent. "Actually, it was an error of judgement on our part. I'm ashamed of all our unfounded suspicions."

The rest of us exchanged glances of bewilderment.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

Manzur was reluctant to open up. But at our insistence he was forced to come out with the whole story.

Our reclusive neighbour wasn't always like this. He was as lively as anyone else.

He got married. Like many he had a happy family until an accident completely turned his life upside down.

He had gone out for a spin with his beautiful companion. The night was dark. The car zipped along eerily quiet roads. The lure of a hundred thrills pulsed through their youthful blood.

Just then he seemed to experience a monstrous horror not death, but something akin to death. He could see it all with dazzling clarity a loaded truck bearing down on them with manic speed in order to smash his world of dreams. He didn't remember anything else. Everything happened in a split second. The car crumpled like flimsy tin and plunged into a ditch. The gentleman didn't lose consciousness, but kept his eyes shut. He knew that if he opened them they would register an image of intolerable pain and agony.

For a long time he kept his face averted from his companion. Somewhere there lurked an oppressive suffocating sense of dread. A feeble groan suddenly reached his ears. At first it seemed like an indistinct cry of torment coming from thousands of miles away. Then silence again. But everything became clear as his mind cleared. The owner of the pain-racked voice was close at hand. But the injured body was so helplessly squashed beneath broken glass and twisted metal that he

couldn't imagine it would again pulsate with life.

And yet, Nazneen survived. But for this she was inwardly mortified. Half of her left leg was crushed. Slivers of glass had scored deep wounds over much of her forehead.

Picking up the unconscious body in his arms, our neighbour had rightly judged that once she regained consciousness, Nazneen would not be able to accept her plight. The day he brought her home from hospital he knew how the humiliation of the injury had utterly devastated her. He tried many words of consolation but nothing could give her solace.

She laughed at his words in disbelief. "I know you are saying all this just to console me," she said. That night she spoke of a strange pledge.

"If you love me," she said, "you will have to make a pledge."

It was quite extraordinary. None must get to know about her unbearable situation, not even the neighbours. Her husband must swear that he would ensure that.

"But how is it possible? What if there's a visitor?"

"No, you can't let anybody in."

"If anyone wishes to have a chat?"

"No, you can't allow even that."

Didn't he have the gumption to make such a simple pledge for the sake of love? Was the fear of public opinion impossible to overcome? Nazneen's pitiful gaze seemed to confront his chivalry with this silent question.

The gentleman at once made an inviolable resolution. He took her hands in his and said, "Very well."

Ever since, that arrangement had been in force. He would never allow the slightest deviation from his commitment to a vow made to an injured, incapacitated, tormented body.

Unbeknownst to him, a singular defensive parameter had sprung up all around his life. His circle of acquaintances shrank. He withdrew from society. That there was someone called Nazneen who had briefly raised a fountain of happy laughter in this house was all but forgotten.

The loyal husband avoided his neighbours by sneaking out early to go to work and coming back late in the evening.

Meanwhile, Nazneen began to enjoy the game of self-concealment. Since she could no longer share in the merry laughter of the world outside, she grew to like the small world enclosed by the walls around her. She liked the thought lying there patiently until the ultimate moment.

Perhaps things would have gone on like this but for a slight deviation that occurred one day.

That is the day Manzur went there. Usually, if anyone knocked, the gentleman himself would come out. If the caller tried to start a conversation he wouldn't provide the slightest encouragement. He never asked anyone in. He never showed any cordiality in speech or behaviour. He knew this was the best means of keeping people away.

He believed that the curious thousands would be kept at bay by his show of callousness. Nazneen too would be left in peace. His pledge would hold.

Since nothing untoward had so far upset the settled routine of his domain, it was perhaps a firm belief that such a thing couldn't happen

suddenly that led him one day to leave the door ajar when he went out.

It was pitch dark. Inside the house it was hot and stuffy. A faint breeze stirred outside.

Just then Manzur went to pay a visit. He called out a number of times but there was no response. He might have turned back, but a faint moan came from somewhere and startled him. He noticed that an inner door was slightly ajar. A feeble light burned inside. Nothing there was clearly visible. Manzur followed in the direction from which the moan had emanated like someone entranced. He was trembling.

A pale, inert, anguished face, with only a pair of tremulous terrified eyes showing signs of life in the entire frame.

But Nazneen saw the intruder before he spotted her and let out a horrible scream.

It was not because of the sudden intrusion of a man, but mortification at the revelation of her long hidden state of being.

At once Manzur beat a hasty retreat.

Strange that we knew nothing about it, but Manzur believed that one evening within days of the incident he saw a dead body being borne out of that house.

Manzur didn't have the nerve to make enquiries, but he was sure that the private world the woman had created, self-contained and sheltered from prying eyes, had been demolished in an instant by his invasion. The severity of the sudden shock must have pushed her towards inevitable death. At least that is what Manzur believed.

When he finished his story I said, "The gentleman came looking for you one day."

Before I could finish the sentence he said slowly, "We have met."

"Really? What did he say? He wasn't angry, was he?"

"No, he wasn't angry," Manzur replied. "He said to me, 'It's not your fault. You only wanted to get to the root of a mystery. You were intoxicated by the spirit of discovery.'"

"And then?" I asked.

"Well, the gentleman smiled when he was about to take his leave, and said, 'Believe me, I'm not angry. I knew this was bound to happen one day. It was beyond my powers to stand up to the curiosity of the whole world. Rather, what has happened is just as well.'"

"How so?" Manzur had asked.

"Something like this would have happened sooner or later," he said. "I was counting the days in apprehension."

Manzur told me that a few days back the gentleman had moved out of the house, never to return. Before leaving he had sent for Manzur.

"At first I thought I'd go away without telling anyone. Then I realized I wouldn't have a single acquaintance here. You'll remain as my only link to this place."

"Why me of all people?" Manzur had asked.

The gentleman said, "You see, we have nothing more to hide. We two stand exposed before each other. You have discovered me through satisfying your curiosity and I have discovered you through breaking my pledge."

Anis Choudhury's 'Selected Short Stories' awaits publication.

Dr. Kaiser Haq is a poet, and professor of English at Dhaka University.

NON-FICTION

With Amitav Ghosh . . . to the Sundarbans

ASFA HUSSAIN

AMITAV Ghosh is one of the most widely known Indian Bengalis writing in English today. His popularly read books are *The Hungry Tide* and *The Glass Palace*. Others that follow are the highly praised *The Calcutta Chromosome*, *In Antique Land*, *Dancing in Cambodia* and *The Shadow Lines*, conceived in shimmering and monumental epics and myths. His most recent (and the first in his new trilogy of novels) *Sea of Poppies* is a stunningly vibrant and intensely human work that confirms his reputation as a master story teller.

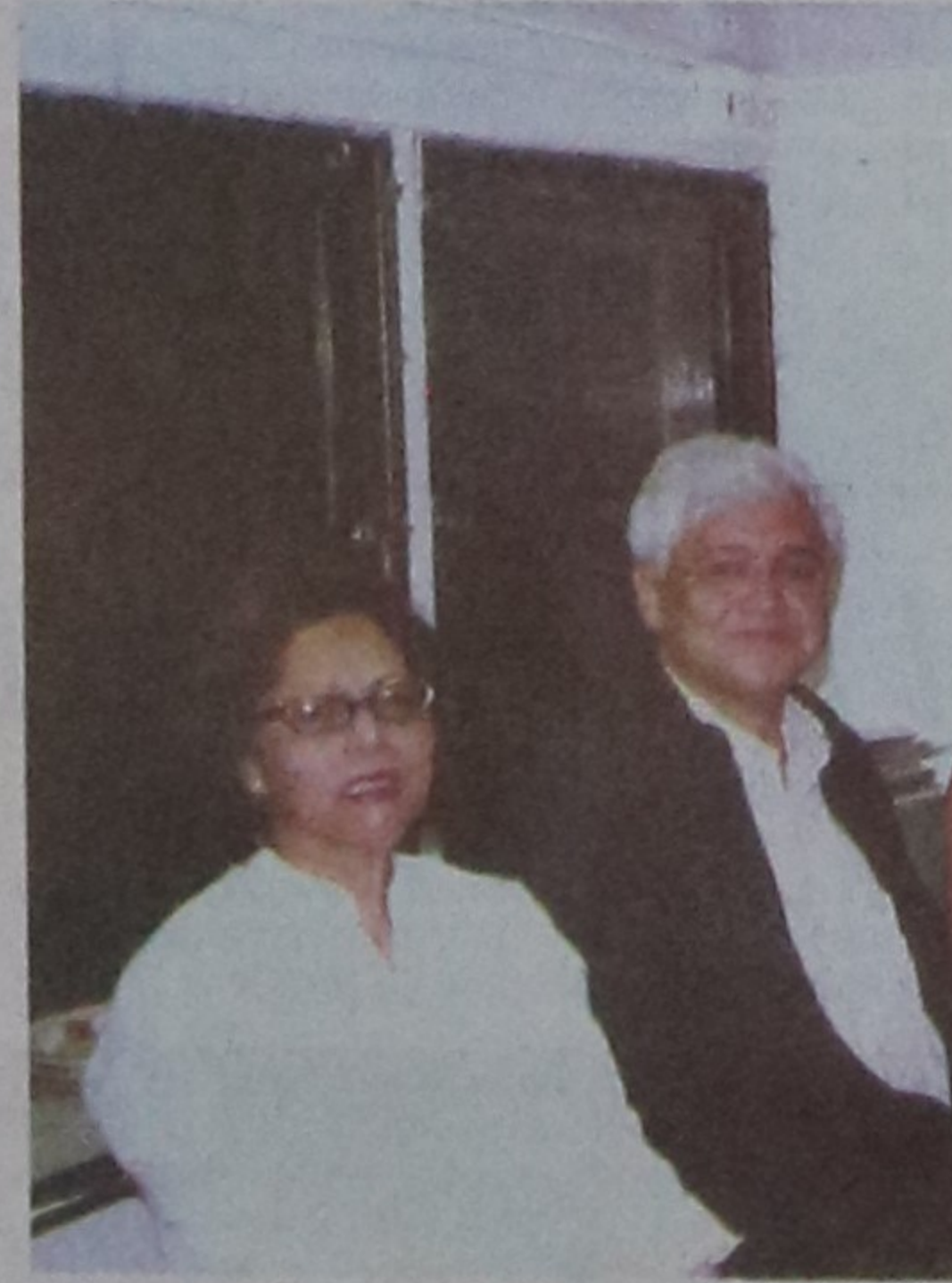
One of his most popular works written on the Indian side of the Sundarbans, *The Hungry Tide*, was read not long ago in Dhaka at the Reading Circle (initiated by Professor Niaz Zaman), which meets once a month. TRC is a group of serious book readers and lovers of literature and has been gaining increasing popularity among literature buffs.

Amitav Ghosh's visit to Dhaka on 21 February 2008 took place against the backdrop of collaboration between TRC and Independent University Bangladesh (IUB). Ghosh would be writer-in-residence at IUB.

Amitav Ghosh is not only a story teller, a novelist of extraordinary talent mesmerizing his readers with suspense, mysteries, human relationships between races and classes and myths bound with actual happenings. He is also an anthropologist by training. He is a writer by choice. He gave up a lucrative teaching career at reputed American universities to do what he likes doing best, which is to share a story with his readers. He is a writer who looks, listens and narrates a story, translates history into myth, the subjects consequential to historical circumstances. He interweaves historical events with myths, creating fiction, which gives his writing substance and balance. There is always something to know, things that happened in the past, facts forgotten brought forth to the reader in his existing state of mind.

Ghosh's style is simple and straightforward, portraying ordinary beings possessed of unique values to convey the very spirituality of individual inner strength in varied circumstances. This very aptly surfaces in *The Hungry Tide*, the story of Piyali Roy, an American-Indian in search of rare river dolphins. Her encounter with Kania Dutt, a Delhi businessman, and her meeting with Fokir the boatman, their relationship that disturbs the delicate balance of settlement life are at the core of the tale. The writer's masterful story telling abilities came alive during what properly was a literary tour of the Sundarbans. With Amitav Ghosh on the tour,

organized by The Reading Circle on board 'The Chutti', a perfect boat of the Guide Tours, were, among others, the delightfully chatty Elisabeth Fahrni Monsur and the experienced Razia Quadir. Both have a powerful pulse on conservation issues, one on the Ganges river dolphins, whales and porpoises, the other on the behavioral patterns of tigers and their habitats. Their expert opinions on the forest sparked immense interest, with the trip extending to three nights of breathtaking magnificent sunsets deep among the tall mature sundari trees and the mangrove, the last wilderness, a natural treasure of vital importance for Bangladesh and India.



Asfa Hussain with Amitav Ghosh

Amitav Ghosh, sitting in our midst to catch those moments, was a distinctive experience of fulfillment, sharing tales of expeditions and the mysteries of the Sundarbans, followed by casual and laidback conversations on food, family and relaxation. And, of course, knowing the much-at-ease-Amitav was indulgence indeed.

The writer's presence unfolded pages; and the superstition and legend of 'Bon Bibi', which he had painted in words in the *The Hungry Tide* came alive on the waters and on the shores. The pages of the book transcended banal reality in the surrounding ambience. The popularity and the legend of the

traditional 'Bon Bibi' is much prevalent in the villages surrounding the Sundarbans. People of all religious denominations have long prayed to the 'Bibi' for protection as they believe she has powers over wild animals.

Much of the forest on the Bangladesh side is uninhabited. On the eastern edge near the forest checkpoints are tiny fishing communities of honey, wax and golpata collectors and woodcutters. Each year a 'Bon Bibi' mela is held, underscoring the integral part of local culture and heritage.

We witnessed the Sidr ravished forest sprouting back to life, the colours of the forest gradually turning into various shades of green. Birds, mammals and nature coexisted with renewed vigour to replace the decay and destruction; the forest wore its beauty with pride as though nothing had happened; the fragile ecosystem turned around and threaded together to balance with the law of nature.

Those of us who had read the book imagined and recreated the passages into reality. That was our state of mind during the journey. The high tides wash the shores several times a day, leaving a trail of comical mudskippers nibbling on hermit crabs, snails and slugs. Often there are sightings of tiger pugmarks, wild boars, otters, civet fishing cats, and the shy large masked fin foot, a rare species, after the recess of the high tide. The tide leaves nutrients from the waters on the banks to sustain life.

Amitav Ghosh is shy, gentle and soft-spoken. Secretly amused by our tete-a-tete, within a few hours he was addressing us by our first names as though he knew us from long before. The chats and laughter on the deck and bridge, in the dining lounge, the exchange of recipes brought forth the essences of food. The thought and taste was essentially what we all enjoyed, as we ate the wonderful sumptuous meals on board.

On the 26th it was time for him to depart, to Kolkata via land route, to finalize the draft of the much-awaited *Sea of Poppies*. I did feel a little sad to see those five days of excitement of having him in such close proximity come to an end. He stepped into the waiting speedboat to take him to Mongla and from there by car to the border with India. We said our goodbyes, his right hand waving, his distinguished silvery hair tousled with the salty cool morning breeze, his hand waving, till we could see him no more.

Asfa Hussain is a lawyer and member, The Reading Circle.

Note
Readers and contributors will please note the new e-mail address of Star Literature..... littds@gmail.com

REFLECTIONS

MONOMOHOON DUTTA *The soul in devotion*

MIR MAHMUD

A devoted soul in search of the platonic in faith, poet Monomohon Dutta has gone beyond the frontiers of time. A hundred years have elapsed since his passing in 2009. He works cover only thirteen years (1896 to 1909), but his deeds have outlived his corporeal existence. A remarkable number of admirers remember him with great respect. They feel a strong attachment with the soul of Monomohon Dutta.

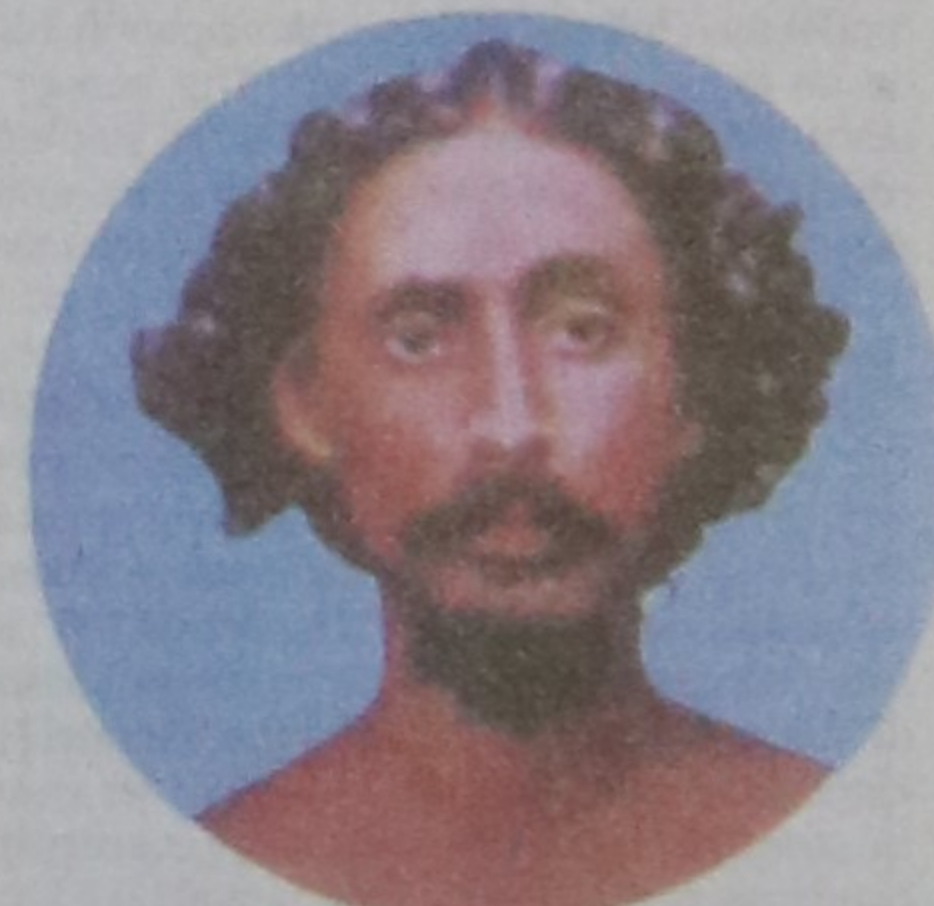
Monomohon Dutta was moved by the supernatural. So he came in close contact with Ananda Swami, a saint who was famous for his supernatural deeds. At the age of nineteen he was educated in supernatural activities by Swamiji. This education was rounded off through having seven postulates reach fruition. The first postulate related to establishing a platonic religion.

Ananda Swami was moved by the new term, *platonic religion*. We have never been able to find out his explanation of the term, but we do have Dutta's reaction. Swami advised Monomohon Dutta 'to write all which comes to his mind'. Again his careful phrase "...the path of religion is as sharp as a sharpened razor."

Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and Christians, rich and poor, everybody approached Monomohon Dutta and identified with his thoughts. They found simplicity, nobility, honesty and amiability in Monomohon Dutta.

Monomohon Dutta believed in a supreme power which controls us and so man has no freedom. It was his fourth postulate. We then get the background to his first poem:

The sun was setting in the west. The sky was decorated with different colours. Monomohon Dutta was leaning against a bamboo and gazed towards the sky. He was lost in himself. It was a day in Shrabon in the Bangla year 1303 (first week of August 1896). Suddenly his heart began to dance with an unknown wonder. A huge poetical composition began to develop in his brain. His first verses came out fluently:



Nah! without you this heavenly earth which containing everything turns to nothing; You're the main source the real worth of all worth that is you everywhere in the universe...

When the poem was fully composed, it was dark and the sky was full of stars and the moon. Dutta had turned into a poet who believed in God but with belief unlike that of not others. He believed in religion but not in its limitations.

Monomohon Dutta was not a follower of any particular religion. He studied and assimilated the Sankskrit couplets, syntax, and the Bangla translation of the Gita. He studied the verses of the *Chandi*. He minutely read the *Vaishnava*. He read Shankaracharya's works. He studied religious works. He has written of a vacant mood sometimes taking over his faculties. He was sometimes weak, sometimes apathetic; sometimes he was drawn to Shiva, sometimes to Kali. Spiritual and supernatural waves flooded in upon him in succession.

Secularism was in his soul. He asked himself:
"Say to me, my mind
Are you Hindu or Muslim?"

Mir Mahmud is a freelance journalist and writer.