

TRIBUTE

The world Buddhadev Bose inhabited

NURUL KARIM NASIM

THIS sketchy analysis of Buddhadev Bose's (1908-1974) writings, the major poet and prominent writer of Bangla literature of thirties, is a tribute to his centenary anniversary (which of course was observed last year). I write to focus on especially three autobiographical essays of the poet. I remember I had an opportunity to meet him at his 202 Rash Biharee Avenue residence in Kolkata four decades back on a cruel April morning in 1972 along with my friend Serajuddin Ahmed, a short story writer with whom Buddhadev had intimate regular correspondence. Even during those days of the military regime under the dictatorship of Field Marshal Ayub Khan, President of the then Pakistan (1958-1969), there was no normal movement of printed material between two countries, India and the then Pakistan.

But my friend received the latest books as gifts from Buddhadev. Since I was a full time cricketer at the undergraduate level, I had hardly any interest in literature, whether a Buddhadev Bose or Shamsur Rahman. I had not even heard of Buddhadev. Seraj encouraged me to read the short stories of Buddhadev Bose, "Bhasho Amar Bhela" (Float My Boat). I was completely amazed, fully impressed, and totally hypnotized by his lyrical language and unusual style of telling stories based on common day to day middle class struggling life and liveliness in the thirties. And that was the beginning of my encounter with Buddhadev Bose. Jyotirmoy Guha Thakurta, my teacher in the English Department of Dhaka University, lent me the latest book of Buddhadev Bose "Golap Keno Kalo" (Why the Rose is Black), a work of confessional fiction based on his Dhaka University days and the non-cooperation movement of Gandhi. Precisely that was the beginning and ground-work for me to enter the vast world of a versatile writer of Bangla literature. When my friend Seraj came with a proposal to visit Kolkata to meet Buddhadev Bose, I gladly and spontaneously accepted it. We had a detailed discussion about contemporary Bangla literature across the border when we met him in Kolkata. A vast range of topics was covered in our three-hour discussion which can be a separate entity under the headline of an interview.

Much has been written and talked about during Buddhadev's lifetime and after his death in Bangla --- his poetry, short story, drama and non-fiction. To English speaking readers as well as expatriate Bangladeshis he is not very known. Both Dhaka and Kolkata have brought out special commemorative publications covering his literary career.

Basically a poet of the thirties, Buddhadev took keen interest in short story, fiction and drama. His "Tapashwee O Tarangenee" was given the Indian Academy Award, the greatest national award in Indian literature, in 1969.

Kabita Bhaban, the residence of the poet, was a gathering centre for literary and cultural activists during the thirties and onward. He brought out a poetry magazine, *Kabita*, in the shape of a poetry monthly published from London, accommodating not only poems by budding young poets of the time but also analytical essays of poetry from both home and abroad. He undertook the painstaking job of translating Baudelaire into Bangla, which created a sensation at the time among enthusiastic young writers. The five masters of Bangla poetry, known as Pancha Pandab --- Jibananda Das, Sudhindranath Dutta, Bishnu Dev, Amiya Chakravarty and Buddhadev Bose --- had regular literary sessions or 'Adda' at his residence, Kabita Bhaban, where they exchanged views and discussed the global literary scene. The introvert poet Jibananda, however, was not regular at all in that literary gathering or Adda.

Regarding his three autobiographical writings --- *Amar Chheleybela* (My Childhood), *Amar Joutbon* (My Youth) and *Amader Kabita Bhaban* (Our Kabita Bhaban), we can safely say that these are not only non-fiction, but are also a documenta-

tion of the time. It will be a useful guide for those who wish to conduct research on this great poet of Bangla literature. Having looked at the historical and intellectual context, this trilogy opens up a new world before us. We come to know of the struggle he and his contemporaries went through in digging out a new and different path for Bangla literature when

Rabindranath Tagore happened to be the most influential in the literary arena. It was Buddhadev and his few friends who created a 'new wave' in Bangla literature, as distinct from the trend Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam had set in motion.

The masterpiece of the poet, *Bandeer Bandana* (Worship of the Captive), published in 1926, was a totally fresh and vibrant poetical work in the thirties.

Buddhadev's first prose work, a work of fiction called *Shara* (The Response), published in 1926, earned him fame within a short span of time. Literary critics praised it for its lyrical prose and theme. In 1934, a collection of short stories, *Avinoy, Avinoy Noy* (Acting, Not Acting) was published. It was also a very successful literary work. From that moment on, he did not need to look back any more.

The autobiographical trilogy is a retrospective study based on Buddhadev's childhood, youth and adolescence as well as literary and academic career. He recalls numerous details of his lonely childhood in Noakhali and Dhaka and his youth and adolescence partly in Dhaka and partly in Kolkata. A talented student of English literature at Dhaka University, he had all along a brilliant academic career. He left for Kolkata after a few years of teaching at Dhaka University. It was to be a painful experience for him till the end of his life. A sense of rootlessness and

alienation always haunted him like other immigrant writers of the world. Indirectly it was a blessing for his literature and it added a new dimension to his writing.

Jadavpur University, an academic centre for comparative study, was his creation. He was not only a versatile writer but a dynamic literary organizer as well.

Buddhadev Bose was born in Comilla, Bangladesh, on 30 November 1908. His father Bhudeb Chandra Bose and mother Binoy Kumaree were both born in Malkhanagar, Vikrampur (Munshiganj), Dhaka. Buddhadev's mother died immediately after his birth. He studied English Literature in Dhaka University English Department and in 1930 did his honours in English with distinction. His friend and contemporary writer Achintya Sen has written in his memoirs: "I saw Buddhadev first in Kallol office, a middle-sized young man, smokes continuously and laughs openly."

Buddhadev's novels include *Rekhachitra* (The Sketch) 1928-29, *Akarmanna* (Worthless) 1929, *Era Aar Ora Ebong Aro Onekey* (They and Many Others) 1930-31, *Mon Deya Neya* (Exchange of Hearts) 1932, *Jobanika Patan* (The Curtain Drops) 1931, *Rhododendron Guchcha* (A Bunch of Rhododendron) 1932, *Ektee Katha* (A Word) 1930-31.

Edited by Buddhadev Bose and Premendra Mitra, the poetry journal *Kabita* appeared on 1 September 1935. Buddhadev's first visit abroad was to America in 1953. In August 1956 he joined Jadavpur University, in the Department of Comparative Studies, as a founder professor. He resigned from the post in 1963. He died on 18 March 1974 in Kolkata.

Buddhadev Bose has a clear, vibrant style; he is detached and distant as well as confessional and introverted, observing with an acute eye the inner conflict and tragedies of human failings.

Buddhadev Bose is one of the most interesting novelists writing in Bangla. Never afraid to tackle romantic as well as demanding themes with elegance and as often caustic wit and satire, he deserves a much wider readership through translation from Bangla to English both home and abroad.

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NON-FICTION

An exclusive club . . . and passing time

MUSHFIQUR RAHMAN

1956 was another momentous year for me. It was the year I was inducted as a life member of a most exclusive club. I was giddy with pride at my self-importance of this unique distinction. I was the only life member. Even those who conferred this honour on me were just ordinary members of the same illustrious organisation.

My immediate older brother and his friends had banded together to form a club. The very idea was quite alien. There was no precedent of such an organisation in our rustic environment. Even the concept and the brainstorming sessions which followed were considered somewhat revolutionary. The 'conspirators' had hushed discussions amongst themselves. I tried to eavesdrop on their conversations, stary-eyed at the unfolding drama and resentful about my exclusion from the making of local history. Eventually, the younger kids were given a brief glimpse of the grand plan. The 'grown-ups' were going to establish a club and they were looking for a suitable name. Suggestions were welcome; even youngsters could participate.

After much soul searching I came up with the name 'Ghorasal Shishu Samity', which I passed on to my brother. I was still a child and my imagination could not go beyond my childish circumference. My brother did not dismiss my proposal altogether, but I can now understand why the word 'shishu' would be anathema to him and his compatriots who were on the threshold of their teens. I do not remember what other names were suggested or who came up with the eventual winner: Kishor Ashar. Looking back, it was indeed an inspiring choice because the name reflected what the organisation was all about.

I am absolutely sure that none of the Kishor Ashar leaders had ever heard of Karl Marx or other political thinkers at that point in their lives. Their teenage political philosophies were largely shaped by oral history passed on by their elders. My father began his university life as a Gandhian and in the traditions of the time wore a *dhoti* to university, for which he was once reprimanded by the venerable Dr. Shahidullah. The encounter with the culture-conscious professor did not persuade my father to change his dress code; he simply changed his travel paths around the university corridors, looking out for the diminutive but conspicuously bearded pundit and avoiding a chance encounter with him. However, the 1920s and 30s were periods of great political flux and my father along with many of his generation switched his allegiance from the Congress to the Muslim League. It is up to historians to evaluate the root causes of this seismic shift - whether it was the demagoguery of a clever non-practising

Muslim lawyer from Bombay or the refusal of the Congress leadership to address some fundamental issues or perhaps a bit of both!

Coming back to the nascent political thinking of the Kishor Ashar leadership team, I would have to conclude that they were intensely patriotic Pakistanis without being overtly religious, which in hindsight may not make a lot of sense. But that was the reality. However, what was quite extraordinary was the egalitarian organisational structure of Kishor Ashar - it was an organisation without a formal leader. It was a team of equals and if someone was more equal than others it was only through his actual output in delivering a result. The club premises were located in a corner of a 'Bangla Bari' of one of our cousins. An almira (an ornate wooden cabinet) was donated by another family which was to serve as the library. Books, mostly works of fiction, were donated or euphemistically borrowed (stolen) from different households and a rigorous system regulating borrowing rules was established. Anjali fufu, then a spinster in her late 20s, became the official librarian; and she was quite merciless in enforcing the fine of one paisa per day for late returns. My introduction to the Shapan Kumar series was through Kishor Ashar library and I have to confess that the romance and excitement I got from that detective series far exceeded anything I got from Sherlock Holmes books which I read later in life. By the way, I can't remember if Deepak had an associate and if so, who was his Dr. Watson?

Fortuitously, at this point in time, I received an unexpected present by mail. My second oldest brother had been dispatched to Sardogha in the early 1950s. He had gone on a school expedition to Sialkot, which is famous as a manufacturing centre of sporting goods. He bought a football for me and sent it by postal parcel, with my name on the address label. Thus there was to be no confusion regarding the ownership of this football. Kishor Ashar leader I might not be, but I was now the sought after owner of a football and suddenly my status rose by a few notches amongst the collective leadership team of Kishor Ashar. They pleaded and cajoled and when that didn't bear fruit they threatened me with ex-communication from Kishor Ashar. Finally, the godfathers of Kishor Ashar made an offer I simply could not refuse. I was offered a "Life membership" (Ajiban Shadashwapad) in exchange for the ball. How could a 9-year old boy refuse the chance of a lifetime?

A few years ago I went to visit Anjali Fufu (a distant cousin of my father), the erstwhile librarian of Kishor Ashar. I was told she was very sick. Her place was hardly 200 meters from our house but I hadn't gone in that direction in many decades. The whole

place looked unfamiliar. Gone was the open space in front of the old club and the club house itself was nowhere to be seen. There were all kinds of houses all around - some new brick structures and some made of corrugated iron sheets while some of the familiar older houses of my time were in various states of dilapidation. The place was like a mirror which reflected the fate of what had once been the 'village aristocracy'. Some amongst the growing population managed to sail to more attractive shores, but for those who were left behind life is hard. They are caught between a rock and a hard place. They don't have the skills of hands-on farming and yet their disdain for physical work coupled with their reminiscence of a golden era would even make Mary Antoinette blush. They look sneeringly at the double storied brick houses funded by remittances from Dubai and lament at the audacity of the upstarts who breathe down their necks through the leaking roofs of their own derelict houses. They are trapped in their delusions.

Anjali Fufu was pleasantly surprised to see me after all these years. We exchanged brief pleasantries. There was the expected litany of complaints about everything - shortage of everything shortage of money, shortage of food and medicine and above all shortage of respect from the Dubaiwalas - harking back to a glorious bygone era. I listened politely but said nothing for I had no solutions for her. To lighten the mood I told our former librarian that I wanted to check out a book from the library. I said, "You may not remember but I am a life member". I am not sure whether she was in any frame of mind to appreciate the deep irony of my observation.

Recently, I had some repair work done on a car and the repair came with a lifetime guarantee. I asked the manager what 'lifetime' really meant. Whose lifetime? My lifetime or that of the car or perhaps that of the spare part? He attempted to answer but my mind had wandered off and I wasn't listening anymore. It was really a rhetorical question which did not seek an answer. I had simply made an observation in the form of question. When I was inducted into Kishor Ashar life membership, I was never told that life also implicitly implies death, which includes demise of seemingly omnipresent and omniscient organisations like Kishor Ashar which to a 9-year old was going to last for ever!

When I visit my brother, now settled in Toronto, I may have to confront him about this lack of disclosure in the Kishor Ashar prospectus.

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POETRY

TAGORE POEMS

TRANSLATION: FAKRUL ALAM

What Is It That Preoccupies You All So?

Friends, what is it that preoccupies you all so?
What is this thing that creates such agony?
Why do people prate about "love" night and day?

Does it always cause torment and lead to tears?
Is it always bound to end in despair and sighs?
What makes people taste what must turn to ash?

In my eyes everything looks lovely and fresh,
All that I view appear to be pure and full of life,
The sky seems to me molten blue and fields green

I find buds blooming softly and moonlight serene

All that I behold seem to reflect my tranquility!
All that I see smile and sing even till death,
I feel no pain, know no tears, and taste no grief!
Flowers shed joyously, moonlight fades dreamily

The stars sail in a sea of light into the horizon!
Who can be this happy? Come and join me,
Friends, my happy songs will set you free.
Even if you must cry forever taste bliss this once

At least once in life forget pain and sing joyously!

ROMANTIC

They call me romantic.

I accept the label.

Since I quest for existence's essence.

Dearest, my mantle I've hued in that color!

When I come to your door

I invoke you with a hymn

Based on a morning *raga*

Devoted to Bhairab, God of dawn.

I bring to your sanctum

An offering of the tuberose,

Embodying the scent of spring woods,

Wafted on a discreet breeze.

Tenderly, I recite poems for you,

Sentences set in placid measures,

The whole shaped by my art.

You listen, and inebriated, smile!

When I play an overture on my flute

Based on the *Raga* called Multan,

In the depth of my unconscious

It finds out its own level.

I center you in my dream world

Taking care to drop off

All the dust coating it.

It is a world I created.

Eluding the Almighty's gaze.

From his art studio I stole

Colors and essences,

And emulated his magic of creation.

I know that most of what I do is illusory,

And a lot indistinct.

When you query, "Can this be called realistic?"

I reply, "Never, I'm a Romantic!"

I know the roads taken in the real world.

I've paid my dues to them

Knowing that you can't do so in words

I respond to their summons.

It's a world of affliction, ailments, and squalor!

There women are scared of marauders

There I must fling my mantle and wear armor;

It's a place for sacrificing, suffering and striving.

A place where the battle-drum

Summons one to heroic action.

Let not that be a place for playacting.

Let that be a place where the beautiful

Walks with Bhairab, the God of Destruction!

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REFLECTIONS

NUSRAT JAHAN PRITOM

I wondered lonely as a cloud --- the poet had laid down these words long ago, substantiating a feeling for intellectuals, scholars and literati to ponder on for many generations after him.

When speaking to any septuagenarian, there is often an enigmatic nostalgia that haunts through their words. And after that nostalgia screens those greeneries, and paddy fields, and lonely clouds. It is with just one person or rather a common phenomenon; that is up to the reader to decide. However, in the experience of this writer (in her early twenties), the latter is more pervasive. It may be an uncle or an aunt, it may be a musician, artist or teacher, or anyone else whom I interview, or it may be the friendly and ever-cheerful colleagues or editors who speak of their golden youth, its all the same. If the person has crossed well over fifty, (although not under this time period) they talk about a Dhaka full of orchards and Krichnochuras, something that is seemingly only a fairy tale to me when I have grown up and gotten used to busy, crowded and concrete Dhaka city. Trees and greeneries it seems have been restricted to Sangshad Bhaban, Dhanmondi and Gulshan lakes. Well you can aount Savar and Ashulia but those are not really considered Dhaka now are they?

I find myself often wondering what growing up in the Dhaka of the early 50's would have been like. To have seen 'dhan' (crops) in Dhanmondi, and instead of Gulshan where Jackfruit trees used to be. In our second floor of our apartment where I had the happiest and worst times, there was a bevy of solitary trees: solitary because each had a different look even while co-existing. Perhaps if I wrote botanically, I would have given names but here I would have to seek pardon of my reader. I have often been told the names of some of them by someone from Green road who had

Out of nature



seen the 'greener' aspect of that road, but I forgot the names immediately to receive the addendum, "Oh! It's not your fault. You didn't grow up seeing them and learning their names."

Reverting back to my window view of solitary trees, it is perhaps that view that has made me calm and given me wisdom. Strange! Not that I used to be love-sick or depressed at that age to have been calmed by the soothing touch of Nature, a saying most are familiar to, but it had given me this very wisdom that one does not need to stare at nature only because of the audacity of life but rather for its grandeur and beauty.

William Shakespeare had talked about however cruel Nature can be, but it is no crueler than man. Well, you see, there is an

identity of all hidden in this very nature. We all are after all raised from It's soil, and we all become dust to it. Therefore from our incipient stage of life, this identity develops independently. Most of us who are too busy in our lives seldom look for it. Some of us who are searching for a meaning come back to Nature to look for that identity which is a reflection of our own selves. Each nature of a person is different and different people have different natures. Similarly our faces in Nature also differ. For example, when I look back at Nature, alone and hidden, what I feel can simply not be compared with how someone else feels. It is not only due to the difference in experiences in everyone's life but also due to the fact that the identity is itself different in our development in nature. What about those people who never searches for that identity parallel to that identity as sentient beings, "Well, they never find it and state that feeling of 'emptiness' and 'something's missing'. Whatever that's missing is a part of their own forms blend in Nature.

Well that poses the question: how far and farther will we go away through time from Nature? Separating ourselves from Nature is also cutting a bit of our own selves. We may be full in flesh and bones but individually we are deformed. Our parents have seen green days, our grandparents even greener. We see barren lands, our children...The scarcity, the thirst, the restlessness, the disability are on the increase. Security, completeness, serenity and peace are on the decrease.

All I will say to end it is "Please plant trees." It maybe in the balcony, in the garden, outside your door, on your roof, anywhere. Do not detach your three-year old from connecting and re-bonding with Nature as in time, his health on that subject counts and in time, it even heals.

Nusrat Jahan Pritom loves bonding with nature.