

LITERARY EDITOR

The writer Mani Shankar Mukherji, famously known as Sankar, and celebrated for such works as *Chowringhee*, was in town recently. In this issue of *Star Literature*, we carry literary impressions of the visit from a whole range of those who have had the opportunity to interact with Sankar.

To photocopy or not to, that is the question

NIJAZ ZAMAN

Not growing up in a Bangla-speaking household, the only Sankar I was familiar with as a child was Shankar's Weekly. The one Bengali writer I knew was Tagore through his English translations: the poem "Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high" and the short story "Kabuliwallah." Sarat Chandra came a little later, and that mainly because of the movies my parents saw based on his books. Sarat Chandra's books themselves came much later when I was struggling to teach myself Bangla. Not just classics, a young man I met in French classes assured me, Sarat Chandra's books were also easy reading for a beginner. Then a friend in Chittagong helped me read Tagore's short stories in the original. Much later, a young tutor, who gave me a crash course in Bangla literature, introduced me to Bankim Chandra difficult yes, but rewarding and, because I was a feminist, helped me read Roquia Sakhawat Hossein's Bangla essays. But Sankar did not figure in any of these readings.

It was not till a member of The Reading Circle returned from Calcutta last year, all excited after reading an English translation of Sankar's *Chowringhee* that I came to know that there was a Bengali writer who had been writing over five decades and had become a household name. Her excitement prevailed and, unanimously, TRC chose to read *Chowringhee* in the English translation. There was only one problem. Apart from my friend's copy there were no other copies. There were a few mild objections: "Let us wait till copies are available." But the excitement was too intense to allow for delay. So TRC members duly photocopied the entire book and read it. I do not photocopy a book that is in print, so did not get to read Arunava Sinha's translation.

Much later, in early October this year, our small reading group at Independent University, Bangladesh which had invited Sankar, or to give him his full name Mani Shankar Mukherji, as its 2010 Scholar in Residence, we read *Chowringhee*. By this time, The University Press Ltd., which had contracted to do five books by Sankar, had published *Chowringhee*. I had bought the book but was unable to proceed beyond a few pages. It was on the day of Sankar's talk at IUB that Words 'n Pages brought copies of *Chowringhee* and Middleman and I was finally able to get an original copy of the English translation. Thus it was that while Sankar was still in Dhaka on his first visit to Bangladesh that I started reading Sankar. I enjoyed the Bangla but, knowing

that I could never finish it in the five days Sankar would be in Dhaka, skimmed through the English translation in a way that I could never have with the Bangla. Though we generally tend to prefer the original Bangla to translations, the translation by Arunava Sinha seemed a good one.

Though literary critics refuse to accord Sankar a high literary status, the book was fascinating. *Chowringhee* is, as Romesh Gunasekera suggests in his review titled "Hotel Calcutta" (The Guardian, April 18, 2009), an allegory for life in Calcutta in the mid-fifties. Of course there is much that is omitted with the hotel being the setting for only those people who would normally frequent hotels. Thus *Chowringhee* is almost completely devoid of Muslim characters except for a very few: Khan Bahadur Huq, for example, who attends the banquet of the Philanthropic Society, and Tobarak Ali who, with Ram Singh whips open bottles. There is mention of a Farida along with the cabaret dancer Connie, but Farida herself does not appear in the novel.

The opening paragraph of the novel, with its reference to Lord Curzon who conceived "the idea of dividing this green, fertile land of ours" suggests the shadow of partition, the first partition of Bengal leading to the Partition of India and a second partition of Bengal. But the rest of the book is free from political references. It is perhaps only in the brief episode of the Philanthropic Society that there are political echoes when the narrator suggests that there are occasions when Hindus, Muslims, and the English can co-exist. When it comes to eating and dining, the Agarwallas, the Langfords and the Khan Bahadurs are united: "It didn't take long for the wave of that laughter to reach the Khan Bahadur, with the result that three civilizations became one before my very eyes."

Of course there is the hotel itself, named Shahjahan and its bar named Mumtaz. Did the writer suggest the decay of the Mughals by using these Muslim names? The continued presence of Muslim culture in a world where Muslims had ostensibly been banished to a new homeland? The questions will have to wait till another time.

There is humour and pathos in *Chowringhee* as the narrator spelled "Shankar" rather than "Sankar" proceeds from the thankless job of hawking wastepaper baskets to the post of a receptionist/typist at Hotel Shahjahan. Young and innocent, he soon gets to see the seamy side of life: married women who take a suite for a night while their husbands are away on business, cabaret dancers who make a living by allowing customers to burst the balloons which

cover their bodies, hostesses whose job is to see to the flowers and the sheets as well as entertain special guests. Shankar soon gets to understand what the request for an extra pillow means.

There is a profound sadness in the book as one after the other Sankar's friends and acquaintances depart, to distant lands and other jobs, or die by accident or their own hands. Marco Polo, whose wife has gone off without a divorce, leaves for the Gold Coast for a new job and a new life with Liza. Sata Bose, who was Sankar's friend and mentor at the hotel, falls in love with the air hostess Sujata Mitra and changes his job only to lose her in a car accident. The detective Byron, who had helped get Sankar a job at Shahjahan, leaves for Australia where detectives are held in greater regard. As the hotel changes hands, the future looks bleak. Shankar too loses his job.

Though there isn't one plot except in that the story comes full circle with the narrator getting a job at Shahjahan and then losing it it is in the fragments of the stories woven into the novel that the great charm of *Chowringhee* lies. Everyone has a story if we could only hear it with our hearts.

Above all, *Chowringhee* is an allegory of life. Using hotel metaphors, the narrator notes how people come together and then part.

When I had checked in here, it was filled with known and familiar faces. Some left after breakfast, a few disappeared after lunch; others went away after tea. Now it was time for dinner. And no one was left.

As I write these lines, I can understand the excitement of my friend Shahruk when she "discovered" *Chowringhee*. But for that discovery and the suggestion made at our meeting, "Can we not invite Sankar to Dhaka as we have invited Amitav Ghosh earlier," Sankar would not have visited Dhaka.

Yes, I got him to sign both my original copies of *Chowringhee* in Bangla and English, but my friend Asfa got him to sign the photocopy that had made a difference in our lives, that led to her persistence in keeping in touch with Sankar to ensure that he did come.

As Sankar signed the photocopy he murmured, "Is it right for a writer to sign a photocopy of his book?"

He did not answer. Nor did I. And yet both he and I knew that it was because of photocopies like that that many of the members of TRC got to know Sankar and that Sankar came to Dhaka to meet his readers in person.

Dr. Niaz Zaman, Supernumerary Professor, Department of English, University of Dhaka, and Adviser, Department of English, Independent University, Bangladesh, is a member of The Reading Circle.

Sankar: The agony and ecstasy of writing

SHAIFUL ISLAM

On October 20, the noted Bengali novelist Mani Shankar Mukherji, better known simply as Sankar, spent the day on the new campus of Independent University, Bangladesh. In the morning he met IUB students and a few teachers of the Department of English and Department of Modern Languages, IUB.

After a brief introduction of the author (because he did not require a longer one) by Professor Razia Sultana Khan, Head, Department of English and Department of Modern Languages, Sankar talked about creative writing. Through memorable anecdotes and humorous and touching descriptions of his childhood, Sankar narrated how he emerged as a writer. Forced to shoulder family responsibilities after his father's sudden demise, Sankar tried a number of jobs, including being a type writer cleaner, a typist, a clerk, a stenographer and once even a petty salesman hawking wastepaper baskets an episode he describes with his mixture of humour and feeling in *Chowringhee*. Finally he met a British barrister, Noel Barwell, who employed him as his babu or clerk and introduced him to literature.

Three hours passed swiftly as Sankar regaled his audience. "But I have to leave something for this evening," he said and stopped.

That same evening, to a large audience, Sankar spoke on "The Making of *Chowringhee* a not-so-well-known story." The writer was introduced, more formally this time, by Professor Razia Sultana Khan, who noted that "Sankar is a household name in Bengal." She was echoed by Professor Omar Rahman, Pro-Vice Chancellor of IUB, who described how, as a young boy, he had been introduced to Sankar through *Chowringhee*. "When I read *Chowringhee* as a young boy and several times since then, I have remained enthralled and drawn into the subtle and nuanced descriptions of a city and a society on the cusp of change from a polyglot cosmopolitanism to a more strident parochial Indian identity a veritable fin de siècle." Professor Bazlul Mobin Chowdhury, Vice Chancellor of IUB, narrated the importance to him as a student of sociology of Sankar's *Koto Ajanere*. Professor Chowdhury then presented the IUB

sash to Sankar.

Finally, the moment the audience had been waiting for came. Sankar began by saying, "Lucky is that land where authors are born and doubly lucky are the people who recognize their authors in their lifetime." He noted how, after he had written his first book, many said he would be just a one-book author. To prove his critics wrong, he wrote his second book, and his third, and he has not stopped yet.

In his humorous and open talk, Sankar allowed his audience a peep into not only his own life, but into the lives of writers and publishers as well. And he explained how and why he had allowed the book to be translated into English. For a long time he had been satisfied with being a household name in Bengal, but the translation of *Chowringhee* into English gave him a worldwide audience and he appreciated that.

With the floor open for questions,



Sankar immediately established a light note. While he graciously answered many questions, he pointed out there were three ways of answering a question:

- 1) I know
- 2) I don't know
- 3) I know but I decline to answer

The next morning, Sankar visited the Department of English and Department of Modern Languages, IUB, and spent an informal couple of hours chatting with students and faculty who asked him the questions that they had been unable to ask the previous day. Sankar's visit to IUB was coordinated by Dr. Akimun Rahman, Associate Professor, Department of Modern Languages.

Shaiful Islam is Senior Lecturer, Department of English, Independent University, Bangladesh.

Lighting lamps with Sankar

AYESHA KABIR

"I tried my hand at everything, from mathematics to guarding shoes, from painting to Pitman's shorthand, but nothing quite seemed to be my calling," remarked Sankar, wryly recalling his struggle to succeed. But at the young age of 21 when he took up his pen to write, words flowed effortlessly and the rest, as they say, is history.

Writer Mani Shankar Mukherji, who was in Dhaka recently on an invitation by Independent University, Bangladesh, was speaking at a programme hosted by The Reading Circle and the Indira Gandhi Cultural Centre, Indian High Commission, on October 22 at the Indira Gandhi Cultural Centre in Gulshan. It was a rare treat for literature lovers as this was the first time the famous writer, better known simply as Sankar, was visiting Bangladesh, despite an avid fan following in the country.

Professor Niaz Zaman introduced The Reading Circle to the audience, relating how they had in the past initiated visits of other authors from abroad like Amitav Ghosh and William Dalrymple. She thanked Independent University, Bangladesh for its collaboration in bringing Sankar to Dhaka. TRC member Asfa Hussain for her tireless efforts in liaising with the writer, and the Indian High Commission for its cordial cooperation.

The Indian High Commissioner in Bangladesh, Mr Rajeev Mitter, welcomed the audience to the Indira Gandhi Cultural Centre and looked forward to other similar literary collaborations in future.

The chief guest on the occasion, Minister for Information and Culture Abul Kalam Azad, welcomed the writer and thanked TRC for arranging the visit. In his speech he noted that such programmes could facilitate regional peace and foster better relations between the two countries. He informed the audience that Bangladesh and



India would be jointly celebrating Tagore's 150th birth anniversary in the coming year.

Ambassador Mahboob Alam, member TRC, described how he had first become acquainted with the writer when, as Third Secretary in the Pakistan High Commission in Italy, he had been requested to help translate the dialogue of a Bengali movie based on one of Sankar's novels. He had subsequently met him on his posting in Kolkata as Deputy High Commissioner of Bangladesh. He said that Sankar's writings were an immediate success and just as some people loved him instantly, there were of course the envious ones who wrote him off

as a passing fancy whose popularity would fade as fast as it appeared. Thankfully, Sankar proved them very wrong.

The moderator of the programme, Prof. Syed Manzoorul Islam, spoke of the universal appeal of Sankar, saying that he did not write just for the middle class. There was a liveliness in Sankar's works that made them perfect for films, and easy for directors.

Syed Manzoorul Islam said that it was an honour that Sankar had come to Bangladesh for the first time after so many years. He mentioned the obstacles to such exchanges. He appealed to the Indian High Commission to facilitate easier visa processes, particularly for academics, literary and cultural persons.

Then it was Sankar's turn to speak. His face radiating a smile, Sankar said how grateful he was to be able to come to Dhaka and was touched by the love and warmth that was accorded to him here. He spoke at length on how he had struggled in his early years and how the words of an Englishman who had called him "exceptional" became a driving force in his life. His mother's faith in him, despite all odds, had also been an inspiration in pushing him towards achievement.

He said that every individual had a lamp burning inside him or her. A good writer lights that lamp.

He thanked The Reading Circle for giving him the opportunity to visit Bangladesh.

The writer Mahbub Talukdar read out an excerpt from the original *Chowringhee*, while Farida Shaikh and Niaz Zaman read out passages from its recent translation. Others who spoke on the occasion included Ankan Banerjee, Director, Indira Gandhi Cultural Centre, Shahruk Rahman and Asfa Hussain.

Ayesha Kabir is a writer, journalist and member of The Reading Circle.

Encounters with Sankar

FARIDA SHAIKH

The cavernous hall at Independent University, Bangladesh at Bashundhara, was packed with an august audience to hear Mani Shankar Mukherjee. The invitation was from the Vice Chancellor, Professor Bazlul M. Chowdhury.

The entrance to the hall showcased the English translation of Sankar's first two novels, *'Chowringhee'* and *'The Middleman'*. The third, *'The Grief Unknown'*, is expected soon.

It is wonderful to be in Dhaka. It is a joy and gladness... Nevertheless it took me such a long time, over fifty five years, to arrive. That has given me so much of happiness'. The writer stressed the importance of English. It is necessary to make Bangla literature international. He was much impressed by the state of English in Dhaka and its cosmopolitan ambience. Talking in Bangla the writer humorously added that speaking in English confronts us with tricky questions, like what should I say? And how should I say it? The audience laughed, and with the fading of the laughter Sankar began his talk in eloquent English.

The writer was a sixteen year old lad when he set out in search of a livelihood. He started off as a clerk to the last British barrister of the Kolkata High Court, who introduced Sankar to literature and to the contemporary literary circles of Kolkata.

After the sudden death of Barnwell, the barrister, Sankar wanted to honour him, and decided to write a book about him. That impetus led to his first novel, *'Koto Ajanere'*. It was labeled as a stimulating

novel. However, his detractors ridiculed his work and titled him as the 'one-book author.' This tremendously hurt his ego. His mother consoled him, with examples of Kashiram Das, the reputed author of a single work, the *Mahabharata*.

It was during the same period that he produced *'Chowringhee'*, on a rainy day at the water-logged crossing of Dalhousie, a busy business district in the heart of Kolkata.

At the Senate Bhaban, Dhaka University, a book publication ceremony was arranged by The University Press Limited, to honour Sankar. The special attraction was the publication of *'Chowringhee'*, *'Asha Akankha'*, and *'Kotha Monohon'*. The books were on display and quite a number of copies were signed by the author for readers.

Imdadul Haq Milon, the prominent writer, declared that next to Sarat Chandra, Sankar was the most widely read Bangla writer in modern times. Nearly one hundred works of Sankar have been published.

No writer should promote his own books. In earlier times promotion of the self was usually discouraged. It was generally supposed that writers became prominent after death. And Bangla writers indeed became famous after their death. Sankar from his own experience said that he had to make enemies to reach his publisher.

In Dhaka he noted the prominence of English, and this is comparable to conditions in other mega cities of the world, like Mumbai or Delhi. About Kolkata, he said it was becoming more and more a

non-Bengali city, for Bangla is hardly the language in use, be it for the benefit of literature or business.

The role of UPL was compared to that of building a bridge. The aim of this endeavor was to promote a reading of Bangla books through publication across the border.

Indira Gandhi Cultural Centre arranged an evening with Mani Shankar Mukherjee.

Sankar responded to the question from the audience: 'Please tell us who or which book inspired you into a career in writing?' He began by recounting many of his failures --- like not doing well in school, particularly in arithmetic. He tried to learn singing, but that too was a total disaster. He did various odd jobs, and then came his work as a clerk in the chamber of a British barrister. It was this association that made him familiar with people in hotel management, in the railways and in business. He was placed in a reading room and so gained much familiarity with books. It was through these small mazes of life that his writing career began to take shape.

Mahboob Alam, former diplomat and a friend of the writer, spoke on behalf of The Reading Circle, a group that loves books and reading.

As moderator, Professor Syed Manzoorul Islam noted that Sankar's visit to Dhaka was the opening of a door to an exchange of books and publications across the border. This, he said, would lead to a much needed promotion of writers and books from Bangladesh.

Farida Shaikh is a critic and regular reviewer of books.

Thank you, Sankar!

M. OMAR RAHMAN

Mani Shankar Mukherji aka Sankar has had the rare distinction of becoming a legend in his own time. There is hardly an educated household in both Bengals where at least one of his books has not been read. Although a prolific author, in the popular imagination he is best known for three books: *Koto Ajanere*, *Chowringhee* and *Seemabaddha* with *Chowringhee* being perhaps most iconic. Forty seven years after *Chowringhee* was first published and made Sankar a household name in Bengal, a recent English translation, in 2009, has brought him well-deserved although belated world-wide recognition. I have a personal relationship with Sankar, not the man but his books and the depictions of his books. I suspect, like many of my generation, I first watched Sankar before I read him. I was fascinated by the movie *Chowringhee* which came out in 1968 with the inimitable Uttam Kumar playing Sata Bose, and particularly its depiction of the cosmopolitanism of Kolkata in the late 1950s. For a somewhat precocious 11-year-old boy who had been born and brought up in Dhaka, the movie was a

visual testament to my mother's (always an ardent Calcuttan) lament about the essential difference between the pleasant provincialism of Dhaka in the 1960s and the bustling urbanity and sophistication of Kolkata where she was born and brought up and never quite got over leaving.

Subsequently when I read *Chowringhee* as a young boy and several times since then, I have remained enthralled and drawn into the subtle and nuanced descriptions of a city and a society on the cusp of change from a polyglot cosmopolitanism to a more strident parochial Indian identity a veritable fin de siècle. Like the best of authors, Sankar's writing evokes a multiplicity of emotions. It transports the reader to a place in time which he/she can almost taste and touch and participate in. This capacity of drawing in the reader emotionally is something Sankar shares with Marcel Proust, the author of *Remembrances of Things Past*. As a psychiatrist I am struck by Sankar's great capacity for empathy, for putting the reader in the shoes of the characters he creates. When you read *Chowringhee* you become the characters: Sata Bose the urbane receptionist/concierge who has seen it all the venality of the rich, the squalid lives of the hotel employees, the daily compromises you



need to make to go along and get along. You suffer with him in his ultimately unsuccessful attempt to escape from this sophisticated but tawdry world that the Hotel Shahjahan represents into the anonymity of middle-class domestic bliss. His love for the air hostess Sujata Mitra and their desire to live a simple life away from all of this hustle and bustle come to naught. You understand the complexity of Rosie, a grasping shrew trying to make it in a tough neighborhood. You appreciate the impossibility of Karabi Guha, the hostess who wants to transcend class barriers and marry her true love Anindo Pakrashi, the scion of a notable industrialist family. You are titillated by the extramarital shenanigans of Mrs. Pakrashi, hidden behind the veneer of wifely duty and social responsibility. Sankar taps into a rich vein of middle-class fascination and contempt of the lives and hypocrisies of the wealthy. He weaves an intricate tapestry which ensnares the reader and leaves him at the end of the book hungering for a sequel.

There is so much to say and so little time and

ultimately we are here to listen to Sankar the man himself. So I will stop here. However, I want to share an anecdote which speaks to Sankar's iconic reputation. A few days a friend of mine called me and said, "To ke pawa jai na."

Khoob byasto? I never seem to be able to get in touch with you. Are you very busy?"

I said, "Hein, Sankar ashchhe to. Yes, Sankar's coming."

"Kon Sankar? Which Sankar?" he asked. "Money nai *Chowringhee*, *Simabaddhar lekho*. Don't you remember? The author of *Chowringhee*, *Simabaddha*."

He seemed a little confused. "Lokta ekhono bechey achhey? Aami to bhebe chhilam onek agay mara gechhey. Tui thatta korhish na to? Is he still alive? I thought he had died a long time ago. You aren't pulling my leg, are you? Is he really coming?"

"Asholai ashchhe. Tui ashish. Yes. You should come," I said.

Finally, I want to thank Sankar Da personally for allowing me to appreciate my mother's youth through his writing.

Thank you.

Welcome address by Professor M. Omar Rahman, Pro Vice Chancellor, Independent University, Bangladesh, on October 20, 2010 on the occasion of Mani Shankar Mukherji's being appointed 2010 Scholar in Residence at Independent University, Bangladesh.