

TRIBUTE

# Remembering Samarendra Sen Gupta

TAKIR HOSSAIN

I was first introduced to West Bengal poet Samarendra Sen Gupta at poet Muhammad Samad's residence at Dhaka University teachers' quarters in 2010. He wore a *khaddar panjabi* and carried a bag. His pleasant personality was easily expressed through his softness of speech and cool temperament. During that year, Gupta visited Dhaka to participate in the National Poetry Festival. On that evening, poets Mahadev Saha, Nirmalendu Goon, Lutfor Rahman Riton, Aslam Sani and a number of writers sat together and conversed on many contemporary issues. Gupta, however, was a little silent and fortunately I sat beside him. Sometimes I talked to him about his childhood, poetry and his becoming a poet. He could be articulate.

Recently, with his passing, we have lost one of the leading contemporary poets of Bengali literature, one who truly projected our lives, nature, reflections and contemplations of life. Most of his poems have a great touch of modernity.

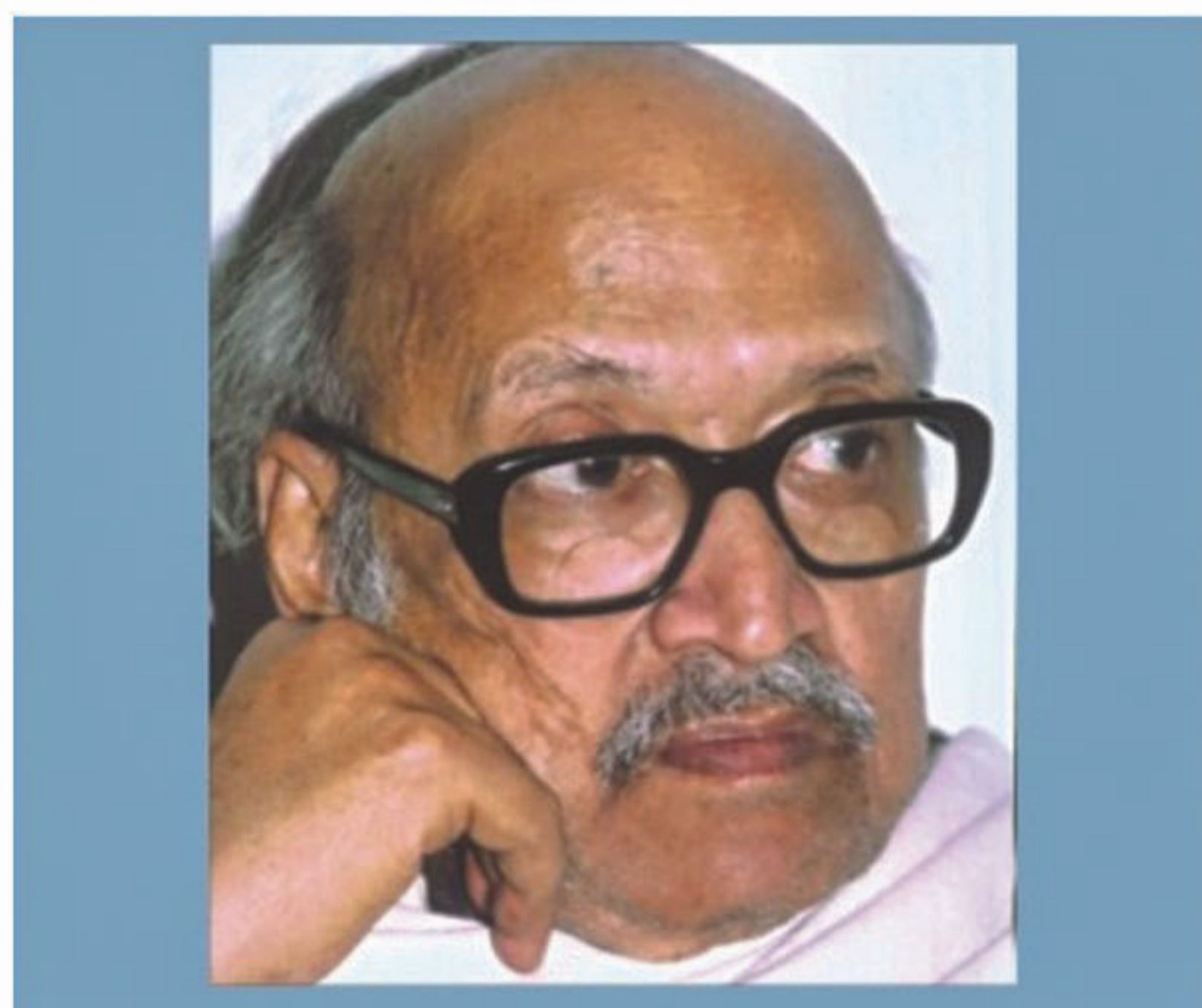
Gupta was born in Dhaka in 1935 and spent the first sixteen years of his life here before moving to Calcutta (now Kolkata) in 1951. He was a student of Pirenonth High School (now Nawabpur High School). He passed his matriculation in 1951 from the same institute and migrated to Calcutta the same year. After settling in Calcutta, he became involved in left-wing politics.

Gupta remembered life as it was in Dhaka. As he noted, "Dhaka life was very vivid and colourful. The city was expanded focusing on Old Dhaka. The population of Dacca was not large. We lived in a big house in Purana Paltan. The house had a touch of aristocracy. The rose garden in our house was famous in the city at the time. Lots of level-headed persons used to come to our house, especially for the garden. My father was the registrar of Dhaka University. We had quite a few eminent neighbours, like Jasimuddin, Mohitlal Majumdar, Ramesh Chandra Mazumdar and more. Most of the people who lived in our area were Hindus. Most of them were involved with Dhaka University."

Gupta continued: "At the time, riots were a regular feature in Dhaka and people lived in anxiety. There would be a number of riots every year around the time of Durga Puja, Janmashtami, Muharram or other religious festivals. The common people were very helpless. Influential people led these illicit activities.

"After 1947, the situation started deteriorating rapidly and most of our Hindu neighbours started selling their houses and migrated to India. Hindus felt very insecure. My family migrated to Calcutta in 1951."

Gupta began writing in 1956-1957. His first write-up was published in his college magazine. Afterwards, the legendary author Premendra Mitra requested him to write for his literary journal. The journal was very prominent during that period. In his career, Gupta worked for Anandabazar's *Ochena Shahor* from 1958 to 1959. Once he worked for the *Kolkata Korcha* where Sunil Gangopadhyay, Shyamol Gangopadhyay



and Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay were his colleagues. Then he wrote for many literary journals and poetry quarterlies. Once he even worked as a sales executive for East India Pharmaceuticals.

Gupta is generally a modernist poet. He is also a prolific poet and his poems are of outstanding intellectual quality. Incidents of everyday life can be found in much of his poetry. He frequently experiments with form and content. He often approaches surrealism and expressionism in his works. He uses the imagery of the moon, sun, sky, lush greenery, clouds and other natural wonders in his poetry. His poetry shows a considerable degree of social awareness and a sense of satire. His works also focus on Kolkata's contemporary life and times.

Gupta has authored around twenty four compilations of poetry, literary criticism, and travel literature. His *Gachh Manush* was selected for translation in French. As a translator of repute, he was actively connected with National Book Trust of which he was a committee member and also related with Sahitya Academy as research fellow. He also translated the American Poetry Chapter in the "Shapta Sindhu Desh Diganta" collection. Some of his notable poetry books are "Amar Samay Olpo", "Coffee Houser Shiri", "Desh Amar Shadesh", "Charidike Prithibi", "Khola Kolom-er Pashe", "Chhobir Shobdo" and more. He was the recipient of several prestigious awards -- Sahitya Academy Puroshkar, Rabindra Puroshkar, Vishnu Dey Puroshkar being a few.

Takir Hossain is with Star Arts & Entertainment.

READINGS

## Nakshi Kanthar Math

SABREENA AHMED

It was the celebration of The Reading Circle's 5th anniversary and it was the month of the International Mother Language Day. What could have been more appropriate than the reading of the poet Jasimuddin's epic folk Nakshi Kanthar Math that is known to people of both East and West Bengal. The stage of the auditorium decorated with yellow Gandha and green leaves resembled the colours of Falgun. The sound of flute on record gave an image of the Bangladesh rural beauty that is prominent in "Pollikobi" Jasimuddin's poems.

Prof. Niaz Zaman gave her welcome speech of the event by thanking H.E. Rajeev Mitter, High Commissioner of India to Bangladesh, and Ankan Banerjee, Director of Indra Gandhi Cultural Centre (IGCC), for their constant support to The Reading Circle (TRC). She also thanked Asfa Hussain for maintaining the liaison between the TRC and IGCC. With a brief introduction of the poet's life, Prof. Zaman mentioned that he had together with Rai Bahadur Dinesh Chandra Sen of the University of Calcutta collected the folk literature of Bengal. She emphasized the importance of promoting the translation of this literary piece again to the whole world. The word "Nakshikantha" that we use now has become popular after he coined this term for the first time in this poem.

Farida Shaikh, the next speaker of the inaugural session, talked about how TRC works. This group started off on 20 February 2006 with just three members meeting at Words 'n Pages. Over the years, the number of members has increased. Till now, the TRC members have read 60 books. It does not mean that all of them have read all the books, but when a book is discussed in the circle every month, they decide to read more of that writer to see his/her other works. At present, TRC has 30 members.

The daughter of the poet Asma Chowdhury, and her husband Dr Taufique-e-Elahi Chowdhury, Bir Bikram, were present on the occasion to share their memories with the audience. Elahi shared some amusing stories with all. Once, the poet had gone to the market by rickshaw as his car had broken down. After sometime when he returned home without any shopping bags, his family members asked the reason. He said that he had seen a lad on the way and had offered him a ride. The boy picked his pocket while getting down from the rickshaw, and he could not do any shopping. Elahi added that the poet was a very loving and active person.

In the second session members of TRC read Bangla excerpts from Nakshi Kanthar Math and its English translation, The Field of the Embroidered Quilt (translated by E.M. Milford. Syed Badrul Ahsan, Salma Karim, Jackie Kabir, Farida Shaikh, Shahrukh Rahman and Prof. Niaz Zaman recited selections from the epic.

Sabreena Ahmed is a writer, translator and teacher.

LETTER FROM BOSTON

# Sunshine on my shoulders makes me happy

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

The last few days it has been overcast and cloudy in Boston, with the sun playing a game of "hide and seek" with massive patches of clouds, trying to break out of the cover of clouds, but losing the battle more often than not. Cloudy days are not my favorite ones, and during fall and winter, when days are short and nights are long, I am not eager to jump out of bed and start my daily routine if it's cloudy and dark outside. On any given morning, before I get out of bed, I make sure that the sun has made its appearance on the eastern horizon. Why? Because if the sun is not up yet, I feel very little urge to get up myself. During the winter months, when it is dark by 5 PM, and the night sometimes lasts almost 14 hours, I feel the sun gets more rest than we do. I hardly ever get more than seven hours of sleep, whereas the sun has at least twelve hours, I don't see why the sun can't be up in the morning before I do. Also, I need the sun to get me started. Nothing wakes me up and energizes me as much as the sight of the rising sun in the morning.

I love the sun, its daily routine, the untiring regularity with which it travels from the east to the west, the light it gives us, and the millions of other images it creates everyday on its journey. When the sun shines brightly, every hour the space around me takes on a different and new look. In the morning, when the sun emerges from its long sleep and its rays break through the tall trees that border the eastern side of my house, it warms up my heart and gives me hope that the day is going to be good. When the rays fall on my eyes, or the light reaches the foot of the bed and tickles my feet, I am sometimes reminded of an old Manna Dey song "Ek jhak pakhider moto kichu rodder, badha bhengey janalar saat she shomuddur" (Like a flock of birds they came, the glow of the sun from across the seven seas).

Then, around mid-morning, as the sun gathers more energy and rises above the tree line, painting my little yard with green and other colors and waking up the grass and plants, I follow the shadows cast by the trees and try to tell the time of the day by the length and angles of the shadows. The sun at mid-day, when it is at its full-strength and showering us with the most light and warmth, is not my favorite, though. I like it more when the sun is a little coy, playing a game of tag with the trees, the lamp posts, the moving cars and rickshaws, or the rooflines. As the sun moves in its orbit past the meridian, and gently makes it way down the western horizon, my mood also changes, becoming mellower and more reflective, since I know the light is not going to last long and give way to sunset, and, darkness will take over.

But the last few hours when the sun is receding are also often my sweetest. One reason, the fading sun and the golden color it splashes all around often brings up some of my best memories. Many of them involve my grandmother, my Nanoo. When I was

younger, and staying with her, we'd have our evening tea together on a regular basis. From the dining room, where we had our afternoon tea, I could see the sunlit backyard. Little did I anticipate then the treasure that the illuminated backyard holds in its midst. I might be hiding under the blanket taking an afternoon nap, or deeply immersed in some mystery novel by Nihar Ranjan, in the guest room of the house, when my Nanoo would softly walk towards my bed calling my name. I might have been content to be left alone but could not resist the invitation to join her for tea with 'jhal muri' and 'ruti panir', snacks prepared by Chan Mia, my uncle's trusted cook. The sun would still be shining, but the shadows from the surrounding buildings would paint the yard with dark patches of rectan-



gular and other shapes. The sight of sun, its golden light on the grass, the little guava tree in one corner, the shed in another corner, the small flower and kitchen garden, and the boundary walls would always lift my spirits. I felt glad that I came to join Nanoo for tea, even if hesitantly. My reservations would soon melt away as I warmed up to the world awash in gold, staring at the still life panorama painted in the yard. Tagore captured that mood aptly when he said, "Emni korey jaey jodi din jaak na."

It didn't hurt that Nanoo was a gifted story teller and an endless source of literary jewels. She would tell me stories about Shanti Niketan heard from her brother, Syed Mujtaba Ali, the eminent writer, and recite long poems from Tagore which she had memorized by heart. Her favorite was Kacha o Devjani, but

she also inspired me to explore Tagore and his music, a passion I still have as one of my life's greatest gifts.

Well, how I digress! Let me come back to the theme I started with, the sun. One of the tunes I have hummed along since my youth is John Denver's "Sunshine on My Shoulders Makes Me Happy". Denver sings, "Sunshine on my shoulders makes me happy| Sunshine in my eyes can make me cry| Sunshine on the water looks so lovely| Sunshine almost always makes me high". Yes, sunshine does always make me high. And, it does so even if it is the setting sun! The western sun is actually a witness to some of the most memorable moments in my life, and inspire the most romantic feelings in me. I am not a poet, but I feel like one when the sun unleashes its store of red, orange,

pink, magenta, and others on the western sky. Only yesterday, I snuck out of my office in downtown Boston to get a glimpse of the montage that the sun painted on the western sky. When we were in high school my friends and I would sit on the banks of Dhanmandi Lake for hours watching the sun go down, and paint the water in orange and then flood it with deep shades of red. While sunset often marked "curfew time" in my house, soon we learned how to stretch that out a little longer. Our addas never ended even when the sun disappeared, and we kept jabbering in the dark until we could not see each other's face any longer! Oh, I curse, why couldn't the sun just stay a little longer?

Dr. Abdullah Shibli lives and works in Boston, USA.

POETRY

Soft as a poem

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

You are soft as a poem /  
Placid as a mountain stream . . .

Your lips are rosebuds on a  
Beach at dawn /  
Your flowing hair is a celebration  
Of monsoon glory . . .

Your laughter is mellow nocturnal  
Rain /  
Your whisper speaks of autumnal  
Pleasures . . .

You dance on the gleaming sand /  
My ancient flute plays around your  
Fairy feet . . .

My hand lingers on your fair cheeks /  
My eyes travel across the landscape  
Of your nose . . .

Your touch will heal /  
Your song will cause new spring  
In the parched soul of a desert . . .

The light falls here /  
As the roads take you home /  
The moon is in stupor yet . . .

The sun goes with you /  
The stars go looking for you /  
As dreams gleam in your eyes . . .

You are, lady, my poetry /  
You are, woman, my remembrance  
Of God

You and me and....

HASAN HAFIZ

On a wintry night you bought

A stonewash shirt  
In yellowish black  
In a sudden glance  
It gives the feel of an oil painting  
By a master painter . . .

Not still life in oil painting  
Enhancing décor  
Glare of colour scheme  
Artistic beauty of presentation  
How poignantly evident there  
In eye catching ecstasy!

Fragmented pictures  
Of life entwined in sorrow and love  
Is evidently exposed  
Enchanting art of life  
Of you and me..  
Is our offspring 'Gourav'?

Translatio: Fakhruzzaman Chowdhury