IN TRIBUTE: SYED MUSTAFA SIRAJ

A writer's writer...

JUNAIDUL HAQUE

The death of Syed Mustafa Siraj re-taught me two lessons. Excellence is appreciated by the thoughtful minority only. And the media get excited only over very popular figures.

Syed Mustafa Siraj was not exactly unpopular. But he was not as popular as Sunil Ganguly or Shirshendu Mukherjee. Like Manik Bannerjee or Bimal Kar or our own Syed Waliullah or Syed Shamsul Huq, he was a writers' writer. He was better than all the popular novelists. He was an excellent writer who knew his land and its people like the palm of his hand. He didn't live in an ivory tower and was always 'matir kachhakachhi'.

Let me begin with his devoted support for our great War of Liberation. He filled the pages of Anandabazar, the popular Calcutta daily, with his brilliant articles on Bangladesh, Bangabandhu and the Mukti Bahini in 1971. He was a journalist with Anandabazar for twenty

five years. Please remember that he was born in a state where the common Muslim, being part of the minority, grows up with a soft corner for the Middle East and Pakistan. Gifted men like Kazi Nazrul Islam and Syed Mustafa Siraj certainly thought differently! They were progressive and secular. The latter wrote on our 1969 movement for democracy too. He watched with great interest and wrote passionately on our battle for freedom and its final preparation. And Kazi Nazrul Islam? Asked in the 1930s to support the demand for Pakistan, the great poet thoughtfully commented: Pakistan? A piece of Saudi Arabia on the secular soil of the sub-continent? It won't last long!

Syed Mustafa Siraj was a brilliant practitioner of magic realism. His Sahitya Academy Award winning novel *Aleek Manush* testifies to this statement. He got the award in 1994. He also got the Bankim Purashkar, the Ananda Purashkar, the Bhuwalka and Narasinghdas awards. He left nearly one hundred and fifty novels and more than three hundred short stories. Neel Gharer Nati is his first novel. It was published in 1966 and became quite popular. Uttar Jahnabi, Trinabhumi, Kingbadantir Nayak, Padmabati, Jaltaranga, Dabanol, Chumki and Gangaputra are some of his finest novels. Inti Pisi O Hatbabu, Bhalobasha O Down Train, Hijal Biler Rakhalera and Taranginir Chokh are some of his collections of short stories. He also wrote detective stories on public demand and they predictably became bestsellers. He wanted to give up writing these Colonel Niladri Sarkar stories but couldn't because they fetched him the money needed for a decent living. Satyajit Ray (and yours truly too) liked these thrillers a lot. It may be remembered that Ray himself wrote a lot of Feluda stories to keep his 'ovens hot'. His great movies didn't earn enough money! Forgetting such ironical truths, it may be mentioned here

that Colonel Niladri is a detective with a difference. He is aged, very intelligent, is eccentric, has a Santa Claus beard, loves nature, is an ornithologist, smokes a pipe, is a butterfly collector, is jovial and quotes proverbs and rhymes.

Like his Colonel, Syed Mustafa Siraj loved nature. As a writer he explored man's relationship with nature and society. He loved the villages of West Bengal. His fiction is almost totally based on rural Bengal. He was a realist and not a romantic. It was not nostalgia for him but man's battle for survival. His works carried the fragrance of the soil. He also wrote poems as a young man. Aleek Manush was published serially in the 1980s in Chaturanga, the famous literary journal founded by the legendary Humayun Kabir. It was published as a book in 1989. Syed Mustafa Siraj practised magic realism much before it became a craze in the east. Ranir Ghater Brittanto, his short story, was made into Faltu, a feature film by Anjan Das about an orphan's struggle. Murshidabad played a central role in his fiction. Aleek Manush was also based on Murshidabad and dealt with the different cults within the Muslim community there.

Syed Mustafa Siraj was born in a village named Khoshbaspur in Murshidabad in 1930. His was a respectable family and his father Syed Abdur Rahman Firdausi was a renowned freedom fighter and a Persian scholar. Siraj was a bohemian young man who joined Aalkap, a folk drama group, where he played the flute and taught dance and drama. He was a Marxist and was with the Gananatya Sangha. One day he got tired of his Aalkap work and started writing poetry and short stories. A little later, from his late twenties, he wrote only short stories and novels. He did so till his last days. He died from a heart attack in a Kolkata nursing home. A cyst was earlier detected in his colon. He died on Tuesday, September 4, and was 82. He was buried in his native village the next day.

Syed Mustafa Siraj was a widely translated writer. He was translated into all the major Indian languages. His short stories were translated into English by Nivedita Sen, a Delhi University professor. Aleek Manush was translated into eleven Indian languages. Shahitya Academy published the English version of the novel.

Before his death Syed Mustafa Seraj was the seniormost among the several Syeds contributing brilliantly to Bangla literature. He was a gem of a writer and an excellent person, very scholarly and wise and liberal. Shirshendu Mukherjee calls him his 'noble and lovable' friend. Abul Bashar eulogises his 'noble mentor'. Rural West Bengal has lost its best living spokesman.

Junaidul Haque writes fiction and essays #

Man of nature and poetry

FARIDA SHAIKH

His prose style was intermingled with vastness of nature, poetry and philosophy of life. The mystery and origin of life and death for Syed Mustafa Siraj were found in nature. Even so he harbored no compassionate stance toward life, nor was he mournful towards death. He viewed all human beings as helpless creatures.

Siraj was an unparalleled creative genius of Bengali society and culture. The eulogy comes from the eminent poet-journalist of Pashimbongo, Syed Hasmat Jalal.

Sunil Gangopadhya informs us that the writings of Syed Mustafa Siraj were immortal in the Bengali literary world. He was able to create life in rural Bengal 'with far more authenticity than writers like me who live in the city.' Siraj was able to portray the 'realities of rural Bengal'. He could do this because he was deeply connected with life in the village. Siraj had a 'very strong command of the language'. Siraj was strongly against all communal divides. He strongly protested against communal politics wherever it raised its head.

'As the president of Satiya Academy I had commissioned a documentary on the life and works of Syed Mustafa. Fortunately it was completed in time 2011 so that he could see it in his life time. He had been satisfied with the effort.' Thus Gangopadhya.

Aleek Manush is a gripping novel from the very start; the book cannot be put down until the end. One enjoys every page of it. Such is the reading experience!

The narrative is situated in pre-partition Bengal, Murshidabad district, peopled by the Muslim community, divided on account of variation in beliefs and practices. Embedded in this rural panorama is the love story of two ill-fated souls.

Some readers wonder why the writer has labeled the principle character 'aleek', 'unreal', when he, the main character in the novel, is portrayed as very much a man of flesh and blood, and feels passionately for the woman he loves. Who, then, is the real man?

Siraj essentially explores man's relationship with nature. The trees, the rivers and the rainfall live out their own course of life. Man tries to control nature; as for example building a dam across a river.

Through his writing Siraj makes obvious his belief that the state is a kind of torture machine, and those in administration are complicit in torture. The military and the police are mostly state-owned hooligans. He has delved deep into rural Bengal. His sharp observations provide details on the

typical 'gaon and taun', the typical fight and the faith of the village people; the futility of their living and longing. He carefully records the rural responses to modernity.

Siraj affirms: "One of my chief convictions has been that of not believing in any particular religion. I am free of religious belief. But I also understand that most people are religious and I am, therefore, tolerant towards anybody's religion. I would consider to have succeeded in my role as a writer if I have been able to spread this message."

On the power of man vis-a-vis nature, Siraj speaks thus:

"Many of my stories have rural settings that juxtapose the quotidian problems of men against nature's inexhaustible potential. Nature always brought to me a sense of limitless freedom, a taste of infinite liberty. I spent my childhood in the village



in Khosbaspur and Birbhum to the extreme west of the Ganga, they are a recurring landscape in my fiction. Although the region is romanticised as Ranga Matir Desh, the land of reddish, ruddy earth, its soil is arid, unyielding and hostile. In trying to make a living out of that earth, the people there are tough and capable of much hardship. This is reflected especially in the women of that region who possess reservoirs of courage, strength and the resilience necessary to survive in a hostile environment.

Earlier, Siraj remarks:

"Like Colonel Niladri Sarkar, although I have become more of an urban dweller over the years, I am still a nature lover. I periodically retreat to my house in the village to find the solace and peace of mind that the city cannot give me."

Siraj created the detective character 'Goenda Colonel'. The former Colonel Niladri Sarkar is the hero who finds the culprit or killer on every occasion. Sarkar is the eccentric sleuth in the stories, narrated by a lazy journalist, Jayanta, who accompanies him on his investigation tour. The colonel is a butterfly collector and orni-

thologist, smokes pipes and has a Santa beard. He is also jovial and likes quoting Bengali proverbs and nursery rhymes.

And though he vehemently opposed communal politics, he, very strangely was affected by this poison. 'He was a master of unsaid words.' His publisher knew him since 1972-73. He was described as possessing 'a heart of gold, unique person with unpretentious way of reviewing the world... a knowledgeable person.'

Syed Mustafa Siraj's writing career spanned over forty years. He penned over 300 short stories and 150 novels, with the 'scent of the soil,' a literary giant comparable to Naguib Mahfuz of Egypt. Nearer home he comes close to Polli Kobi Jasimuddin. There is also a close affinity between the writer's work on rural religious beliefs and practices and Syed Walliullah's Lal Shalu about a poor man in a remote village wanting to establish his religious beliefs and fighting down others in the rural area. Abul Mansur Ahmed's Aiyna also comes to mind.

In his column, ' Je kotha bola hoe ni' for the magazine Kashtipathar he wrote on why he believed that the Mughals ruled badly, the etymology of the name Sri Lanka, some anecdotes of his personal life. In his opinion these writings together could be shaped into a Writer's Memoir.

In 2004 Nivedita Sen translated into English popular children's stories involving Colonel Niladri Sarkar, 'The Colonel Investigates', and more recently, 'Die, said the Trees and other stories. 'The National Book Trust is still in the process of getting 'Aleek Manush' translated into Urdu, Tamil and Dogri. His first ever translated work was in Hindi for the paper Sarika, edited by Khushwant Singh, in 1965. His first novel is 'Neel Gharer Nati.' Thereafter, many short stories 'Mrityur Ghora,' 'Rakter Pratyasha' and 'Goghna' have appeared in Hindi, Urdu and Tamil newspapers and some novels have been translated into Malayalam.

Film maker Raja Sen describes Siraj thus: "Ekdom matir maunsh chhillen uni." Mayamridanga, a semi-autobiographical classic, is about Siraj's experience of bohemian days and his association with Alkaap, a dying folk culture of Poschimbongo. As funds were not available then a documentary on Alkaap was made that won the best documentary award.

Not much of Siraj's work has been translated into English. But that was hardly a subject of concern for the writer.

> FARIDA SHAIKH IS A SOCIAL ANALYST AND CRITIC.

PEREGRINATIONS

This write-up was to have been the first of a two-part article Star Literature means to carry for its readers. It first appeared in 'East Pakistan Review: An Anthology', published in Karachi in 1958. ----Literary Editor

SYED NAJMUDDIN HASHIM

This subcontinent has always been the home of such rebels and objectors. It should not of course be presumed that all of the fakirs are dissenters. In point of fact many are not. Many have found their individual outlook fully consonant with a particular system of religious or speculative thought. Others have not. It is not the conformity or non-conformity that matters. It is the common approach of all of them. The insistence on ploughing one's lonely furrow --- that is significant. Also important is the common man's ready acceptance and profound understanding of his bard, who is variously and concurrently termed by them in loving indulgence as 'Saint', 'Beggar', 'Madman', 'Lover'. In a society so rigidly governed by accepted codes, it is refreshing to see a recognised and honoured place given to these rugged individualists. It speaks for the essential sanity and strength of our rural society that it accepts as natural deviations from the norm by 'abnormal' people. There is hardly any fear of the unknown, for the entire universe beyond of whose existence people are sure, lies in the unknown. Hence we find none of the senseless cruelty to the village idiot as one finds in the city streets. Being close to Nature and God, the villager in Bangladesh knows that He makes them as He wishes and according to no set standard of perfection.

We have unwittingly crossed into the realms of mysticism and speculation, which are the province of the scholar, philosopher and the critic. We will leave them to it and return to the magic. For them the fruitful conjecture about how much the best of our later poetry of Tagore Tagore and Nazrul owe to these obscure bards and to the uninterrupted stream they represent. For them also the study in analogy, comparisons between the symbolism of Bengali folk poetry, the ornate formalism of Persian Sufis, the overelaboration of parallel ideas in the 'conceits' of that prodigy of perverse learning, John Donne, the heredity of the present-day Bauls and

Vedas, picking up on the way the varied fare of Vaisnava, Buddhists, and Nath Yogis, etc. Since we have strayed into the realms of

Fakirs stretching way back to the days of the

spiritual songs we might as well start with a few common genres like murshidi and marfati. Examples will illustrate better their distinctive features. Murshidi derives from irshad or 'ordinance of direction from above'. In other words, search for fulfillment or salvation through a Guide. The essential feature is the unending search for this guide and complete and willing surrender to him:

'How shall I ever ford this world-river without a kind Murshid? I have fruitlessly frittered away my days and did not search and find my kind. The oarsmen, who were in the boat, have one by one taken their leave and I am in a quandary'.

Marfat is from irfan or Communion. It is of a more wide latitude being the vehicle for the most diverse spiritual and philosophic soliloquies and discourses. Here the attempt is generally more ambitious, a lonely quest for the Universe, without a third person to light the way:

'The days have been wasted in the search for mundane things and in this quest I have been reduced to a beggar. Oh, my heart I have bought lead at the price of gold. I have not learnt my way about in this world'.

An allied genre is the large volume of poetry and song that build their superstructure on the analogy of the human body to the world, to the human situation and dilemma, as already seen in the song of the bald-headed fakir. A more plebeian example will bring this home.

What led you, my besotted fool, to build this colored edifice, to build this coloured edifice in the midst of this confusion? The hair has gone grey, the teeth have fallen, and the high tide of youth now is at the ebb. Gradually, the multi-coloured plaster of your proud house has bitten the dust'.

Almost identical to the above are Baul, based on non-Muslim spiritual themes:

'Awake, you citizens. Open wide the doors of your mind's temple. The new sun is up and touches with its crimson fingers the eastern sky. This auspicious moment will perhaps never come again. In this world, on the seas of doubt launch our vessel, Pilgrim, but keep your wits about you'.

The Baul has a distinctive tune blended of many folk elements and the Kirtan with its high-pitched and long intonations. The Kirtan deals almost exclusively with with the love story of Krishna and Radha on the banks of



the sacred Yamuna. But its devotional content transmutes the dross of the love affairs of particular persons to one long paean of joy at the human soul's proximity with its creator, a somber dirge at their temporary separation. Though meant in the beginning for the four walls of the temples, Kirtan has become the vehicle for all the human emotions, and holds sway over the millions.

Just as Kirtan sings about Lord Krishna who came down to earth and as a cowherd stole the hearts of the maidens of Brindaban, the Shyama-sangeets are devoted to the Goddess Kali. The difference in the character of the two deities, one playful, compassionate, nearhuman, the other lonely in her awful grandeur, her unreasoning anger and destructive instincts, her jealous command of exclusive devotion, all are reflected in the songs about

them. It is perhaps for this very reason that Kirtan belongs to the mass of people while the other to votaries of the goddess and a handful of others. Also Shyama-sangeets and Ramprasadis (songs about Kali written by Ramaprasad in a distinctive tune) have been more limited in their appeal than Kirtans, which all manner of things to all people. The central attraction, of course, is that to the average person Kirtan is a love lyric and all the world loves a lover.

Despite our preoccupation with religion, speculation and matters of the spirit, the bulk of our folk-songs of course belong to this world. Their diversity is so breathtaking that all one can do is to run over a few selected kinds.

Among them all the best known are the boatmen's songs, most prominent of which is the Bhatiali. Our people spend half their life on the water sailing down the rivers. The boatman thinks back to his home, to his beloved, scenes of parting and reunion. The murmur of the waters keeps tune to his sad longing and like the even flow of the river he sings a monotonous tune dealing with all facets of life. The river is equated to the journey into Eternity or the unknown, and the longing and dread of a man alone under lowering skies and on rolling rivers induces a mood of mysticism, obstinate questioning about the why and wherefore of this seemingly eternal sojourn.

Shari is the oarsman's chorus primarily, but generally is the collective song of wherever people work together, whether in the rice fields or in the boat regatta.

There is a bewildering variety in our narrative songs. The Jari's main theme is the martyrdom of Imam Husain and the legends around the Kerbala. They are not strictly authentic and true, but this is only to be expected when the popular imagination ranges free over a subject dear to its heart. Even the learned Mir Musharraf Hossain, writing about this theme, lost sight of the historical bearings and as a result produced a real work of art. The form of the Jari is also very interesting. Into the main narrative are inserted choral songs or 'dhoas' expressing appropriate comments in a given situation. Then there might be extempore interpolation of musical debates between two parties of singers, and in some areas are even followed by dances.

The Ghazi songs are ballads based on folk tales sung by professional singers. The narrative opens with an invocation which salutes practically everybody, from the religious figures to symbols of nature and even one's parents. Then follows the story which deals with feminine beauty, the toilet of a blushing bride, entreaties to the lover to stay awhile, et cetera. Most of the themes come from the Arabian Nights.

The main difference between these two closely allied genres is that while the Jari ballads are based on Muslim religious stories, particularly about the martyrdom of Hazrat Imam Hussain, the material of the Ghazi ballads comes from ordinary folk tales.

We have traced the spiritual and mystic element in sufficient detail to be able to explain the main theme of the songs written by Rabindranath Tagore. His is the same world as that of the Fakirs and Bauls, a lonely world predominated by the refrain of the lonely shepherd's reed in the mountain fastness, the burning incense in a hermit's cave like a lifted prayer, a world of detachment in which one yearns for the Being who rules our life and destiny, in which one is an onlooker while the Universe hides from the thirsting soul its dark mysteries according to its dark logic.