

TRIBUTE

Sunil Gangopadhyay

The passing of an icon

JUNAIDUL HAQUE

Sunil Gangopadhyay, poet, story-teller, novelist, playwright and essayist, died at his South Kolkata residence from a massive heart attack in the early hours of October 23, 2012. It was the Nabami of Durga Puja. His wife Swati Ganguly was beside him. Their only son Souvik was in Boston. He came home to perform the last rites on Thursday, October 25.

Sunil Ganguly turned 78 on September 12, 2012. What a coincidence that he died on the birthday of his great friend Shamsur Rahman! Sunil was a great friend of Bangladesh too and was born in Maijhati in Kalkini of Madaripur. He always missed his birthplace and visited the area several times in the recent past. He was quite healthy and never had any serious illness. His death came as a shock to his admirers.

Sunil Gangopadhyay was one of the finest all-rounders of Bangla literature after Rabindranath Tagore, Kazi Nazrul Islam and Buddhadev Bose. Like Bose, he was working on the Mahabharata before his death. He was one of the best living poets of Bengal and one of the best writers of fiction. He had been President of the Sahitya Academy since February 20, 2008. Earlier, he was its Vice President for five years. Humble and down to earth, he was secular to the core of his heart. He was Muslim-friendly and minority-friendly. He was affectionate and kind and a guardian of young writers. He also wrote under the pen names of Neelohit, Sonaton Pathak and Neel Upadhyay. Neelohit's novels are about an imaginative twenty-seven-year-old who never grows older. As Sonaton Pathak, he wrote an excellent literary column on writers and books in Desh, the famous weekly, in the early seventies. His Neera poems inspired several generations

of Bengali readers. He always considered poetry his first love.

It was immediately after liberation that we came to know about him and read him a lot. I even liked his name. His simple, attractive prose made him a favourite writer of many. His world view was very modern and liberal. He was a humanist. Eka Ebong Koekjan, his epic novel, was well-liked by us as it appeared serially in Desh. Later he wrote his historical masterpieces, Shei Shomoy, Purba Pashchim and Prothom Alo. They became best-sellers and brought him many awards. Shakti Chattopadhyay and he were the most popular Kolkata poets after Rabindranath Tagore, Kazi Nazrul Islam and Jibanananda Das. He and Shirshendu Mukherjee were the most popular novelists of Kolkata. He visited Bangladesh often. He also went to Europe and the USA. The Bangla-speaking world admired him as a writer. Hard work brought him fame and money.

He was a prolific writer and authored nearly two hundred and fifty books. He was the founder-editor of Krittibas, an influential poetry magazine that became a platform for a new generation of poets, experimenting with new forms. Sunil wrote travelogues and the 'Kakababu' series of detective fiction. His first poem was written as a seventeen-year-old. His first novel was Atmaprakash, published in the Puja issue of Desh in 1965. Two of his novels were turned by Satyajit Ray into films. He won the Sahitya Academy Award, the Ananda Purashkar (twice), the Bankim Purashkar and The Hindu Literary prize. Writers Amitav Ghosh, Shirshendu Mukherjee and Abul Bashir mourned his death. So did poet Nirendranath Chakraborty and fiction writer Samaresh Mazumder.

Nabaneeta Dev Sen and Shankha Ghosh rushed to his residence after getting the news of his passing away. The literature-loving Bengali President of India condoled his death and eulogized him. So did the President and the Prime Minister of Bangladesh and the Chief Minister of West Bengal.

It was true that Sunil Gangopadhyay was a rightist like Buddhadev Bose. As in the case of TS Eliot and Buddhadev Bose, people I admire a lot, I would prefer to ignore his political belief. It is true that Shamsur Rahman or even Shakti Chattopadhyay and Al Mahmud are better poets. But he had the breadth of mind to admit that. It is true that he could not author a novel like Putul Nacher Itikatha or Padma Nadir Majhi. He was no Manik Bandoopadhyay. Nor was he even as powerful a writer of fiction as the recently expired Syed Mustafa Seraj. His epic novels are best sellers and extensive works but not very deep. But Sunil Gangopadhyay was brilliant in his own way, had a wonderful prose and understood young people well. Therein lay his popularity.

And he was liberal, broad-minded and down to earth. A crazy student leader friend of mine once told him point blank during our DU days that Junaidul Haque was a serious student of literature and a young writer and he felt that half of his (Sunil's) novels were not very good, were not worth reading! (I was very shocked at my friend's behaviour). Now those were the days when Sunil Gangopadhyay would be surrounded in Dhaka by admirers like Humayun Ahmed, Imdadul Huq Milon, Afzal Hossain and many others. Youngsters here loved him. Any writer of his stature would turn my student leader friend out of the room. But not Sunil. He just smiled and

said, 'Tell Junaid to read my good novels only. The bad ones are not for him.' That was the essential Sunil for you --- liberal, smart and ready for any situation. It gave me great pleasure to learn later that both Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay, my favourite, and Sunil Gangopadhyay liked my literary column, Pogor Journal.

How shall I and his millions of admirers remember Sunil Gangopadhyay in the future? As a poet of rare merit who wrote many memorable poems, poems which became very popular; as a literary organiser of brilliance, as the editor of Krittibas; as the spearhead of a movement of modern Bangla poetry. Allen Ginsberg liked him exactly because of that. As a powerful writer of fiction with a smart, racy, attractive prose well-liked by his admirers. As a writer of a few good epic novels. Brilliant epic novels like Eka Ebong Koekjan and Purba Paschim. Brilliant short novels like Arjun. Wonderful travelogues, detective novels and honest, brave literary criticism. As a warm and kind man who loved Bangladesh, the land of his birth, from the core of his heart.

It was Sunil Gangopadhyay who made West Bengal observe Ekushay February. It was Sunil Gangopadhyay who sincerely believed that Dhaka would be the future capital of Bangla literature. His death proved his belief. Dhaka mourned his death much more than Kolkata. His son acknowledged the love of Dhaka with gratitude.

Rest in peace, well-loved Sunil Gangopadhyay. We shall miss you for a long time. You were unique, with a new style, both in prose and poetry.

JUNAIDUL HAQUE WRITES FICTION AND ESSAYS.

POETRY

Sunil

The Bridge Maker

NAHID KHAN



Chronicle created conduit whether we wanted or not It appeared as preordained as many worldly affairs Made some cherish and more to screech, but The truth is the stream that separated the entirety.

The striving to reach across from either side, Of the created river, started to flow not to end. The toil took its toll, undying ache was in the air A lot of water ran under the bridge with time.

Then we had you among few with a new view, You have come along from the East or the West Beamed in the journey with the glow of sunlight Sometime with the tenderness of moonlight The heavy air started to become lighter.

Your poetry paved the bridge enduring Your novels designed the architecture eternal. You made us believe it is fine to have seam But seamless is our love of the way of life. We were different only to remain the same You reiterated we are two but we are one That reign will not be lost in the requiem.

The 'first light' brought us 'those days' That will keep shining in the blue skies Indeed keeping your words, with love unceasing You will be there, intangible and ever sparkling.

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SHORT STORY

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

His wife left him last Friday. Since then, Farid has been trying to reach her on her cell phone but without much luck. For a day or so, Farid was getting her voice mail, but each time he would hang up since he did not want to leave any message for Amrita. Now, when he tries to reach her number, he gets a weird voice which in the most annoying fashion repeats the standard message: "If you have reached this number by mistake please check the number again or call the operator." The whole exercise, and the tone of the voice he finds so annoying that once he felt like screaming back "shut the f.. up".

It's Thursday morning, and Farid is already feeling nervous about spending another week-end alone. As he walks towards the kitchen he tries to cheer himself up by considering some possible diversions to keep him busy: may be he can drive to his brother's house or go shopping for food and some knick-knacks. He perks up a little but still feels empty with a tinge of helplessness inside. He has enjoyed cooking in the past when Amrita was with him, but does not want to cook now for himself--plus he still has some leftovers from last Sunday. Moreover, one of his sisters-in-law brought him some food when they came to see him last night.

The empty house has just added to his feeling of loneliness and emptiness. He has tried to figure out what might have caused Amrita to take such a drastic action. He thought she was joking when she came up to him as he was watching the Red Sox vs. Yankees game on TV, stood beside him, and in a soft voice, almost apologetically, said, "I am leaving this house tonight". Farid thought Amrita was going out to run some errands, and without taking his eyes off the TV, replied, "When are you coming back?"

"I am not sure. I left your dinner in the fridge, please heat it up in the microwave. I will be back to take my books and other stuff. I am going to stay with a friend for a day or two, but did not want to move in with her."

As Amrita was slowly laying out her plans, Farid looked up and saw Amrita standing there with no expressions on her face as she said what now appeared to him as a very matter-of-fact articulation of a very well-thought out course of actions.

"What do you mean by 'staying with my friend'?", he asked, trying to stay as calm, or give the appearance of calmness, however fake, and struggled to not let the growing sense of panic within him get the better of him. He knew that he has to be level-headed to deal with this situation. A wrong move and things could turn for the worse.

Not getting any response from Amrita, he asked, "Are you not coming back tonight?" "I will be OK. We will be staying at my friends and will be in touch with you once we have settled in. She has a big house in the countryside, and we will be fine", she said in a very level tone without betraying any emotions, almost as if to reassure Farid.

Farid now finally realizes Amrita is taking their son, Kajol, with her, and it is then he reckons that this is not a game she is playing, nor is it a spur of the moment decision.

"How come you did not tell me about it sooner?" he now tries to change the direction of the conversation. May be she would see that Farid needs a little time to think it over; or she might even possibly reconsider her plans and they could talk about it the next morning.

. . . The Life After . . .

"Oh, dear, oh dear! You knew I was thinking of finding a place of my own for some time. I had mentioned to you last week, and you just shrugged it off. I was hoping that we could talk about it. The more I thought about it during the last week, the more I felt it was the right thing to do for both of us." She did not look angry or emotional, nor did she sound distressed.

Farid turned the volume down on the TV, and looked at Amrita. She was wearing a cotton Tangail saree, her favorite kind, and had a light makeup on. He tried to think for a second why he was feeling a sharp pain on the left side of his stomach now. In a flash, he realizes that it only happens when he is very stressed or has some problems that has remained under the surface for some time. He finally says,

"But what about Kajol? Where is he going to school? And, if you really go away now, what are we going to do about the family reunion which is coming up in two weeks time?" Farid now desperately tries to think of a few more reasons why Amrita should give it a little more time. But, all his last minute moves amount to nothing, and after another round of quick exchanges, Amrita left.

Farid finishes his tea, and as he gets ready to go to work, he feels the absence of Kajol, and misses the everyday ritual of saying "good bye" to him. He wonders how Kajol is doing, and wishes he could find out if he is missing him too. While father and son were not very close, they got along pretty well. Sports, movies, library, and once-a-month trip to the comic book store were all part of their common interests, and had given him a chance to bond with Kajol, even though he sometimes found himself at a loss when talking with his son about music and video games! Only the other day, while he was driving Kajol to the mall, Farid turned the radio to an Oldies radio station but Kajol wanted to listen to a Top-40s station, KISS-108. While Kajol was rapping all the way to the mall, Farid kept on wondering whether they lived in two separate worlds. Now Farid wants to find out how Kajol is doing and whether he is in school, getting help with his homework, avoiding junk food, etc.

For a few days, Farid tried desperately to find out the phone number of the friend she was staying with but soon discovered that she had an unlisted number. He calls Amrita's number again but has no luck. For the last two days, he divines that she has had his calls blocked. Did she put him on the "do not call" list? As soon as the thought crosses his mind, he feels a sensation of numbness in his left hand. Does she hate him now so much, he wonders.

They had disagreements, but things always worked out. Only once during their thirteen years of marriage did they have a major fight he was later reassured by others that is not a bad record. Only in the last month before she left did matters start to get a little nasty. She said to him, "You know, you are not romantic at all," when she proposed going to a concert by Amit Bhattacharya, a popular singer in the Indian sub-continent, and he did not want to go. He does not see the connection between going to a light music concert and a character trait as complicated as being romantic. He regrets now turning down Amrita's suggestion to go out. But, he still does not understand why something so trivial can cause such a major rift in their relationship, nor does he accept the harsh judgment that Amrita gave out to him. He looks back and tries to see if Amrita has been dropping hints that he missed about their

relationship. His brothers and sister-in-law were all surprised when he told them that Amrita has left him. "What! She never gave you any advance warning?" was the first thing almost all of them asked.

"That's not fair," said Nina, his brother Amjad's wife.

"That is very cruel and selfish," said Champa, his other sister-in-law.

"I don't know how she could leave you after these years without discussing the matter in a rational manner with you," said his brother Kabir. From the tone of their reactions he is trying to figure out if his brothers and their wives are trying to tell him something about Farid's intelligence or any aspect of his marital life. Why did they expect that Amrita would tell him in advance? Or what signs should he have seen of Amrita's intentions? They were not fighting a lot, nor were they living in separate rooms in their house. They did not go out together so much, but enjoyed watching TV together, going shopping and doing things with Kajol as a family. Since Amrita left, Farid has spent countless hours looking back to see if there were any telltale signs of Amrita's unhappiness, or anything she said or did that would indicate her plans to leave him. It seems like Amrita was almost planning a coup d'etat in complete secrecy, or working "under the radar" as one of his friends characterized the departure.

But he is still puzzled as to why Amrita would want to leave like that abruptly and without any forwarding address. It is as if she planned to maintain no contact with Farid. He wonders whether she wanted for Kajol to have no contacts with him either? How would this twelve-year old live forever without any connection with Farid, who, while not very fatherly, was nonetheless a loving and caring one. He remembers that when Kajol was two years old, Farid would spend two to three hours every day after work walking with him on the sidewalk in front of their apartment building. He can also now recount many trips they took to the little stream near their house, and fondly remembers the many things they did together on these trips: spotting the little fishes that swam in the water, the leaves that Kajol liked to drop to see them float away, or the occasional game of water splashing that was Kajol's favorite sport!

He can't believe that Amrita thought that she could just pull the plug on Farid since the courts would always give him visitation rights in case they ended up getting a divorce. But he shudders at the thought of getting a divorce. He is aware of the pain, and devastation that a formal process of divorce, particularly a court battle, would bring about. He remembers that his friends Dan not only lost his wife and house, but also all his money, the trust of his kids, and finally suffered severe depression due to the isolation from family and friends even as he tried to forge a new and independent life.

No, he is not prepared to go through a formal divorce proceeding. The court system is too much biased in favor of the mother, and would not even hesitate to deny visitation rights to the father if the mother can show a single evidence of the father's lack of interest in the child's upbringing. As these thoughts come by, he realizes now that there might have been some lapses on his part once in a while.

So, no divorce, he repeats to himself. But, what if Amrita has already contacted a lawyer, or decided to take that path. He resolves to be

conciliatory with Amrita if he is able to locate her.

That evening after work, he stays an hour longer checking his emails and some of the social networking sites that Amrita visited to see if there were any messages that might give her new hideout or intentions away. No, she has not posted anything new since last week. He leaves the office and starts to walk towards the parking lot when he again remembers that the weekend is almost here and he has to go back to an empty house. He resolves not to dwell on it any more and just take one day at a time.

He slowly heads towards the small bench at the end of parking lot, and sits down as if waiting for his ride. He tries to think about the projects for the next few days, and remembers that Kabir had invited him to a party at his house on Sunday afternoon. He starts to feel better as others leaving the office stop by and greet him. None of them know about events that happened in his personal life. After a few minutes of sitting there under the open sky, he starts to feel better as he tallies up the milestones in his married life. After all, they accomplished quite a little bit together. They bought a house. Added a swimming pool. Added an extension for a possible relocation of her mother with them. But along the way they have had their disagreements. Squabbling over little things. Money. His extravagance.

Once when he had mentioned their domestic tiffs to his friend Dan, he had suggested marriage counseling. When Farid mentioned the idea to his wife, she snapped right back at him, "so what good has it done for Dan. His marriage is in shambles."

Farid tries to concentrate on the research proposal that is due next week. He is also applying for a sabbatical, but is having trouble in deciding whether to go for a semester with full pay or for a year with half pay. The one-year leave will give him time to shore up his affairs, and decide whether he needs to prepare for possible divorce proceedings. He does not look forward to going through a messy divorce. His friend's experience has been an eye-opener for him. Custody of the child, dividing up the property, restrictions on relocation, alimony payments, etc. are some of the issues over which Dan and his wife fought for months, leaving both of them exhausted, and they ended up being hated by their children and their own siblings!

After almost a month, as he was seriously considering hiring a private investigator to locate Amrita and their son's whereabouts, he received a letter in the mail, written by Amrita. The letter was short but offered him the ray of hope that he needed. She did not mention any details about her own plans, but provided Farid an outline of a plan to stay involved in Kajol's life. He would be able to see his father during Thanksgiving, Christmas break, and other major holidays, and for a week in summer, if Farid does not stand in the way of the schema laid out in the letter. During the subsequent negotiations, mostly over the phone, Amrita never raised the topic of divorce. Farid agreed to all her demands and signed along the dotted lines. Amrita moved to an apartment in a town not far from their former house, and Farid finally saw Kajol during Thanksgiving. His sisters-in-law arranged a Thanksgiving Dinner at Nina's house. After that, he met Kajol a few more times, at Christmas, during Spring Vacation, and at some events at his school. He and Amrita also talked often on the phone, and

also met once one on one. Farid longed for these meetings, both to see Kajol, but also to meet with Amrita. Their conversations during these encounters were amiable, and resembled the friendly banter of old friends. Farid never asked Amrita about her decision to leave, and Amrita cleverly stayed away from any past references.

Farid's brothers stayed close to him during the year of transition to a new life, and guided him through the tangle of social and familial relationships as Farid tried to regain his place in Amrita and Kajol's life. "Let Amrita enjoy her independence. One day she might decide enough is enough and might even give you another chance. But for now, don't push it," one of his brothers said.

Farid on his part, while being keenly aware that his new relationship with Amrita was far removed from what he was used to and did not fit into his idea of a normal family life, knew from his conversations with his brothers that this arrangement offered the best chance of a future that did not involve starting a new family, or alienation from Kajol, nor a major financial stress. Farid, after a semester of sabbatical, came back energized and redoubled his efforts at work.

Time passed soon, and a few years later. Kajol left for college. Farid and Amrita are still involved in his life, and they see each other at least once a week. He still lives in the same house. She has found a job working at the library and is learning to sing again. She has made many new friends, but Farid and Amrita see each other often. Farid couldn't help by notice that they enjoy each other's company and have long and animated conversations, on the phone and when they meet.

One day, after their weekly rendezvous, he asks, "So do you want to move back with me?" She gives a very mysterious smile, and lowers her eyes.

"Why? Aren't we doing OK the way things are?" she says with a smile. She pauses for a few seconds, and continues,

"Let us ask this question after Kajol finishes college. He has only two more years and we also can think about our relationship when we reach this next crossroads," she paused again, and started walking the other way. And then she turned back, and said, "Do you remember the song we used to love and sing together when we first got married?"

"Will you still love me tomorrow? Tonight with words unspoken You say that I'm the only one But will my heart be broken When the night meets the morning sun? I'd like to know that your love Is love I can be sure of So tell me now, and I won't ask again Will you still love me tomorrow?"

Farid hums and joins Amrita as she sings the song. He remembers the song, but is surprised that Amrita had the tune and the lyrics by heart. When they finish the song, he finds himself standing very close to Amrita, looking into her eyes, which sparkles in the street light, and he is not sure if the tears he sees are those of joy or sadness. He says finally. Softly, almost like a whisper, "You will still love you tomorrow!"

With that, he gently touches her hand, and starts walking towards his car.

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