

## MEMORIES

# My sister, my soulmate

NAZMA YEASMEEN HAQUE

I have been asking myself ceaselessly all these years the eternal question that anyone, having suffered a loss, would ask --- a loss that leaves a special kind of void, creating a gaping hole that does not heal with the passage of time. It rather exacerbates its presence by renewing itself day after day. But why does it not die away? I often wonder. Nine years is a rather long time. Memories normally would fade, particularly when one is afflicted with one's own troubled life. One more often than not feels as if the world around one is about to close in any moment.

Since we human beings are basically egocentric, we only look at ourselves, at our daily life and daily chores that mostly are mundane in nature. We thus spend day after day enveloped in a kind of delusion. One feels and believes that one has the heaviest burden to carry on earth where the perceived world becomes too small, creating a kind of insularity. The heart acquires some strange qualities, such as being unfeeling, uncaring and some other sentiments that are not to be there within its normal domain. To illustrate this point further, I cannot but relate an anecdote in the context of however morbid the subject may be because it is so relevant. An elderly Englishwoman had to write a 'get well' card to one of her relatives. Below 'get well soon' she scribbled, on second thought, 'I was more sick than you are now', which manifests the intricate ways in which the human mind works. When feelings are thus blunted, for whatever reasons, one suffers less, and eventually not at all, for others. We all differ in our sensitivity to emotions and exactly on this account we operate on a wide range of reactions.

In my case, however, time could not help me in either erasing memories or anaesthetizing my feelings for her. They remain very raw, even today. Since I would visit her every day on her ten ill-fated days, the attending doctors got curious about me, about who I was and my relationship with her. They noted some resemblance in features between their patient and me. I was informed, on my inquiry, that her internal organs had not been functioning properly. Nevertheless, I would check the board on patients' daily information every day, gathering to

face but at her long, beautiful artistic fingers that would not play the *tanpura*, *tabla* or harmonium any more. She stood there, looking at her on whom silence had already descended. No more would she sing in her unique voice those soulful songs with such animation.

Then began my encounter with the concept of death in as much of its totality as was possible --- death as transition to another form of existence (?), immanence of the human will and our belief in immortality. All of this crowded into my mind, for a long time, until it dawned on me that an acceptance of this state with some constructive outlook could possibly lessen such suffering. My first realization was that death is one of those phenomena about which we think the least although we are within its realm every moment of our life. We tend to forget the only immutable event amid the huge clutter of our quotidian routine. Again, death is nothing but a logical continuity of life. It just takes another form on another plane but does not annihilate the source it springs from. In the infinite realm of the universe, nothing is lost forever, no soul goes missing. The Owner gives shelter to all. Thus my belief in life and its ally death was reinforced. Yet as a mere human being, one feels helpless in such a situation. At this point, I fervently sought help from a more down-to-earth source for solace in my never-ending moments of pain, from poetry on death by Rabindranath Tagore. 'A death track is this earth. It's a world of death'; 'living deaths, we live in death's own house, ignorant of its meaning.' Tagore elucidates it further: 'Life: is it then a name for a handful of deaths --- an aggregate of dying?' Ultimately the poet sings of death's victory: 'Death is just another name for what you call life, not an alien at all.'

There was a magical effect on my sensibilities. It stirred up my soul. I felt her presence in my moments of undefined existence. I found her again. Thus began my conversation with her, however one-way that might be. Memories came flooding back.

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*Neela,*

*Do you remember once while talking about age, I commented that since I was on the wrong side of fifty, I did not like my age any more? You smiled and nodded. I hardly realized how portentous my utterance would be. You left us at the age of fifty-five. I cannot ascertain if you can hear me or not, but I do hear you. It is all etched in my mind, conversing face to face with you or on the telephone. We two would talk on a whole lot of things. Call it a quality in one's character or not, we both shared it.*

*Commonalities aside, we fought on many grounds as well. I still remember having heard you sing a very melodious Nazrul song on Baishakh. Impressed, I called you. We talked about it and I added that for me it had all been about Rabindra Sangeet that month. My half knowledge was thus dispelled. A similar thing happened when you enlightened me on Mahmudul Haque as being one of the distinguished writers in our country.*

*I must narrate some apparently strange things to you that cannot be explained by any logic. Right after you departed, I spotted the name 'Neela' written at a number of places. This was and still is an uncanny experience. My best companion explains it as a relationship of soulmates between the two of us. And the game that we played on all ten days you were in the ICU? The first thing that I did on coming in was to ask you who I was. Every time a shy, sweet smile would flash on your pale face and you would answer, 'Shejo Apa'. I was reassured that your consciousness had not let go of you. When you were almost no more, I whispered your name in your left ear and miraculously you answered on the fourth whisper. That was the last time.*

*And then, all of a sudden, I turned bold and did not let the media people take your photograph. Commercial motives run high even in the midst of great despair and endless sorrow.*

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It will be exactly ten years next March since Neela went missing, physically. After the initial shock of her passing, I have tried building my refuge by confabulating a domain of my own. I keep on writing 'Neela' on the film of vapour on the mirror as hot water flows from the shower every day. I cannot yet bring myself to hear the songs sung by her, though I have made gifts of them to those asking for them. I believe this limitation works in all human beings. This is our fallibility.

In our supplication to Him, we feel how infinitesimal we are.

**THE ARTICLE IS A REMEMBRANCE OF NILUFAR YASMIN (1948-2003), CELEBRATED NAZRUL ARTISTE AND TEACHER, BY HER SIBLING, DR. NAZMA YEASMEEN HAQUE IS AN EDUCATIONIST, MUSIC ENTHUSIAST AND CRITIC.**

## REFLECTIONS

# Revisiting Buddhadeva Bose

SYED BADRUL AHSEN

Two decades ago, perhaps more, a reputed Bengali language weekly in Calcutta serialized a number of letters written by Buddhadeva Bose to his daughter. Till then, my idea of Bose had been pretty much vague. You could even say that I had little idea, apart from having heard of him, of the position he enjoyed in modern Bengali literature. It was not until Waheedul Haque, the guru who literally led me by the hand to enlightenment and had me get a taste of Bengali literature, indeed the Bengali cultural tradition, pointed out the letters to me, instructing me to read them, that I went looking for Buddhadeva Bose. Those letters opened up a whole new world for me. Having studied English literature at university and with a smattering of Urdu poetry and prose in my academic background at school (which was in pre-1971 West Pakistan), I suffered from indescribable poverty when it came to understanding the literary nuances of my own country. If my mother taught me how to write and read Bengali (and this was when I was in college), it was Waheedul Haque who opened the doors and windows to the Bengali literary and cultural heritage for me.

And so it is that I recall today the man of letters that Buddhadeva Bose was. He died in March 1974, when I was a student of Notre Dame College. In all these years that have flown by, I have tried connecting with him, as I have tried linking up with so many others, through finding and poring through his essays. It was a huge pleasure to discover, at one of those moments when you least expect to be surprised, that Buddhadeva Bose had obtained record grades at his honours and masters examinations in English literature at Dhaka University in 1930 and 1931. That has made him, for me, a major intellectual figure to be emulated. But, then, emulating great men is often an arduous exercise. The standards they set are exacting. When you consider Bose's life, as you go back to a study of his youth --- in Noakhali and Comilla and Dhaka, but more in Dhaka --- you seem to be in a position to understand that his early infatuation for poetry was a potent sign of the love with which he would pursue literature someday. He was constantly into poetry, into literary criticism. And as his subsequent career would demonstrate, after he had moved to Calcutta, it was literature that he lived and breathed. For him, as Professor Serajul Islam Choudhury once put it, poetry was a good deal more important than life. One tends to wonder if Bose's literary instincts came to be encapsulated in the name he gave his home, or call it his world. In Kavita Bhavan (House of Poetry), for decades Bose and his friends, among whom were many who were prominent on their own in the literary world or would go on to make a name for themselves, would discuss poetry, indeed an entire range of literature that went beyond Indian shores.

The life of the mind was what mattered to Bose. His poetry journal *Pragati* remains one of the earliest indications of the way he saw the place of literature in life. And then there was the decisive matter of the Kallol school of thought, the young poets who were clearly inclined to make their own niche in the Bengali literary firmament. Yes, there was Tagore, almost in the twilight of his life and yet even then an overwhelming presence across the cultural landscape of Bengal, indeed of India. If the world knew of Gandhi in the political sense of the meaning, it identified with Tagore in the aesthetic mould. Rabindranath Tagore's was a vital image, deep-rooted and constantly branching out towards an equally ever-expanding sky. Buddhadeva Bose, like the realist he was, acknowledged Tagore's pre-eminence (who would not?) and yet there was this all-encompassing need in him to chart a new course in modernist literature. In his *Kobi Rabindranath*, Bose explains in great detail the place of Tagore in the world of the Bengali. His respect for the poet was abiding, as was the appreciation of the older man for the young Bose he had earlier met in Dhaka and whose poetry had charmed him. But even as Bose remained, like so many others, in thrall to Tagore, he veered away from him into a different sphere. He had to, in a way. It was his view that poets in the post-Tagore era would find it difficult to follow the Tagorean approach to literature. 'It was impossible (for these poets)', said he, 'not to imitate Rabindranath; and it was impossible to imitate Rabindranath.' Romance became a hallmark of his poetry. For all his literary differences with Tagore, though, there were (and are) people who truly believed that historical links were what tied the two men to a common tradition. Listen to Ketaki Kushari Dyson. In her view, Buddhadeva Bose 'is the most versatile literary figure in Bengali after Rabindranath Tagore, someone about whom it could be said that Tagore's mantle had come to rest on his shoulders.' Dyson then gives you a definitive understanding of Bose: he was a Renaissance man. And that says it all.

Renaissance men are unconventional men. You will have been made aware of this fact through his bold exploration of sexual desire in *Raat Bhor Brishti* (quite remarkably translated as *It Rained All Night* by Clinton B. Seely). The dilemma of a woman trapped between her deep affection, if not love, for her husband and her sexual desire for his friend (which desire is fulfilled) is a hint of the modernism Bose sought to bring into his fiction. To be sure, he was dragged through the courts on charges of promoting obscenity through the work. He survived, yes, but one cannot quite be sure that it did not leave him feeling bitter. And bitterness was there too in his discovery that as an emigrant from Dhaka, then a nondescript place when juxtaposed with the very cosmopolitan Calcutta, he was unable to scale the academic heights he ought to have. All that came to him was a position at Jadavpur University, where he set up a department of comparative literature in 1956 in his capacity as head of the department. Bose's stint at Jadavpur does not appear to have been a happy one, seeing that he left, or found it necessary to leave, the university in circumstances that have never been clear. But those few years spent in pursuing the field of comparative literature was eventually to come in handy when Bose travelled abroad and taught at universities in the United States. With teaching came an interest in literary translations of western writers. Convinced that literature

had no boundaries, persuaded into rejecting nationalism of all kinds as a constricting factor in life, Buddhadeva Bose went into serious, purposeful studies of Baudelaire, Rilke and others before presenting them to his fellow Bengalis in translation. And, of course, there is *Tithidore*, a tale of a man and a woman caught up in the frenzied grief that follows Tagore's death, on the day the great man dies. In those moments, when an entire Calcutta appears to be lost, unable to deal with the poet's death, images of the city's landmarks --- College Street, Chitpore, Kalighat, Chawringhee, Dhurrumtola and Esplanade --- flash before the reader. Calcutta will not be the same without Tagore; and yet it will move on, beyond Tagore. It will weather the storm.

Nostalgia for the past, whether in the personal or in a comprehension of literary trends, was a major factor in Buddhadeva Bose's life. But if he felt he had missed out on



a rich literary past, he did the next best thing: he observed that past as a continuity of tradition and sought to link it with his times. That, for him, was modernism. As to the personal, there were the enduring images of Dacca (as it was known then) that shone through his recollections of Purana Paltan, the area where a significant part of his life as a young man, nine years to be precise, was spent. *Amar Chhelebela* relates the story. Curiously, though, he appears quite indifferent to Comilla, where he was born, and pretty bitter, if not exactly hostile, to Noakhali, where he went to school. Noakhali for him was the heart of darkness, with little to recommend itself. Docile, quiet, rather philistine (which was not the case as other accounts of the period have sometimes shown), Noakhali was one place Bose was happy to turn his back on. Years later, Noakhali was to lower itself even more in esteem before him through the riots in the run-up to the partition of India. It would explode in communal fury and would not simmer down until Gandhi's arrival there. No one else went there. It was the frail Gandhi who slogged through the mud and grime and layers of hate to restore peace. But, says Bose, Noakhali had taken its revenge.

The critical faculty in Buddhadeva Bose is a reminder of other critics you have been in company with, A.L. Rowse and F.R. Leavis and Maurice Bowra for instance. Bose's review of modern Bengali literature in *An Acre of Green Grass* (1948) remains a shining example of what literary criticism ought to be. His portrait of Pramatha Chaudhuri shows the way:

'Sharp eyes, a dagger-like nose, a clean-shaven handsome face wreathed with wrinkles, a splendid body of a man shattered by illness, looking for all the world like a great mountain eagle, wounded in combat, wings broken, alone.'

A little later, Bose brings in Tagore, yet once again:

'Rabindranath and Pramatha Chaudhuri represent two altogether different worlds; one, the winding stair of imagination panting up to the starry tower; the other, the comfortable well-lit drawing-room of the intellect. Rabindranath is ever drunk with dreams; Pramatha Chaudhuri is incorrigibly sober.'

Buddhadeva Bose was small in build, almost frail. And yet he was an individual larger than life. His opinions on issues, almost all of which touched upon literature, were strong. Politics certainly affected him, but it was an area he was not unduly concerned with. Reading was a preoccupation all his life. Perhaps it was the Frenchman Charles de Gaulle who, while speaking of himself, could well have been speaking of Buddhadeva Bose as well: 'Do not ask me who has influenced me. A lion is made up of the lambs he has digested; and I have been reading all my life.'

Bose was forever reading. And, of course, writing. Here he is, in his own words (in the article 'Bathroom', translated from Bengali into English by Hanne-Ruth Thompson):

'I am a man of moderate temperament. My imagination is so unrestrained that, in order to keep a balance, I have very few needs on the physical level. I can make do with very little. To tell the truth, as long as I have a room where I can sit and lie down, a few books, and food, water and tea available at the usual times, I can spend my days happily... It is not that the blows of the world don't touch me but they wash over and off my skin --- they don't leave a mark on the inside.'

(Buddhadeva Bose --- story teller, poet, essayist, critic --- was born in Comilla on 30 November 1908 and died in Calcutta on 18 March 1974).