

## THE BUTTERFLY'S BURDEN

# Kolkata: dimensions of the human spirit

RUMMANA CHOWDHURY

MUNSHILLAL was making the *phuchkas* faster than I could eat them. I tasted the fresh coriander and chilli pepper mixed with the spicy tamarind concoction and took a deep breath. From in between the layers of my own personal memory lane, the first eight years of my life in Kolkata flashed before my eyes like a kaleidoscope. My father had been posted at the Pakistan High Commission in Kolkata and my sister and I had been studying at the Queen of the Mission School in the early sixties.

"MunshiLal, how long have you been selling *phuchkas*?"  
 "Mem Sahib, for over 57 years now."  
 "How many children do you have, and does selling *phuchkas* adequately sustain you and your family?"  
 "I have no complaints, Mem Sahib. My children are happily married and we all have a comfortable life."

I then thought to myself, this man had been selling *phuchkas* for 57 years and I am 57! I wiped my tamarind drenched lips and fingers with my *dopatta* and looked around. Does tissue paper exist in this part of the world? I saw the open drains, the used clay tea cups, vendors aligned on the street selling clothes, bangles, *kolapuri* sandals, bags, and *teeps*, happily bargaining and hawking their wares to people from all over the world. Back into the present, the streets looked, felt, smelt, sounded and even tasted just as I had remembered them. Here I was again, invited to this mysteriously wonderful city to humbly receive two prestigious literary awards. While staying here, I was also graciously invited to record two self-composed CDs of my own poetry recitation. So I thought to myself, why not stay in the city and explore it instead of rushing in and out? So I decided that I would stay for just under three weeks. It was gracious on the part of my very dear friend Nashid Kamal to be in Kolkata to see me receive the honours.

I enthusiastically checked into Hotel Lytton on Sudder Street and I wanted to turn this stay into an adventure that would allow me to reminisce about my childhood while simultaneously exploring the changing dynamics of this astonishing city.

I was surrounded by the heavenly smells of freshly cooked food that lingered on for many moments. *Paobhajhi*, *chaatpaapri*, *akabab rolls*, *bhulpuri*, *momo* (*Japanese dumplings*), *dosas* and so many others unrecognized by me, yet presumably scrumptious nonetheless. I was told by my West Bengali friends in Toronto to taste their mobile *moori*, *sharsheilish*, *masala coffee* and *banarasipaana*. My mouth was watering before I had even begun the journey to tasteful delight.

Kipling once stated that Kolkata was "The City of the Dreadful Night". I loved Kolkata in the early sixties and regardless of the time that has elapsed, I adore it now. This resilient city had so much activity and adventure to offer me during my stay, from the last week of January to the first week of February, 2014. So much to experience that I did not quite know where to begin.

The Chief Minister of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee, was making a fiery speech on the 30 January, "Cholo Brigade."



Kolkata's annual book fair was taking place from January 1st to January 9th, a place where Bangladeshi authors, writers and publishers could come together with their Indian counterparts in a celebration of literary art. The popular movie 'Jai Ho' was playing in theaters, alongside the Bengali movie 'Royal Bengal Tiger'. I was attracted to a very popular line delivered by Salman Khan in this latest Hindi film where he says, "Don't say thank you. Instead, do something for three other people." They will in turn each help three other people and this becomes a chain with endless links.

What a wonderful idea! Then there was the 8th World Poetry Festival 2014 which was taking place from February 6th to 8th at Shibananda Hall at Ramakrishna Mission, Golpark, Kolkata. Poets from all over the world, including Bangladesh, India, Peru, Turkey, Macedonia, Russia, Vietnam, Italy, Thailand, Israel and Pakistan, would be participating. I was interested in their recitations, but I was most interested in a seminar that would be directly relevant to my own work, "Problems with Translations in Poetry." Many years ago, the *Sunday Telegraph* had commented on Geoffrey Moorhouse's *Calcutta, The City Revealed...* "Like another Zola, he plunges into this hell. Dissecting it, almost lovingly, he discovers aspects of the human spirit, both Indian and universal, out of which the reader may trace some sort of pattern in the chaos". As I stood on the banks of the Gangar Ghat overlooking the new Howrah Bridge and coloured water fountains behind me, the soothing yet blaring Rabindra Sangeet playing through loudspeakers overpowering my senses, I remembered reading this book over thirty-five years ago when I was an impressionable student of Dhaka University. I had sobbed my heart out after reading Moorhouse's chapters on Poverty, Wealth and Bengalis. I had found echoes of our own country there. Many years later, some parts of Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* made me feel the same way again

but by that time, life had conditioned me better and there were no tears.

I had left my husband and younger daughter Qaanita to take care of each other in Dhaka. After living in Canada for thirty-two years, a break from cooking, cleaning, home and office, life felt simply heavenly and I felt rejuvenated with my freedom and travel. With a tinge of guilt? Absolutely not! A very close friend of mine took me to the Oxford bookstore on Park Street and we leisurely browsed and bought books like Vikram Seth's *Mappings*, Nobel Laureate Orhan Panuk's *Other Colours, Writings on Life, Art, Books and Cities*, Amartya Sen's *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian Culture, History and Identity*, Sanjoy Shekhar's translation of *Half a Rupee Stories* by Gulzar and some translations of Urdu poetry and postcards, all the while enjoying iced coffees and sandwiches and mischievously engaged in outrageous debates of our Dhaka University days.

I went for the book launch ceremony sponsored by the Niyogi publishers of Delhi on 3rd February to support the launch of Syed Badrul Ahsan's biographical work on Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, *From Rebel to Founding Father* held at the Statesman auditorium at the Kolkata Boi Mela premises. In his speech, Ahsan said English language documentation and research material available on Bangabandhu was limited and obviously there was need for a change in the situation.

This 38th Kolkata Book Fair lasted for around two weeks and attracted over 20 lakh visitors. To my amazement, free packaged water was offered to everyone who attended. There were 500 stalls. Peru was the theme and the Nobel Laureate Mario Vargas Llosa was present, standing amongst stalls from the US and the British Council. To my delight, publishers from Bangladesh were prominently featured as well and authors such as Jibananda Das and Kotha Shahitk Rabeya Khatun, Jhumpa Lahiri, Sanjib Chatterjee, Ruskin Bond, Daud Haider,

Faridur Reza Sagor and Sunil Gongopaddya were also showcased.

I enjoyed meandering through the well organized and aptly decorated publishers' stalls and felt like a kid in a candy store. There were publishers and authors from Bangladesh, celebrating a Bangladesh Day amidst the aroma of books, authors, writers, publishers and journalists from all around, everyone bringing their own individual and unique charms to the table. Even now, a smile creeps onto my lips as I look at the 27th and 28th series of water colour painted postcards, "Portrait of Kolkata", done by Samir Biswas. I have not yet decided which set I will sacrifice for my daughter Fariah, doing her PhD at the University of Toronto, and unable to accompany us. She would have loved to accompany me for the trip, but the postcards would have to do for now.

We visited Shantiniketan (the profound nature of this experience tempts me to write a separate article altogether.) We went to Victoria Memorial the next day and enjoyed the history and paintings featured inside it, stopping in between to sip on some Shikanji, (a drink mixed with soda, lemon, ice and spices which not only quenched your thirst but also your soul). We visited the newly renovated national museum of Kolkata which had finally reopened after six months, featuring a collection so mind-boggling and so incredibly underrated it was almost tragic.

A few days later, after I was awarded the "Shouhardo Shommanona" at the Poshchim Banga Bangla Academy on February 6th, 2014, Kobi Pankaj Saha (receiver of the Life Time achievement Award from the Chief Minister of West Bengal & Mukti Juddha Shommanona from our Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina) invited us to tea at "Amantran" behind the Bangla Academy premises where apparently writers, actors, poets, journalists, movie makers and many out of job and so-called frustrated artists hang out at all hours. We had a whale of a time with Joydeep and Anita Chatterjee, Paru Di, writer and researcher NazmunNahar. I also met Modhuchanda Torafder, writer Gour Mitra, Partha Ghosh, Ananta das, Sujit Sarker, Dilip Basu, Dr. G.P.Sarker and many others. Given the kind of creativity, liveliness and intellect that was present here, I was not surprised at why Satyajit Roy and many others like him supposedly picked budding talents from this exact area.

I had my first breath taking view of Kolkata University (Darbhanga Hall) on the 25th of January when I went to receive the "International Michael Modhusudan Datta" award on account of this great Bengali poet's 190th birth anniversary. I had the great fortune of meeting writers, poets and authors from all over India and abroad for this occasion. Justice Shomoreshe Banerjee, ex. Governor of West Bengal, Mr. Shamol Sen, Dr. Bindeshwar Pathak (who received the International Bangomoni Award), Dr. Nirmal Kumar Roy, and Dr. Charu Nath amongst others were present. Dr. Bidlian Datta presented me his book of Essays, "Probondhaboli Shotabdir Satadhara". And Pankaj Saha gave me his "Kaladhare Shopno."

Deeper into the trip, a dear friend of mine took me to eat Sharshe Ilish at the Oberoi. The fragrance of the freshly ground Sharshe and the scrumptious soft pieces of deboned Ilish Mach lingered with me as we walked past the swimming pool on our way out. As I looked at the reflection of the blue and white sky in the clear water of the pool, I almost forgot that I lived in another continent so far away for the majority of the year. The strong, sweet street tea that was served in little disposable clay cups made a blissful finishing to our meal. The Commercial Library building, Mir BaharGhat Street, Madan Mohan Burman street, Kalighat road, the potters colony at Kumartuli, Footnani chamber, Balmir Lawrie building, the central Municipal office, Chowringhee and The Scottish cemetery brought back so many memories. We were enjoying barbecued corn with lemon and chaat masala and walking through Girish Chandra Bose road when Mamata Banerjee's "Cholo Brigade" speech was being telecast. Indeed a popular and



powerful speaker  
 I cannot refrain from describing the "mobile moori" which was offered to my friends and me as snacks while selecting our material purchases at a store and bargaining our lives away. Not to sound like an ad clip but, yes, it is crunchy while you are munching, smells of fresh mustard oil and oriental spices, and was absolutely delicious beyond words!  
 As we sleepily carried our sandals in our hands and passed through the lobby of the hotel where we were staying, the graceful Chinese receptionist wearing a shaded mauve silk saree with intricate NakshiKantha floral designs, done by the tribal girls of Vishwa Bharati, gave all of us an understanding, dazzling smile. She knew what this city did to its patrons, as it had done to us.

RUMMANA CHOWDHURY, POET AND AUTHOR, LIVES IN TORONTO AND IS AT PRESENT ON A VISIT TO BANGLADESH

## REFLECTIONS

# Impossible perfection . . .

MOBASHIR MONIM

PERFECTION, a word that in its own is everything and nothing. Perfection, a state of satisfaction which the human mind reaches after correcting something too many times. Perfection, it is something that we all try to achieve, and yet fail horribly. Of all the poets and writers and authors, there are but a few who were not obsessed with the sense of perfection and its presence in their writings or the inner meaning.

We all hope to achieve perfection, see it with our own eyes, if not our own work, then at least something worth praising and looking up to, to say that it indeed is divine. Even when our work is flawed, and nowhere near completion, we say to ourselves that it is perfect just to fool ourselves. What is it that makes us want to near perfection to such an extent? Is it the will to impress, or to prove, or to acknowledge that we indeed are capable of more? That is a question, which in its own is flawed. We yearn for perfection, we hope for it, we work for it, but all that we actually can do is just near it without ever reaching it.

But where is the point where the perfection meets reality? Or is it even there? These are questions that cannot be answered, not at least within our life time. But even though we know that perfection can never be reached, we try again and again. Each time a little harder than before, each time getting a little closer than before. But in the end it all comes down to noth-

ing, since perfection was not achieved.

We become frustrated, irritated, annoyed and depressed at our own failure, at our own work, at our own incomplete master piece. But we still try, even though we know full well we will fail, we still try, to leave an imperfect masterpiece, to be grasped by the people, to taunt others, to say "How far can you get?"

Others just let it be, not bothering to touch it anymore, giving up. They then start to believe that perfection is something that can never be achieved by the mortal man, but only by a divine power. Maybe they are true, maybe we cannot achieve perfection, but that just disproves that "nothing is impossible", it causes a paradox. It all comes down to what we believe in, to what we open our minds to, to what we want to believe.

But what is the cost of perfection, is it time, the most expendable yet the most expensive asset at our disposal? If so, then why can we not achieve perfection even when we spend years and years of your lives to complete one thing? Or is it simply just not possible? We may choose to believe whatever we want to, for whatever reasons we may have. We may either choose to believe in its existence and continue to work and seek for it believing that the way to perfection is only visible to those who seek, or we may give up altogether thinking that it can only be achieved by the divine hand.

MOBASHIR MONIM STUDIES A LEVELS

## POETRY

# My words in raspberry colour



AINON N.

As you recite  
 I feel drawn to the notes  
 Like the lucidity of free spirit  
 As I listen  
 I see flecks of images in patchwork  
 Telling the tale of fresh will  
 Of laughter, and life

I hear  
 The narrative  
 Summon delight of living  
 From where there is no farewell  
 This wisdom tale  
 Incorruptible by time  
 Dares to walk towards today

I hear  
 Passionate hearts sing the song

Of memories  
 Tremulous, and  
 Vibrant within the confines of strangers' souls  
 Binding imagination to stars  
 In anticipation

As your voice lingers  
 On soundless present  
 I meet a longing heart  
 Where desire of needs resides  
 I meet a watchful mind  
 Where liberty of reason  
 Is furiously independent

As you recite  
 In quiet,  
 The place of my retreat  
 I meet their braided compromise  
 Yet once again.....

# Mother

MOHSENA REZA SHOPNA

She was Great God's special creation!  
 He gave her mildness of the rustling of leaves,  
 the fragrance of white roses and the gentleness of the evening breeze.  
 From up above he had sent down knowledge upon her to travel on the path of truth...  
 She had, in the silence of night, approached eternity in haste . . .  
 How long shall we lament, Amma, when you know how frail we are?  
 I loved you immensely...  
 I had spent my life, listening to your teachings,  
 had worn out myself following your footsteps,  
 I had abandoned the delights of my life, for you,  
 only for you...for you had burdened me with your love!  
 Your last words had torn our hearts apart...  
 'Leave me all of you, for my soul is drunk with love'  
 You, who had cried aloud, 'Let me sleep, for my spirit is satiated with days and nights  
 Draw me to down in the arms of slumber,  
 for my eyelids are

wearied of this wakefulness'  
 'Wipe away the tears, come and take your leave of me, allowing my spirit to fly, to be liberated'  
 'I have now gone far far away, leaving behind only the anthem of eternity!  
 Close your eyes and you will see me among you,  
 now, tomorrow, and thereafter. Dig my grave where there will not be the rattling of bones, depriving my resting place of quietude.'  
 Oh Amma.... do you know how much I miss you?  
 Today --- and always?

