

WHERE FACT AND FICTION INTERACT

AUTHOR: BAPPADITYA CHAKRAVARTY

REVIEWED BY SHAHID ALAM

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WHEN fact meets fiction regarding a person, or place, or event in one story, the line between the two usually gets blurred, and, more often than not, it becomes difficult to ascertain when and where fact segues into fiction, and vice versa. Waqar A Khan, an avid history and heritage buff, and founder of Bangladesh Forum for Heritage Studies, presented just such a book to me, after having initiated its publication. *Samudragupta: The Making of an Emperor* is a historical novel written by Bappaditya Chakravarty. More to the point, it is a thriller that mixes real life events with a deft touch of imagination to detail the rise of Prince Samudragupta to become the Emperor of India, or, at least, the territory of the Indian empire as it was then configured. Samudragupta was a larger-than-life figure whom the great British historian Vincent Smith had named "Napoleon of India" in his book *The Early History of India*. He was the son of Chandragupta I and his Mahadevi (pre-eminent wife), Queen Kumaradevi, once a Licchavi princess. Chandragupta I had other wives, including the mother of Prince Kacha, the eldest son, and the story revolves around the struggle and multi-layered intrigues that eventually led to the ascension of Samudragupta to the throne of India. And it was a long and distinguished reign lasting from 335 to 380CE. These are also historical facts that are faithfully recounted in the story. He was a fearless warrior, a sagacious general, and, seemingly in contradiction to these characteristics, an accomplished poet, musician, philanthropist, and patron of the arts and literature. These wide-ranging qualities might cause some people to raise their skeptical eyebrows, but these are the facts as documented in the well-known inscription on a pillar in Allahabad as well as the Eran inscriptions.

At its height, with conquests and expansion mostly by Samudragupta, the maximum extent of the Gupta Empire was reached in and around 400CE, embracing an estimated 3,500,000 kilometers. It is the third largest in terms of size in the pre-British Raj Indian history. Magnificent archi-

ecture, painting, and sculpture were prominent features of the Gupta Empire. Above it, at number 2 was the Mughal Empire, which reached its zenith around 1690 CE, during Emperor Aurangzeb's reign, with a territory of approximately 4,000,000 kilometers, and, at number 1, the pre-Christian Era Maurya Empire, which reached its apex point under Emperor Asoka, and reached its maximum extent in 250 BC with a total territory comprising 5,000,000 kilometers (all figures given thus far are estimates reached by a scholar). Compare the three with the modern Republic of India with a territory of 3,287,263 kilometers (of course, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Nepal are independent countries). The British Raj, of course, was bigger, including Myanmar as part of South Asia, and, except for some tiny enclaves under other European countries' control, brought the entire India under unified control for the first time in the sub-continent's history.

Those are facts. Bappaditya Chakravarty, with some dexterity, weaves them into a thriller that mixes up fiction with fact. History is replete with royal family members, in order to make their way up to the throne, doing away with potential, and real, rivals, whether that results in regicide, fratricide, or any other elimination of other relatives. While the monarchy has largely become constitutional in almost all countries that have them, political assassinations to pave the way to power (and, inevitably, riches) continue to this day. Power, or the trappings of power, is heady stuff. Chakravarty has presented just such a scenario, in the process, drawing attention to all of Samudragupta's multiple character attributes. They portray a truly great monarch, equally adept at war and peace, although, and this should come as no surprise to those familiar with historical fiction, the author admits to having taken "certain liberties with Samudragupta's expeditions." Sometimes, while bringing together various attributes and events, the author is a bit glib, neatly trying to fit one to the other in a seamless web, but, generally, he manages to compartmentalize events and people in a logical manner.

While the plots and intrigues are natural ploys to ascend the throne by Prince Kacha, the first-born son, his father's considered choice as heir apparent was his half-brother Samudragupta. There was also a serious sub-plot whereby the pretender wanted to establish puritanical Hinduism in the realm, especially at the expense of Buddhism, by using draconian measures like forcible conversion, imposing heavy taxes on non-Hindus, and force of arms. In fact, he "has issued a number of diktats making Hinduism the official religion of his domain." Actually, the novel begins with the author describing a



mysterious plot. While the sagacious Chandragupta I, father of Kacha and Samudragupta, was formally addressed as *Maharajadhiraja* (King of Kings), he lived an unostentatious life, who was utterly devoted to his beautiful chief wife (Mahadevi), whose Licchavi dynasty had generally converted to Buddhism.

Originally of the warrior caste, *Kshatriyas*, they were now derided by the hardline Hindus (especially by the Brahmins) as 'fallen' *Kshatriyas*. And one of them was married to the *Maharajadhiraj* of India! Chandragupta, both out of devotion to his wife and

his own liberal bent, did not pay much attention to this, and allowed followers of *Hinduism* and *Buddhism* to coexist in his kingdom. But his enemies were powerful and crafty. "There were camps in the court, however --- one led by...Kacha --- that advocated a revival of the Brahmannical tradition and rued that the caste system had lost its stranglehold on society, others advocated amity between the religions. Fortunately for the King, the latter were larger in numbers, although internally divided along sectarian lines. And then there were the opportunists, favoring one faction or the other, seeking always to make a gain in one way or other." Fanaticism is a hydra-headed monster, imposing severe privations on humanity, and, so often making them pay a price that they do not deserve for any fault of their own.

In the event, following wise counsel from seasoned advisors, his own long-drawn-out assessment of the two oldest princes, suggestive goading by Queen Kumaradevi, and his own considered predilection, he appointed Samudragupta to be his heir apparent, much to the disgust and annoyance of Kacha, who had already planned a heinous elaborate plot to immediately kill his younger brother, and, eventually, usurp the throne for himself and establish *Brahminism* throughout the land. In the manner of portraying villains, the author also portrays Kacha as lascivious; drug user, and inveterate drunkard, while Samudragupta had high morals, including his intent to marry a banished princess from a far-away land (note the fairytale overtones!). The morality play, a staple in Indian movies, and other art forms, and so special to this part of the world!

Keeping with tradition, Samudragupta was well-versed in the writings of legendary economist (and purveyor of diplomacy), Kautilya, who had anticipated Niccolò Machiavelli by many centuries, and who lived during the Mauryan era, and continues to be followed in India. As was, not surprisingly, Kacha. Chakravarty draws a comprehensive pen portrait of the heir apparent: "Samudragupta was a young man of some twenty-three years, very tall, fair and built like a bull.... When

bare-bodied, his torso seemed to have the imprint of every kind of weapon known, from sword scars to arrow punctures, javelin cuts to deep mace wounds. For additional adornment...he bore claw marks of bears and tigers that he had subdued with short swords and knives. His face was however gentle...the face of a musician--- which he was, and of a poet --- which he was too.

Samudragupta continued with the tradition of his father of surrounding himself with sagacious courtiers. Great generals, spymasters, advisors, loyal to him to a fault, made his person, and his kingdom, safe. While the exigencies of the battlefield could force him to take very harsh decisions, he could also be chivalrous, and embraced defeated, but gallant, foes into his fold. His love for Datta, the exiled princess, whose throne he restored to her after annihilating a fiendish usurper (the pat contrasts familiar to Hindi films easily discernible), was reciprocated and they were married in front of his father and mother. Eventually, Kacha is defeated, and Samudragupta becomes crown prince on the way to becoming an Emperor. Obviously, much of the story is conjecture mixed in with facts, but the author has never claimed to have written a historical work of pure scholarship. This is not a bad ploy at all! A historical novel of what is what and what could have been is a refreshing read after going through large tomes replete with high scholarship.

Samudragupta's real (or imagined) tolerance and humanism is clearly articulated here, part of the reason why he is considered one of the great rulers in Indian history: "I am in favor of Hinduism, if not the fanatical *Brahminism* that Kacha espouses. Simultaneously, I will encourage the Buddhist idea of *dharma*, and promote Buddhist scholarship." There are other such portrayals of Samudragupta in the book of over 500 pages that could be finished much more quickly than one could comprehend.

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Hitting at our society's missing rectitude

AUTHOR: JESMIN CHOWDHURY

REVIEWED BY DR. FAHEEM HASAN SHAHED

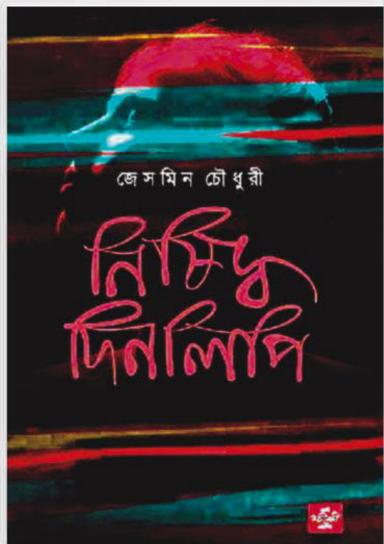
Publisher: Shobdoshaily Prokashon, Price: BDT 300

MOST of us in our apparently tranquil society are driven by an overriding middle-classism: complacent inside personal existence with an all-going-awesome mindset. The interweaving complexities of our murky surroundings occasionally create some annoyed "ki je hochhe eshobi!" mutterings within our social circles, but those gleefully vaporize over time. As long as we aren't affected, we allow 'life' to carry on along its course.

In such scenario, raising your voice, for whatsoever reasons, has almost become taboo in our eyes. You just drag troubles by raising your voice alone; there are forces who don't appreciate it. And specifically if you are a female, you drag controversies. Then, regardless of the urgency of the cause or the sensibility of the issue, you make people brand you with the eventual term 'feminist aka Taslima Nasreen'. That you aren't being treated justly or respectfully will become null, because you spoke about what you face. Nobody feels that you don't need to be a feminist to speak about the crude realities. In every sense, you are the one who is the de facto 'choritroheena nari'.

Since most victims silently obey this diktat, they don't raise voices. But a Jesmin Chowdhury from Manchester does. And she does it without being a Taslima Nasreen. Instead of sensationalizing her suffocations, she simply hits at your conscience to make it rise up from dead. This her newly published book "Nishiddho Dinlipi" appears as essential scruples for both male and female readers. A collection of vignettes that she had published in different popular webzines and literary sites, the book tells you why we all must look inside our souls to understand women's world. Novelist Selina Hossain in her preamble rightly echoes similar sentiments.

But let me clear this: the book is neither a slogan nor a shout. It is Jesmin's interior voyage impelled by her exterior society, the society of hidden evils. The society that resides across boundaries: in her hometown Sylhet, in Dhaka, London, Manchester and everywhere. Both men and women wear masks, and those masks undergo changes in color and shape to maltreat-insult-malign



women. 'Choritroheena kholachithi' (An open letter from a debauched woman) is, therefore, the perfect start for this book. It magnificently exposes our hypocrisy about judging women in the yardstick of a series of interconnected maxims: a woman's 'goodness of character' is socially determined and society is governed by masculine ethics; women dare not skip any of those ethics because women can't have ethics on their own; they must always be guided by their shelter-givers (not just men, women too) whose even wrong guidance should be received as righteous fate by women. Jesmin, after separation from her abusive first husband, refused to accept these maxims. With her kids, she gloriously fought on her own to stand up on her feet without any support of societal shelter-givers. The middle-class masks, shocked and angry, had no other way except defining the *choritroheena-ness* of her being, her existence.

So readers can see, how countless *Jesmins* mutely fume in all households transcending boundaries, more specifically, Bangalee boundaries. It is now up to the readers whether they will shed off their middle-class masks and become real humans.

The irony of the entire matter is, women themselves are part of this masculine mindset. Jesmin describes in her equally thoughtful piece 'Ami kidorai shokhi beshsha galire?' (Do I care your calling me a whore?) how male-governed society's members in shirts-trousers and saris get shocked by women with voices and do not hesitate in equating them with 'prostitutes'. And thereafter comes Jesmin's logical query: on what ethical standing do even our brothel-mongering males hate prostitutes for their profession? Well, middle-class hypocrisy rules.

'Barbar phire ashe bedonar honeymoon' (The honeymoons of sorrows return repeatedly) is another striking piece which depicts how married women face circles of painful honeymoons in their lives, i.e. the stage by stage abusive events followed by apparently happy moments...ultimately never making them really happy. Jesmin's experience of working as an interpreter in a young girl Maya's prolonged divorce case prompted her to write this touching piece.

Besides numerous fascinating discourses on women voice, Jesmin raises diversified issues too: her valiant freedom fighter dad, the ludicrous garbage in social media, the dreadful fate of infant rape-victim Puja, the curse of clueless parenting in Bangladesh, the inhuman plight of maltreated maid servant sand so on. Every article appeals to our never-thought-of humane senses, deplorably drowned in the sea of our middle-class double standards.

Jesmin's personal stature as an English language teacher and a freelance interpreter has allowed her to view multiple shades of contemporary life. And her credit lies in painting those shades with sheer honesty. "Nishiddho Dinlipi", in my view, is a unique framescape of the naive personas residing within us which Jesmin has treated with passionate maturity. You will feel discomfort at times, but that mustn't stop you from roaming through the pages. And inarguably, her silky, free-flowing prose will captivate even the most reluctant reader.

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Ornament of Human Race

AUTHOR: MAHFUZ PARVEZ

REVIEWED BY SOHEL RANA

Publisher: Balaka Publication, 2017, price: Taka 100 US \$ 2.00

M ANOB Bongsher Alonker (Ornament of Human Race: A Long Poem) is a book of poetry by Dr. Mahfuz Parvez and it is published by Balaka Publication. It is some kind of *Kahini Kabbo* (a form of Ballad) in which contemporary issues have been duly portrayed. He has penned a sketch of Globalism, Imperialism and Hegemony to uphold the voice of the oppressed. It consists of a single poem which describes existing human society, culture, belief etc. It is now available at the *Ekushe Book Fair-2017* at the stall of *Balaka Publication*. His total published books count 15. His remarkable books are: *Nano Bhalobasa o Onnamno* (poem), *Bidrohi Parbotto Chottogram o Santichukti*, *Swadhinota Poroborti Bangladesh*, *Ekobinsho Sotoke Bangladesh* etc.

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NEW BOOK

তুমি ব্রিস্টিময়ী
শাহআলম সাজু



Tumi Bristimoyee

AUTHOR: SHAHALAM SAJU
Publisher: Aninda Publication

Tumi Bristimoyee is a romantic novel by Shahalam Saju (Journalist and writer). It has been published by Aninda Publication in this *Ekushe Book fair-2017* and it is now available at *Aninda Publication* (stall no.456-459). This novel portrays nature and love closely related to human relationship. It also tells the story of hope and despair, gain and loss etc., but finally glorifies human affiliation.