

Kolkata, Kolkata! (2)

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I had promised my readers that I will come back to them again with my favourite city of Kolkata for it is impossible to wrap up an emotive writing on this great city in one instalment. Kolkata became increasingly dearer to us during our youth. There were plenty of reasons for that. Primary were the entertainment possibility that this city offered. When we were in college Suchitra Sen and Uttam Kumar reigned supreme in Bengali film. For us Kolkata was the city of Suchitra-Uttam. So we were naturally attracted to the city. But once we arrived there we literally forgot about these acting idols and immersed into what this great city had to offer. This, often, consisted of enlargement of the things that were dear to us when as children we visited Kolkata. My interests were many. Some of them were trivial. And others might merit adult attention. Kolkata in those days was city all of us longed to visit. Dhaka, then known as Dacca, was a tiny town without any paraphernalia that would make this a city. So Kolkata was a 'city' to look forward to.

Much of my weakness for Kolkata came from the verbal memoirs of my father. He had his college and University

education in Kolkata. We have many anecdotes of my father while he was in that city. Upon our wheedling he told us that he had a physical contact with a girl before his marriage. We were all ears to hear his fantastic story. This story is hilarious. There was heavy rain fall in a monsoon day causing inundation of the roads surrounding the Calcutta University. My father was stuck in the campus due to flash flood with many other students. At one point they decided to wade across the road. A sari clad girl was hesitant to cross the flowing water and asked the boys for help. In those days boys were conservative. So no one came forward. My father became chivalrous and took her in his arms and with bold strides crossed water. He was heartily congratulated by the girl for his chivalry. That made his day. We never forgot to mention this anecdote when in our conversations 'physical contact' emerged as a subject.

We simply adored the University area and spent countless hours in the coffee house there with friends and, at times, with our seniors talking about intellectual matters that invigorated us in our youth. The Calcutta Coffee House was a sought after joint those days and I discovered many luminaries from the intellectual world of Kolkata in that place. I once

discovered Satyajit Roy in a heated discussion with poets Subhash Mukherjee and Bishnu Dey. It was a matter of delight to have discovered the mortals of our dreams in flesh and blood.

I also adored the Dhakuria lake; popularly known as the Ballygunj Lake. We went there for an occasional swim. Gariahat was abuzz with the shops of various sizes and denominations. It was always crowded, mostly with girls and



women. So, in our youth that was a place we frequented.

Rabindra Sadan was founded in 1961 to commemorate the birth centenary of poet Rabindranath Tagore. We used to frequent the Sadan to witness the famous singers performing there. Hemanta Mukharjee, Manabendra, Shyamal Mitra, Shandhya Mukherjee, Pratima Banerjee et al used to perform there regularly. In our youth, thanks to the orientation on music we

received from Chhayanaut, we were also attracted by the performances of classical music, vocal and instrumental. So while in Kolkata, we went to various classical musical shows, vocal and oriental, if they were free or if we could afford the price of the ticket. I was exposed to the music of such maestros as Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Kahn and instrumental music of Ustad Vilayet Khan, Ravi Shankar and Ali Akbar at the Rabindra Sadan or in the Gorer Math now known as the Maidan sitting under the Shamiana for nearly a meagre amount.

Howrah Station was another high point in my life. I hopped in to a lift, at the Park Circus Tram Depot, going to Howrah and, on reaching the station, got a comfortable seat to sit in and spend hours watching various kinds of passengers. This provided me with substantial materials for my writings later.

I have hardly touched upon the girls of Kolkata who attracted us in that age of emerging youth. In those days just watching girls was an amazing chore. The smartly attired Kolkata girls and their un-inhibited going about was the main attraction for us. Such was our youth and the years of growing up. Kolkata is forever. So the city would emerge in my discussions many times in the future.

See you next week.

BETWEEN CONTEMPORANEITY AND TRADITION

The Scrolls and Song of Gazi Pir

ARTS
GAZE
BY LUBNA MARIUM



In a country with scant patronization of the folk arts, eminent thespian Ramendu Majumdar's Expressions Ltd is to be congratulated for organizing 'Patakabho Parampara', a week-long exhibition of the folk painter Shambhu Acharya's 'patachitra' or 'scroll paintings' and more, from May 12 - 19, 2017 at the Chitrak Art Gallery, as part of the organization's Silver Jubilee celebrations. As Acharya is the ninth generation of *patuas*, or scroll artistes, who present paean of the incredible tiger-riding Sufi saint Gazi through their artwork, it is apt that the exhibition concluded with a presentation of 'Gajir Gaan' by folk singers Mongol Mia and his uncle Waj Ali from Matlab in Chandpur. These songs, sung along with the scrolls, are ballads about the mythological Gazi Pir, recognized as a rival of Dakshin Ray, the god of tigers.

Remarkably, it was Expressions, too, that had arranged Acharya's first solo exhibition in Dhaka in 2003. Since then he has gone on to be exhibited in cities the world over, including London, New York, Brussels. His work has found place within the collections of the British Museum in London, the Fukuoka Museum in Japan, the Shanghai Museum in China and many more.

Patuas traditionally worked by traveling from village to village with paintings of epic stories done on scrolls. In each village, they would sing songs narrating the

stories on the canvas while unfurling their work at the same time, creating a dynamic oral tradition enhanced by visual art. Often a family or individual singer had a single *pat* that they would perform. Though the stories that were painted were repeated from artist to artist, each singer wrote their own melody to create a signature style.

Traditionally, all of the *patuas'* paints were handmade from naturally occurring



sources such as indigo, tumeric and other plants. Many rural *patuas*, including Shambhu Acharya, continue to make their own paints to this day.

Of much interest is the performative transition being effected within such folk cultural practices. Fascinatingly, we notice a suspension of the categorical distinctions of tradition and modernity; and instead notice a shifting aesthetics of discursive signifi-

tion wherein neither tradition nor modernity are ever made wholly present. This is very evident in Shambhu Acharya's work too, that embraces contents of contemporary context without totally moving away from the original form of an art handed down through generations. Cultural identities, thus, are considered to be performative constructs rather than actual essences in the face of spatial and temporal shifts in social relationships and sites of activity.

Gajir Gaan, or the 'Songs of Gazi', correspondingly, represents a theatre of intersections: historical, literary, and spiritual. Time and space collide and merge fluidly as the natural and supernatural worlds traverse dimensional barriers, flowing into one another and placing contemporary human characters into intimate contact with phantasmic specters of the past, both legendary and imaginary. These songs are part of the 'Panchali' literature, a genre of narrative folk songs. The word, 'panchali', originates from *pauchal* or *pauchalika*, meaning puppet.

Gazi songs are preceded by a *bandana* or hymn, sung by the main singer in which both Allah and Hindu Gods and Goddesses are invoked. The singer then narrates the story of Gazi's birth, his wars with the demons and the evil spirits, as well as his rescue of a merchant at sea. Although Gazi Pir was a Muslim, his fol-

lowers included people from other religious communities as well.

These folk performances are ritual in nature and believed to be efficacious, with their performance having the ability to grant the wishes of those who make a '*manot*', or vow, to arrange these performances.

'Panchali' Literature while embracing a stylistic formality, using dense literary allusion, and transgressive supernaturalism, comments upon the spiritual hunger of the modern world, and doing so mythologizes the present moment. While, there have been a few experiments to assimilate this aesthetics within contemporary literature, especially in the work of Salim Al Deen and Saymon Zakeria, more or less the genres remain popular, merely, with folk theatre. Folk theatre, on the hand, continues to keep, the mostly oral, 'Panchali' texts contextual and contemporary by incorporating issues of present day significance.

One hopes that young playwrights will delve deep into these liminal art forms, which exploit the permeable boundaries between the tangible and intangible that occur at a metaphysical junction between entertainment and religious rituals, because, without doubt *patachitras* and 'panchali' literature are invaluable cultural heritages of Bangladesh.