

MANIK BANDOPADHYAY

# A HUNGER ARTIST

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May 19 marked the 110th birth anniversary of Manik Bandopadhyay. This week's In Focus remembers the author of *Padma Nadir Majhi* and highlights his contribution to the spirit of the age. With modernism thriving in Europe, Bengali writers were influenced by the changes in the world literary scene. They were not shy to experiment and to break away from the overwhelming presence of Tagore. Manik Bandyopadhyay stands out because of his artistic and political conviction that made him hungry for reality.

"The Puppet's Tale? Manik babu must have turned humans into puppets then, or made them become slaves to fate! The judges have spoken. The book however is kept alive for [more than] 20 years by those who do not judge me. They realise how this book is a sympathetic protest against those who pull the strings to make people dance like puppets. It is not revolution, but it is an act of continuous sympathetic protest."

Meet Manik Bandopadhyay—wounded by the critics who had glanced at the title of his novel to dismiss it as fatalist or feudalist. Manik's tongue-in-cheek reply shows that readership is the real mandate that an author needs; engagement with the society is the real commitment that an author desires. After he joined the Communist Party in 1944, his peers started sifting through his work in search of ideas that would compromise his political ideology. Some accused Manik of giving too much space to romantic sensibility or cheap sensuality (e.g. *Putul Nancher Itikatha*), possibly to titillate his readers, while others, of not understanding emancipation of labour as he resorted to Utopian visions (e.g. *Padma Nadir Majhi*). For them, the protagonist in *Putul Nancher Itikatha*, Shashi is nothing but a representative of the petty bourgeoisie while Hossain Mia's island without religion in *Padma Nadir Majhi* is a place that generates slavery.

Manik, however, has always remained firm in his artistic conviction. In an essay "Why do I Write," he posits: "I write because I have the urgency to share a fraction of the way I have seen and felt life. No one else knows what I know" (*Jol Pore, Pata Nore, Jana Noy*). Indeed, despite being dubbed a champion of realism, Manik knows that the mimetic function of his narrative prose can only give expression to a fraction of the temporal experiences of an individual. It is impossible to retell and reconfigure reality in a way a psychoanalyst like



Manik is known for delving into the mind and bringing out the gritty reality. His poverty allowed him to face reality more than we can think of. After his death, one of his comrades asked his wife why she did not phone him. "It takes five annas to call," was her curt reply.

Did he relish poverty? In his diary, he wrote about his wife Kamala (Dolly) who heaved a sigh of relief after giving birth to a stillborn. "Dolly is not at all unhappy to see the child die. It saves her from a lot of hassle. Thank goodness, she said. Now I can rest a bit before getting rid of the cook and save some money."

Did Manik see money as the proverbial root of all evils? In "The Wife of a Leper," he observed, "Everyone knows that earning implies bringing someone else's money to one's own house. If one can draw such money at a big scale, one becomes a big [read rich] man. The line that separates little-earning from big-earning is linked with the sweat of labour and the deviousness of the brain."

By the time, Manik wrote his last novel *Praneshwarer Upakhyan*, it seems that the conviction with which he started writing had started becoming slightly clouded. He was tilting towards the supernatural. He identified the power of Ma's forgiveness and kindness in her process of practical sense and evolutionary consciousness.

Readers who are comfortable in seeing Manik as a champion of the class struggles, dialectical materialism are confused by this sudden shift in the writer's ideology. What happened to the Manik who famously located God among the rich neighbourhoods while reflecting on the lowly lives of the fishermen of Ketupur? Did he finally succumb to the trap of religion, the opium of the masses?

At the beginning of *Putul Nancher Itikatha*, there is a description of a man killed by lightning bolt. A villager Haru was taking a short cut while coming from town and took shelter under a banyan tree during a thunder storm. The gods in the sky struck him down, and the boatman Gobardhan was considering the appropriateness of touching the body in terms of caste. Only the educated Shashi had the consciousness to go beyond the logic of larger-than-life gods and lower-than-life caste system.

I feel, the mysterious disappearance of Atoshi Mami towards the end of his first story has a similar embedded desire of bridging the irrational and the rational. The same desire is evident in the last journal entries of Manik. He was thinking of understanding divinity in scientific terms. He wrote in English in 1954: "The long-drawn controversy—what was first—matter or energy? Not meaningless but also a manifestation of truth, the real truth, that human consciousness is progressive." He was even considering ways of presenting superstition of religion in a scientific way.

It is easy to bring in a theoretical lens to categorise Manik for his scientific analysis or psychoanalytic insight in understanding his time and space. It is possible to bring in a historical lens to canonise Manik as a writer of the thirties. It is even possible to identify how Manik used saga, lore, narrative as the local source of his stories to resist the western genre of the novel—a figure invested in decolonising the mind during the time of colonisation. The craftsmanship of Manik however lies in making the temporal universal. Because of his genuine interest in man and society, he can rub shoulders with any great writer of any culture to show how great literatures can transcend the binds of their time. As Devesh Roy has shown, Manik always posits man at the pivot and society at the rim; his characters span out like spokes in a bicycle wheel.

The wheel is on the move. It is not possible to think of Manik without his artistic hunger, and his commitment and attachment to the society in which he not only lived but also progressed.

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literary magazine.

The editor-in-charge and a member of Kallol group, Achintya Kumar Sengupta later recalled, "One day a dark lanky fellow came to our *Bichitra* office. He said, 'I've brought a story'. I told him to leave it on the table. He said, 'take it,' stretching his arms to hand in the manuscript in a manner to suggest that it should go to press right away."

The short story not only got published but also gave Manik his first earning of twenty taka as a writer. One of the editorial assistants from *Bichitra* came to his house to hand in the money with a request of writing more and a copy of his published story "Atoshi Mami," which eventually became the title story of his first collection of short stories. Even though Manik later prescribed that nobody should write before the age of thirty, he violated his own rule by a near decade. At college, he started giving more and more time to his writing. It is at this same time that he got introduced to leftist politics. The double distractions cost him his education. He failed twice in his BSC exam and was ousted from college. His elder brother, who did not see any use of creativity, stopped sending him money. Manik reacted by saying, "One day people will utter my names along with Rabindranath or Sarat Chandra."

Born on May 19, 1908, Manik Bandopadhyay was the fifth of the fourteen children of his parents. He was given the name Probodh Kumar Bandhopaddhay. Owing to his dark complexion, he was known to his family members as *Kala Manik* (black diamond), or simply Manik. His father was a sub-registrar who was posted in different parts of pre-Partition Bengal. Consequently, the family travelled all across the undivided Bengal, which had a shaping influence on Manik. For instance, before his school entrance exam he ran away from home to spend some time with the boatmen community in Tangail. His experience later helped him depict the fishermen's villages in *Padma Nadir Majhi*.

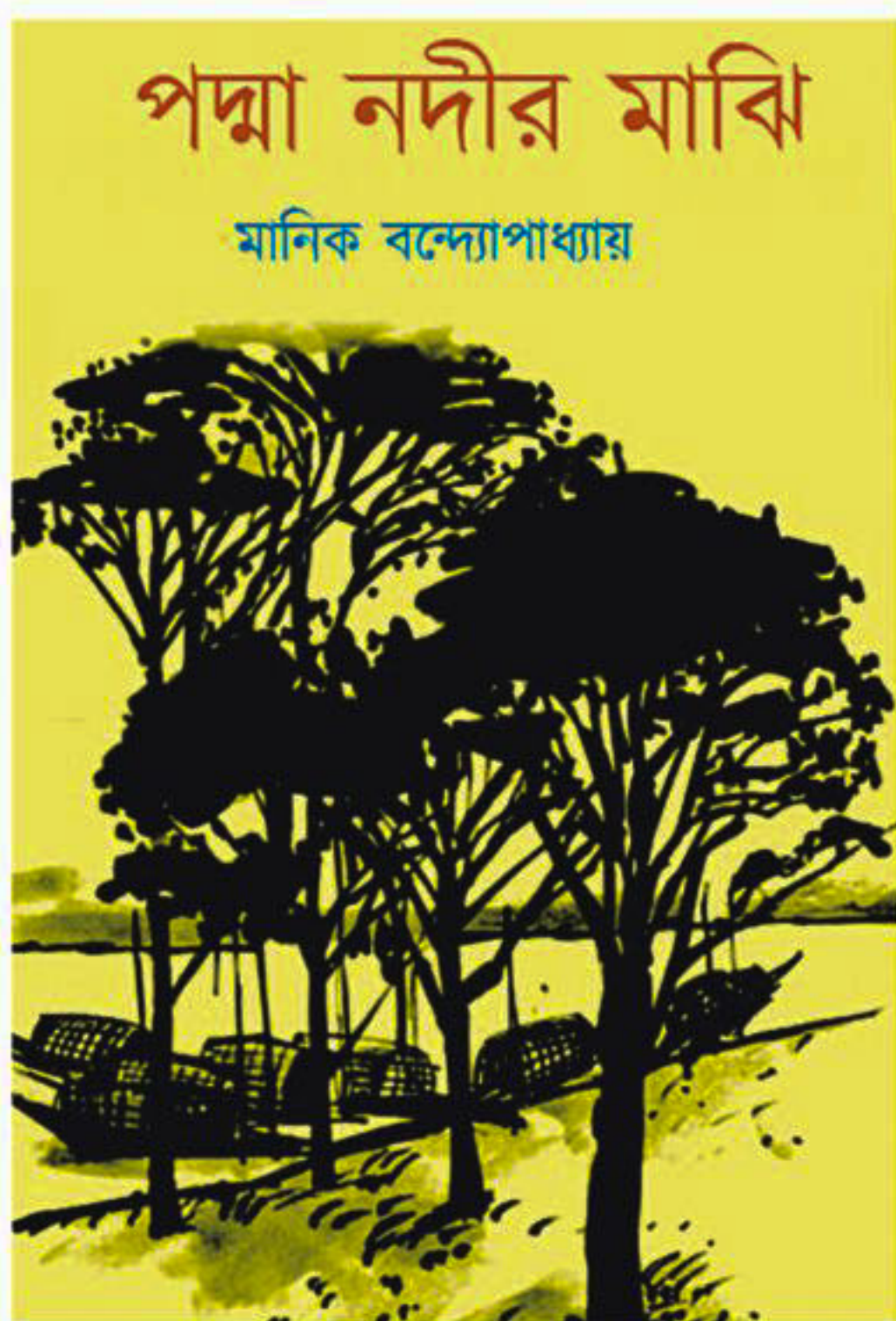
At the time of submission of his first story, he used his pet name Manik as his nom de plume, thereby authoring his own name, his own career path. It was not mere chance that made him an author. In an essay, "Before Doing Literature," he mentioned the training

and preparation required for writing. That Manik has become a 'gem' of Bangla literature is because of his experiential reality and the economy of language with which he expressed it. There are critics who have tried to categorise the different phases of Manik based on his encounter with poverty, alcohol, political dogma, epilepsy or even later day obsession with Ma Kali. They, however, all agree on his creative genius, and his contribution to the spirit of the age.

Many of his artistic themes are present in "Atoshi Mami" as seeds that we find abloom in his mature works. The story is about a musician, Jatin, who bleeds profusely every time he plays his flute. The artist lives in seclusion, and plays his flute only in the evening. Jatin is dying of poverty, and it is his love for music and his wife Atoshi that keeps him going. In her effort to keep her husband alive, Aunt Atoshi asks the narrator to deter Jatin from playing his flute. The narrator uses a ploy to buy the flute from Jatin before the family leaves town. Much later, one day on a train the narrator meets Atoshi who tells him how Jatin has died of an accident and she needs that flute back to join her husband in a place which only the couple can occupy.

This is a strange tale, especially coming from a twenty-year-old. Even more strangely, it foreshadows his own life of financial hardship and physical illness. Like Atoshi who was scarred by her uncle, Manik too bore a scar on his ankle from a burning charcoal which fell into his shoes. He was a wild boy, involved in all sorts of troubles including getting into fights with bullies and being injured by glass shreds while making firecrackers. He took up alcohol at an early age and showed signs of epileptic fits. Twice he had near death experiences by the river while walking in a trance. He often had flashbacks of memory. He never held any steady job. He is the ultimate Kafkaesque 'Hunger Artist' who literally killed himself in the process of writing 36 novels, 177 short stories, and many letters and non-fiction pieces. Or should I say he is just like Jatin who died in the process of creating music amid poverty?

The supernatural hints made in "Atoshi Mami" are far from the obsession for naturalism that he had.



Freud or a materialist like Marx would entail it. A writer has a plot in which he has to populate his characters; and he has to plot a storyline where these characters will interact both as individuals and social beings. The narrator in *Putul Nancher Itikatha* reveals: "It's not the beauty of the village that is made up of trees, houses, or ditches that Shashi was looking at; he looked around for people."

Is Manik taking a jab at his contemporary Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay in these lines? Maybe. Maybe not. Manik is known for breaking away from the sentimentality of Tagore, his spirituality and idealism. He was writing at a time when a writer needed to respond to the advent of technology and the social evolutionary process. In "Trends of Novel," he writes: "Artists must have a scientific attitude, especially today, so that one can detect the illusory pitfalls of spiritualism and idealism. ... The mood and idea of a novel must be based on reality. The characters may turn out to be odd, but still they need to be earthly and real."

...The narrative of a novel can involve imagination that is beyond reality, a mindscape that exists only in the mind of a writer; yet such creation must be grounded in real lives, real people and real environment."

I refer to Manik's own composition process to understand the man behind his works. His explanation proves him to be a man of conviction, a man who knows what he is doing. He was a first year Honours student at the Presidency College, when one of his friends, a failed writer, challenged him to publish his work in a literary journal. Manik had obtained first divisions in both his matriculation and intermediate examinations, and was all set to pursue his Honours degree in Mathematics. When his friend blamed the system for not allowing budding writers like him, Manik simply retorted by pointing out that perhaps his friend's writing was not good enough. In response, his friend dared him to get published. Manik took up the challenge, and within three months' time he showed up at the office of *Bichitra*, an acclaimed