

A Tribute to Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay on his 125th Birthday on September 12, 2019

In the Turmeric Fields: The World of Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay

SOHANA MANZOOR

*"Holud bonay bonay
Naakchhabiti hariye gechhe
Shukh neiko monay..."*
(In the turmeric fields
I lost my nose-pin
Feeling so unhappy...)

Young Durga of *Pother Panchali* chanted the rhymes as she wandered amidst the wildernesses of Nischindipur. No, she did not make up the lyrics; they were taught to her by her elderly aunt Indir Thakrun. I myself was very young when I first came across the tale of Apu and Durga, but the words got imprinted in my mind and I used to recite them as I played in the overgrown shrubbery

and empty plots of Banani in the late seventies. The glitzy high-rise buildings were still decades in the future, I was free to romp around with a stick in hand and imagine myself as Durga and my little brother as Apu. I did not know the exact meaning of these lines but the *holud bon* or the yellow forest/ turmeric fields beckoned to me like a magical sun-drenched domain where my imagination ran wild and I could get a break from the tedious routine of homework and school.

This article, however, is not only about the world of Apu and Durga, but the amazing and picturesque depiction of the rural Bengal in Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's work. Everybody familiar with Bengali literature knows about the Apu trilogy, the first two volumes of which were written by Bibhu Babu and the third, by his son Tarapada Bandyopadhyay. Bandyopadhyay's short novel *Aranyak* also gained fame because of its critique of urbanization and the destruction of natural habitats. Love for nature and rustic people of the rural north Bengal lies at the heart of this novella.

My admiration for Bibhu Babu's prose began with *Pother Panchali*, extended to *Aranyak*, and then expanded with his huge volume of short stories. I still remember sitting in a corner of our veranda, poring over the tales. Some of my first stories were "Kinnordol," featuring the gifted cousins with musical talent who died early, the magical and romantic story of a flutist in "Meghmallar," who committed an atrocious crime unknowingly against the goddess of music and wisdom and his atonement, the simple and ardent wishes of a poor boy in "Taalnobomi," to be invited to a better-off neighbor only to have his heart broken and the mysterious appearance of a girl when a visitor arrives at his ancestral house in "Patrik Bhita." "Puin Macha" is one story that all readers of Bibhutibhushan remember: the adolescent girl who loved to eat *puin shak*, and was often harassed by her mother. But when she dies at her in-laws' house, the memory comes back to haunt her family members. The emotions explored in these short stories are simple and genuine; human follies are exposed, sometimes even made fun of,

but most important of all, they are depicted in a background of a rural Bengal that is now almost gone. The pages are steeped with descriptions of the *shal* forests of the Northern districts, the hushed repose of an Arcadian expanse, steep mountain paths, lonely villagers, starlit nights and all that comes with such explorations. The author draws the portrayals with the compassion of a fellow human, and indeed the everyday sorrows that might seem insignificant to great writers concerned with national crisis, turn vivid and reach out to the readers.

I have often wondered why I am so much taken in with Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's work, what mystery is there in his writing that appeals to me more than any other Bengali fiction writer. One reason, of course, is that I grew up with his characters, but the more important reason is that in his description of nature and stories, I discover the quintessential spirit of the nineteenth and early twentieth-century Bengal. There are critics who have criticized Bibhu babu's romanticizing of poverty as opposed to Manik Bandyopadhyay's realistic representation of rural Bengal, or Tarashankar's political standing in locating the same rural atmosphere through a critical lens. Bubhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's art is very different from both the other Bandyopadhyays. I would say that he doesn't idealize or romanticize poverty, but softens its harshness. Indeed, his brush strokes are softer with colorful hues, whereas Manik Mandyopadhyay uses crude charcoal to bring out the coarser aspects of life. Yet, in some significant ways, Bibhu babu's portrayal of nature is unparalleled, where light and darkness cause miracles, like a chiaroscuro painting in words, where one can visualize the red dirt roads curving around the meadows, hear songs of unseen birds in the woods, see lonely travelers with meager belongings, and the rich abundance of natural beauty.

I have often felt that Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's place in Bengali literature is parallel to that of Jibanananda Das. One of them brings in the beauty of rural Bengal in prose and the other in poetry. Jibanananda Das ventures to walk thousands of miles through the historical spots of

ancient India while Bibhutibhushan ambles along the untrodden greenery of north-western Bengal, identifying various birds and wild creatures in his sojourn. Theirs are the tales of Wordsworthian rustics that never get to enjoy the commodities of modern life. What can we as readers expect to gain from that life? We often speak of rural simplicity. Or, perhaps it is our version of Arcadia? Many would perhaps not care to look back at the past any more. The urbanization and materialistic aspects of life hinder us from looking back except perhaps in our dreams and imagination. But sometimes, all of us need to think of the days past, of our cultural history, of the shambles we stand on. We need to connect ourselves with our forefathers and foremothers, with our roots that go deeper than all the hullabaloo we immerse ourselves everyday.

So, I come back to the beginning of my essay. What and where is this *holud bon*? Is it merely a reference to the golden paddy fields? Or, is it some actual turmeric field or forest? Or, perhaps, it is neither. When Durga ran along the wilderness with her brother, she was about twelve years old— a mere child from our perspective. But during those days, that was a marriageable age, and Durga might have very well been dreaming of a happy conjugal future. She does blush and shy away at the prospect of union with a young man visiting the neighbourhood. The *holud bon* could very well be a reference to the marriage ritual of *gaye holud*. Then again, the loss of one's nose-pin signifies ill-omen, and hence along with hope there is also a tinge of anxiety: what if things do not go smoothly? Even if Durga had lived instead of dying young, how much happiness could have her parents bought in a marriage that depended on dowry and the social status of her father? The times may have changed and the songs and places may differ, but the tension and dreams still abound. The lives of the rustic people of Bengal still go about in the very same manner.

Sohana Manzoor is Associate Professor, Department of English & Humanities, ULAB. Currently, she is also the Editor of Star Literature and Reviews Pages.

The Deer

A Translation from Dr. Muhammed Zafar Iqbal's *Shongi Shathi Poshu Pakhi*

NOORA SHAMSI BAHAR

We lived in Pirojpur then. Barisal is the land of rivers and nullahs, and Pirojpur is no exception. Unless you have been to this Southern region of the country, you cannot claim to have really seen the country. We were not used to seeing such multitudes of rivers and hence, the first time we did see them, we could not help but be amazed. There were villages on either sides of the river, and for as far as the eyes could see, there were coconut and Areca palm trees. Various kinds of sailboats floating away – what a remarkable scene! The ebb and flow of the tide could be seen twice a day; the residents' lives here were tied to the ebb and flow.

We had grown up by then. The siblings either go to school, college or university; some here, some in Dhaka. When we get together for holidays, it feels as if there is no greater joy than to be alive. After dusk, we sit together in the inner veranda, the fireflies swarm in a distant tree; thousands of fireflies in a single tree – synchronously switching on their photic emission and then switching off. We tell stories in low voices while sipping on tea. Abba would sometimes want to hear songs, my sisters would sing "Sokhi Bhabna Kahare Bole" while swinging their heads; we would sit or lie down, look into the night sky and listen to the song. Sometimes, Ira would slowly advance towards us and take a sniff.

Ira is the name of our deer. On one of our holidays, when I arrived home, I saw Ira roaming around inside the house. When brought from the Sunderbans, Ira was apparently only a fawn, but now Ira has grown quite a bit. My elder brother petted the fawn and affectionately named it Ira. Reputedly, deer cannot be completely tamed. After all, a wild animal is meant to live in the wildernesses. So when we would call out Ira's name, it would sometimes pay heed and come closer, and at other times, it wouldn't bother – it would only raise its head and look towards the direction of the call. Within the compound of the house, there is a courtyard where there are trees and shrubs; Ira walks amidst them and feeds on the grass and leaves. Ira loves

to eat raw rice. If you call our Ira's name while holding out a fistful of raw rice, it comes to you and licks the rice off your hand. Sometimes, Ira would allow you to caress its body. If in a really good mood, Ira would voluntarily raise its head and come stand close to us, and we would stroke its neck. Deer is a very beautiful creature, so pleasing to the eye.

On the whole, we were spending an excellent time. I have grown up now, hence I sometimes ponder over the joys and sorrows of life. What else could one call happiness, if not for the days of merriment spent together?

Just then, the horrific time of 71 came upon us. The entire nation was afflicted by misery and anguish. Torture, injustice and destruction, deaths after deaths. Three million people had to give up their lives for the sake of love for their motherland. Not a single person was spared from that fatal venom, so how could we? When the country gained independence, our beautiful family was devastated. We were scattered in different places, and with a lot of difficulty, we came under one roof at our remote village home – all except Abba. He lay under the shade of a tree on the riverbank; his bullet-pierced body was retrieved from the river by the village folk who buried him there.

Slowly and gradually, life began once again. A rented house, a few blankets, and Amma surrounded by us siblings. Once commute started again, I took Amma to Pirojpur to see where Abba was and how he was doing. The military personnel had already looted the house quite a while back, but that is not where our concerns lie. When a member of the family is no more, what good will the family property come to?

When I was going through severe personal depression, someone asked me, "Didn't you have a deer?"

I was suddenly reminded of Ira. Indeed we did have a deer. A beautiful deer from the bygone joyous times. I answered, "Yes, do you know where the deer is?"

The man said he did not know but there was a deer in one of the houses nearby. For some reason, I really want-

ed to see Ira once more and so I began a search. What was I to do with a deer at this time? Life as it was, seemed difficult for human beings, let alone a deer.

Finally, news arrived that about a mile or two away, there was a deer within the compounds of a certain house and it could have been our deer. One day, I went over to that house and introduced myself. The gentleman received me cordially and welcomed me inside and bade me sit. I told him, "We used to have a deer but there is no trace of it since the end of the war. I heard you've found a deer?"

The gentleman said he had indeed found a deer but chances of it being ours was very slim. Apparently, the military troops had ransacked our home abysmally, and they must have shot down the deer for its meat. The gentleman's words were logical and yet I expressed my desire to see the deer once. It might not be our deer, and even if it would be, I would not take it away, yet I wanted to see it. The gentleman immediately took me inside. The compound was huge; we would have to look for the deer. The gentleman said, "Deer don't want to come near humans; they stay hidden away and out of sight."

I was looking for the deer and suddenly caught a glimpse of it from afar – quite a large spotted deer. There was no way to identify it as our Ira. I don't know what I was thinking, but I cupped my hands together around my mouth and called out, "Iiiiiira," just as I used to call out before. The deer suddenly pricked up its ears, erected its head and stood up. Then it turned around and looked at me. To my surprise, suddenly it took long strides and hopped towards me. When it neared me, it stopped and then stretched its neck outwards and brought its head close to my face. I put my arms around its neck and caressed him. It stood there, silently, with eyed closed, and accepted my affection. This is Ira, our deer, a chimera reminiscent of happiness. For some reason, tears welled up in my eyes.

The gentleman became quite surprised, and I think he felt a little embarrassed too. Deer cannot be domesticated. That's what he knew. Is there

anything more bemusing than a deer recognizing its own pet name after the passage of a year, and darting towards me like that? Right then, the gentleman made arrangements to hand over the deer to me, but what was I to do with a deer?

A man from our village had come with us to help out. I am not even going to mention his name because if I start narrating his tale, it will take up countless pages. He witnessed the entire incident with me and thus at the very moment when the gentleman handed over the deer to me, he announced that



he would take the deer, and that he would take its responsibility.

At that time, there was no way to commute to the village. Trains were not running because bridges had been blown up; there were no vehicles since there were no roads. Under such circumstances, I didn't know how he would take the deer home and to be honest, I didn't care to know.

I couldn't believe he would actually manage to take the deer with him but indeed he had accomplished the mission and showed up with the deer

at our distant village home. The people of that vicinity hadn't seen many deer in their lives. So it didn't come as a surprise when Ira had become a spectacle in the neighboring villages. With absolute freedom, it roamed around in the farmlands of the village. No one had the courage or the power to catch Ira. Despite its name being Ira, it was not a doe; it was a stag. So when he grew bigger, he grew antlers on his head. What an appearance! He would roam around freely in the fields of the village – an unforgettable sight.

The ending of the tale about the

deer is not a happy one. Truth be told, this is the problem with the story; even though the ending is not a happy one, it is the ending that must be given to culminate the narration. We were in Dhaka then. A letter had come from our village and it contained news of Ira. I wish it didn't. Apparently they had slaughtered Ira and eaten him up. Allegedly, deer meat is delicious.

Noora Shamsi Bahar is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of English & Modern Languages at North South University.