

COLLAGE: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

SONGS OF OUR SOIL

In praise of Mymensingh’s Bangla folk ballads

SHAMSUDDOZA SAJEN

Folk-ballads are living archives that represent the imagination, values, ideas, and aesthetics of the people to whom they belong. Bangla literature has a rich repertoire of folk-ballads. We are, however, quite oblivious of this treasure trove and, therefore, there is a dearth of research on these folk elements.

Czech Indologist Dusan Zbavitel’s *Bengali Folk-Ballads From Mymensingh And The Problem Of Their Authenticity* can be called a wonderful exception in this regard. It is considered to be the first literary study of the beautiful folk-ballads from Mymensingh. The study was published by the University of Calcutta in 1963.

A brief background of the book may not be irrelevant here. In 1923, Rai Bahadur Dineshchandra Sen edited a volume of epic songs from the Mymensingh District of the then Eastern Bengal under the title *Maimansimha-gitika*. The ballads were mainly collected by Chandra Kumar De, a literary activist from the area. In the following years, Dineshchandra published three more volumes of balladic texts containing epic songs from different parts of Eastern Bengal. The beautiful ballads received enthusiastic response and admiration in India and abroad. However, for some scholars these ballads were too good, and they shared doubts about the antiquity, authenticity and folk character of these lores. Dusan Zbavitel found this uncertainty “highly regrettable” and undertook a study to assign to the ballads their proper place—“one of the high points of Bengali literature”. Dr Zbavitel tried to find out: “what is it that makes them so excellent?”

Zbavitel confined his analysis to the study of the ballads originating in Mymensingh—41 ballads containing more than 21,000 verses. He took an arduous effort of analysing each of these 41 ballads to prove their originality and, I must say, he achieved his goal with marked success.

One key argument put forward by Zbavitel in favour of the originality of the *gitikas* from Mymensingh is that these ballads are not collected by a single person and, still, there are similarities among the ballads: identical images, and similar

artistic approach and common inventory of similes and metaphors. So these ballads couldn’t be the creation of a modern poet as suggested by some detractors.

According to Zbavitel, the most significant aspect of these folk ballads is that they are devoid of any religious implications. They generally show harmonious co-existence of the Hindu and Muslim communities, without religious bias on either side. Zbavitel points out the fact that most of the Hindu ballads were collected from Muslim singers, which

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shows, according to him, that these folk poems were enjoyed and appreciated by both the communities with the same eagerness. The secular outlook of the folk ballads is diametrically opposite to the explicit religious connotation of the classical Bengali literary texts such as *Mangal-kavyas* and *Vaisnava* literature.

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As to the literary techniques, the ballad writers, being true to the characteristics of folk epics, do not try to introduce innovations in their lyrical dictions. They are content with the poetic means offered by their predecessors. They want to tell an interesting and touching story in a simple garb, fresh with country scenes and feelings.

Zbavitel also discusses the manner of preservation of the folk ballads—preserved, in most cases, in torsos. Referring to two versions of the same ballad, *Maishal Bandhu*, he argues, “The ‘original’ ballads [were] sometimes rewritten by another folk poet, or other poets, quite freely, without any scruples; whole portions, as well as individual couplets and verses, were taken over, others were replaced by newly replaced passages, and the story itself was often changed.” The reasons behind such changes, according to Zbavitel, might be an effort to offer listeners a ‘better’ story than the original one.

Due to this oral nature of preservation, it is always difficult to prove the originality of folk elements. If we undertake an effort to study the folklore of Bangladesh, Zbavitel’s book will be an invaluable companion guide.

Rabindranath Tagore wrote to Dinesh Chandra Sen in appreciation of the book *Maimansimha-gitika*, “Classical Bengali literary texts such as Mangal-kavyas are ponds dug on by order and at the expense of the rich, but *Maimansimha-gitika* is a source of exuberance from the deepest level of the heart of rural Bengal, a clear stream of genuine pain. There has never been such a creation of self-forgetting *rasa* [aesthetic joy] in Bengali literature.” [translation by the author]

While celebrating the Bengali new year this Pohela Boishakh, may we remember the melody and the essence of communal harmony embedded in *Maimansimha-gitika*.

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BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

The invisible life of migrant domestic workers

NOUSHIN NURI

“Absence is the highest form of presence.” This Joycean quote could not be truer for Nisha.

One day, after her husband is swallowed by the cave while mining for gems in Ratnapura, Sri Lanka, Nisha makes the tough decision of sailing to Cypress for her livelihood. She ends up as the nanny for the child of a woman named Petra. Nisha, like all nannies, is conveniently invisible behind the wholesome meals cooked on time, the garden well-kept, and the child taken care of. But when she suddenly disappears, leaving her passport behind, Petra begins to feel her presence for the first time. *Songbirds* (Manilla Press, 2021) is a tale of migrant domestic workers whose presence becomes more vivid only once they go missing.

Nisha’s story is not entirely a figment of imagination by author Christy Lefteri. In 2018, five migrant domestic workers and their two children went missing in Cypress. Even after the cases were reported, no investigation or even search was initiated. The police simply dismissed them as runaways. It wasn’t until two years later that the real and more tragic fate of these women was discovered.

Though the names and many details of the original victims are not preserved, *Songbirds* holds the essence of the event. Lefteri explores how the police remained negligent to the cases only because the victims were foreign women from poor countries.

Nisha’s disappearance, similarly, is not taken seriously by the police because to them, migrant domestic workers are the “drifters of the world” who drift to lands of better opportunities, unanchored by family ties. Little understood are the circumstances that force these nannies to mother their own children through a virtual

screen—Nisha doesn’t get to see her daughter for 10 years except for video calls twice a week, but it is a part of the price she pays to save up for Kumari’s education.

Nisha calls Kumari using an iPad from Yiannis—Petra’s divorced neighbour, and her lover. She knows it is common for employers to dismiss their maids if an affair is discovered; yet she finds comfort in spending nights with this man.

Yiannis himself is another complex character. An investment banker beaten by the blows of the 2008 financial crisis, he has been lured into the illegal and dangerous trade of poaching songbirds. Once he steps into this trap, even if he wants to, he’s unable to break loose of the neatly sealed underground world of poaching—thus metaphorically transformed into a songbird stuck in a net.

These songbirds migrating from Africa mirror the soul of the migrant domestic workers. They migrate to foreign lands to seek freedom and new opportunities. Like the poached birds, the workers too are trapped with huge debts to the agencies that helped them find work. Like songbirds that keep singing even when they are stuck in the poacher’s mist net, these women, despite the crippling debt and prejudices, dream of finally saving up enough for a good life back home.

Against this backdrop, Christy Lefteri conjures an immersive world through food. Recipes of the savoury *dhal* and sweet *aluwa* Nisha cooked for her employers shows local Sri Lankan cuisine being brought to Petra’s Cypriot home. The pages become aromatic as Yiannis roasts haloumi and olive in the forest or as Nisha’s husband cooks flat crispy bread named *godamba* roti and delicious green jackfruit curry with pandan leaves and coconut milk.

But not once do we hear Nisha’s voice. Her life is told the way it was lived: from the perspective of others. Her story is a tragic one of many migrant domestic workers who take flight to find freedom but find themselves trapped in mist nets of racism and misogyny.

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Amartya Sen’s ‘Home in the World’: Life of an intellectual

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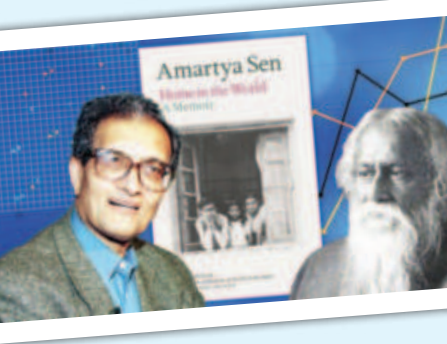
“When I was born, Rabindranath persuaded my mother that it was boring to stick to well-used names and he proposed a new name for me...Amartya”, writes the author and economist. Amartya Sen is often mentioned along with Rabindranath Tagore and Satyajit Ray for their remarkable contributions to Bengali history, and for their common connection to Santiniketan. Sen enhanced the glory of early Bengali intellectuals and continues to be a part of it till now.

Home in the Real World: A Memoir (Allen Lane, 2021), the most recent memoir of the Nobel laureate, borrows its title from Tagore’s “The Home and the World” and reflects his influence on Sen, which began from young Amartya’s first day at Tagore’s unconventional school. It is an engrossing read with the anecdotal presence of personalities—Satyendra Nath Bose, physicist Paul Dirac, Rabindranath Tagore, Gandhi, and (other) great economists—

drawn from history, their presence in the text is sometimes humorous, sometimes historical, and at others, informative. We learn of Sen’s familial background, his early battle with carcinoma (which he diagnosed from reading medical books even though many doctors denied the cancer’s existence), his convictions addressing rationalism, and his opinion over political issues. The remarkable work moves in a slow, graceful manner as it exudes the fragrance of the 20th century through its pages.

Sen depicts his childhood acquaintance with Mandalay, Dhaka, and Santiniketan with homely affection. A vague remembrance is presented of Mandalay, a charming city with a beautiful palace, Irrawaddy river, pagodas, and the distinguished prominence of women within the society. The happiness felt at their house, Jagat Kutir, in old Dhaka, watching engaging films with his Dadamani, and

early memories of going to his father’s laboratory at Dhaka University made Dhaka a place that Sen felt he belonged to. “Being in Santiniketan for the school terms and Dhaka for long holidays seemed an ideal



combination to me [...] All this changed with the partition of the country in 1947 [...] It also meant that we had to move [...] I loved Santiniketan but I greatly missed Dhaka—and Jagat Kutir”, Sen writes.

Amartya Sen spent the best years of his life in Santiniketan or what he preferred to call ‘school without walls’. The air of freedom there—which didn’t exist while he was in St Gregory’s School—was crucial in moulding his thinking and his perception of education; he learned the importance of freedom and reason, a combination that resided with him all his life. The presence of Tagore and his close relationship with Sen’s family make the pages more indulging. Sen’s scholar grandfather, an intimate friend of Tagore, is equally present in the many anecdotes.

One of the interesting chapters of the book is devoted to unfurling the fundamental differences between the two great leaders of India: Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi. Amartya Sen shares his scepticism of Gandhi’s sentimentally prioritised and unscientific vision—unlike that of Tagore’s—and expresses resentment for the little attention Tagore’s real ideas received from the western audience.

A quiet, nocturnal Calcutta with its adda, debates, late night walks, theatres, and avenues of books in College street—“I had the wonderful sense that I had come to the right place on earth”—is delightfully narrated from a time when Sen was studying Economics and Mathematics at Presidency College. The intellectual ride swirls through cultures and places across history. It also brings forth a realisation of how the world changed in such a short time.

Readers more interested than I in the conceptions of economics and politics will find much to interest them. I couldn’t really comprehend why a memoir needed to establish such an in depth theoretical understanding of economics. I was more deeply immersed in the story of such an interesting life led by an accomplished person.

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