

BAISHAKH

Scenes from Days in Old Dhaka

The boy casts a last look at Nagordola. He hears the cries of joy of the riders as the Ferris wheel goes round and round. He's ridden it once, but he'll love to jump in again for another round.

RAHAD ABIR

The Baishakhi fairgrounds is just a stone's throw away from the Doyagonj Bridge, where grandpa always takes Rony for afternoon walks. At the Dhupkhola Math fairgrounds, the boy goes wild with excitement. So many toys to buy, so many sweet snacks to eat, so many fun rides to try. The Mela is abuzz with a raucous yet delightful soundscape. He flutters with joy. "Dada, I want this. Dada, I want that," Rony demands as he capers about, driving grandpa crazy and tugging his hand violently in all directions.

Over an hour, the boy makes grandpa broke. Still his seven-year-old heart is unconvinced. He begins to shed tears, and grandpa has no way but to pull his empty Panjabi pockets inside out. "See?" Grandpa says. "I had 10 taka and I spent it all on you. Now let's go home."

clay elephant and the wooden push-n-pull walking toy. And his other hand is holding a cone of finger shaped *goja* sticks. The boy bites into a stick as they head out the fairgrounds.

Toward the end of that year, 1987, grandpa no longer takes the boy to afternoon walks. "It's dangerous," grandpa explains. "Military is everywhere." At times, Rony surreptitiously slips from the house and wanders through the alley that leads to the main street. From a safe distance he watches open top olive-green jeeps patrol the street. At a neighbor's front yard where children gather to play, he often hears some older kids chant a phrase: "Down, down, down with Ershad."

The following year, the boy's family has moved to another neighborhood in Narinda. He is happy in the new place. One of his friends at school happens to live next door. The friend's father, who is in the trade of business, reads books. One day Rony hears him tell his friend, "If someone asks you about your religion, say it's Sanatana Dharma."

That year, the day before Pohela Baishakh, the boy learns about Chaitra Sankranti, a celebration of the last day of the month Chaitra in Bangla calendar. When he visits his friend's, he is offered fruits and a variety of homemade sweets, including *payesh* and coconut laddoo.

Delwar is a senior mastan, a known goonda in the neighborhood. His kinfolks—younger brothers and many cousins—all have eventually followed his footsteps. One of these cousins, a school dropout, is Rony's age. Rony plays marbles and spinning tops with him, along with the other kids in the neighborhood.

In one year, arrangements are made to celebrate Baishak. A small stage with shamiana is erected off the main street, blocking the three-way junction. On the day of the Pohela Baishak, the program kicks off in the late afternoon. The host is none but Delwar. Long and tedious speeches are delivered. Songs and dances are performed. Then Delwar stands upright before the microphone. He begins reciting a poem. *Bidrohi* by Kazi Nazrul Islam.

For the first time, the boy sees the other side of Delwar mastan, in the skin of an artist. His thick and stentorian voice is mesmerizing. The boy is awed, enchanted, fascinated. Each word of the poem fills him with a thrilling sensation. This is his first ever experience to watch someone perform *Bidrohi* live.

Of medium height and sturdily built and balding, Delwar is in his mid-thirties. He has a hard face and large eyes, eyes that are

powerful enough to give one a cold shiver. What astonishes the boy most is Delwar renders the whole poem by heart. How could the heart of a goonda or mastan bear such a passion for poetry? How on earth has he gotten this artistic talent? the boy wonders. When Delwar utters the last two lines of the poem, the boy truly imagines him as the real rebel—a savior dropped from the sky to save the troubled nation:

Ami chiro bidrohi bir/ bishwo charaye uthiyachi eka chiro unnoto shir (I am the rebel eternal, / I raise my head beyond this world, / High, ever erect and alone! —trans. by Kabir Chowdhury)

The boy has had goosebumps all over his body, all throughout the recitation. Long after Delwar finishes his performance, his masterful voice stays with the boy. He feels possessed for days and weeks. That afternoon, Delwar mastan turns his preteen life upside down. Eventually, the boy purchases a second-hand copy of *Sanchita* from Bangla Bazar and starts memorizing many brief poems.

Some years later when Delwar dies of a heart attack, the boy has yet to learn *Bidrohi* in full by heart. Pohela Baishakhs come and go. Rony will listen to many recitals of the poem *Bidrohi*, but it is Delwar's voice that still reverberates in his ear.

The boy, Rony, is me. The boy is now a man, over forty.

As the man writes this piece on Pohela Baishakh, as he thinks back to his early days in the eighties, he relishes the happy memories of going to the Baishakhi Mela. He is to remember the exuberant soundscape of the fairgrounds. He can hear the continual sound of *dug-dugi*. The rhythmic steady creaking of Nagordola is not to be forgotten. As the Ferris wheel goes round and round, its riders—kids and teens—cheering and screaming and laughing their hearts out.

Growing up in the eighties in old Dhaka, the man cannot remember hearing anyone greeting others uttering: "Shuvo Noboborsho." In those days, the arrival of Baishak was all about going to the fair. Maqsoodul Haque of Feedback band rightly says in his song: *Melay jaire, melay jaire...*

Rahad Abir's work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Prairie Schooner*, The Los Angeles Review, Singapore Unbound, Himal Southasian, Courrier International, The Wire, and elsewhere. Currently he is working on a short story collection, which was a finalist for the 2021 Miami Book Fair Emerging Writer Fellowship.

From Syed Shamsul Haque's Stanzas of Summer & Spring

TRANSLATED BY AFSAN CHOWDHURY

My city has turned off all its lights. And then someone has muddled, all the road-marks and signs. The nameless by-lanes and roads like shriveled intestines,

coil down into the belly of hope. "How will you go home so late?" "Shall I come with you?" "No, it's not necessary." She had said that so long ago, yet the words keep coming back again. They ring in times of defeat. Smear me with Holy ashes in moments of victory.



"Shall I come with you? Shall I come along?"

"Do you like these flowers? You can take them." "I don't even like flowers." "That's so strange. Who doesn't love flowers?" Flaming flowers in your hair, saris trimmed in red, you sing sitting at the foot of the old Oak at Ramna, so many of you. 21 Yet how is it your feet are never like wings of dove? What strange agony drives Shyamal's sister to suicide, in distant Kurigram? She does it, she does it every day, even till today; And even now out here, the midnight express still whistles on. What Tagore music has done for Bengal, how hearts break, rumbles the bomber of dreams, the silver door comes together, bellies swell up in pregnancy under a supernatural touch; all these will wait for none. "Before you make Bangla your own," they say, "you will belong to Bangla." Within the drought, famine, revolution, snake-pits, the shrill cry of the blue bird, they shall turn into the eyes of the boat's prow But I do not become one! I am a slave of the celestial tobacco. The more I lose faith, the more I sell myself to the embrace of the smoke.

Syed Shamsul Haque was a Bangladeshi writer. He won the *Bangla Academy Literary award* in 1966, *Ekushey Padak* in 1984 and *Independence Day Award* in 2020 for his contribution to Bengali literature.

Afsan Chowdhury is a Bangladeshi liberation war researcher, columnist and journalist. He received *Bangla Academy Award* in the year 2018 for his contribution to the liberation war literature.



Clutching the clay boat in one hand and the balloon bashi (flute) in the other, he gives one more soulful glance at the vendor who is vending toy steamboats. In a water filled small round tub, the vendor exhibits how his "bhotbhoti" works. He lights the oil infused wick, and it runs ahead cutting across the water, just like a real big steamer launch that the boy had seen at Sadarghat port.

"It's too expensive," Grandpa says and pulls his hand. "We'll buy it next time."

The boy casts a last look at Nagordola. He hears the cries of joy of the riders as the Ferris wheel goes round and round. He's ridden it once, but he'll love to jump in again for another round. Grandpa is holding a

BOOK REVIEW

"In the sky of knowledge, there are no borders"

A Review of *Mahasweta Devi's Our Santiniketan* (trans. Radha Chakravarty).

ISBN: 978085742901. Seagull Books, 2022

BY MITALI CHAKRAVARTY

"Today it seems to me that every festival in Santiniketan offered homage to the seasons in some form or other... Much later I learnt that the festivals of Santhals and other Adivasis are the expressions of respect for farming and forest life. There are forms of nature worship based on an advantage of the earth as a primal mother."

One of India's foremost literary figures of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Mahasweta Devi was awarded the Ramon Magsaysay Award in 1997 for her "compassionate crusade through art and activism to claim for tribal peoples a just and honourable place in India's national life." Her affection for humans and nature were bred into her by her tenure in Rabindranath Tagore's Santiniketan where she studied from 1936-38. There were many more from Santiniketan who have been change-makers in different fields like Amartya Sen, Satyajit Ray, Indira Gandhi, Syed Mujtaba Ali and Gayatri Devi to name a few.

The theme of bridging borders has been recurrently spelt out in the narrative translated by Radha Chakravarty from Bengali to English. An eminent translator who has been nominated for the Crossword Translation Award (2004) for *In the Name of the Mother* by Mahasweta Devi, Chakravarty's rendition retains the flavours of Bengali, livens with the synergy at Santiniketan and gives a vivid stylistic feel of the writer, preserving the persona of a strong, fearless, accomplished, unconventional thinker in her mature years.

Our Santiniketan is a translation, of Mahasweta Devi's *Amader Santiniketan* written in Bengali. This book came into being in 2001 when the author started penning down her memories on the persuasion of the editor, Alok Chattopadhyay, of Sriшти Prakashan. This is an important book

for the current troubled and divisive times. The translation of the idea of the world as a family exposed to a larger readership may perhaps impact our move towards a more humanitarian world.

The Santiniketan projected by Mahasweta was a place that transcended all barriers of race, class, creed and wealth coloured with love, kindness and affection. It showcased Rabindranath's vision of an ideal education system. We are told: "And in Rabindranath's time, Santiniketan offered independence. It offered nurture. And those days, they didn't teach us the value of discipline through any kind of preaching. They taught us through everyday existence"

Mahasweta Devi studied and played together with many, including eminent names in music, Kanika Bandopadhyay and Suchitra Mitra. She mentions others who taught, served or studied in Santiniketan and touched the world in different ways to make it a better place — Amiya Chakravarty, Nandalal Bose, Rathindranath and Mira (Rabindranath's children), Ramkinkar Baij, Rani Chanda, Maitreyi Devi, Mrinalini Sarabhai along with people who were part of the 'kitchen army' or the man who ran the tea stall.

Tagore was present at festivals, rehearsals and even presided during meals on some occasions. They worked at creating an ideal environment conducive to learning. By her description, Tagore had visualised education to build on the strengths of the children or students.

"Santiniketan did not adopt any

measure that would jeopardise the children's sense of confidence and security. The attempt was to instil in everyone the conviction that if one tried, one could achieve e-v-e-r-y-thing...

"He (Tagore) was the creator who moulded human character. He knew the children, when they grow up, will choose their parts according to their individual capacities. But his concern was to ensure that the children learn to use time productively and find joy in active effort. We were also trained to think for ourselves and apply our ideas in practice."

Reflecting on her youthful days at Santiniketan, Mahasweta Devi wonders, "Why does education in love not feature in today's curriculum?" Though in Santiniketan, they followed academic rigour, they were disciplined with affection. They were taught to give dignity to all kinds of work. Perhaps

that is why Mahasweta wrote, "Santiniketan taught us there is no such thing as worthless activity." There is a sprinkling of humour through the book with descriptions of the young Mahasweta's mischief, her comments on animal life, including Gaekwad's slogan "Give donkeys due respect."

Most of the world regards Tagore as a poet, a writer, a polyglot and the first Asian to win a Nobel prize. This book portrays him as a visionary who connected to people. The author mentions the mingling with Adivasis who would come down for festivals and how the older children would go

to Surul, which was part of Sriniketan. Sriniketan and Santiniketan were two projects that Tagore held very dear. He poured, we are told in *A History of Sriniketan* (Niyogi Books, 2022) by Uma Das Gupta, all his Nobel prize money into these. Das Gupta tells us that Tagore considered Sriniketan as his 'life's work.' Mahasweta writes how it was a conglomerate vision where Tagore wanted the literate middle class to bridge borders between villagers and the city folk, the uneducated and the educated. Now, both these institutions are adopted and flourish under the banner of Visva Baharti.

Mahasweta Devi concludes her narrative with her regret at being withdrawn from Santiniketan too early, though she did return for her university education post the poet's death. Things had changed by then. Towards the end of her narrative, she also gives an opinion on how she feels Tagore's vision should have been interpreted. "I feel that this Visva-Bharati could have been developed into a University with a different character... The institution could have drawn East and West closer to each other. In the sky of knowledge, there are no borders after all."

Reading this memoir has been like an idyllic escape into a Rousseauvian world where one is transported to an existence beyond mundane, manmade borders. That Santiniketan and Sriniketan were both projects shattering the confines of "narrow domestic walls" is evident with the involvement of thinkers, scientists, writers and ideators from all over the world. The translation of the memoir has actually captured that surge of energy that could help us move towards a better, more humanitarian world. This is an intense, immersive, inspiring and refreshing read.

Mitali Chakravarty writes for love and harmony and in that spirit has founded the Borderless Journal.



aqua green, your icy blue

BY RIFAT ISLAM ESHA

now i see you in summer the kind that came, before rain could settle us April, the beginning of it - the designated 'cruellest month' April, that's still roasting our breaths the skin of ants moving in circles amid gravels and twigs at my feet, there is a sense of aqua green and your icy blue: the elements of silence, but also the becoming of deeper colours that define wordlessness heavy with meaning.

i have been close, this time - closer to the image of the instrument of life

because of you what makes me, takes shape quietly enough, it's true

and truer even in tears

no summer could dry the joy as i felt it and i know, you did too.

Rifat Islam Esha is a poet. For more updates on her work, you can follow her on Instagram: @rifatiesha