

The (thrilling) Art of a Serious Literary Pursuit

As I evolved in my profession of journalism, narrative writing allowed deeper dives into the very causes and effects that make both low-key and tawdry realities, and triumphant human existence born of gritty survival, dignity, elegance—and arrogance and hubris, of course. This is where I learnt to fly. It was on the wings of the histories, events and lives of others, but it was a rare privilege to be accorded such access, and to carry the responsibility of telling stories to—hopefully—weave a fuller fabric, contribute to understanding and change. All the fiction and non-fiction that I read, all the years of wonder and delight at the art of words now translated into a living: as much a joy as a vocation.



BY SUDEEP CHAKRAVARTI

This is about living in a twilight world of a romance with fiction as well as non-fiction. It's a ménage à trois that I wouldn't ever end.

Quite often, non-fiction tops. If this is a bit in flagrant delicto for lovers of fiction, so be it. There is art in non-fiction too. You would see it if you left yesterday's wardrobe at a charity sale and wore a new second skin of mind and matter. Non-fiction mind and matter.

Sexual metaphors aside, this is a serious literary pursuit.

In South Asia we've generally been raised, irrespective of the language, on a diet of fiction. Mood, both personal and political, is usually seen as being best expressed in a poem, story, novel, a play, and more. Absolutism that so often carries over from colonial times into these allegedly post-colonial times

is enough reason for fictionalizing angst, crafting a statement, rooting for appropriate allegory.

Our non-fiction was largely born in hagiography, spiritual treatises and the occasional travelogue. Ironically, many of these are taken as examples of glorious history and sanctimonious fact—but that's another matter. Following a globalized tradition, this trend segued into memoirs, autobiographies and biographies, life made plump or life laid bare, to supplement the non-fiction that most of us have known since our schooldays: various academic texts, postulates and scholarly works in an ever-growing array of 'disciplines'. (I place that word in an apostrophic embrace only to highlight the irony of the word discipline in realms where the best work has almost always come from leaps of research, thought and faith. Other ironical words? Civil war. Civil society. But I digress. Indeed, pleasant

surprises and finessed-by-lanes exist as much in non-fiction as in fiction.)

Non-fiction was truly revealed to me in my first ever job, in media. I soon devoured incisive journalistic histories of Vietnam—*A Bright Shining Lie* by Neil Sheehan comes to mind. Ryszard Kapuscinski took me to the surreal warzones and universe of dictatorships in a manner Gabriel Garcia Marquez did—or his spirit children like Isabel Allende and Salman Rushdie. *Amrita Bazar Patrika* showed the way with brave writing on the Marichjhapi massacre. Mahasweta Devi showed the raw power of both fiction and non-fiction. Firmly rooted in her world of activism, *Hajar Churashir Ma* could so easily have been written as non-fiction. In any case it brought outraged tears and a great chill of both fright and anger in the two avatars in which I saw the story translated, as a finely wrought movie in Hindi and as arresting plays in

languages as diverse as Marathi, Hindi, Bangla and Meeteilon.

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Then came a break in my life, by choice: no more writing for media moguls who had lost sight of genuine storytelling that drew me to the profession in the first place. The Nadir of such Moguls, if you will.

Three novels arrived from this lateral shift. A bildungsroman set in a great time of oppression and reclamation of liberty in an India of the mid-Seventies. A set of angry novellas set in an India of almost apocalyptic and bloody change of the 1980s and 1990s garnished with all the hope and despair of my generation. A novel set in Goa, my adoptive home of nearly two decades, is a study of the hubris of paradise.

As much as all this carried me, writing narrative and literary non-fiction transformed me.

I live a life of revelations and mostly unfettered freedom—a treasured commodity even in the most seemingly generous society: Freedom can disappear like mist. Until then, freedom arrives in applying a narrative approach that tries to marry the skills of a journalist, researcher and writer.

If it means merging travelogue and novelistic writing with reportage and research, as I attempted with *Red Sun* (on India's Maoist rebellion) and *Highway 39* (set in the conflicted lands of Nagaland and Manipur, not far east of Bangladesh), so be it. If it means taking these aspects and adding human rights, business imperatives and case studies, as with *Clear.Hold.Build*, a study on business and human rights in India and South Asia, fine.

If it means writing a mix of history,

culture, ethnography, politics, memoir and satire—as I attempted with *The Bengalis: A Portrait of a Community*—who is to stop me? If I approach history, attempt myth-busting and make it accessible to lay readers, as with *Plassey*, why not? If a book requires aspects of conflict and conflict resolution from a regional and geo-strategic perspective, and use of every suitable multiple-genre device for it—field notes; reportage; archival research for history, politics; hatreds; hopes; interviews; analyses; aspects of climate change, and to merge it all with storytelling—as I have done with my latest, *The Eastern Gate: War and Peace in Nagaland, Manipur and India's Far East*—then it's on account of acknowledging the stupendously complex aspects of the subject and attempting to simplify it with the tools of research and reflection, context and narrative.

In any case why restrict non-fiction when a smorgasbord of life, of stories to tell, present themselves? To do otherwise would be to invite solitary confinement. Non-fiction with a vast palette of options is immensely liberating—as liberating as writing a short story, a novel, a poem, a play, a screenplay. It permits a journeying into genre-bending flights of information and analyses combined with a certain thrill seeking. How far can I push the envelope of narrative non-fiction without ever jettisoning the rigour of research?

It is good to be a part of a growing community of such writers, relatively old and relatively young, in India and South Asia. A Ghazala Wahab who questions the indignity accorded her identity in an India of engineered violence. A Manu Pillai who offers elegant, less told histories. A Meena Kandasamy who is a force of nature. And so many, many more names beyond the enlightened literary firm of Rushdie, Ghosh & Roy—and even *they* glory in non-fiction!

My next book is a narrative history of modern Delhi. It's also a crime thriller. And it is also a socio-political commentary.

Sue me.

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SONABHAN BIBI

RAHAD ABIR

One year, a week before Eid-ul-Adha, my grandma, Dadi, came to Dhaka from the village and broke into tears. "What happened?" we asked. She sobbed and said she'd brought a rooster for us. A stranger who offered her help with her bags and belongings at Sadarghat Launch Terminal, while getting off the steamer, disappeared with the rooster. Dadi had been raising the rooster especially for us, ahead of Eid-ul-Adha festival. My father didn't earn enough to sacrifice any animal (or he thought he would better save the money for his children's education).

So, the rooster was Dadi's treat for us on Eid. It was a good, healthy, and over a year-old red rooster. "*Lal boro rata morog*," in her words. She could have easily sold it for two hundred taka, she said, starting to cry again. She cursed the rooster larcenist throughout the afternoon and evening. She blamed herself for her foolishness too, for trusting such a random stranger.

For many reasons, Dadi was a remarkable character. Every time she was in Dhaka, she needed to see a doctor. After her visit to the family physician, she would whine about him, "This doctor is no good." Why? Because neither the doctor had ordered a series of tests, nor had he prescribed plenty of medication.

It was almost impossible to please Dadi. For example, say she was back from having had a meal at her son's house. How did it go? "They didn't give me the *raan* (chicken leg)," she would say. If she'd been offered the leg, her response would be, "They didn't give me the breast." If she'd been left on her own, her reaction would be, "They were so unamiable and unfriendly."

My Dadi happily played the "typical Bengali" mother-in-law role. After marriage, my 17-year-old

mother came to Dhaka to live in a sizable joint family—my father's parents and his two unmarried sisters. Dadi left no stone unturned to make the young bride's life miserable. "*Taka diya bandi kina anchi*," Dadi used to bellow when she was within earshot, my mother told me. When my mother was pregnant with me, Dadi declared that if the baby was a girl, she'd send my mother away with the newborn for good and remarry her son.

It was thought that Dadi was possessed with a jinni. When she was a very young girl, she was found on the top of a banyan tree. Sitting on a branch and dangling her feet, she was laughing hysterically. She was brought down, but the jinni never left her. She was also bitten by a mad dog in her childhood, that might be another reason for her intractable craziness.

Every year, she used to attend the annual Urs festival of Lengta Paglar Mazar in Chandpur. The festival was to commemorate the death of the naked fakir Soleman. Many years later, I found out that the devotees of the festival were unhinged, delirious, and neurotic. These half naked fakirs wearing ox red loin clothes are withdrawn, long detached from the family, and, more importantly, many of them are addicted.

At our family home in the village, Dadi had a secret and sacred place—a tiny room of her own, where she sat to perform her devotional act, *zikir*. As a little boy, I would peek into her sanctuary with a feel of fear and unease. Inside there was a step stool, and sitting on it was a small ebony staff, along



with some half burnt candles and incense on a brass pricket. And the walls, adorned with red fabric, promised the sanctity of the spot.

Dadi was the first woman who I saw smoking. At times, she would buy a couple of cheap loose cigarettes, and when no one was around, she would smoke them in the kitchen, sitting by the *chula*.

Dadi was also the first woman I saw who had multiple piercings in her ears. Three in total—one in the helix of the ear, one in her tragus, and the third one in her ear

lobe. Dadi had more than one nose piercings, too. She wore a nose stud and a septum ring. In those days, multiple ear and nose piercings were assumed to be a rustic and provincial practice seen only among the women of the uneducated and subaltern families.

Many years later, when I went to Britain, I realized that Dadi was ahead of her time. Piercings, in the West, have become a form of expression. The western world has heartily taken the ancient practice of body piercing as a popular trend.

I was in the third grade when the joint family broke up. By then my

two paternal aunts had long been married. My grandparents settled back in their old home, in the village.

Dadi loved me a lot even though she was mean to my mother. Seven years before her death, Dadi took me to a small, ramshackle jewelry shop in old Dhaka's Karatitola to make me a ring. It was a marquise ring with an imitation ruby stone in the middle. I wasn't much enthusiastic about it, but tried it on my middle finger. It felt uncomfortable. My mother then kept it in the almirah safe in case I lost it.

It was 1999. Dadi had been ill and bedridden for about a year. And for the past five months, she had completely lost her speech. She couldn't move her body on her own. Bedsores developed. My grandpa, *Dada*, struggled to take care of his wife alone. My two aunts who lived in the same district came in turns and stayed a few weeks to tend Dadi.

I went to see her one time from Dhaka. When I reached the village, it was late afternoon. I asked Dadi how she was doing. Her eyes stayed fixed on me; her mouth moved but couldn't make any words. Having

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had my meal, I washed some grapes and sat beside her. "Dadi," I said, "uhh, uhh." I opened my mouth to show her to do the same. Her lips parted a little. I pushed a grape into her mouth. Her jaw moved, slowly and sluggishly.

The second time I went to visit Dadi, she was in a state that she might die anytime. She had stopped eating. When water was poured into her mouth, it would stream out in a trail through the corner of her lips. The only way to confirm that she was still alive was, her unblinking eyes, staring into the ceiling. And her irregular, unsteady breathing. Her back stank of rotting flesh. Ants found their way into her *shital pati* mattress to feed on her bedsores.

That night no one slept. It was awfully hot. A rattan palm mat was spread on the veranda. Dadi was transferred there as well. And, sitting by her head, *Dada* and *phuphus* read the Quran, hoping that Allah would take pity on her putting an end to her suffering.

Dadi died around three. For a moment, before she breathed her last, her eyeballs seemed to be moving, looking at us. At me, in particular. And then her eyes froze in a blank stare. She was breathing no more. My aunts sobbed, covering their faces with the hems of their saris. *Dada* closed her eyes. My youngest aunt said to me, "She just waited for your arrival, to see you for the last time."

It was the very first death that occurred in our family. Dadi, whose name was Sonabhan Bibi, died in August 1999.

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