

Barisal, beyond, and the making of BENGALI LITERARY MODERNITY

In conversation with Clinton B Seely, emeritus professor of South Asian Languages and Civilisations at the University of Chicago. A leading scholar of Bengali literature, he has authored a seminal biography of Jibanananda Das, translated Michael Madhusudan Dutt's *Meghanad badh kabya*, and written influential essays on modern Bengali literary history. Recently, the University Press Limited (UPL) republished his book *Barisal and Beyond*. This conversation is centred on the book.

The Daily Star (TDS): The title *Barisal and Beyond* suggests both rootedness and transcendence. How do you interpret Jibanananda Das's regional imagination? Does *Barisal* function more as a remembered homeland or as a metaphorical space of longing and exile?

Clinton Booth Seely (CBS): *Barisal* is where I started out in Bengal. *Barisal* is where Jibanananda started out. Both of us went elsewhere. Both of us went beyond. *Rupasi Bangla* is how Jibanananda, in part, remembered *Barisal*; *Barisal and Beyond* is how I, in part, remember *Barisal*.

Though I was not "called back to Bengal", Jibanananda was, and it was definitely not a metaphorical space of exile for him. If he ever felt exiled, it was when he accepted a teaching job in Delhi at the very end of 1929, leaving that post in early 1930, and then again later, after 1946, when he took up residency in Kolkata, never to return to live permanently in *Barisal*. He felt exiled from *Barisal*, not in *Barisal*, I think we can safely say that.

I consider one of his most haunting lyrics to be the one in which he is "called back to Bengal". It is a poetic apostrophe, first published in *Kavita* in 1937. Just to be certain, there is no confusion about what constitutes a poetic apostrophe, let me assure my readers that it has nothing to do with the punctuation mark, as in the apostrophe "s". A poetic apostrophe is a figure of speech in which a speaker directly addresses someone or something that is not present or capable of responding. Shakti devotee and poet Ramprasad Sen made good use of the apostrophe when addressing his chosen deity, the mother goddess. The poem "Come Back" (*phire eso*), though not devotional in a religious sense, is just such a lyric, poetically employing the apostrophe. The addressee, I argue in the prologue to *Barisal and Beyond*, is Jibanananda himself, summoning himself back to *Barisal*.

Come back to the sea's shore,
Come back to paths through fallow fields,
To where the train stops
At a world of mango, *nim*, and *jhau* trees,
Come back. Once you wove an egg of blue.
Still today stars lie silent in the dewdrops.
When will you turn into a waterfall of birds
And be aware of me?

An even more emotional lyric of his, in which he identifies with *Barisal*, is the poem where he has a personified tree address humans:

Said the ashvattha slowly: "Which way are you headed—
Where do you wish to go?
We've all been neighbours so long, so very, very close.
Your sun-stained straw huts, they're standing yet.
And here you go forsaking home and lands,
Heading where, what path—I have no idea.
You've wrapped up your belongings, even the broken bowls, that leaky pot.
Now where are you set on going?"

Not fifty years have passed, why, it seems just yesterday
Your grandfathers, fathers, uncles
—yes, I remember them well.
Here on the edge of these very fields they bought land, built their straw huts
And in this land, on these paths with all this grass and paddy, and trees of *nim* and *jamrul*,
They paid off their debt of sorrow with life's hopes, hunger, and exhaustion.
Standing here I watched it all—it seems like just the other day.

You won't stay any longer? Which way are you headed?
I suppose there's greater peace somewhere else—more hope?
A deeper sense of life, I guess?
And that's why you'll go there to build your huts of hope.
But, no matter where you go, life itself does not change.
No matter where you build your hope-filled huts, a tale of hunger, dreams—
A tale of pain and separation shall show itself in graying hair.
So said that ashvattha tree, trembling in the darkness overhead."

It was the ashvattha tree who—and the human pronoun makes sense here—was referenced in the poem about a suicide eight years earlier, questioning whether it/he did not protest that grievous act. Why would anyone deprive himself of Bengal, of *Barisal*!

TDS: What personal or intellectual motivations led you to focus so deeply on



Clinton Booth Seely

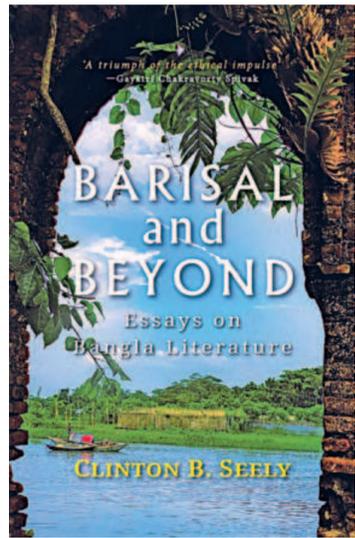
Jibanananda Das? Did your identity as a non-Bengali scholar affect how you were received in Bengali literary circles?

CBS: It was Jyotirmoy Datta, who, after his tenure at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, relocated to the University of Chicago and became one of my professors, along with Edward C. Dimock Jr. It was Jyoti who encouraged me to consider undertaking a biographical and literary study of this unique and challenging Bengali poet, fairly recently deceased at the time. My non-Bengali identity actually made access to his literary world easier. Jibanananda was everybody's favourite poet (after Rabindranath Tagore, of course), and all were more than willing to share with me, a non-Bengali, their reflections on Jibanananda and his poetry.

TDS: Has your understanding of Jibanananda Das's work evolved over the decades since you first encountered it? If so, what critical or emotional shifts have shaped the way you now read and interpret *Banalata Sen*?

CBS: I have a complete chapter in *Barisal and Beyond* on my rereading of "Banalata Sen." I always thought it odd, even awkward, that the speaker in that poem went from the South Asian subcontinent to the Malay archipelago and went nowhere else outside the South Asian subcontinent in the entire poem. Late in my career, I came to realise that "malay sagar" is really a misreading—by all of us, Jibanananda possibly included—of the *sagar*, or body of water, off the Malabar Coast.

TDS: How do you view Bharatcandra Ray's *Annada Mangal* in terms of poetic transition? Despite being situated at a literary crossroads, how did he so



Cover of the book *Barisal and Beyond* (UPL edition, 2025).

masterfully employ older medieval literary motifs in his poetry?

CBS: The *Annada Mangal* is, in my opinion, the apex of the *mangal kavya* literary tradition, both in terms of being a perfect *mangal kavya* structurally, and in terms of being the most highly ornate literary composition of that genre. I argue these points more extensively in the second half of the first chapter of *Barisal and Beyond*. For our purposes here, let me take up the second of my claims first. Most narrative texts of the pre-modern period rely upon two metres, *payar* and *tripadi*. *Payar* has been deemed the more prosaic of the two, used extensively to advance the action of the narrative. *Tripadi* is often reserved for ornamental elaborations, though both metres can be used for both purposes. Bharatcandra employs a far, far greater variety of metres than just these two.

My second claim, that the *Annada Mangal* is structurally a perfect *mangal kavya*, is diametrically opposed to what Professor Sukumar Sen has written. For Professor Sen, Bharatcandra's text is actually three separate texts: one a *mangal kavya per se*, one a romantic or erotic tale, and one a historical narrative.

I view complete *mangal kavyas* as having three distinct segments. The first takes place in *dhyva loka*, or the home of the divines and heavenly folk. The second takes place in the mortal world, the realm of humans. The third starts out in Bengal, where a Bengali, usually

a merchant, sets out to do business elsewhere in the world. This third segment I call the Dhanapati paradigm, Dhanapati being the name of a Bengali merchant who, in one *mangal kavya*, goes to Ceylon to engage in trade. The king there misidentifies the merchant as a thief, imprisons him, and plans to execute him. The goddess, whose *mangal kavya* it is, has to intervene to humble the king and free the wrongly imprisoned Bengali merchant.

Bharatcandra's *Annada Mangal* has precisely these three narrative sections. The first section takes place in heaven. Unfortunately, two of the heavenly characters are caught making love when they should have been worshipping the goddess. Those two beings are condemned to spend some time out of heaven and down among humans in the mortal world. Their names, we come to know, are Vidya and Sundar—he from South India and she a resident of Bengal. Their courtship constitutes the second segment of Bharatcandra's tripartite *mangal*. Vidya's father condemns Sundar to death for violating his daughter, until the goddess steps in and convinces the father that a legitimate marriage had taken place, a so-called *rakshasa* marriage, thereby exonerating Sundar, and at the same time convincing everyone of the supremacy of



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that particular goddess.

The third segment consists of the conquest of Bengal, specifically the Jessore region, by an army of the Mughal emperor Jahangir. That Mughal army is assisted by a Bengali gentleman from the household of a Hindu *zamindar* from Krishnanagar. In appreciation for the needed assistance, the Mughal general promises the Bengali gentleman a reward to be bestowed by Jahangir.

In a perfect "Dhanapati paradigm", the Mughal general and the Bengali gentleman proceed from Bengal to the Mughal capital in northern India. Once there, Jahangir disbelieves his general and decides, wrongly, that the Bengali gentleman is a liar. He imprisons the Bengali and threatens execution. The goddess *Annada* intercedes, punishing Jahangir and effecting the Bengali gentleman's release, after which he is rewarded by Jahangir and sent on his merry way back to Bengal—the culmination of the perfectly structured tripartite *mangal kavya*.

TDS: You have written extensively on Tagore's engagement with *mangal kavya*. What is the significance of his reading of this genre? Did it shape any critical approaches that later influenced modern Bengali literary criticism?

CBS: I can't say that Tagore's understanding of *mangal kavya* literature, which he obviously knew well, influenced modern Bangla literary criticism. I would say, however, that his understanding of the structure of the *mangal kavya*—a ubiquitous narrative genre among Hindu Bengalis in premodern Bengal—and the power of that *mangal kavya* to argue for the supremacy of one goddess or god over all others, made it possible for Tagore to argue against restrictive, conservative societal rules and caste regulations—his *nyam*—and to argue in favour of progressive, liberal, modernising spontaneity—his *icche*—in the symbolic and delightful drama *Taser Desh*, or *Land of the Clouds*.

TDS: What, in your view, is truly "modern" about *Ravana* as portrayed in Michael Madhusudan Dutt's work? How would you evaluate Michael's retelling of the *Ramayana*—does it reflect a European spirit shaped by Occidental ideas, or is it influenced more by South Indian Dravidian interpretations that challenge Orientalist readings?

CBS: The most oft-quoted line by Michael is not from any of his literary writings. It comes from one of his letters, where he wrote: "I despise Ram and his rabble, but the idea of Ravan elevates and kindles my imagination; he was a grand fellow."

Your question as to whether his retelling of the *Ramayana* is more reflective of European classics or more influenced by the Dravidian

recasting of the tale: I go to great lengths in *Barisal and Beyond* to show that the characters in Michael's epic do not deviate from those same characters in either the Sanskrit *Ramayana* by Valmiki or the standard Bangla *Ramayana* by Krittivasa. That, over the years, so many critical readers have seen deviations between Michael's main characters and those same characters in the older *Ramayanas* can be attributed to what I have called in *Barisal and Beyond* "subversive similes". Michael makes the reader think that he has fundamentally altered the characters of Rama and Ravana through the use of those "subversive similes".

Let me step back from Michael's quoted sentence from his letter above. It might be concluded that he is focusing on Ravana; he is not. His epic is not titled *Ravanavadha*. It is *Meghanad badh*, the slaying of Meghanada. It is Ravana's first and foremost son, Meghanada, who is the focus of this epic. It is really Meghanada who "elevates and kindles" Michael's imagination. It is Meghanada whom Michael valorises, even idolises. It is Meghanada, I submit, to whom Michael compares himself and finds himself wanting. Let me quote from my own published writings, from the introduction to my translation of *Meghanadavadha*, to show you what I mean:

Datta tells us in one of his letters how it

to predetermined features of a particular genre. I must admit that at times I have wondered whether Jibanananda was reluctant to publish his *Rupasi Bangla* sonnets due to the possibility that they would be judged more on whether they conformed to one or another European sonnet structure than on whether the emotional content was compelling. The sonnet, as we know, has been a very productive genre in Bangla ever since Michael. Jibanananda need not have been diffident about how emotionally compelling his sonnets were, given their reception during the 1971 war of independence.

TDS: When you encountered Tagore's work through Satyajit Ray's films, did it change the way you understood the original texts? How did that experience shape your thinking about how literature and cinema speak to, resist, or transform one another?

CBS: Satyajit Ray's direction, as well as Madhabi Mukherjee's and Soumitra Chatterjee's acting interpretations of Charu/Kadambari and Amal/Rabindranath, make Tagore's novella come ever more alive for me. It has been my experience that with cinema and literature, whichever I see or read first becomes my preferred standard. If I see the film first, the novel proves somehow inadequate. If I read the book first, the film

usually fails to meet my standards. In the case of *Nasta Nir* and *Charulata*, neither takes second place to the other. Both impress me equally and overwhelmingly.

As I note in the preface to the UPL edition of *Barisal and Beyond*, my reading of this tale of a marriage under strain conforms to Satyajit Ray's dramatisation of Tagore's work. Furthermore, I note in that preface that Satyajit's understanding of the narrative—and mine as well—is not acceptable to all contemporary Bengali readers and viewers. There are those who vigorously reject the notion that the character Amal is in any way autobiographical, or that Charu is, for all intents and purposes, the actual Kadambari Devi. Those who hold that opinion are, of course, strongly implying that Satyajit Babu and I have tarnished the good name of Rabindranath and Kadambari. I reiterate here what I write in the preface:

[N]either Satyajit Babu nor I were besmirching the name of either Tagore or Kadambari Devi. Nor was Tagore, with his moving and obviously heartfelt depiction of his wonderfully talented *bouthan*, his sister-in-law, being disrespectful of her.

TDS: You describe Raja Pratapaditya as a "problematic" hero. What led you to that assessment? Was he an exception among the *Bara Bhuiyans*, or do similar ambiguities appear in the portrayal of other figures? How did later currents of Hindu nationalism, and the pull between regional Bengali identity and pan-Indian heroic imagery, shape the way his legacy came to be remembered?

CBS: My chapter on the "problematic" Bengali hero, Raja Pratapaditya, should explain to readers why I consider him problematic. Tagore questioned Pratapaditya's status as a hero during the Swadeshi period and specifically challenged his niece Sarala Devi Chaudhurani's lionisation of him. Based on the literary evidence I have seen, including the Ram Ram Basu biography, I stand with Tagore's opinion, as opposed to his niece's, of this pre-modern Bengali warlord from Jessore.

TDS: How do you situate Rizia Rahman within the landscape of post-independence Bengali fiction?

CBS: Rizia Rahman can easily be placed within a literary lineage of Bengali women writers beginning with Begum Rokeya. However, I consider Rizia Rahman from the perspective of Bengali writers in general, not only women writers. Her attempt to make sense of individual identity within a particularly heterogeneous population, such as that found in modern-day Bangladesh, strikes me as thoughtful and provocative.

TDS: How do you assess Mir Mosharrar Hossain's place as the first major prose writer in modern Bengali literature, particularly in light of the ongoing debate about whether Bishad Sindhua qualifies as a novel? How do you interpret his personal trajectory—from a non-communal thinker to a more conservative figure later in life?

CBS: Mir Mosharrar Hossain, like Michael Madhusudan Datta, was a linguistic phenomenon. Both men completely mastered language idioms other than those they spoke. Both men took literary texts and tales utterly revered in their own cultural traditions and re-created them in a more contemporary idiom. Both men somewhat lost their youthful perspective and creative impulse later in life. But both men left us incredible literary art, part and parcel of the world literary canon. The question of whether *Bishad Sindhua* qualifies as a novel reminds me of Tagore's early negative criticism of Michael's *Meghanad badh* as not being an epic at all. We know that Tagore later retracted that early opinion of Michael's classic, attributing his initial view to what he saw as juvenile brash exuberance. I take up the issue of genre when it comes to Mir Mosharrar Hossain's impressive work, and I do address the notion of "genre criticism" generally in *Barisal and Beyond*—the notion that the quality of a work of literature somehow depends upon how well it conforms

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The interview was taken by Priyam Paul.