

'Samar Sen'

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Reading this *book was a different kind of experience. Having known him only as the Founder Editor of FRONTIER, in imagination of this reviewer he was just a scholar with leftist leanings. This short biography running to 87 pages presents Samar Sen as one of the makers of Indian Literature. The title of the book itself on the inside sheet says so. It was a pleasant surprise to find that this book has been published by the Sahitya Akadmi, a Government establishment. One could not miss the irony that the establishment has come forward to publish the biography of a person whose writings and whose journal were essentially anti-establishment. Nityapriya Ghosh, the biographer has presented readers with a good readable account of Samar Sen's life and times.

The accolade (one of the) 'makers of Indian literature' is justified by the first chapter titled 'A Representative of New Indian Poetry'. Samar Sen started writing poetry in his teens. Here is one piece (Original in Bengali was published in a major literary magazine, *Purvasa* in 1935 and translated in English by Samar ten years later):

*I go out in the grey evening
In the air the odour of flowers and the sounds of lamentation.
I go out into the hard loneliness of the barren field in the grey evening
In the air odour of flowers and the sounds of lamentation.
In the gathering darkness a long, swift train suddenly
Passes me like black lightning
Hard and ponderous and loud are the wheels,
As ponderous as the darkness, and as beautiful
I look on, enchanted, and listen to the sounds of lamentation.
In the soft, fragrant air,
The long rails, grey-dark, smooth as a serpent, shiver and
A soft, low thing cries out in the distance,
But the sounds are hard and heavy,
In the air the odour of flowers and the sounds of lamentation.*

Samar was a contemporary of other famous Bengali poets like Buddha-deva Basu, Sudhindranath Dutta, Premendra Mitra, Radharaman Mitra and others. The young poet, when he was just twenty-two years old, took up cudgels with the Nobel leureate Rabindranath Tagore who was 77 at that time! That Tagore did appreciate Samar's poem is a different matter. To quote the author "He (Samar) was flippant with elders right from his childhood and it was not surprising that he should write to Tagore in that manner, even if the elder was revered all over the world".

Samar wrote quite a few poems in Bengali language and collections of his poems were published from time to time. First collection, comprising forty-nine poems was titled *Kayekti Kabita* and was published in 1937. Next in the series was *Nanakatha* having fifteen poems was published in 1942. His poems received a critical review. In 1945 an anthology of English translations of Bengali poems edited by Debi Prasad Chattopadhyaya was published - which contained seven

poems of Samar Sen. In 1934 yet another such anthology in English edited by Buddhadeva Basu, was published. This included nine poems of Samar Sen. Yet another anthology of 25 love poems in Bengali edited by Abu Sayeed Abu published in 1956 contained five poems of Samar Sen. An anthology of seventy-eight poems of Samar was published by Signet Press in 1954.

The crowning glory came for the poet in 1936 when *Times Literary Supplement February 1*, edition - discussed two of Samar's poems among others under the caption "A Land Made for Poetry. New India's Hopes and Fears".

Readers are given to understand that Samar's talents as a man of letters was not restricted to writing poems. He was the editor of a literary magazine *Shriharsha* (English edition) by Calcutta University college students. In 1938 he read a paper 'In Defence of Decadents' at the third session of Indian Progressive Writers' Association. He reviewed modern Bengali poetry under the title '*The Alien Corn*' in *The Statesman* in September 1951. He wrote reviews of the poems of WH Auden, Christopher Isherwood, Thomas Mann, Ezra Pound and others.

After he joined AIR in 1946, he stopped writing poems. Commenting on his own poetry (*Frontier* April 4, 1970) he says 'this writer has been out of touch with poetry for the last 24 years. Alas! It no longer rings a bell in him. When he is forced to look up some of his own stuff, weariness and boredom overtake him'.

Nityapriya Ghosh, the biographer has identified three clear strands in Samar Sen's poetry: his love of nature and his idea of love; his criticism of Bengali middle class; his criticism of the political and economic system in which he is meshed. Since the complexion of the state and the country has not changed except in some superficial external form, his poetry continues to be riveting.

The second chapter is titled "Protest and Anger". This was the period when the angry young man started writing his poetry. He was fond of travelling. The author describes his travels to Ranchi, East Bengal (Barisal town) and some other places. Among his friends and admirers were Jibananda, Kamakshi Chatto-padhyay—his brother Debi Prasad Chattopadhyay, Asok Mitra, Buddhadeva, Bishnu, Subhash Mukhopadhyay and a few more.

Samar's writings often stirred up strong reactions and protests. In particular, his essay 'In Defence of the Decadents' stirred up a nest of hornets. The main point he made was:

"The modern Bengali writer is between two fires. If he tries to be honest with regard to the vices of his own class and voices his sense of decay, he falls under, and is found guilty of the charges of obscenity and obscurity. The eternal principles of art, he is told, are beauty and truth and beauty, to deny which is bad taste, a perversion. On the other hand, he is told from the progressive quarter, which emphasizes his defeatism and obscurity, that he is decadent and damned petty-bourgeois".

Samar admitted he was not writing for masses who were illiterate. He wrote for the middle class, 'he then thinks of a perhaps a dozen or so of his admirers and continues to use a medium of expression whose beauties commend themselves only to the dozen or so'.

"The boredom and the horror, rather than the glory of life, is our immediate reality... It is best to admit this and write about the class you know well than to exult in the future of a classless society. Consciousness of decay is also a power'.

The third chapter is titled 'Decay of Love, Decay of Society'. This covers the period from 1939 onwards when he passed his MA examination and got a University scholarship for research. He did not make much progress in his research. He got a job as a teacher in Prabhat Kumar College, Kanthi, Bengal. Within a short time he got a job as a lecturer in Commercial College in Delhi. Married Sulekha in April, 1941. The biographer says that Samar got bored of homelife within a week of marriage. The reasons are not clear.

In the latter part of 1944 Samar gave up his college job, had a go at an advertising firm for a week and then joined All India Radio as an assistant news editor. Teaching commerce students was no joy for him; salary of a teacher was also miserable. The radio job was more rewarding. He even bought an Opel car but, understandably, found it hard to afford both petrol and alcohol. In the Delhi station of All India Radio, he found company more stimulating than in college. One of the acquaintances was Nirad C Chaudhuri (1897-1999) .

There is an interesting bit of information that Samar was not enthusiastic to know Nirad Babu intimately.

P C Chatterjee, later the Director-General of AIR, was at that time a twenty-five year-old, in the News department and a colleague of Samar. He remembered that Samar did well as a radio editor, writing short simple sentences, with no bombast which was just right for the spoken word. His colleagues at all levels liked his naturalness and sly sense of humour. But careerwise he did not do well, because that required a certain brashness.

Delhi life did not suit Samar. He came back to his own city Calcutta with a sub-editor's job in *The Statesman* in 1949. He stayed on the job for seven years.

He was fond of his two elder brothers-they were eminently companionable. He spent more time in the homely chat sessions than in literary circles. Calcutta too had spent up its energy in the turmoil of the thirties and forties. Samar too settled down in what is suspected as the middle age stupor.

The fourth chapter is titled 'In Quest of the New Man'. He got a job as a translator in the Foreign Language Publishing House, Moscow in 1957. This was the post-Stalin-early Khrushchev-Bulgaganin era. He translated some of the works of Maxim Gorky, Chekhov, Tolstoy and Iven Brunin.

Samar was disillusioned about the Soviet Russia eventually but when he left Moscow after a stint of four years and a half, he was not that disenchanted. He had a soft corner for his Russian friends who were pained to see him leave Moscow. But he had his children to be given college education. The Lumumba University denied admission to his children because of typical red-tapism. Moreover, Samar would not stay forever in Moscow. He had to come back to India and advancing years might be detrimental to getting a job in his country. He left Moscow in August 1961.

The next chapter (5) is titled 'No Revolutionary, but Editor of a Revolutionary Paper!' This writer liked this chapter best for the simple reason - this is where there is some familiarity with the details. On return from Moscow, he joined *Hindustan Standard* as its Joint Editor. He left his job in early 1964 and was jobless between February and September that year. Then he got an offer from Humayun Kabir to edit his new weekly which would be 'non-aligned internally

and externally, secular and democratic'. The journal was christened 'Now'. The 24-page English weekly, priced 30 paise was an instant hit.

The weekly jelled well with the times. It was a tempestuous period in the history of West Bengal and India. A movement to free political prisoners (many leftists were in jail after what India called the Chinese aggression), a movement to fight inflation, processions and strikes by workers and teachers, a demand for food and kerosene had kept the state continuously in turmoil. Meanwhile, the CPI was vertically divided into the right and the left. 'Now' was a voice against the Congress Party, that ruled the country including all the states, and against the Communist Party of India which supported the Congress with encouragement from the Soviet Russia. 'Now' aligned itself with the Communist Party of India (Marxist), of course, with some reservations.

Humayun Kabir was not happy though heavy weights like Amalendu Das Gupta, Asok Mitra Nirranjan Majumdar and Nirad Chowdhury were writing for the journal. The Congress Party lost the election in West Bengal in 1967 and the United Front led by CPI (M) came to power. Since 'Now' aired with sympathy the views of CPI (M) Kabir threw Sen out.

This was the time when the Naxalbari movement was born in May 1967 - the police took the side of landlords and swooped down on peasants. The villagers fought back and killed a police Inspector.

Frontier came out on 1st April 1968. A private limited company was formed- Germinal Publications-with funds largely contributed initially by Samar's relations and soon after by friends and admirers of *Now*. The new paper continued uninterrupted till Samar's death in August, 1987 and thereafter continues without any break at any critical juncture of time, braving all the odds and defying the moments of great stress and strain.

Frontier did not provide Sen with material comfort. The paper offered no support to any group or any tactical or strategical war of any particular group, but liberally published stories of 'actions' and 'encounters'. The jailed Naxalites surreptitiously sent their views, documents, news of their actions to *Frontier* and through this paper debated their line of action. *Frontier* became the de facto mouthpiece of all the Naxalite groups who were keen on exchanging views.

It was in this period that Samar showed exemplary courage. He defied the ruthless State machinery and dared publish documents and articles by banned Naxal groups. It was a mystery that Samar too was not rounded up. Maybe because he ridiculed the assassination policy of Charu Majumdar and did not approve of the activities of any particular faction of the CPI (ML) though he admired the courage and conviction of the persecuted cadres.

There is a bit of information that the *Frontier* Office at 61 Mott Lane, off Dharmatolla (now Lenin Sarani) attracted correspondents like Neville Maxwell from *London Times*, Lawrence Lifschultz from *Washington Post*, Viratell from *Le Monde* of Paris, Jan Myrdal and others. In the words of Nityapriya Ghosh 'they did not expect news from Samar but they could get a hang of India from that little man more than from air conditioned offices of Indian newspapers'.

After 1977, when the Emergency was lifted, *Frontier* began to lose its attraction. From 1985 onwards Samar was taken grievously ill several times. He did not keep well more than three months at a stretch. Wrong medical treatment

made the situation worse. He died on 23rd August 1987 at the Calcutta Hospital in the 71st year of his life.

The sixth and last chapter titled 'Out of Touch with Poetry' is just short of five pages and looks like a recap of facts already presented.

The above account may be taken more as an introduction of the book on Sen, than a review of it. Some facts given in the first chapter are repeated in the second and soon-though in a different context in the book by Nityapriya.

Nevertheless for admirers of Samar Sen, this book will provide a journey—an interesting journey, through his life. Readers are thankful to the author for having provided them with such an opportunity. □□□

**SAMAR SEN* by Nityapriya Ghosh.

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