

Calcutta Notebook

DRC

THE ANNUAL JAYANTA DAS memorial lecture has been mentioned in this column earlier. The fourth lecture was delivered by Sanjoy Mukhopadhyay of the Film Studies department of Jadavpur University on December 10, 2011 at the Vivekananda Sabhagriha. The subject was 'In Search of Roots'.

A sea-change has come across the vast territory appropriated by the "refugee colonies", set up in the teeth of opposition from the then central and state governments. These colonies were the urban nurseries of a left movement which started with barricade militancy against a callous and corrupt rightist government and rapidly congealed in urban and suburban West Bengal into a meticulously electioneering party with frankly pro-capital leaders and a backbone of self-seeking supporters. This was accompanied by a transformation of the homeless squatters first into organized colonists and then into householders with secure jobs or flourishing small businesses. How far the two transformations were linked phenomena is an interesting problem for the social scientist.

The trauma of fleeing the homeland, the terrible effort to establish a toe-hold in cousin territory, and the fight for a place in the sun was an epic struggle, according to Sanjoy Mukherjee, without parallel in the annals of the Bangla-speaking peoples. He is pained when today's third generation, effusing an essentially alien culture, stamped symbolically in Sanjoybabu's mind via the logogram of the ubiquitous Bermuda shorts, struts around the 'residential complex' paid for by the sale of, and erected on, the squat set up and defended by Grandfather. It is a fact that the landscape which evolved from marsh and scrubland into thatched cottages with homely sanitation, vegetable 'machas', colony 'pukur' tanks, schools and temples, within a couple of years, is now nowhere to be seen. When a team of film experts came down from the BBC to Kolkata to make a documentary on the films of Ritwik Ghatak, they found little distinction between today's Ashoknagar, the original of the set in Ritwik's *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, and any other usual post-millennium well-to-do middleclass residential area in off-central Kolkata. They finally had to build the set of a colony of the early fifties in Barasat. The organizations set up by the colonists to negotiate with the RR department of the government, resolve disputes, including boundary problems, preserve colony owned tanks, parks, and commons, run schools, and oversee clubs and community worship of Durga and Kali, have shrivelled while there has been a cancerous hypertrophy of the clubs which not only extort massive subscriptions for collective "worship" all round the year but interfere in disputes between husband and wife, brothers and sisters, father and son, landlord and tenant, and act as vigilantes of some one or the other political party.

Sanjoy Mukhopadhyay is pained by the scant concern of his Bermuda generation for their roots, but not surprised. What astounds him is the little lasting effect of the trauma of partition on Bangla art and culture. The major novelists Manik Bandyopadhyay, Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay and Samaresh Bose took partition in their stride. Manik's epic of love as free will, *Padma Nadir Majhi* is set in a particular community (of boatmen) but is really beyond time and place. (It is perhaps the slenderest epic in world literature) The novel looks into the kaleidoscope which is man's soul, exhibiting patterns of family, community, labour, exploitation, love, hate, deceit, and responsibility, forming and dissolving, till the artist suddenly lets us discover love as the only factor which can snatch a little free will away from that juggernaut of destiny, Hosen Mian. In *Kokila*, Kuber thus wins a little from destiny, but Sasi, the Hamlet of Bangla literature, like his prototype, loses all to destiny, because he lets the little munia of love escape from his hands. *Putul Nacher Itikatha* is a terrifying addition to the absurdist saga of Sisyphus, but here the village community is the swamp of destiny. In a rare fit of optimism, Manikbabu did see a new community as a positive environment for the soul of man, and wrote *Holud Nadi Sobuj Bon*. But the fight of the *Bastuhara* did not stir him.

Tarashankar found his epic among a community of palki-bearers with a love-hate relation with their former employers, the landowners, their myths arising from the swampy ox-bow bend where they lived. *Hanshuli Banker Upokatha* is again the story of a community which tries to restrain its young men within traditionalist boundaries, and how it fails. This is a great document of how the pull of the factories breaks up rural communities, put already to tearing strain by rural stagnation. It is a paean to rebellious youth. Tarashankar strangely was satisfied in his role of the anti-Marxist Elder, although he didn't let his(?) ideology colour, his artistic discernment, at least, not much. That partition couldn't sway him was not really very unexpected, though, very few things outside the collective unconscious of Birbhum touched his soul.

Samaresh Bose's epic-duo *BT Road-er Dhare* and *Sreemati Cafe* are set in refugee country and the time, too, is about right. Samareshbabu is absorbed in depicting and analyzing the quarters, the locality, the shops and little businesses, the neighbours and villains, the milieu, in fact, of the suburban factory worker. The refugee flits in and out of his novels but does not attract the creator in Samaresh as a protagonist.

Other novels of epic scope have been set among interesting communities and have flourished in diagnosing and following the movement of the contradictions therein. *Titas Ekti Nodir Nam*, *Tista Parer Brrittanta*, *Rohu Chandaler Harh* are examples of such strong novels.

In truth the struggles of communities and their protagonists have drawn the strongest of these novelists to write novels with epic qualities. Does it not appear really strange now that nobody was moved by the gash of partition to write about the saga of the squatters' colonies and their fight? Sanjoy Mukhopadhyay thinks that it is a refusal to acknowledge the trauma, a collective fit of denial, somewhat akin to the trend among German young people to deny the Holocaust.

This denial, when it extends to the progeny of the displaced, creates a generation without roots.

The only person who shrieked 'J' accuse' was Ritwik Kumar Ghatak. Before coming to him, one should enquire if Sanjoybabu has perhaps overstated his case. It is true that the trauma and the saga have not made dents in modern Bangla poetry, although these were the years of maturation of Subhas Mukhopadhyay's poetry and that of Sakti Chattopadhyay, and, of course, the Krittibas group of Sunil Gangopadhyay. But, it is not true that there were no important works touched by the forced exodus. Salil Sen wrote a play, *Natun Ihudi*, which was produced on stage and made into a film. Satinath Bhaduri wrote a short story 'Gananayak' on the partition. Communal riots drove Samaresh Bose to write a short story 'Adab'. There was a proliferation of little magazines in the late forties and early fifties, around the time of the IPTA production of 'Nabanna'. Some stories, featuring partition, had a cutting edge almost as sharp as Manto's. Many of these were written by young people who later disappeared into private life without caring to preserve their work. Such stories are lost. The present author remembers the plots of two stories written around the theme of prostitution among the displaced, forced by indigence. In one, a desperate, young girl with a still undeveloped body is not taken by the older group for 'work', and hits on using rags to deceive customers. In the other, a woman, disfigured by leprosy, meets a customer in stipulated darkness. Sisir Kumar Das in his *History of Indian Literature* refers to a story on partition in a handwritten magazine.

For Ritwik Ghatak, partition was the target, the Other, whose malevolence defined the subject and its context. The don in Sanjoy took over at this stage and the audience had a delightful tour of Ritwik territory as he projected long sequences from *Komal Gandhar* and *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, with commentaries on key frames. As the layered meanings packed by Ritwik into the frames, angles, and camera movements of seemingly straight forward narrative like MDT were decoded by Sanjoy, the audience learnt of Ritwik's use of Indian mythology in the frames to accentuate the sense of loss.

The definitive feature film about the displaced from the East-Chhinnamul, has only one print, stored at the Film Institute of Poona. Sanjoybabu had downloaded a copy from a TV showing, and now projected parts for the viewers. The film was stark, cruel and accusing, a tour de force on celluloid. It was directed by Nema Ghosh, and Ritwik was an actor and an assistant director. This was in 1950. Pudovkin came to India in the early fifties and saw the film. He wrote a long appreciation on the front page of *Pravda*. In 1952 Ritwik completed *Nagarik*, his first full length feature.

Sanjoybabu wanted to discuss *Subarnarekha*, but time was up.

Outside, the night was nippy and the stars were out. This columnist thought of Jayanta Das, a founder of Chittaranjan colony, a communist, singer and arbiter of disputes, a man of the people and loved deeply by them. He also worked in CGCRI and founded the union there. Unbelievable? But, then, those were the days people lived many lives in the span of one. He

still brought together diverse people of diverse opinions to meet and discuss things as he did while he lived. People won't see the likes of him in a hurry. □□□