

Monograph

YEAR 2 VOL 4.



STUDENT-LED MAGAZINE

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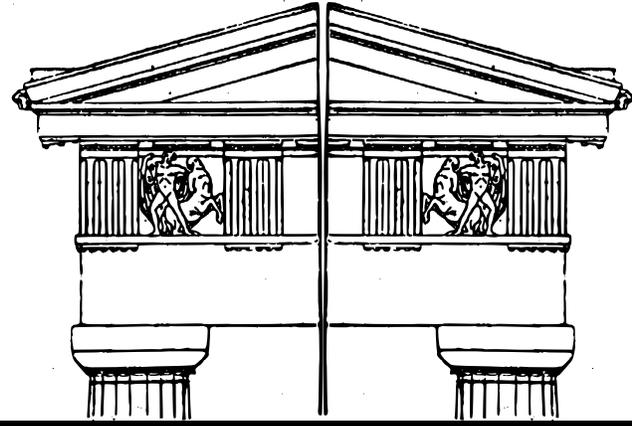
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Editor's Note



Anuraag Das Sarma

Monograph took shape in the pandemic, and in some ways, we do owe it quite a bit. But it has also been the biggest struggle we've had to face- both as a collective and as individuals. It feels absurd, out of all other things, to think that a year back, on this day, I was rushing to complete the 2021 issue. I remember having, above all, a sense of hope. 2021 would be different. The pandemic would end. And now, here we stand. Entering into 2022 with rising cases and a new variant. I'm hopeful still, but a tad bit less. I'm hopeful of our resilience more than of the future.

This issue, thanks to the help of the wonderful author Anindita Ghose, who has taken it upon herself to be our Guardian Angel, we were able to run wonderful guest articles. Thanks also in large to Aryama Sen (the mind behind @indigenous) and Roham Shyam Chowdhury (@jobless.charnock) for sending in wonderful essays and of course to Sohini Chattopadhyay (an award winning journalist and ex-editor of Open magazine).

In the world of literature, a new book by Parimal Bhattacharya has just hit the shelves. "Field Notes From A Waterborne Land: Bengal Beyond The Bhadrakalok" published by Harper Collins was a book I'd had on my radar for a while, and when I got the opportunity to talk to the man behind it all, I was, by all means, star struck. Getting a chance to interview him will always remain a highlight of 2021.

And finally, I would like to extend my gratitude to all our readers. It is with your support that we can keep this machine running. It is because of you that Monograph is what it is today.





The Music of Ritwik Ghatak

First published on the Indigenous Blog

Aryama Sen

*“Why do you always sing sad songs?” Ishwar asks his sister Sita in *Subarnarekha*. “It is almost as if there is nothing in this world beyond pain and suffering.”*

When art stems from lived experiences, it must be truthful. And truth is seldom under the compulsion to have a happy ending. Cinema, for Ritwik Ghatak, was not a medium of ‘storytelling’, but the strongest way he could reach out to the masses. Talking about his shift from theatre to film, he once said, *“We used to give open-air performances where we could rouse and inspire an audience of four or five thousand. But, when I thought of cinema, I thought of the million minds that I could reach at the same time. This is how I came into films, not because I wanted to make films. Tomorrow, if I find a better medium, I’ll abandon films.”* Ghatak chronicled the partition like few others – the refugee crisis and the rootlessness of a people affected him deeply, on a personal level. He spent his childhood in East Bengal, amid green meadows and songs of boatmen.



His characters, too, feel suffocated in the city, searching for a lost childhood and a home – suddenly a new country they can perhaps never return to. His films thus leave us with a sense of emptiness, giving us a feel of what it is like to not ‘belong’ – there is poverty and suffering, there is struggle. Yet, sometimes, there is hope. Sometimes, there is love. And wrapping it all up, there is music.

The music of Ghatak’s films, not talked about as often as they should be, is perhaps what first helped me connect with them. Indian classical music, folk songs, and Tagore seep into the pores of his films, adding character and more value to the stories he chooses to tell. ‘*Melodrama is a birthright, a form in itself,*’ he had once remarked, and music and sound enhanced the ideas he wanted to communicate. Ghatak himself had a deep understanding of music – he learnt to play the sarod for a brief period under Ustad Bahadur Khan, who was involved in making the music for several of his films. He loved Beethoven, and applied his compositions in the background score of a few films as well. Though uncredited, he made a documentary on Ustad Allauddin Khan, sarod player and multi-instrumentalist, a guru to several acclaimed musicians including his daughter, Annapurna Devi, and Pandit Ravi Shankar among others. Music formed an important backbone of each of Ghatak’s films, but I shall primarily talk about *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960), *Komal Gandhar* (1961) and *Subarnarekha* (1965) – commonly referred to as the partition trilogy. It is the music of these three films that have stayed with me the most, along with the pain and love that its characters experience.

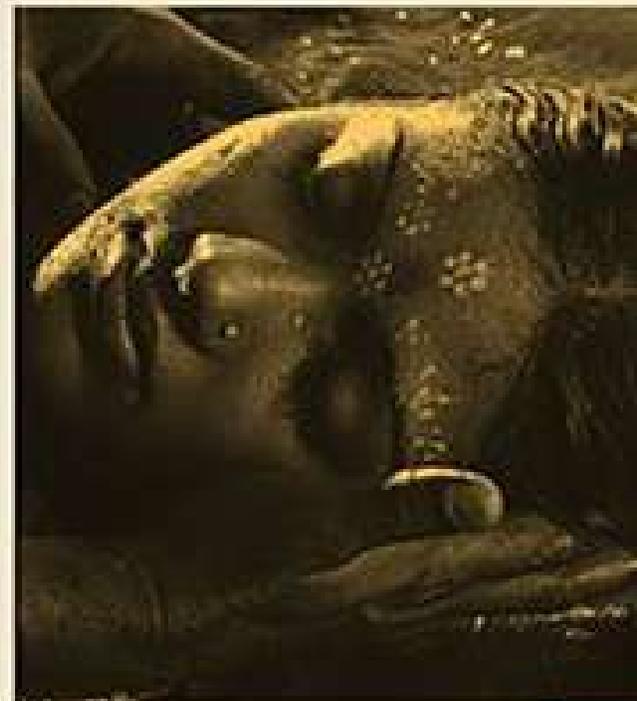
Shaktipada Rajguru's tragic tale of a family uprooted by the partition and struggling to live a decent life in new circumstances is immortalized by Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara*. The pain of Nita (Supriya Choudhury), the protagonist and one of the three strongest women characters of the partition trilogy, is felt the most – the struggling refugee woman who sacrifices her life and love for the rest of her family. The only person in the family who understands her is her elder brother, Shankar (Anil Chatterjee). An aspiring singer, Shankar is not an earning member of the family and spends his days practicing on the riverbank. Most of the film's songs (music by Jyotirindra Moitra) are by Shankar – compositions in Indian classical to which Pandit A. T. Kanan, renowned vocalist of the Kirana gharana, lends his voice. The film begins with, and is punctuated by brief, calming aalaps. Shankar's respite is his music, which seems to run in a parallel world of its own, in an attempt to drown the clutter of their suffocating existence. Shankar is looked down upon by his family because he doesn't contribute to the family income – his dreams of becoming a vocalist are not appreciated by anyone in the family except Nita. While the *chhota khayal* 'Jai Maata' captures the carefree self that he maintains as an exterior, 'Dukha Daridra Dur Kijiye', that he sits down to sing one night, conveys his deeper sadness and helplessness.



RITWIK GHATAK

A RIVER CALLED TITAS

INDIA-BANGLADESH, 1971





Towards the end of the film, when Shankar returns to his home after making a name for himself as a celebrated musician, he sings ‘Lagi Lagan Pati Sakhi Sang’. This return is one of personal victory, as it can be called – the neighbourhood where he had spent his formative years being considered a failure now looks up to him as a celebrity, young boys run up to him to ask for his autograph. The composition in Hamsadhwani – a raga commonly associated with happiness and joy, thus comes naturally to him. He walks past the same riverbank where he had spent days practicing, but now there is confidence, a distinct change in the way he sings. This version of the khayal, sung beautifully by Pandit A. T. Kanan and enhanced by Anil Chatterjee’s acting on screen, remains unforgettable. It is a song of happiness and homecoming, before yet another tragedy hits the family.

Ustad Bahadur Khan plays most of the background music in Meghe Dhaka Tara, and this is another common thread that connects the films of the partition trilogy. He was also the music composer of Subarnarekha, which featured a very short sarod recital as well. Sita (Madhabi Mukhopadhyay) sings several compositions in Indian classical music – most of which have a tinge of sadness in them, as her brother points out. Her tunes of loneliness are temporarily broken when Abhiram (Satindra Bhattacharya), his childhood friend, professes his love for her. That day, Sita sings a happy song, ‘Aaj ki Ananda.’ The song that Sita practices in their humble dwelling in Kolkata, ‘Khelan aaye hori barkha ke,’ also paints a happy picture – times are tough, yet there is the joy of starting a new life with the man she loves.





“I cannot speak without Tagore,” said Ghatak in an interview. “That man has culled all my feelings long before my birth. He has understood what I am and put it all in words. I read him and I find that all has been said and I have nothing new to say.” It is thus not surprising that Tagore’s songs find themselves effortlessly in Ghatak’s films. ‘Aj dhaaner khete,’ a popular rabindrasangeet that is mostly taught to children is used more than thrice in *Subarnarekha*. The song talks of large, open rice fields, a flowing river, and the clear, blue sky – very much like what Ghatak describes his homeland to be, in his stories and essays. As Sita grows up with her brother Ishwar (Abhi Bhattacharya) in the outskirts of a city, this is the song she learns from her music teacher. Sita’s childhood is embroidered with this song, and it stays with her forever. Later in the film, she sings it to her son, born in Kolkata. The description of nature doesn’t appeal to him, and he asks his mother, ‘What do rice fields look like, ma?’ Yet, it is the same song that he hums when he sees a rice field for the first time, without his mother by his side. This is how the film ends, with the lives of Ishwar, Sita, and her son shattered by the tragedy of life but bound by Tagore.



In Subarnarekha, Ghatak provides a strong commentary on the life and culture in post-partition Kolkata through the eyes of Ishwar and his friend Haraprasad (Bijon Bhattacharya), who come to explore the city for the first time. ‘Ghastly’ fun is how Haraprasad describes it – the race course, the bars, the brothels. He uses the music of the climactic orgy scene in Fellini’s La Dolce Vita as he shows the bars of Kolkata. “Was I influenced? Not at all. The music merely helped me say a lot of things,” he says.

The use of sound to make an impact is perhaps most prominent in Meghe Dhaka Tara. The night Shankar leaves home, Nita asks him to teach her a song. They sing ‘Je Raate Mor Duarguli,’ a rabindrasangeet that translates as –

*On that night when the storm broke open my door
I did not know that you entered my room through the ruins,
For the lamp was blown out, and it became dark;
I stretched my arms to the sky in search of help.
I lay on the dust waiting in the tumultuous dark and I knew not that storm was
your own banner
When the morning came, I saw you standing upon the emptiness that was
spread over my house*

This is a song of despair. With it, one accepts darkness as her companion for life, while the other leaves it behind – the ruins of a family pushed into forgetting themselves. As the two of them sing, hardly able to look into each other’s eyes, most of what we see are their silhouettes, and a crisscross of light and shadow playing on their faces.





This scene haunts us, and its mood is intensified by the sound of a whip lashing repeatedly towards the end of the song. The same repetitive whiplash is also heard in another dramatic scene, where Nita comes out of her fiancé's room and walks slowly down the stairs – after discovering her sister's relationship with him. The use of sound to bring out the tragedy in a situation again reminds us of *Subarnarekha*, where Abhiram, who is orphaned as a child, meets her mother seconds before she passes away. The moment she dies, a train passes with blaring noise.

The suffocation that Ghatak felt in the city impacts every film of the partition trilogy. *Komal Gandhar* was partly based on his experiences of working with the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), one of the strongest cultural movements of his time. Ideological differences led him to leave the group, but it left a profound influence on him. Ghatak crafted a brilliant tale around the travelling theatre movement, rivalries between and within groups, the effect of partition on art, and a love story. Anasua (Supriya Choudhury) and Bhrigu (Abanish Banerjee) are members of separate theatre groups, but they are attracted to each other while working together on a play. What brings them together is partly theatre, but another reason is the partition – they find peace in common roots. 'Ekhanakar akashtao dhowa' ('Even the sky here is filled with smoke') – is how a character in Bhrigu's play describes the city.



The effect is perhaps similar to Sita's son asking what a rice field looks like in Subarnarekha. As the team travels to Kurseong for the rehearsal of a play, someone again sings Tagore, 'Akash Bhora Surjo Taara' ('The sky, filled with stars and the sun'), almost a celebration of the escape from the cacophony of the city. Even the name of the film is borrowed from a Tagore poem, 'Naam rekhechi Komal Gandhar mone' ('I've named her Komal Gandhar in my heart').

The members of the theatre troupe in Komal Gandhar often break into songs like 'Esho Mukto Koro' ('Come, free us') throughout the film – songs of hope in times of trouble. Often called a musical for this reason, it is in keeping with the note at the beginning of the film, that it is the story of a group of theatre-crazy youths who've come together as a family, and art is what binds them together. What is important in Komal Gandhar is that their theatre is not 'art for art's sake' – there's a greater cause as they travel across the length and breadth of the country and speak of the lives of its people. Bhrigu, who leads the team, encourages everyone to march at a protest rally because 'it is their duty', even though there's a play to be staged the next day. This brings forward Ghatak's philosophy with greater force, of art as "a means of expressing my anger at the sorrows and sufferings of my people."

Ranen Roychowdhury's 'Majhi Tor Naam Janina' is another beautifully used song in Meghe Dhaka Tara. The lyrics are roughly translated as:

Boatman, I don't know your name.

Who shall I call?

Who shall row me across?





Like the people of his films who search for roots together, Ghatak and Roychowdhury, both from East Bengal, shared a special bond. This song speaks of a person on the riverbank who doesn't know the name of the boatman and hence cannot call him to travel to the other side, but it has an obvious, deeper meaning – it is a call from the thousands who lost their homes in the partition, who shall spend the rest of their lives searching for one.

“I am not afraid of using any amount of coincidences in my fictional films,” he said. Ghatak's films are poignant, sometimes disturbing, but a constant reminder of the troubled times that our nation is built on. Music breathes life into these films, often complementing his stories and sometimes making a statement in itself. Every song, every sound takes his ideas forward, making his films unforgettable. Years after, these films still hold up a mirror to our faces, like the father in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* who shouts ‘I accuse!’

‘Whom?’ His family asks, but he's left with no answer.

Of Fiction, Dissent, and the English: Kylas Chunder Dutt, the first author of Indian English Fiction.

"My friends and countrymen, I speak not to you with a wish to display my powers of rhetoric (of which I possess but little), I am not speaking from a heated imagination or blind enthusiasm, I speak only the plain and simple dictates of my heart, which I firmly believe meet with a response in all your bosoms. Consider for a moment the cruelties which from generation to generation you have suffered. What improvements in our condition could be expected from the enormities of Clive, the despotism of Wellesley, the wanton cruelty of Warren Hastings and the inordinate rapacity of our present odious Government?"

The early 19th century witnessed Calcutta evolving into a second city of the colonial empire. The East India Company had discernibly tightened its talons around the country, seeping into territories that were no longer just confined to trade. Having silenced rebelling forces once at Plassey, their efforts to expand were complemented by their non-supportiveness towards voices of dissent.



Rohan Chowdhury

Amidst all of this a young student of Hindoo college, Kylas Chunder Dutt, penned down a story in the language of the colonizers, dreaming of an uprising against the foreign forces in a fictionalized narrative based around a hundred years ahead into the future.

Kylas' work — *A Journal of Forty-Eight Hours of the Year 1945* — was the first-ever piece of English fiction authored by an Indian. The short story was published in *The Calcutta Literary Gazette* on 6th June 1835, and it had merely been 4 days before the East India Company cracked its whip on the publication, slapping charges of sedition on the 18-year-old. The journal was an account spanning over two days, with the patriot Bhoobun Mohan — described as one 'splendidly attired in kincaub and gold' and 'with all the learning and eloquence which the Anglo-Indian college could furnish' — leading a rebellion against the British forces. It is interesting to notice how Kylas writes of a revolution taking place an entire century later, with the massive time frame to kickstart a revolution providing us with perhaps an involuntary peek into public perception of the Company's influence at that time.

However, it wasn't just the Company's influence that was looming over the city during the 19th century. Several families also rose to fame around this period — as landlords, businesspeople, or through their contribution to literature and the arts. One such family was the 'Famous Dutt Family' of Rambagan that Kylas belonged to. A descendant of Nilmani Dutt, Kylas was the son of Rasamay Dutt — a judge at the Small Causes Court and one of the pioneers alongside Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Radhakanta Deb, and David Hare who helped set up the Hindoo College. The Dutt family played an important role in the Bengal renaissance, not only having people positioned in prominent institutions, but also giving rise to several writers and poets. Toru Dutt, for instance, paved the way for women authoring English fiction, and the great reformer Romesh Chunder Dutt was himself a descendant of the Rambagan Dutt lineage.



THE CALCUTTA JOURNAL,

OR,

Political, Commercial, and Literary Gazette.

FOR

APRIL, MAY, AND JUNE,

1819.

It is interesting to analyze the factors that could have possibly contributed to the very first piece of Indian English fiction. Kylas pursued his education at Hindoo College and was heavily inspired by Major David Lester Richardson — a teacher and Principal at the institution. The Dutt family's wealth, cultural position, and linguistic adaptability to the Company rule could have been a significant contributor in him choosing English as the medium of expression. The exposure to western educational practices would have also aided, not just in the choice of language, but also in the work itself being a 'literary hybrid' as Alex Tickell writes in his paper titled *Midnight's Ancestors*. This might have developed out of radical poetic and philosophical influences in the college curriculum, perhaps of the likes of Byron and Shelley, exposed through the vivid battle scenes and Bhoobun Mohan's character of a charismatic leader.

The very choice of the character of Bhoobun Mohan as the protagonist is quite interesting in itself. Kylas operated a short-lived monthly journal titled the *Hindu Pioneer* with one of his closest friends at that time — Bhuban Mohan Mittre. That is as may be, it is likely for the friend to have served as the protagonist's namesake in the story.

HICKY'S
BENGAL GAZETTE;
OR THE ORIGINAL
Calcutta General Advertiser.

A Weekly Political and Commercial Paper, Open to all Parties, but influenced by None,

There might be a few explanations as to why a non-conformist, revolutionary plot was chosen. To begin with, Dutt's familial background could have played an important role. Proximity to the pioneers of the Renaissance and possible discourse around anti-establishment notions might have been conducive. Moreover, Kylas studied with his cousin Shoshee at the Hindoo College. Shoshee was a writer himself and had written a similar dissentious piece on an uprising in Orissa wherein the British were coerced to concede the region. While this might account for speculating out of reach, it is interesting to notice how the two cousins wrote on similar themes around the same period, implying a possible mutual influence on the works.

On the subject of dissent, it is also important to note that 1835 was the year when Metcalfe liberated the Indian press, repealing the detestable Licensing Regulations of 1823. However, despite the regulations there was an attempt to mitigate possible censure, as the writing did portray the colonizers in a negative light. Not only was the story narrated in the future amidst a dystopian setting, but the patriot Bhoobun Mohan's uprising fails to free the motherland from the colonial forces.

*"Hope for a season bade the world farewell
And freedom shrieked as India's patriot fell."*

Kylas went on to author several other works such as *The Pindari Lover*, *An Oriental Tale*, and *The Crusader* amongst others (later compiled by his great-great-grandson Kalyan Chunder Dutt). However, one such work titled *Scenes in Calcutta* — published in a March 1836 edition of the *Hindu Pioneer* — stands out in its satirical critique on orthodox Brahmanical and Baboo culture in the 1800s. The narrative explores the obstinance of Brahmins and their rejection of the west and those who subscribe to their notions illustrated through passages like:

"The age in which we live, is infected with the spirit of infidelity — high and low are deserting the standard of Hindooism. But the cause of this is, the communication of European learning to the children of the East..."

And when the Brahmin was asked whether the distance from the sun and the shape of the globe existed in our shastras:

"The sun is about eight thousand miles distant from us, and the figure of the earth is triangular."

Likewise, writes Kylas of the subservient, hypocritical, Baboo:

"Before Europeans veal, jelly, and burgundy are his delights, before Hindus his abominations."

Upon astute observation of the *Journal of 1945* and *Scenes in Calcutta*, Kylas' dissentious tones can be observed from a multilateral point of view. While the former sheds light on a rejection of the Company rule, the latter leaves scathing blows on the very fabric of Calcutta's upper-caste Hindu society in the 19th century. The works are quite poignant and offer insights that can potentially further discourses on the psyche of the populace in that era.





However, the motive remains unclear, for Dutt's position and cultural backing in the Calcutta society cannot be discounted. Kylas Chunder Dutt went on to become a successful magistrate in the colonial administration. Patriotism seemed to have reclined amidst the reception of a reputable opportunity to work with the Company, and he eventually remained a relatively silent figure.

Despite all of this, one cannot reject the importance of his works. We live in an era where Indians opting for English as a medium of expression have been critically acclaimed and accoladed globally for their writing marvels. While a lot of it does inevitably arise from a shift towards British notions of education, it becomes paramount to trace back the origins of how we as a people began to adapt to it.

Kylas Chunder Dutt's patriotism might have been short-lived, but at a time when dissent is still frowned upon, it is curious to look back at how an instrument of the oppressors was used against them. Dutt's writings read in a contemporary sense make the reader realize that the present has merely donned a facade while being completely entangled within a past seemingly far behind but not quite so. And perhaps, it might instill the inner patriot amongst one of us, allow us to question our existing positions, and maybe even allow us to dream the way the 18-year-old once did.

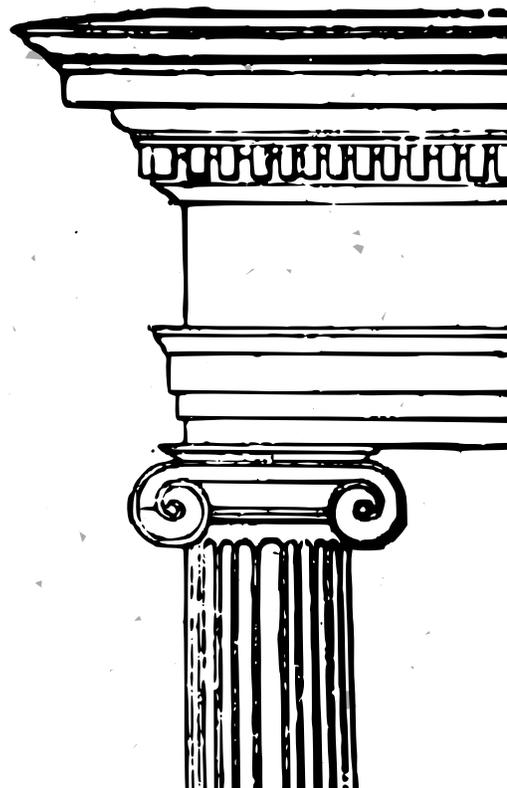
Restructuring Our Collective Heritage

The Path Towards Architectural Conservation



The Problem

The Path Towards Architectural Conservation



Park Mansions: The House With The Slatted Windows

Can you love a beautiful thing without understanding what beauty is? I was eight years and something when I first saw *Charulata*, considered to be Satyajit Ray's finest film and sometimes listed among the greatest films ever made. Ray had died that Calcutta summer, and Doordarshan was showing a retrospective of his films late at night, in remembrance. Those were the pre-DVD days, and even in VHS, Ray's films were hard to come by. My parents would wake me late at night so I could watch with them, the only late-night activity I was allowed to participate in.

"Just watch a bit," my mother would say, "it doesn't matter if you don't understand it." At eight, even for the precocious, full-of-themselves Bengalis, I was a bit young for Tagore's story of a young bored housewife falling for her brother-in-law, and recognising the loneliness of her marriage to an older, professorial man. (It was the typically uneven marriage of high-caste Hindus of the day — a young woman, a man at least a decade-and-a-half older.)



Sohini Chattopadhyay





But I liked the film. I liked it from the start, because I liked Charu's windows — the slatted windows through which she watched a man with a black umbrella on a Calcutta street, one of Bengali cinema's most beloved scenes (and one of international cinema's most recognisable scenes). My grandfather's house had the same windows; windows operated with a spine to pry them open. The *kharkhari*, as we call it in Bengali, lets you glimpse the outside without letting the inside out. It is said to be designed specifically for tropical heat, and is typical of old, statuesque Calcutta homes from the turn of the 20th century.

Of stillness

I felt at home in Charulata's world, though her emotional dilemma was several years of understanding away from me. I felt like I was in my grandfather's house, 25 Park Mansions, with its books, and long corridors and curvaceous, dark wood furniture. (Today's furniture is a lot more angular, a lot more straight lines, no?) More than anything else, the house has the same air of stillness and non-fidgetiness that you sense in the film. Despite Charulata's emotional turmoil, you see her sewing or writing or playing cards, rarely fidgeting.



My grandfather's house has that same quality — even now, it makes me forget my phone and the notifications on my post. It keeps the outside out, and holds me inside. I had little idea then that the building would one day be classified as “heritage” property, that I had grown up in something that deserves to be preserved for the public and the future. I had loved it without understanding it, much like I did with the film.

The foundation stone of Park Mansions was laid in 1910, one year before the British announced that the imperial capital would be shifted to Delhi. Like many things in Calcutta at the turn of the century, it was built by an Armenian, a merchant and philanthropist called Thaddeus Mesrope Thaddeus. Park Street, Calcutta's iconic restaurant and bar street, has at least three other buildings credited to Armenians. Stephen Court, which stands diagonally opposite to Park Mansions, was built by Arathoon Stephen, who also built the adjacent complex, Queen's Mansion. These three majestic mansions were conceived as residential quarters.

A little further down the street, close to the beloved Olympia Pub, is the Masonic (Freemasons') Lodge and Hall, built by Johannes Carapiet Galstaun. Many of the city's most loved and recognised hotels have also been built by Armenians — the Grand Hotel, the Kenilworth, the Astoria and the late Shashi Kapoor's favourite hotel, the Fairlawn.

What is most interesting about this building spree is the timing — the turn of the 20th century was the zenith of the Raj in India. Calcutta is widely considered to be built by the British, and little credit is given to the Armenians. The early 20th century was also the time of the genocide of Armenians by the Turkish state — in her book *A Problem from Hell*, the American academic Samantha Powers describes this as the first genocide of the modern period.





The Armenian touch

But the presence of Armenians in Calcutta predates the 20th century. The oldest church in Calcutta is the Armenian church on Armenian Street. The earliest grave in the churchyard adjoining it dates to 1630, says Iftekhar Ahsan, who runs one of the most popular walking tour companies in the city. The Armenian college near Park Street still admits and educates children of Armenian origin only. Geographically, Armenia is a land-locked country, and the Armenians have been subject to invasions over the centuries. Waves of Armenians have left and settled across the world. They are among the most resourceful and successful immigrant communities worldwide.

According to the Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC), “a heritage building means any building... which requires preservation and conservation for historical, architectural, environmental and ecological purpose...” This definition suggests that a heritage building is a public good meant to be sustained for the city as a whole.

When the heritage status came in for Park Mansions, a plaque was put in in memory of the company managing the estate. In the four years since, nothing has been put up about Thaddeus, about the Armenians of Calcutta, the style of Armenian buildings, or even the distinct architectural features of Park Mansions.





However, a whole lot of signage has come up on the façade of the building itself — advertising for commercial and institutional tenants. The KMC website on heritage specifically mentions that no display of signage or hoardings is allowed on heritage buildings unless it is approved, and in harmony with the building.

Gleaming new commercial tenants have arrived — the country's largest car company has a showroom in Park Mansions, a store for a global computer giant whose favourite colour is white, the tech gadgets branch of India's largest industrial conglomerate, a hip global café franchise known for live music performances. There are new institutional tenants too — the cultural wings of two prominent Western governments have set up office. In the course of these arrivals, the interiors of the mansion complex have been almost completely stripped. The hip café is set to its global décor template, and could well have been in a mall for all that it has retained of its 107-year-old setting. One of the cultural institutes has stripped the original floors and replaced them with a polished wood material. The arrangement of rooms and spaces has been wholly reimagined.

Crumbling edifice

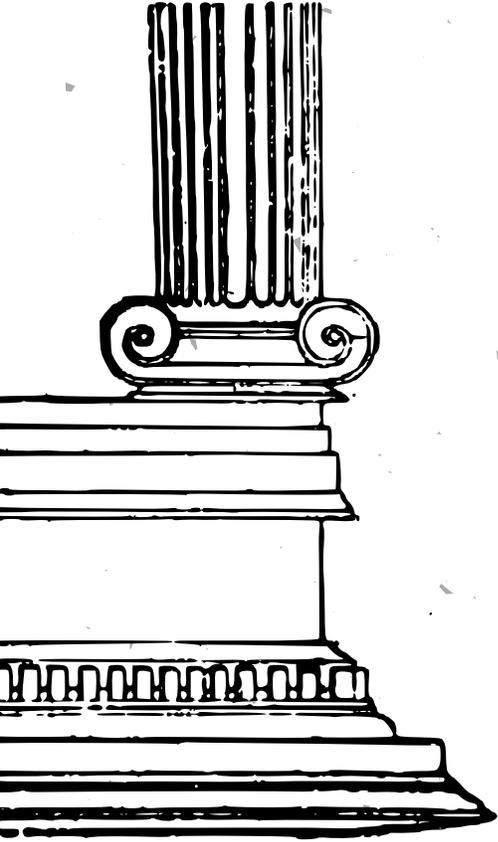
My grandparents, refugees from Bangladesh who came to Calcutta with nothing, have kept it exactly the way they received it. Not a thing has been taken out. The laal mejhe (red floor) — red oxide mixed with cement — typical of old Calcutta homes is intact, still deliciously cold and creamy on bare feet. Our ceilings are still ages away, held up by criss-crossing beams and joists. They make the unreasonable Calcutta summers reasonable and the embarrassing winters a bit more draughty and respectable. His house is, perhaps, the only unit to have retained the space as it was originally conceived.

But the innards of the apartment are falling apart. The sewage pipes, after more than a century of use, often spill out waste in the bathrooms. They leak faecal matter into the walls and ceilings. The estate managers, puffed with the heritage tag, swat us residents away.

What is happening to Park Mansions is known as ‘adaptive reuse’ in urban planning language. A building conceived primarily for residential use is being refashioned for commercial and institutional use. In the process, the character of the building is changing. The interiors are being stripped away. The identity of Park Mansions is eroding.

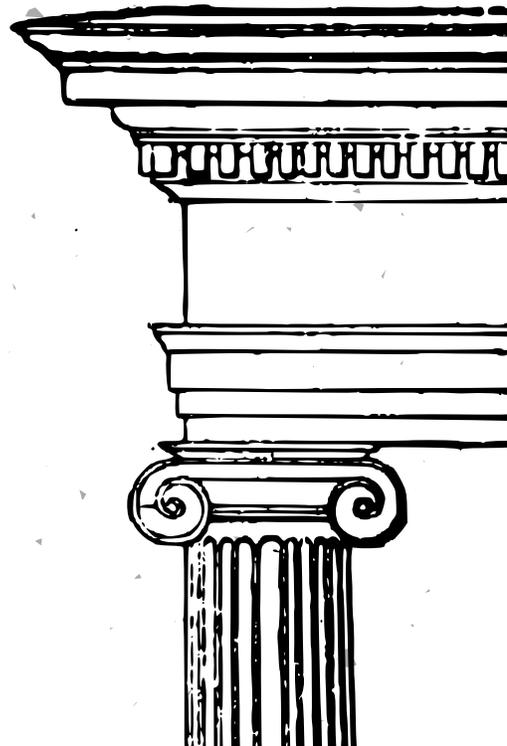
I see this unfolding before me. When I walk down Park Street in the evenings, there is invariably a knot of people in front of the hip new café at Park Mansions. They wait to take selfies below the name of the café. Where they knock their heads close and ready their faces for the camera, they stand in front of the foundation plaque of the complex: “Park Mansions: The foundation stone of this building was laid by Lizzie, wife of T.M. Thaddeus, on the 1st May 1910.” Their photographs have no space for Thaddeus’ Park Mansions. It’s only the building housing the global café chain.





The Solution

The Path Towards Architectural Conservation





In Kolkata, Home is Where The Drama is

Sohini Chattopadhyay

When we, the audience, knocked at 32 Ashwini Dutta Road, a handsome, 80-year-old South Kolkata residence, a young girl opened the door and welcomed us in absent-mindedly. She led the way to the baithak khana (living room), a high-ceilinged room belonging to a different Kolkata, the Calcutta of yore, which had grand houses with window sills wide enough for two to sit comfortably. The girl settled us in before getting into a heated chat with her friend and neighbour about the family pressure she was facing to get married. What we were witnessing was the play, 32 Ashwini Dutta Road, arguably the first site-specific production in Bengali.

As the girls bickered, the domestic help led us away and up the burnished red-cement stairs and sat us down hastily in a bedroom. There, a young man in a towel was in the midst of changing. He sat in front of a dressing table and applied lipstick. Unlike the living room where the paint on the wall was smooth, the paint in this room was peeling — a bit like the young man in the room who was moulting too, chafing and bruising against the hetero-‘normal’ appearance he had to put on. This closed-door dressing table confessional, the most affecting of the series of performances, was broken by a loud hurry-up call at the door, much in the way our own getting-dressed reveries end in real life.

Then, led out into the dining space outdoors, the audience sat around the young man's mother and her sister-in-law — who had gathered around the table and stairs. The two women, close to each other in age and in the disquiet of their marriages, exchanged notes and came to a difficult revelation. They seemed to share an unusual bond, the sort of bond you imagine would have existed among members of joint families that filled up the old Calcutta houses. Not houses as in apartments, but baari, the beautiful ancestral homes of north and south Kolkata. In a film like Piku, which is partially set in such a house, this kind of close-knit relationship among family members has ruptured.

The last segment of the performance was set in another bedroom where a married couple was arguing, caught in the storm of an angry, inarticulate grief following a miscarriage. The audience settled in the sofa and bed around them. One of the walls in the room was stylishly coloured, as if from an advertisement for paint, suggesting the touch of a new bride. Mid-argument, the couple and the audience were led to the dining table for the couple's anniversary celebrations — a cake was cut, a song sung and a box of sweets distributed among everyone, including the audience. The branches of the joint family, each negotiating their private compromises with the world in their corners of the house, come together in a shared space.





Family seats

More than for the performances and the play's text which are credited to the members of an amateur theatre collective, 32 Ashwini Dutta Road is interesting because of its site-specific nature. The play is conceptualised by the interdisciplinary artist Sujoy Prosad Chatterjee, who first saw such a performance in a heritage house in Toronto, which was once home to a former mayor. Site-specific theatre, a term that The Guardian says has been gaining traction since the 1980s, refers to productions that are not in the traditional theatre space but grow out of the sites where they are performed. For instance, in this play, the story centres around the sort of upper-middle-class joint families which once dwelt in the striking mansions of north and south Kolkata.

Kolkata was once packed with these family seats, described by Amartya Sen as "eccentric" and "beautiful" in his letter of support to novelist Amit Chaudhuri's campaign for conserving these properties. The city's centre was the business district, made up of British neo-classical buildings and Armenian and Jewish mansions. A large number of these family houses have been replaced with unlovely apartments today. The houses that remain have emptied out, many of the rooms are locked up, their residents now in distant cities.



Chatterjee's project, running till March, wants to make use of such houses again. Not only in the older, more historic neighbourhoods of Bhawanipore and Ballygunge, but also in relatively new suburbs like Salt Lake, where too many houses are now thinly inhabited. At the end of the performance, Chatterjee invites the audience to start performances like this in their localities. Aside from reimagining these spaces, he hopes that projects like his will rekindle a sense of community in these hollowed-out neighbourhoods. When you visit someone's home and walk through their rooms and sit on their beds, it's hard not to start a conversation.

There's another thing that struck me about the project: the notion of caste and the unlocking of access to spaces. Brahminical Bengali society is highly exclusionary in its practices. My great-grandmother had swept away her son's (my grandfather's) Japanese friend's presence in her courtyard with buckets of water. "Mlechha, mlechha (outcaste, outcaste)," she had told her daughter-in-law from her room above the courtyard, who dutifully threw a bucket of water each time the Japanese man stepped inside. Later, the man had commented admiringly to my grandfather about the 'traditional cleansing welcome' he had received. Another great-grandmother allowed the toilet-cleaner to enter the flat she lived in in central Bombay only from the backdoor, and prohibited her from every part of the flat except the passage where the toilet stood.

These practices have leftovers in upper-caste homes today, perhaps even in mine — questions of where the live-in domestic help will sleep if there are no 'servant quarters'; where the electrician will wait for his fee or the garbage-collector who asks for a glass of water — can they be asked to sit down?

It's a long shot, but imagine your plumber or conservancy-worker buying a ticket to your home 'theatre' and sitting down on your bed to watch. The home and the heart might both have a change then.



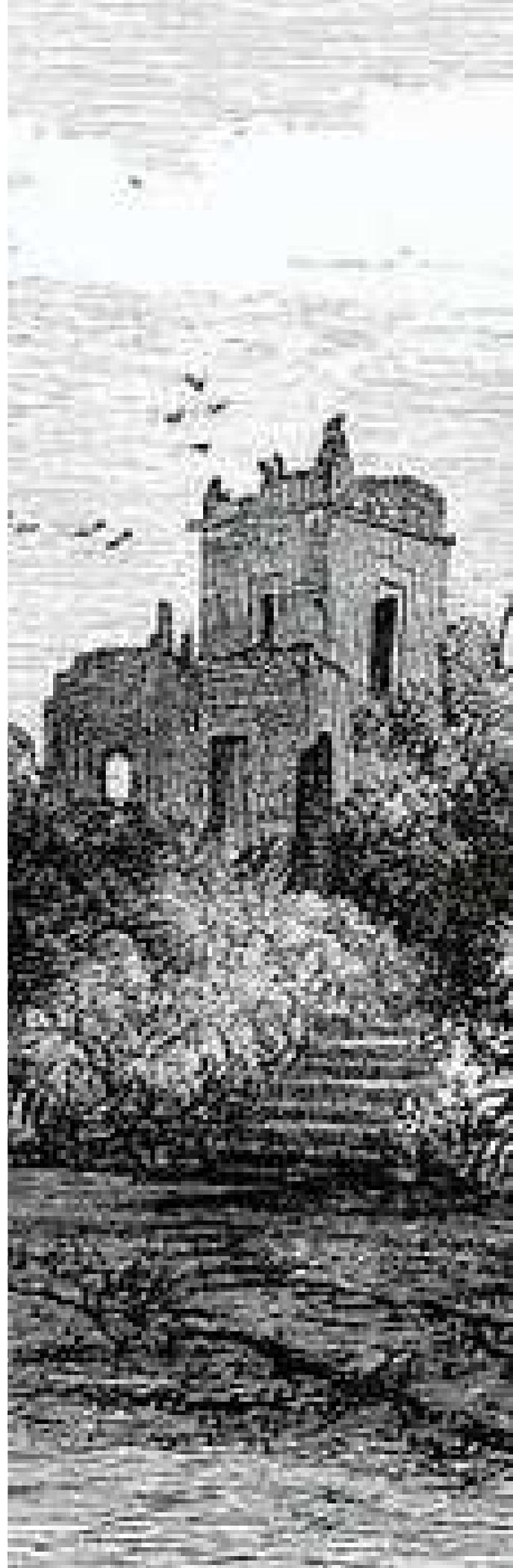
Umrao Jan Ada: The Story Of The Decay Of Awadh

Mehnaz Hussain

Set in British colonial era, Mirza Muhammad Hadi Ruswa's *Umrao Jan Ada* uses a dialogic narrative style to authenticate Umrao Jan alias Amiran's story, a tale of a fallen woman to make it convincing for the readers as well as his own role in depicting the complex dynamics of a society woven with hypocritical approach towards the virtuous and the fallen woman. However, Khurshidul Islam suggests that the real hero of *Umrao Jan Ada* is the city of Lucknow and its culture, and that the novel is an elegy on its demise. Similar to Islam's argument, Mohd.

Asauddin claims that the novel is a story of the decay and demise of the "decadent" culture of Lucknow, describing the city as having been "ravaged" by the end of the book.

The novel opens with a picture of "feudal Lucknow" in which "values of an earlier age continued into a decadent milieu of nawabs and tawaifs in a glittering but fragile texture of music and poetry" (Mukherjee 1985, 91).





Veena Oldenburg points out the hierarchical divisions among the courtesans of Lucknow, then known as Awadh in the pre Mutiny era; the tawaifs being the highest in rank were trained in music, dance and were provided education on religion and ghazals, and hence, were patronised by the aristocracy, the gentry and the ruling classes, who were followed in rank by women known as thakahi and randi who catered to the working classes and the common citizens. These tawaifs, as Oldenburg observes appeared in the civic tax ledgers of 1857-77 under the category of “dancing and singing girls”; “and, as if it was not surprising enough to find women in tax records, it was even more remarkable that they were in the highest tax bracket, with the individual incomes of any in the city” (Oldenburg 259). However, after the mutiny and the exile of Wajid Ali Shah, the dynamics of a courtesan’s location within the socio-cultural spaces of Lucknow changed, and colonial presence resulted in an economic instability. With losing patronages from the aristocracy and noble families, the courtesans were subjected to occupy the same space as that of a regular prostitute. In her study, *The Making of Colonial Lucknow 1856-1877*, Oldenburg highlights this transformation of Nawabi Lucknow and the aftermath of the Mutiny where essential aspects of policy and legislation were safety, sanitation and loyalty to the British state, and that social disease concerning sex work was dealt with chiefly as a medical problem by the British authorities. For the British, Victorian ideals of morality and sexual chastity were desirable characteristics of the virtuous woman, and thus, a clear distinction was made between the virtuous woman and the sex worker. After the introduction of The Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1866 and 1869 in England to control the spread of venereal diseases among men enlisted in garrison towns and ports, a women could be identified as a regular prostitute by any policemen, and then could be subjected to fortnightly internal examination.





The prostitute, if found suffering, was to be interned in a certified lock hospital for a period not exceeding nine months (Walkowitz 2). The same legislation was introduced in British India after the mutiny, thereby further penetrating into the spaces occupied by the courtesans. Oldenburg suggests that it was done not only to prevent the British army from acquiring diseases but also for the purpose of surveillance, since courtesans made a powerful case of resistance to the colonial enterprise. British interference also changed the nature of the relationships of trust and protection between patrons and clients, and hence, prostitution emerged solely as a labour oriented service.

Ruswa's novel deals with this demise of the aesthetics of the city, its traditions, and expresses the concerns which emerged with the onslaught of colonial rule. Umrao Jan, who was abducted from her house in Faizabad when she was a young girl, is sold to Khanum Jan for 125 rupees. She is trained in poetry and music like other courtesans, and enjoyed patronages from the elites of the city. Umrao's vivid description of Khanum's establishment confirms Oldenburg's claim of the glamour and the material conditions of the courtesans.



The courtesan's first "deflowering" ceremonies are celebrated with immense glamour, which makes Umrao aware of her femininity. She describes the changes that were visible in the lives of the courtesans after their deflowering ceremonies, how they received love from men from the nobility, who were willing to do anything they wanted. These men also sent their sons to Khanum's establishment for the purpose of receiving education in arts from the courtesans. In one of the instances recalled by Umrao in her narration, she mentions singing at the court during Muharram, thereby portraying the Lucknowi society of the time, its traditions at the intersectionality of culture and religion.

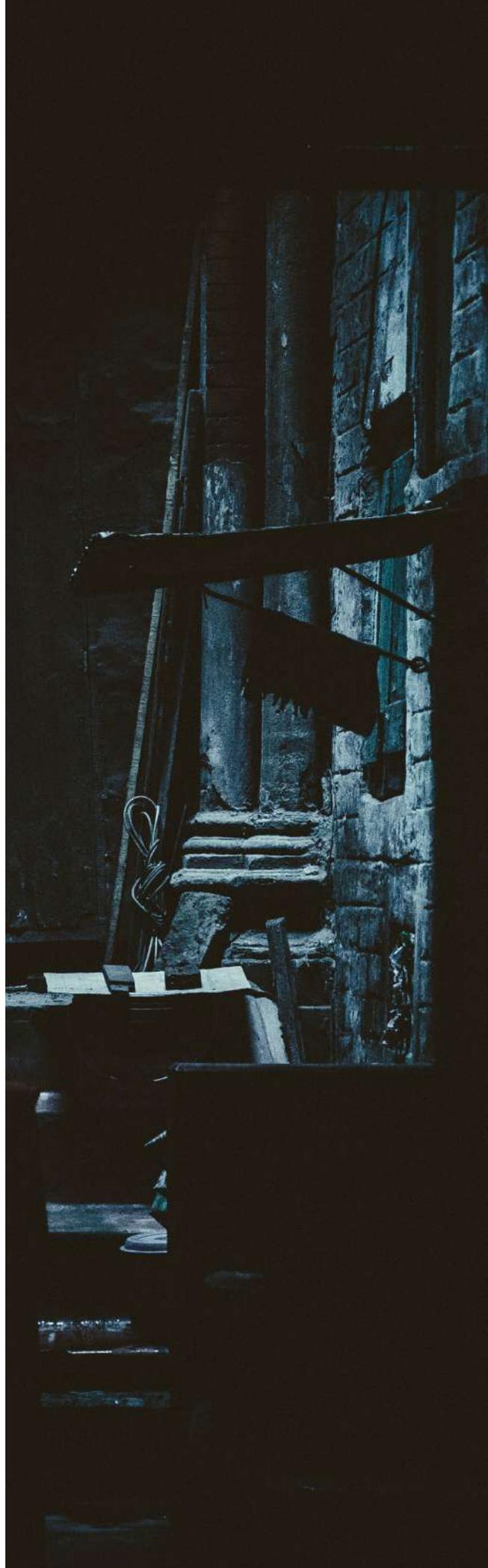
As the plot of the novel progresses, Umrao Jan emerges as a cynosure whose glamour and beliefs as a courtesan becomes an obsession with the readers. We see her transformation from a young girl to a matured tawaif, who even though longs for love, but understands her social location. She elopes with Faiz Ali, and starts living in Kanpur for a short period of time after Faiz Ali is arrested. Later on the request of Gauhar Mirza, Umrao returns to Lucknow and receives patronage from Wajid Ali Shah, but soon has to flee to Faizabad to save herself from the British, who have captured the city by now.

As a result of the mutiny Wajid Ali Shah goes into exile, and due to the dichotomies of the virtuous woman and the fallen woman, Umrao's brother declares her as a disgrace to the family, and thus, she is forced to return to Lucknow. On returning, however, she finds the town in ruins.

Her Lucknow has lost its glory, and the courtesans who were once known for their aesthetic accomplishments, now became demonised as repositories of diseases. The case of Abadi is significant in understanding this change; that Umrao buys her for 1 rupee during the famine and she later catches venereal diseases. The British legislation demands her to take in to the lock hospitals. Therefore, as a combined result of the British clean up which ignored traditional hierarchies, and the decline of the urban aristocracy, "courtesans now found themselves mostly inhabiting the same space and bazaar as regular prostitutes" (Dang 176). Umrao as well retires from her profession by the end of the novel.

Umrao Jan measures the journey of her life not from fixed dates but from the events that led to the decay of Awadh. The ageing tawaif is a symbol for the demise of the cultures and traditions of Lucknow.

"But I have lived through the tragic days of the Mutiny, seen kingdoms collapse before my eyes, witnessed the fall of princes like Birjis Qadr and my heart has become as hard as stones."





The novel therefore, not only unravels the subject of the fallen women, or the life of a courtesan, and the decay of one but also the decay of a city. The culture of patronising courtesans after the mutiny declined, and hence, their material conditions. Their cultural location lacked the previous glory of the pre-mutiny Awadh. Although Ruswa's novel is a representation of the expression of culture of Lucknow, Oldenburg's study suggests that Ruswa takes liberties in his portrayal of the courtesans. Umrao Jan also asserts the same, when she reads the pages of the novel. Prof. Asauddin therefore, suggests his readers to distinguish between Ruswa as the narrator and Ruswa as a person. However, Oldenburg also claims that this novel is the single most source on the courtesans of Lucknow and their profession as it was practised in the nineteenth century Northern India. Ruswa's novel, therefore, conflates history and fiction in a well knitted plot to tell the story of the fall of Awadh, the decay of Lucknow.



Ang(st)

Nazli Karabiyikoglu

They stood together and held each other's hands to ang. First, a woman lay on the ground, then a man. Then, the other woman lay next to him. Keeping their hands locked, they shut their eyes. They saw as much sky as the trees allowed. The green there was dark, and textures, mossy. The forest, a network of wise elders who had shown signs of existence only through the scarrings on trees' phloem. Claws clanging, taste of owls, and a dense cry from animals' songs. They were surrounded by the cool air whose color impregnated on skin when one stood still under the branches. They heard as much of the soil as the night birds wanted. The reptiles could make them feel the breeze, in their sacrum, up to the back of their necks. They kept their eyes shut until the moon looked at the earth from straight up. The white light shone on the man's face, their eyes lit. All three of them took a breath and thundered, "Let's *ang*." They repeated the words, whispering deep into the forest.





“Let’s *ang*,” said the first woman. Told her name so that they recognized her - Sarima.

Sarima’s spirit had been traveling around the area where Selenga River floated in to Lake Baikal before ending up in Tbilisi with the grand migration and spending some years there. The hunger made her go to Erzurum, then Konya, and when she was full, she had settled in a random side of the bosphorus. Her body still as rock and quiet as marble on the ground, Sarima was formlessly beautiful. Her head was way too big for her torso, her bandy legs were actually quite flattering when considered apart from the rest. An oval face. With a large mouth, slant eyes, and dark black hair, all on veiny, yellow skin. Her mouth owned those she faced. She either swallowed them whole or just beheaded them. The beams of her ambition, tenacity, and regrets crossing her heart united at one point: Death.

In her present life, she had made peace with her human existence far from the familiar flow of desiring death that slowly grew in her since the day she realized she was a little girl. Missing only the essence of death, without considering any method of suicide. Getting lost in the creepy obscurities of separation from the body. Abandoning the things that were forced upon her, the body that the soul was merely shoved into, the atlas of bones that resisted standing on two feet. Her lineage enthusiastic to reproduce, the structure of her tongue that changed as the number of her front teeth lessened.

To push aside what was visible and reach for the luminous beings that moved somewhere. To die. To not being and to be the queen of condolences for three days. Then maggots. Worms. Separation from the bones later on, being eaten and swallowed. To touch herself through the soil and to be able to see herself from afar, to look straight at her dead in the eye.





To finally catch that resonance she heard but couldn't understand every time she took the violin between her neck and shoulder and float with it - death. Even if her arms lost their strength, to lean on the instrument and play until the strings left their marks on her forehead.

Sarima's strong arms were ready to embrace death. She thought about the days she spent alone with the instrument she had been one with since she was a child. She remembered the first time she saw her while she walked the conservatory's hallways, longing for someone to continue her murmurs, filled with a talented charge waiting to explode. It was that moment that made her desire for death freeze. Her arrival looked like the turquoise flashings of the northern lights. Interrupted, but directly on her face. She wanted to be her wide basin where the silks that wrapped around her body floated. She was about to pass her when she grabbed her shoulder to make her stop, and their eyes met. Asked her trivial questions, babbled. Tried very hard to make her smile. When she finally had her, she gave her coffee in a carton cup, and in an amount of time to smoke one cigarette, she told her about her violin.





Months passed and Sarima realized her arms moved lighter than ever over the instrument. She was shy and actually scared, but strong inside. She was hopping on strings, leaving marks of melody in mid-air. Her mind kept zooming in on a face, and she wanted to kiss her eyes, which, as an idea, caused her back to stretch, and made her scramble preludes on paper. When she began spending her nights sleepless over the dream of that tall creature, who looked small next to her violin, and she painted her lips cherry red and invited her over. Offered her unusual teas and said she wanted her to be the first to hear her newest piece.

Sarima found her skeleton on the instrument she covered with her head. At the ends of her fingertips she saw her excitement gushing out of her rising chest as she listened. As she hit the notes fixed in her memory, she caressed longer bones before the short ones. She wrapped her neck around stiff, thick veins and shoved his legs through the capillaries. She stopped breathing entirely, dead everywhere but her fingers, the weight of the void descended on the room, as heavy as nebula, as she ground her bones. Nucleuses with their trembling membranes collided, she thought the liquid that poured out of her marrow onto the round headed end of the bone was going to suffocate her.

Sarima opened her eyes, she was covered in sweat when she finished. Looked at her palms, they were bleeding. Eyes shot, she left the heavy instrument leaning on the couch and snuggled to the one still sitting there. Leaving red stains on her face, neck, and back. Her thighs were about to get the taste of red as well when Sarima sensed two separate textures under her discovering hands. A bony one and a meaty one. Sarima leaned over both flesh, death was always one step ahead of them.

“Let’s ang,” said the man. Told his name so that they recognized him - Orhan.

He played the drums, and sometimes the bells, in the orchestra. People he met on his trip to Yakutsk asked him to kam for a ritual. It’s there he learned how to play the mouth lute. He repeatedly told of that night to others, as if it were an epic, as if he lived it again every time, and added he was cured as well with the man they cured before his eyes. Ever since that day, he had been living a carefree, rapt life.





His face that resembled the giant masks carved on mountains completed the rest of his body, moving further from masculinity with his thighs wider than his narrow shoulders, and an overall short figure. Despite his calm demeanor, his nostrils looked flared up as if they were impatient warriors getting ready for a savage war.

The way he dreamed about taking big bites from those meats turning on metal poles as he walked past kebab places was his only urge and desire if he were to distill the gist of life. Besides greasy meats, Orhan was beaten down by the smoking scars of the fresh-cut livestock, the hills of the women who lay on their faces on his bed, and the juiciness of the ripe fruits ejaculating honey. Everything he wanted to exploit until it ceased to exist under him, in his mouth or between his legs, was of pulpy meat.

The first time he saw her was after a stage play by the entrance of the apartment when he walked back, playing his mouth lute. Under the exhausted street light with flies crowding around, a vague blueness settled on the corner of his eyelid. He stood behind her, clacking his keys, and as the desire to rip apart the straps crossing her bare back grew in him, he told her he could open the door if she stepped aside.

Before looking at her face thanking him, he took a peek at the hardened nipples under the silk fabric in the cold of night and was embarrassed when he realized his glance had been noticed. Upstairs she looked at Orhan over her shoulder while she ranged his neighbor's door and asked what he had been carrying in his mouth. He offered her a taste of the trembling noise of strings. They dashed into Orhan's apartment before the next door was even opened.





Spontaneous. Sudden. Unexpected. Orhan was floating in the void of the calves he bit with hunger, where the silk that left sandy taste on his tongue mixed with a subtle smell of sweat and skin. The mole that kept its head underground after digging the caves for hours between her strong and lean legs she had obviously been working out a lot. An urge to attack that had been growing in him ever since the clarification he experienced in his night of kamming in Yakutsk, and it was set free. He wanted to tear tendons apart from bones, suck up marrows in one go, and feel that first point where the earlobes hardened towards cartilage tissue. He signed walls, sheets, windows with the sweat he ejaculated as he devoured both sexes that filled in his mouth separately. Spontaneous. Sudden. Unexpected.

Through the years they danced together as if they organized their own rituals with drums, lute, and tambourine and went mad, he might have told her of the night when he kammed thousands of times. The night when he told her he could sacrifice his entire orchestra to go back and experience once again with his changed self, she had wrapped her arms around his neck and said, “Let’s go then, together. You be the kam, and I be the one praying in a corner.” Then she put his right ear in her mouth and said, “But first, there’s someone you should meet.”

“Let’s ang,” said the second woman. Told her name so that they recognized her - Hazzan.

Hazzan was as tall as the total of the other two lying next to her. She seemed light because of the elegance she tailored to her size. Her hair did justice to the two z’s in her name. A brand-new interpretation of her ancient version, a blond-headed drawing on a cave wall. Hazzan, who found at last the music of her bones, was put there first by Umay[2], bride of the tribes and Afrasiab[3], in that time period, after entering and exiting many bodies throughout centuries. Only with that music she could have passed the wall of men and women she slept with.

She was just four years old when they noticed she could play every instrument. She was bored of them all when she turned ten. While she was playing the cello in the philharmonic orchestra she’d been stuck in, she heard a humming in the floc of sounds. She followed the incomplete melody to find Sarima. She was going to let her take control of her body, fragmentate her destiny, and rule them. Become her flow.





Then one night, an avalanche of notes she wasn't really keen on came running down on her. She cut to Orhan's way through parallel streets, after following and listening to him for a long time, and waited at his front door, like someone else's guest. Give him her body so that he would write her faith on her skin with the extract of leaves. Become his flow.

When she reduced her whole life to a single moment and looked at it from the outside, the meaning she was left with was plain simple. It made her see the reason behind her dreams, flashbacks, the dark shadows standing over her after seeing nightmares, and the sudden foreign echoes of some words she heard. In that moment, she found more than the limitations of her body, which she could only describe as peculiar. It wasn't unease that she carried in her hump, or non-adaptability. The way she stood equal with the particles she could sense with her fingers, ear, tongue made her see it was in fact everything around her that was obscure.

When she saw the writings "energy flow, adaptation of past, communication with the spirit" on the purple sign, she didn't believe it was a coincidence. She opened the door behind the sign, climbed the stairs it led to, and did everything the woman with a pure light around her face asked without questioning. After weeks of sessions where she almost completely lost herself, she couldn't find a past to adapt to, but she did make sure she was at a point where meaning recreated itself. Now, in her mind, she could scream the things she knew since her childhood but couldn't say. A birth. Anything that floated, turned, sought after, inside her only, without coming out from anybody else, being in and arising from her.



Violin at her one side, lute at the other. She was waiting for the day when she would let the cello go and play the “erke.”

Hazzan came out from a woman who carried a void for uterus. In all times, she looked first to the face beyond the hole she came out from. Always the same woman. She was a man. A woman. She was crushed, buried, her ears and testicles were cut, she was banished, her virginity was taken in the woods, and she was sacrificed a couple of times. Every time she was reborn, for the sake of her repetitive destiny, she played one instrument. Oboe, flute, saxophone, lyre, shakuhachi... She saw oceans, flew along rivers, shot birds and ate them, hugged antlers, wailed on top of men, but couldn't bear children.

She studied, read, passed tests. She ran from death, leaving a cloud of dust behind. In the sight of the sword, she galloped, she hit the gas. She prayed a lot every time, to exit from another womb. She put her head on a trunk, threw arrows up to the sky, flared up the flame. She cut geese, cocks. Bulls and horses. Sheep and cows. She bled virgins, she cut virgins. She decapitated. Hanged the heads on spears. Raised them up to the flagpole. Tengri didn't hear Hazzan. Each time she was rolled and sent to the same mother's pelvis.





Always running from death, always dying - in a plane, on horseback riding, next to a huge casserole, at the sumitting of an orchestra - she was born once more. This time, both a woman and a man.

The curving skin under her belly was followed by a large penis below. Two testicules, almost as big as her eyes, hung at the two sides of it. Behind the testes a flower made of tangerine peels was on top of one another. When she grasped what they were as a child it was also the moment when she saw the need to heal her soul somehow despite her faulty embryo. The honeycomb she dug in with hunger. To change her course, see beyond her intermittent music, rare brilliance, and her sex always ready to embrace death.

Sarima and Orhan, she kept them separate for years. Keeping her floral fruit from Sarima, and her sterile penis from Orhan. When the crystalized affinities in both her hands became too heavy to carry, she decided to complete the sexes of her body and not run away from death this time.

Before taking the trip Orhan dreamed of, at the beginning of summer, she brought Sarima and Orhan together. She paired their hands, knees, violin and lute, eyelashes. She left them in each other's arms and watched her faith from afar. They were going to be the channels where love would flow as she beat death.



“Let’s *ang*,” they said one more time. Told their names so that they recognized themselves and each other.

Those behind where they lay hit the drums. Made owl, eagle, wolf sounds. Orhan whistled into the lute in his mouth. Sarima hummed. Hazzan whispered, “Let’s *ang*. I call my dead. My victims in all times. My bodies. I call me, every unborn and dead me. I will face all of you. And ask for forgiveness.”

Trees wuthered. Ground trembled. So, the ground could shake when every few grams left on earth from every dead came together. They got up holding each other’s hands. They bowed before the shaman who came forward, splitting the crowd into two. The shaman held Hazzan and lifted her up. One hand on Sarima’s head, another on Orhan’s. The silk Hazzan wore, was gone. She was naked. The embers, which had been calmly red for hours, flared up. The *ang* was on.

They came. In pink tones and covered with ribbons. With staffs and books. They climbed the hills, mowed the grass, opened the way. They came. In dried blood, cut limbs, and membranes pierced through. They flew over them, landed on the shaman’s crown, blew into the fire. In fetuses, poison, hatred, iron. They whispered the recipe of the cure to the shaman’s ear, asked for their share, promised embryos. In bones, love, and feet who passed here.

The shaman took out an old dagger. Poured oils, salts, and waters on Hazzan’s both organs. Then heated the dagger on fire and kneeled before Hazzan. First the penis was gone, then the testes were carved. Held them all and filled the handful of meat to Sarima’s big mouth. *Death*, she thought. *Out of breath, with my mouth*. Then anything feminine. Carved. Shaman filled Orhan’s ears with the next batch. *Without hearing anymore*, he thought. *The sound of my lute. Without kamming again*.





Shaman delivered Hazzan to men. They put her in her grave, without an organ, her knees bent on her stomach, her hands as fists on her chest. They fixed the *erke* in her palms. They threw on her one layer of dirt, put the cello and the lute in, then covered the grave completely.

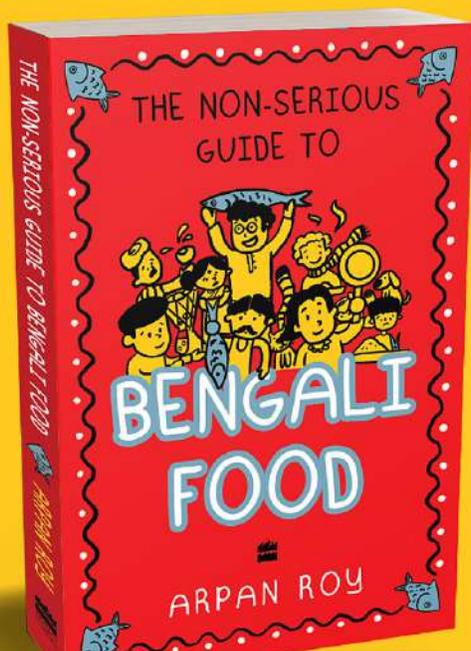
“Take them and leave now,” they said.

Ang was over. The dead were cut. And they returned to their holes

Sarima and Orhan were emptied and covered with blades so that they protected her until Hazzan was reborn once more from a new womb. Their sun-dried statues were set on her grave.

“Let’s *ang*,” they said. They engraved their names so that the dead recognized them - Hazzan, Orhan, Sarima.





Aindrila Ray

Tongue-in-cheek, whimsical and full of surprises, this book by the creator of the immensely popular - The Bong Sense, is your answer to everything you didn't know about Bengali cuisine.

The non-serious guide to Bengali food: A review

As a person who recently moved out of Kolkata, Bengali food and the sudden scarcity of it had been a touchy subject for a while, and I was kind of skeptical, picking up this book. However, deciding to read, and later write about it was one of the very few right decisions I have taken in a while.

Before I move into the review, if you are looking to read heavy literature and sharpen your literary prowess, I would strongly recommend you to put this book down, but if you are looking to get out of a reading slump, or looking for something to read on your next flight, this is your perfect fit.

The author, Arpan Roy, who very rightly claims to know their food well, takes us on a journey that will hit one with at least one of these three things: nostalgia, homesickness, or an intense craving for a Campari chicken cutlet. In the very first few pages the author mentions growing up in Ballygunge and the South Kolkata influence is very heavy throughout the book, and as someone who has grown up around the same area, the reading felt especially comfortable and homely.

The author tries to break down the components of the day-to-day meals of middle-class common Bengali families, and portray the Kolkata lifestyle and the connection between its food and its people in a quirky, millennial kind of way, and to some extent, succeeds to do so. The book starts with the author justifying why he chose to write a whole book about Bengali cuisine, which contains a commentary of how Bengali people and their food are perceived (by which I mean, majorly stereotyped) outside of Bengal, and what follows is a confession from the author that most people will relate to- how he stuck to his corporate job only to be able to afford delicious meals. Arpan also clarifies that they are neither a chef nor a writer, just a lover of Bengali food who considers themselves to be moderately humorous, a judgment that I consider to be pretty much accurate.

Now what I particularly liked is that, before explaining the food of Bengal, the author makes sure the reader knows the geography of Bengal, which is a huge factor in our cuisine as it not only determines the ingredients used but also the way a particular dish is cooked. As we go further into the book, Arpan gives a detailed narration about the staple diet of every Bengali - “*daal, bhaat, maach*” (lentils, rice, and fish) and their accompaniments, the different kinds of *bhaja* (fried vegetables and fritters). The author does not just focus on the food, but also what goes behind the scenes, and brings out a funny side to mundane everyday events in the life of a Bengali residing in Kolkata, events ranging from eating mutton curry on Sundays to drinking tea and smoking cigarettes in the neighborhood tea stall.



The author takes utmost care as he explains the role of history and its direct consequences on our food. From discussing the effects of partition on our food and the differences in the preparation of fish in the two regions to giving an elaborate insight into the exile of Wajid Ali Shah and how he was the one who essentially carried the essence of our beloved Kolkata Biryani, all the way from Lucknow to explaining the development of Kolkata's Chinatown which consequentially led to the formation of the Indo-Chinese cuisine, which gave birth to crowd-favourites like chilli chicken, *hakka* chowmein, and fried rice.

Any guide to Bengali food, be it serious or not is incomplete without the mention of our sweets, and the author does not disappoint. He dedicates a special chapter to 'Roshogolla' and delves deep into the story of its creation and the creator, Nobin Chandra Das, and does not shy away from making a sly mention of the recent controversy with Odisha.

The author demystifies the quintessential '*mishtir dokan*' (sweet shop) and categorizes different sweet shops of Kolkata according to their names, which I found to be particularly funny.

Kolkata's vibrant street food scene is given its due credit, with special sections dedicated to our Kathi rolls, our egg rolls, our *phuchkas* and our *shingara*. Bengalis and their love for tea have not been neglected, the author describing corner tea stalls as hotspots of intellectualism and political debates over countless rounds of *cha*. I was personally also delighted to find special mentions of the popular Bengali breakfast, *luchi* and *aloor torkari* (potato curry) and khichuri during Kolkata monsoons. The author dedicates special sections to Durga Pujo and the food that holds the festival together and winter picnics which are common in Bengali households and highlights the chaos that ensues in its food preparation in the funniest way possible.

The book successfully covers almost all aspects of Bengali cuisine in a very unique style and if the reader has grown up in Kolkata in a Bengali household, they will be able to relate to the descriptions that the author has penned.



The details, the small background stories, and bite-sized incidents from the author's own life and childhood add a personal touch and establish a very easy, informal connection between the author and the reader.

The doodles that are added almost on every page of the book are very cleverly made and add to the humor and the informal tone that the author has maintained so well till the very end.

Although the dad jokes and the constant references to the American sitcom, Friends get tiresome after a point, the writing is fresh and easy to read and comprehend. It feels like a light-hearted conversation with a friend rather than reading.

Another thing that I could do away with is the over-exaggeration and the constant mention of the health hazards that come with the consumption of signature Bengali dishes. They were intended to be humorous but kind of lost their point along the way. Also the frequent, almost irksome bits about the increasing body weight and broadening waistline with every helping of Bengali food, seemed unnecessary as they ceased to be hilarious after the first few times and just felt repetitive after a point.

All in all, the book delivers quite well as a light read and achieves its purpose of being the A-Z guide to Bengali cuisine without being too formal about it. Arpan Roy does a good job in expressing his views and admiration towards a very colorful cuisine that Bengalis have created over decades and centuries and the book feels like a celebration of the sheer brilliance of our food and how it has shaped our culture, our community, and every aspect of the lives of Bengalis all over the world.



Blurred Grief

My head is full
of blurry stories
With unnamed characters.
I think
I've forgotten how to write.
All I've ever done
Is romanticize everything
From roses to cigarettes
To heartbreaks.

All these unnamed characters are
Grieving one thing
Or another.
And I wish I could tell them
That it's not romantic.

Grief lives
At the top of my bookshelf
And keeps smiling at me
As I try to run away from it.

Apoorva Phutela



Amidst a huge bunch
Of emotions, perhaps
Grief is the only one that
Has stuck with me
Throughout these years.

And to be honest,
I'm scared of parting with it.

Because the day it
Walks out the door, I don't know
What I'd fill in its place.

I dream about these blurry stories
At night, and I don't
Understand how/when
Did they get into my head.
All I know is that I can't write them.

These stories teach me
To let go of grief
But don't say how to.
I don't know how to
Let go of something
I've known for so long.
So, I let it live,
In my bookshelf,
And try not to write
About it.



An Annual Love Story in Twelve Quintains

Sakshi Nadkarni

I

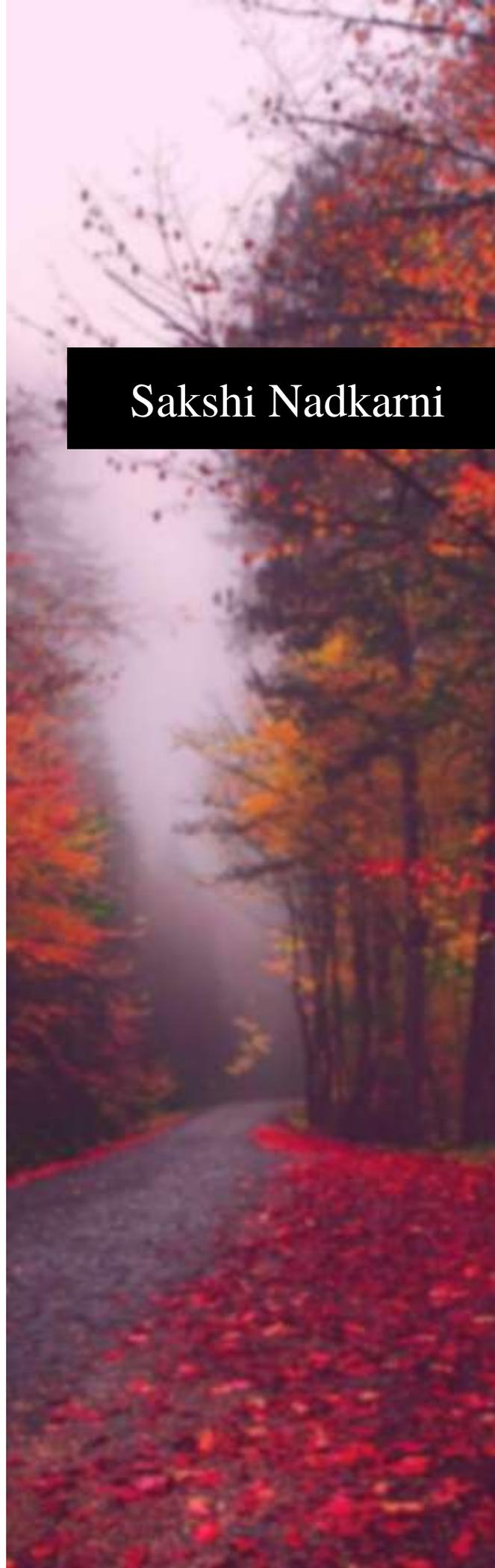
Blistering January winds
Pick withered leaves up
Forcing them gently
Into the revelation
Of a distant romance

II

In softening February
The wind's sword turns
Blunter with fronds' love
A languishing of affection
Smothers the cold

III

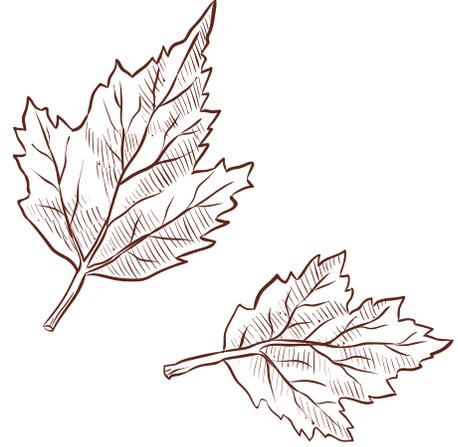
As the summer invites
The night to eat the dawn
The March wind crumples
Beneath his feet – the heap
Of his communal loves





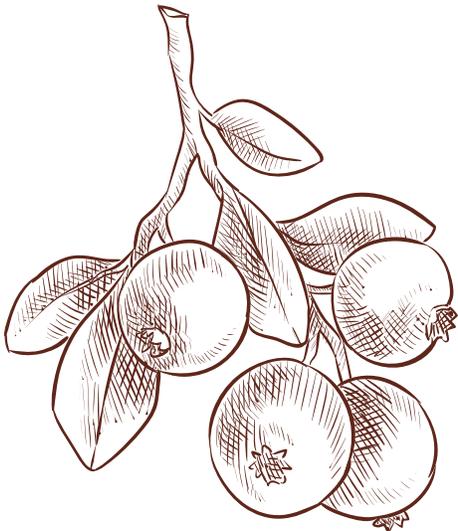
IV

April grows torrid
And the grieving leaves
Burn with jealousy as
Winds of their wildest dreams
Make visits to antipodes



V

The wrath of the leaves
In the crackling May fire
Cannot be assuaged by the
Fruition of sweet, yellow moons –
The wind must weep now



VI

June – the wind's forbearance
Wears out into anguish
The wind cries tears of
Divine repentance
But his leaves won't yield

VII

As the wind weeps for attention
Giant sobs shake the earth in July
The leaves lament with sad sways
Secretly, though, they rejoice
Green blushes colour cheeks



VIII

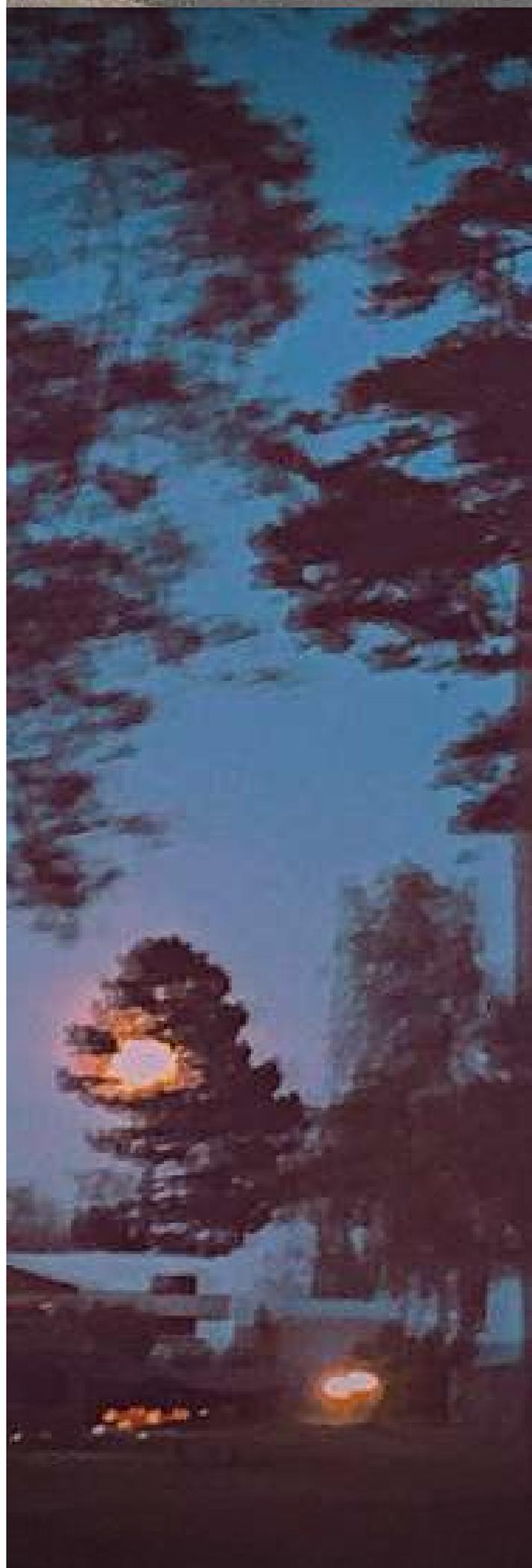
The wind persists and thunders on
Through chilly August nights
Now scared of the wind's gusto
Leaves cling on close
To the vestiges of sanity

IX

Madness triumphs alas
The redemption is complete
In September, the wind
And his beloved leaves
Dance to a folk song

X

Tears cautiously dry up as
The warmth of passion
Alights – crackling fire
Sets the sweethearts
In October's ritzy rhythm





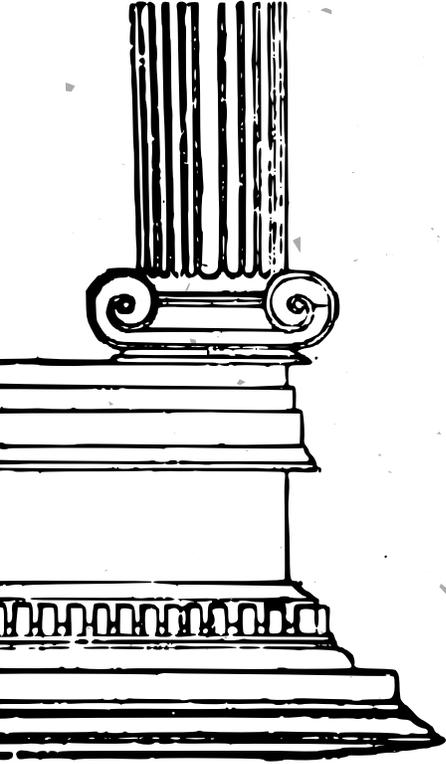
XI

November's the month
Of calm and stability,
Sleepy and cocooned,
The wind and leaves
Forget the sorrows of parting

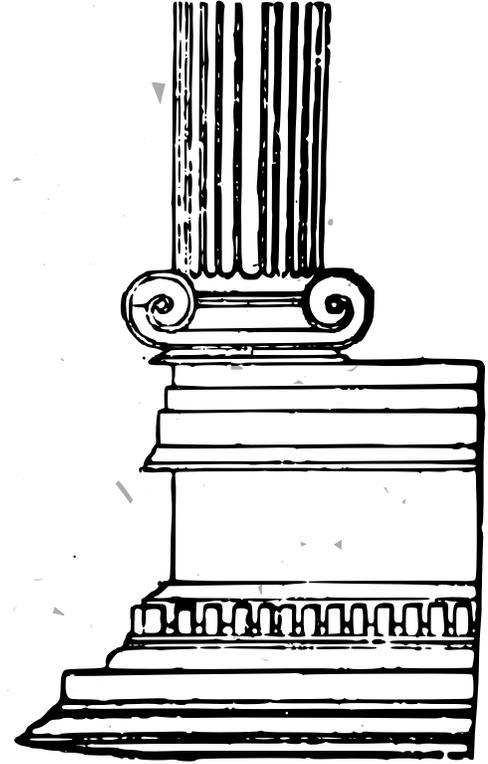
XII

Awoken from deep slumber,
The wind roars and his leaves
shake
In a declaration of devotion.
Sleepily, December watches on
Knowing January to ensue.





Monograph Interviews: Parimal Bhattacharya



In the late 2000s, when the three-decade-long Left Front rule in West Bengal was crumbling, Parimal Bhattacharya began to travel outside the well-trodden urban centres to different parts of the region - from the Sundarbans to tribal Jangalmahal, from the outskirts of Kolkata to villages on the Bangladesh border, from the floodplains of the Hooghly to the forests of Simlipal in neighbouring Odisha.

In his new book "Field Notes From A Waterborne Land: Bengal Beyond The Bhadrakok", published by Harper Collins India, Parimal explores the stories of these largely ignored communities.



Monograph Interviews: Parimal Bhattacharya

1. Narratives in this genre have almost exclusively been about the bhadralok society- the urban middle and upper class. What made you write this book?

I grew up in an old suburban town that has an interesting demographic mix. There are jute mills, there is a river, a Brahmin community of Sanskrit scholars, a big railway marshalling yard and, beyond it, the countryside. I went to a school where children of mill workers, fisherfolk, farmers and blue-collar railway workers also studied. Not in large numbers, but they were there. So, on the one hand, I had a natural exposure to this ‘other’ world from a very early age, on the other hand, I was aware that I was from a somewhat different, privileged community. Of course I was too young to understand the socio-economic complexities, but, you know, kids somehow sniff out these differences instinctively.

When I was a little older – by that time, most of my classmates from these ‘other’ communities had dropped out – I began to read story books and adult novels. I discovered a writer who lived in our town and had written extensively about this other world: Samaresh Bose.

Here I slightly disagree with your point that narratives ‘in this genre have almost exclusively been about the bhadralok society- the urban middle and upper class.’ For English writings, particularly those in the mainstream, this may be true. But in Bangla we have a wealth of literature which focus on the working class world. Most of it, though, are fiction, but we have some fine examples of non-fiction as well. Interestingly, almost all our Bangla writers who wrote about the working class and marginal communities were from the bhadralok; in fact, most of them were Brahmins. But it never occurred to anyone as odd that a Bhaduri was writing about the dalits (Dhonrai Charit Manas), or a Bandyopadhyay was writing about the fisherfolk (Padma Nadir Majhi). We have a brilliant novel on the world of the fisherfolk, Adwaita Mallabarman’s Titas Ekti Nadir Naam. But the readers have never privileged it over Manik Bandyopadhyay’s novel on the same subject, just because it was written by an insider. That may have been happening in recent times, particularly in the academia.

Here I would hazard a guess that a disconnect happened between the bhadralok and the non-bhadralok worlds in West Bengal after the economic liberalization rolled in during the 1990s. Earlier, the differences were of course there, but there existed common social spaces where the two worlds could connect. To give you an example: after the nineties, there was this massive shift towards privatization of school education, triggered by a controversy over English teaching at the primary level. Middle class children born after my generation didn’t have the privilege of exposure that I had in my school. Socially and culturally, the bhadralok world became more insular, insulated, and at the same time more hegemonic, because it had the economic muscle and the media at its disposal.



And this process accelerated while large segments of the population became economically more vulnerable, the fruits of land reforms decayed, labour migration to other states grew, swathes of land became ecologically critical. All this prodded me to write the book.

2. The change in the lives of the bhadralok's as a reaction to technology is well documented. Has it, or to what extent has it affected the lives of the common Bengali- the fisherman, the jute and paddy farmers and the labourers?

In the coastal areas of Purba Medinipur, a section of the population survive by catching prawn larvae that are washed up on the beaches. They do it during the ebbing tide, in small groups of two or three mostly very young persons, working at considerable distances from one another. This is painstaking work, and much depends on luck. Whenever a group would have a good catch, they'd take out a mobile phone and call up a collector from a nearby hatchery, who would come from 2-3 kilometers away riding an M80 scooter with a special larvae box tied on its carrier!

I can give you a hundred such examples. Yes, cheap and easy mobile communication has mostly increased the productivity of people who work in the informal sector in one way or another, in urban as well as in rural areas. The livelihood of thousands of migrant workers who go to other states depends on it. A skilled plumber with a mobile phone is as busy as the city's busiest heart surgeon.

But there is a flip side. And that is really big and dark. The use of technology in sectors like building construction has killed millions of jobs. This is particularly poignant when we look at our state. For a long time, Bengal had been the hub of a skilled workforce in various sectors. Most of it is lost forever, and this will impact the economic future of our state. In my book, I have written about it.

And not just in urban areas, recently I have seen earthmovers being used in villages to do jobs which were traditionally done by manual labour.

3. History for Bengalis seems to start from 1757. Hardly do we read of Gaur or of Nabadwip, of the Sena Dynasty or even Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. Why do you think such an important part of Medieval history is absent not only from our curriculum but also from the consciousness of the Bengali populace?

A very good question. Although a few of our great Bengali historians have written about medieval Bengal – Dinesh Sen's Brihat Banga and Nihar Ranjan Roy's Bangalir Itihas are still very popular books – you are right in pointing out that the pre-British history of Bengal is largely absent from Bengali consciousness and our cultural practices. I don't think that is only because of the lack of available materials and sources. The so-called bhadralok – the educated, urban, middle class Bengalis who are mostly upper-caste Hindus – came into existence during the British rule. We are Macaulay's firstborn, before any other community in India.

As Tapan Raychaudhuri has written in his book *Europe Reconsidered*, ‘the Bengali intelligentsia was the first Asian social group of any size whose mental world was transformed through its interactions with the West.’ That may be one of the reasons. Not that the Bengali intelligentsia didn’t exist during the sultanate or nawabi times. They were very much there. There were many learned men, many among them Hindus, who knew Persian and worked in nawab’s courts. But after the beginning of the British rule, and the rise of Kolkata, there was this break, this erasure in the urban Bengali consciousness.

But I also believe that our medieval and pre-British traditions are still alive in the rural, artisanal and unlettered world of Bengali culture.

PARIMAL BHATT

FIELD NO

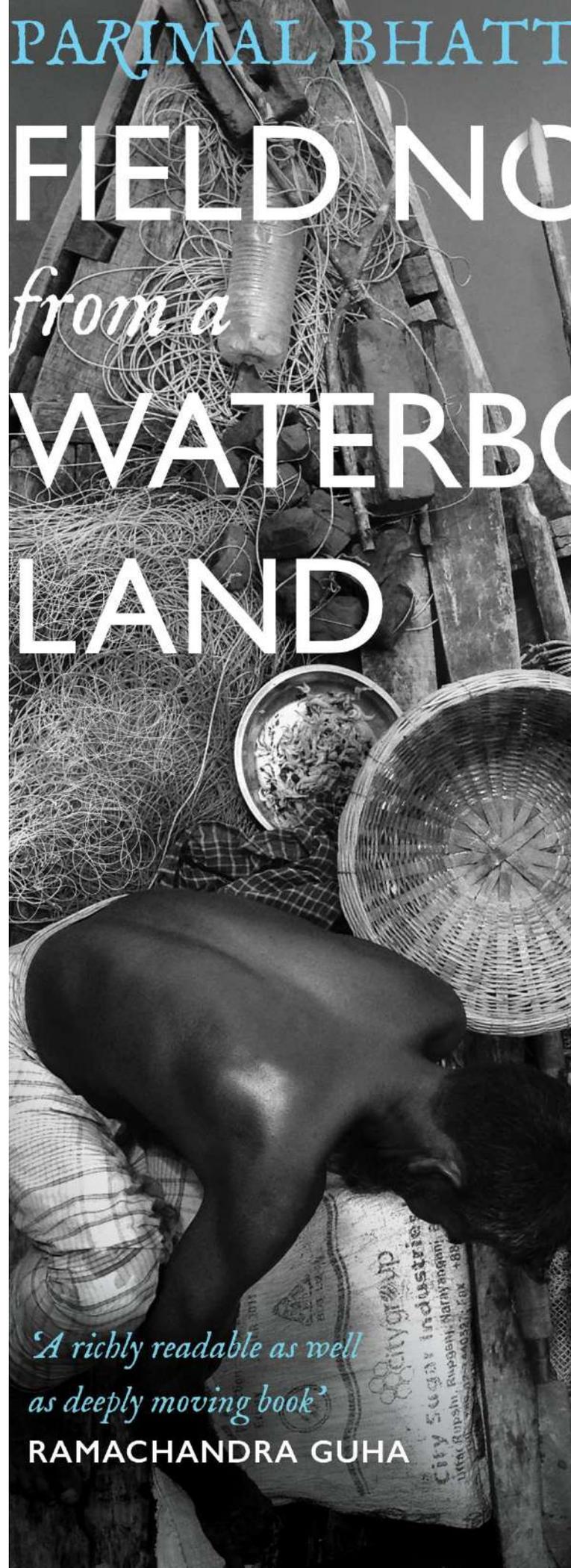
from a

WATERBO

LAND

*‘A richly readable as well
as deeply moving book’*

RAMACHANDRA GUHA





4. *"Grambangla" has been explored by many authors in their works. However, an interesting takeaway from the texts might be the difference between the writings of Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay and Manik Bandopadhyay. While one saw village-folk as largely simple people, the other saw them through the glasses of modernity as superstitious people, two-faced and opposed to city folk. What would you credit such a difference in thought to, and in your personal experience which of the two would be more accurate?*

Yes, both the writers came from different backgrounds and had different orientations. While Bibhutibhushan had a romantic, and also strongly Brahminical, outlook, Manik-babu was influenced by European modernism and Marxism. Both are great writers. But Bibhutibhushan has always been much more popular than Manik because of his warm empathy, which is infectious and comforting. Manik, on the other hand, is incisive, unsettling.



I don't think there is really any difference between the city folk and the village folk. Humans are humans, wherever they are. But the people who live in villages cannot have an insular life, like their urban counterparts. They live in a community that is immediate and concrete. One has to, you see, if one's water channel runs through another's farm plot. The mutual dependence is tangible, as we in Bengali call 'bendhe bendhe thaka' – staying together arm in arm. In the villages in Sundarbans islands, when a mud embankment is breached by a storm surge, that's what communities literally do to check saline water to enter their farmlands and ruin crops – standing arm in arm and facing the waves, with their backs against the bund.

Naturally, politics here is more tangible and encompassing than urban tea-cup vapour or Facebook posts. This also opens up space for violence.



5. Is there anything you'd like to tell the readers of Monograph, especially to those interested in similar spheres of research?

What can I say? There are so many spheres out there, outside the one that is dished out for our consumption via mainstream media and social media, so many Bengals beyond the recycled bhadralok nostalgia, so many urgent stories that are clamouring for our attention. A pair of sturdy legs, a strong stomach, and pairs of hungry eyes and alert ears are all one needs.



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Anindita Ghose

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