

CULTURE

CULT

VOL. 01, NO. 01

OCTOBER 2015



READ THIS MAGAZINE AT OUR HOME ON THE INTERNET

WWW.CULTURECULT.IN

SUPPORT US AT  [/CULTURECULT.IN](https://www.facebook.com/CULTURECULT.IN)

Editor **JAGANNATH CHAKRAVARTI**

Project Manager **ROUNAK CHATTERJEE**

Publishing Manager **MADHUMITA BASU**

Editorial Team **SUNDAR RAGHAV ARIJITA DEY LAXMAN RAMAMURTHY**

Layout Design **JAGANNATH CHAKRAVARTI**

Illustrations **SUHAS KRISHNA JAGANNATH CHAKRAVARTI**

Promotion **TRII-RA**

© **CULTURE CULT**

Published by Jagannath Chakravarti from 11/1, Khanpur Road, Kolkata - 700047, West Bengal, India.

All rights reserved. No part of this magazine can be reprinted/reused in its entire form or in part without the written permission of the publisher.

The Demarcation [CC] indicates the end of a particular segment, and is not to be confused with the Creative Commons licence. Copyright is reserved.



'The Muse - Lady in Red' by Sunil Das

CULTURE CULT

VOLUME ONE - NUMBER ONE - OCTOBER 2015

A Magazine of the Arts, Literature and Culture

06 | EDITORIAL

FEATURES

12 | **THE CELEBRATION OF MEDIOCRITY**
Jagannath Chakravarti

14 | **THE ROSOGOLLA AFFAIR**
Madhurima Basu

17 | **FTII, PRESIDENCY & THE CULTURE OF DISSENT**
Madhurima Basu

20 | **ISIS AND THE ART OF CULTURE CLEANSING**
Rounak Chatterjee

64 | **AAGOMONI - THE FESTIVE DAYS**
Arijita Dey

CENTENARY

24 | **SHREE SOMBHU MITRA**
Siddharth Pathak

THE BAN CULTURE

30 | **NAKED AGGRESSION**
Shrestha Burman

ANALYSIS

68 | 74

THEATRE

Jagannath Chakravarti

72 | 73

BOOK

Madhurima Basu

70 | 76 | 80

WORLD FILMS

*Madhurima Basu
Rounak Chatterjee*

78 | 84

BENGALI FILMS

Jagannath Chakravarti

86 | **INDIAN FILMS**

Sundar Raghav

82 | **INDIA AT OSCARS: COURT**
Sundar Raghav

WRITE TO US

We would greatly appreciate your feedback and comments regarding any of the pieces published in this issue. We will be printing a selection of the letters in our forthcoming issues.

NOTE: Letters may be edited before publication for clarity purposes. We would abstain from 'expurgation'.

Mail your letters to CultureCultin@gmail.com or leave them in our inbox on Facebook at www.Facebook.com/CultureCult.in

If you wish to contribute to our publication, you are more than welcome. Please refer to page no. 99 for details on how to submit.

First phase of submissions is open till November 30.

THE SPIRIT PAGE

96 | **IS THE SOUL IMMORTAL?**
Swami Vivekananda

RETROSPECTIVE

09 | **SUNIL DAS (1939-2015)**
Laxman Ramamurthy

PHOTOGRAPHY

89 | **THE DECISIVE MOMENT**
Henri Cartier-Bresson
Laxman Ramamurthy

LITERATURE

34 | 35

FLASH FICTIONS

Penelope Webb
Saiful Rahim

36 | 37 | 43 | 63

POETRY

Shawn Hatfield
Siddharth Pathak
Adisa Obasanjo
Aniket Kaushal

38 | **SHORT STORY**
Plethora & Wholesale Too

Herbert H. Hoffman

46 | **NOVELETTE**
Mrs. Hudson's Magic Carpet
Jagannath Chakravarti

58 | **SERIAL**
Cross Eyed Sleep
Siddharth Pathak

44 | **TRANSLATIONS: TWO POEMS**
Jibanananda Das
Syed Amir Milan

The Demarcation [CC] indicates the end of a particular segment [CC]

EDITORIAL

*It is never the **right** time. The right time is as we **speak**.*

Born in a society where there is no dearth of inherently good individuals striving to push the collective human race towards a higher state of cultural consciousness, CultureCult is yet another drop in the vast ocean of concepts that are designed with a view as polysemous as they come.

We have no more sense of what the future holds for us than the nameless author of the Altamira cave-painting who set out to depict a lively bison in all her natural, artistic grace.

We wish to be no more than a platform of expression, kindling the spark of creative inspiration like a black canvas of a dark cave wall in some timeless era.

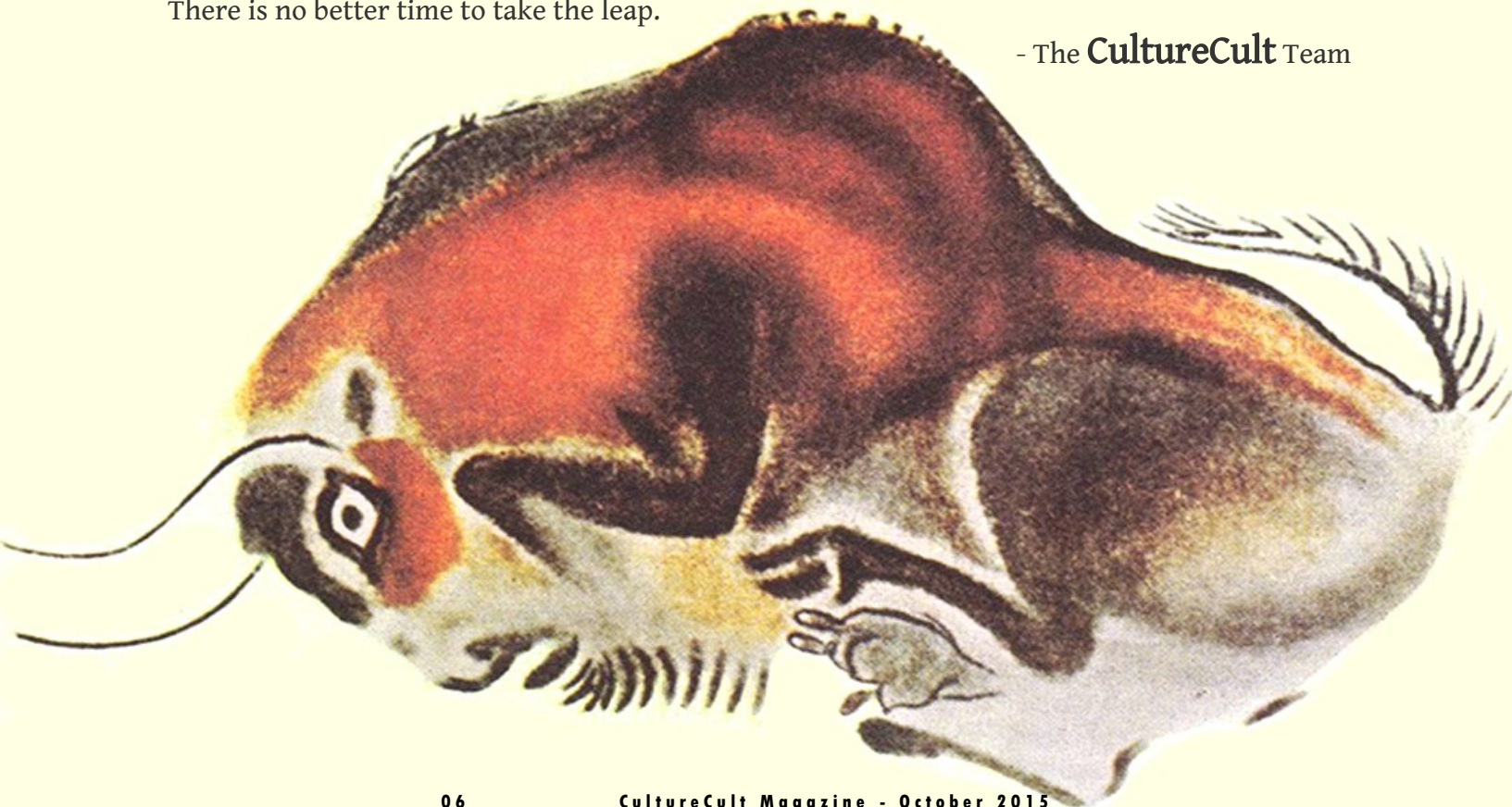
Politically sceptic, thematically indulgent, socially extrovert and theologically 'open', CultureCult is a tangible extension of the modern thinking mind that is yet to define itself within the structural confines of a predetermined *-ism*.

We intend to be a ceaseless work-in-progress that will both strive to attain perfection and know in its heart of hearts that perfection is not something that can be achieved or sustained as easily as working towards it with a faithless heart.

The leap is to have faith in the written word.

There is no better time to take the leap.

- The **CultureCult** Team



get initiated...

CULTURE CULT

Annunciation by Leonardo da Vinci and Andrea del Verrocchio

FOLLOW:



CULTURE CULT

MORE

To search type and hit enter

CATEGORIES

Select Category

NEW ON CULTURECULT



Centenary: Sombhu Mitra (1915 – 2015)



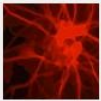
Review: Teenkahon



Review: Kalkijug



10 Great Autobiographical Films



Book Review: The Girl in the Spider's Web



Review: Welcome Back



FILMS / REVIEWS 18 SEP, 2015

Review: Teenkahon

The much speculated and lauded debut of Bauddhayan Mukherji is quite the novel idea on paper. Spanning an impressive one hundred years, Mukherji's three tales of obsession would unite three vastly different stories from...



THEATRE 21 SEP, 2015

Centenary: Sombhu Mitra (1915 – 2015)

The transition of Bengali theatre from its purely commerce-based identity to where it



FILMS / REVIEWS 18 SEP, 2015

Review: Teenkahon

The much speculated and lauded debut of Bauddhayan Mukherji is quite the novel idea on paper. Spanning an impressive one

CHECK OUT OUR:

- About Us
- Columns on CultureCult
- Submissions
- Trailer Gallery

CULTURECULT SELECT

Article: FTII, Presidency & The Culture of Dissent

Review: Natoker Moto

Critique: The Celebration of Mediocrity

Review: Hashuli Baker Upakatha

Article: ISIS and the "Art" of Culture Cleansing

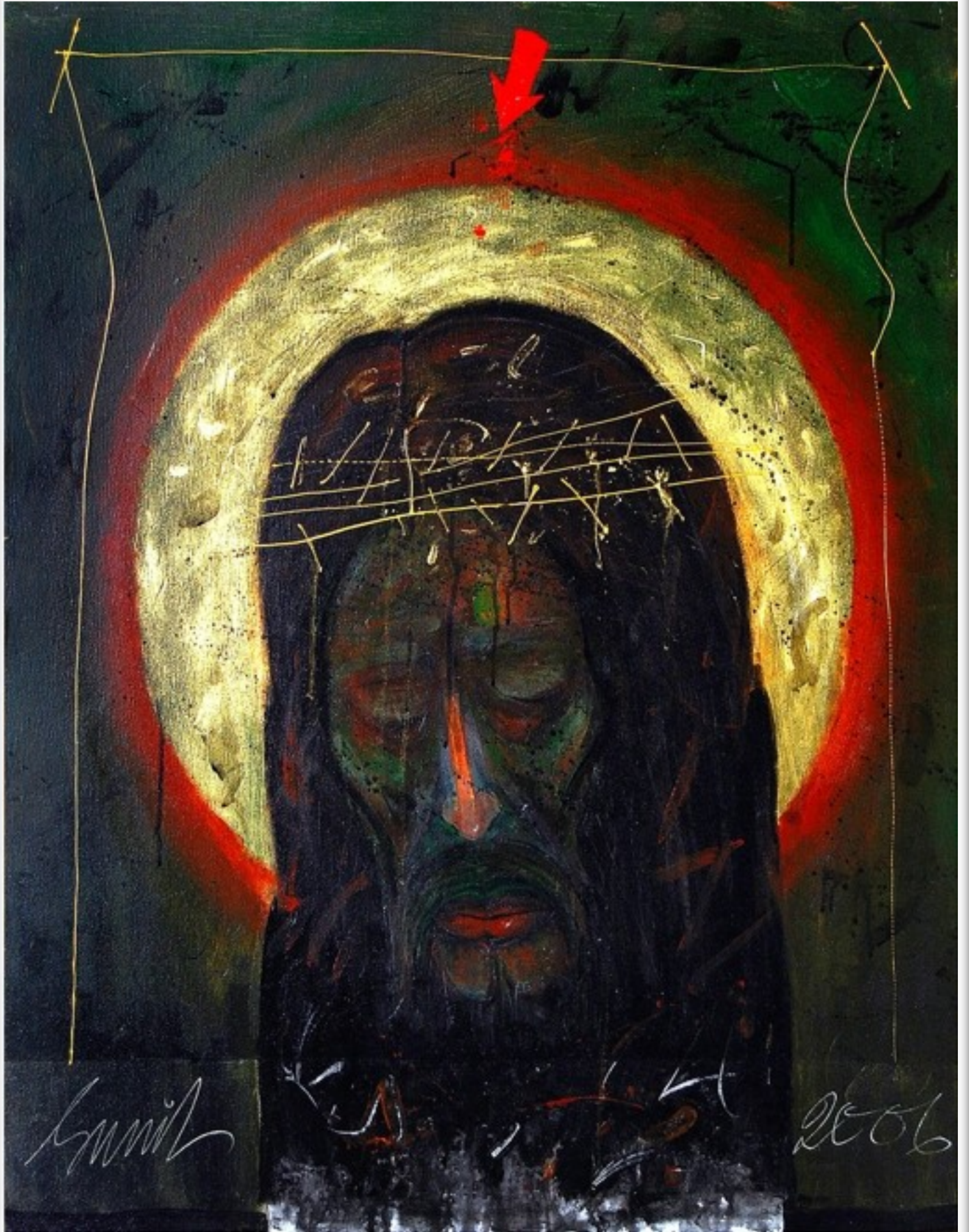
Review: Manjhi – The Mountain Man

Review: Anubrata bhalo acho?

POPULAR ON CULTURECULT

www.CultureCult.in

Follow us at:  /CultureCult.in



Christ by Sunil Das

RETROSPECTIVE



Sunil Das (1939 - 2015)

I do a sketch before I start painting. I always struggle with colours and shapes, until they fall to desired pattern. Like a music conductor, I summon all my music instruments to play and orchestrate an aesthetic unit out of various experiences.

- Sunil Das

by Laxman Ramamurthy

With the unique distinction of being the only Indian artist to have won a National Award from the Lalit Kala Academy (The Shiromani Kala Puraskar) while still in the Government College of Arts and Crafts, Kolkata, Sunil Das was undoubtedly one of the finest expressionist painters that the nation has had the fortune to see. Besides winning a French government scholarship to the Ecole National des Beaux Arts, Das has served as commissioner to the Sao Paulo Biennale and was a member of the jury of the Pfix des Etrangeres, Paris.

While his paintings of horses brought him prominence, Das found himself in Spain during the course of his travels witnessing bullfights, where his fascination for the form of the bull was kindled. "I must have done 7000 horses between 1950 to 60," he says, "In 1962, I went to Spain, where I was fascinated by the bull fights."

His ardent study of sculpting in Shantiniketan and his zeal for graphic art in Paris has imbibed a certain rigor in his paintings mostly associated with the other art forms. Avoiding warm or loud colour tones, his minimalist style often invokes a sense of grotesque ecstasy in connoisseurs, especially in his treatment of the women in his 'A woman in her failings' series or even in his interpretation of

Christ. His signature use of charcoal and conté crayons, an invention arising out of the dearth in pigment during late 18th-early 19th century France, is a testament to his sense of the minimal.

Delving into "man's inhumanity to man", Das' philosophy is apparent in his handling of subject when his focus tends to shift from the perfect animal forms. Human beings are seldom as perfect in his eyes and are represented likewise.

A prolific worker who had nearly ten phases in his vibrant career, Das is fondly remembered as 'Ghora Das' (The Horse Das) thanks to his fascination for horses. Apart from 88 solo exhibitions across the world as well as having his work included in the Paris Biennale, Das received the Padma Shri award from the Indian Government in 2014. The finery of Das' paintings is almost an echo of the primordial painters of humanity, who were as fascinated by the terrific form of the bison as Das probably was with that of the horse and the bull.

Bearing the weight of humanity in his 76 years of hallowed existence, Sunil Das passed away on August 10, 2015 in Kolkata.

The following pages exhibit a selection of his paintings from various phases in his career.

Pages 3, 8, 10, 11, 23, 66, 88

[CC]

*A specimen of the series on
Horses by Sunil Das*



*A specimen of the series
'A Woman in her Failings'
by Sunil Das*

*A specimen of the series
'A Woman in her Failings'
by Sunil Das*



*A specimen of the series on
Bulls by Sunil Das*



FEATURE

The Celebration of Mediocrity

Jagannath Chakravarti

Jagannath Chakravarti highlights the decay of cultural aspirations in a society which is perennially failing to identify or acknowledge greatness & increasingly becoming content with mediocrity.

"It's a disease. Nobody thinks or feels or craves anymore; nobody gets excited or believes in anything except their own comfortable little God damn mediocrity"

- Richard Yates, Revolutionary Road

Celebration of mediocrity is no sin; it is, as expounded by Mr. Yates, but a disease that has the potential to cripple multiple generations by robbing them of the concept and the insight to identify 'greatness'.

Works of art are already difficult to categorize owing to the varied reactions that they tend to invoke in differing individuals. What is art for one is mere discard for another. It is perhaps apt to say that the age of the fair critic and constructive criticism is a thing of the past too. As knowledgeable as they come, the majority find it hard to transcend personal likes and dislikes, values and dogmas and more importantly, the preferences of the professional variety, which drive many to praise particularly bad specimens of 'art' while the handful of good ones are simply ignored.



*A Still from
Asha Jaoar Majhe*

The brunt of mediocrity, however, is not for the critics to bear alone, for we have been brought up in an environment where icons are celebrated with much more reverence than the art that has put them into the limelight in the first place. Thus a 'Bajrangi Bhaijaan' is forever destined to be remembered as a 'Salman Khan film' and prosceniums will sell out tickets by billing a familiar face from TV or films than put an 'actor' on stage instead. It is the very same mob mentality that has turned the strangely christened 'Yo Yo Honey Singh' into a veritable musical genius, or why a Nawazuddin Siddiqui is unanimously appreciated by the public in a 'Kick' or a 'Bajrangi' while his better works go frustratingly unnoticed.

The fictional wedge between 'art' and 'commercial' has bankrupted true art and has enabled a rank of mediocre 'artistes' to take centre stage. They manufacture products according to singularly sinister guidelines which are consumed by the audiences who simply do not care to know any better. The artistes who still strive to do good work must realise that these businessmen are ultimately bad for the business of their craft. The late 80s and the 90s in Bollywood is just fine in terms of figures, but the decades will certainly be remembered as the darkest in terms of the film language and the contexts they peddled.

The most alarming facet of this phenomenon,

however, is the fact that mediocrity in any culture is celebrated at the sheer expense of merit. The fear of the exceptional is often palpable in the creators of the popular content and the opinion is more often than not reflected in the attitude of the collective conscious, driven invariably by the gesture of their idols.

Thus an 'Asha Jaoar Majhe' requires laurel leaves on its posters and immense coaxing to get a respectable screening; a 'Bakita Byaktigoto' fails to lure crowds even after National Awards and a re-release. A 'Herbert' is bombarded with unsavoury 'reviews'; the flamboyant Srijit Mukherji needs to wait out years to attempt a 'Nirbaak' and the clearly talented Raj Chakraborty keeps churning out remakes, indefinitely postponing a 'Tong Ling'.

It is certainly not the case that superior art is not being practiced or appreciated in our society. But the ground must be set so a truly delectable piece does not have to make the rounds at distant festival circuits and win prestigious award bouquets to be appreciated at home.

Greatness must be appreciated for its own sake. To seek solace in mediocrity cannot be the comfort zone of any true artiste or connoisseur of art. It is but a degenerative disorder and must be addressed to preserve what is left of our fraying minds. [CC]

FEATURE

The Rosogolla Affair

Madhurima Basu

The illustrious history of Bengal's Rosogolla has recently been challenged by the neighbouring state of Odisha, which moved a petition for the grant of Geographical Indication status for its own variant.

Madhurima Basu investigates.

It has been a whooping 147 years since Nabin Chandra Das supposedly came up with the deceptively simple idea of letting dumplings of cottage cheese simmer in a pool of sugary syrup to give birth to a dessert. It is 2015 and that dessert by the name of Rosogolla still defines an entire community even after an inconceivable century and a half.

Rosogolla has been the primary mascot of the city without any second guesses whatsoever. Even as the majestic Victoria Memorial, the Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore, the frustrating *Bangla Bandhs* (General Strikes) and the Maharaj himself, Sourav Ganguly, have all come to represent the city in the global arena at some point of time or the other, they have all had to bear the brunt of the occasional snub or critical barb from some disgruntled 'outsider'.

Even if one dares insult the Howrah Bridge by comparing it with its counterpart in London (since, as the rumor goes, the city is in the process of being turned into 'London'), even the most ardent hater of anything from this part of the globe will find it hard to pick up an argument over the indisputable

King of sweets.

The iconic status of the Rosogolla has had a vibrant history, right from its humble days in a few shops of North Kolkata to the gradual rise of the specimen created by Das, which caught the attention of Marwari businessman Bhagwandas Bagla's sweet tooth, the sheer satisfaction of which compelled the man to order the sweet by buckloads, enabling it to attain a legendary status in the City of Palaces.

The sky was the limit for for this sweet as it soon began to travel beyond the borders of Bengal after the introduction of vacuum packaging technology by Das' son Krishna Chandra in 1930, propelling the rise of Rosogolla as it went on to capture the palate of the rest of the nation and soon, the entire world.

This illustrious history has recently been challenged by the neighbouring state of Odisha, which has moved a petition for the grant of Geographical Indication (GI) status for the rosogolla made in Pahala, Odisha; a move that would officially strip Kolkata & the state of Bengal of its proud claim of being the birthplace of its beloved sweetmeat.

Odisha's claims, however, have a mythological backing dating back to the 12th century when the dish allegedly originated in Puri by the name Khira Mohana as the bhog (Holy offering) offered during the Niladri Bije (Arrival of the God) when Lord Jagannath returns from his 9 day Ratha-Yatra. According to legend, the Lord comes back to the



Top: A sweet artisan at work in one of the many sweet outlets in Kolkata

Left: The yellow Rosogolla from Pahala in Odisha which is being claimed as the original version of the sweet by the Odisha

The pearly white Kolkata Rosogolla that has been the world-famous variant of the 'King of Sweets'



temple only to be denied admittance inside the sanctum sanctorum by Goddess Laxmi, his consort, who is displeased since the Lord went on the 9 day trip without intimating her. The Goddess is appeased by the Lord by the offering of the Khira Mohana in a ritual known as the Bachanika. It is being claimed that the recipe found its way to the City of Joy via the brahmin cooks from Odisha who were a common sight in well to do Bengali households during the 19th and early 20th century.

Many eminent thinkers and historians have questioned the veracity of these claims by pointing out that the concept of cottage cheese itself came along with the Portuguese in only the 17th century and the fact that the sweet is conspicuously missing from the list of the traditional 56 dishes that are offered to Lord Jagannath as Prasad.

Deeming the ensuing controversy a matter of preserving state pride, the Bengal authorities, with the backing of 'Paschim Banga Mistanno Byabsayee Samity' (The council of sweet sellers in West Bengal) have promptly started the process of filing a counter petition for GI, contesting Odisha's claim for the same.

Whatever the issue boils down to, it can never be as tasty as the very sweet dish over which the conflict has evolved. Having satisfied the palate of generations, be it in Bengal or Odisha or any other corner of the globe, Rosogolla could care less about its murky origin story as it keeps satisfying the yearning sweet tooth and looks to travel further than it has ever gone before.

Come 2016, a dehydrated variant of the Rosogolla is set to reach space, thanks to ISRO's initiative that will send everybody's favourite sweet along ISRO's proposed manned mission, a historic first of its kind. It will be a sweet day indeed for sweet lovers around the world when Rosogolla defies the chains of gravity and reaches the proverbial 'Final Frontier'. [CC]

FTII, Presidency & The Culture of Dissent

Madhurima Basu

*Justified agitations,
especially those led by
students, have often led
to grand historical arcs
that have redefined the
very flow of
history and time.*

*Madhurima Basu
investigates the recent
FTII and Presidency
protests in that light.*

Expressing dissent, voicing one's dissatisfaction has not only been a part and parcel of democracy but one of the very foundations of its existence. Throughout history, instances such as those in France circa 1968 or Bangladesh (Shahbag) only a year ago have consolidated the notion that agitations, especially those led by students, have often led to grand historical arcs that have redefined the very flow of time.

India, like any other proud democratic nation that has ensured the liberty of thought and its expression, has had her fair share of agitation led by forces of youth who have recently been initiated to concepts and ideals that are as clearly defined on paper as they are vague in effect.

The inspiration to bring about a positive change, whether or not fostered by a certain political belief or backed by political factions of myriad colours and motives, is the very benchmark of a conscious generation that is poised to become a driving force in leading the nation towards a brighter future.

It is, therefore, utterly deplorable when



Left: The FTII entrance

Down: Gajendra Chauhan in Mahabharata



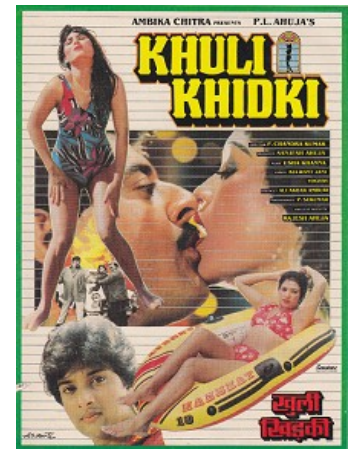
representatives of the country's dissenting youth are hauled and incarcerated under the guise of preserving law and order.

A few of the country's most revered educational institutions including the Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi, Jadavpur University in Kolkata and more recently, The Film and Television Institute of India in Pune, have seen protests led by students to protect the interests of their own, a right that cannot be denied as a matter of principle, let alone the constitution.

The appointment of Gajendra Chauhan as the Chairman of FTII has been debated & dissected all over the media, some castigating the students for not giving the man a due chance while others condemning the appointment of Chauhan with violent veracity, whose only notable appearance as an actor has been his stint as Dharamraaj Yudhisthira in B.R. Chopra's popular 'Mahabharata' series on Doordarshan during the late-eighties. Of course, his acting career did not end there and he went on to "act" in a string of C-movies which did not do much to protect his Dharamraaj (The Lord of Principle) image.

It is hard to fathom why his suitability of appointment is even a subject of contention. As ludicrous as it would be to appoint a Honey Singh at a Sangeet Research Academy or Dhruvadendra Kendra Bhopal, or making Chetan Bhagat the overseer of (not an IIM) the JNU department of English Literature, so is Chauhan's presence a glaring anomaly at an institute like the FTII, which has had the distinction of producing such stalwarts of Indian cinema as Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Om Puri or a Shabana Azmi.

An argument is often forwarded questioning whether or not the learners have the right to choose who oversees their learning process. It is safe to say that for a particular individual, the supreme determinant of his/her suitability is whether the person commands the respect of the body he is poised to oversee. Chauhan, for reasons that are too obvious to count, fails miserably on this front.



Top: A poster of one of the films in which Gajendra Chauhan featured post-Mahabharata

The government's unrelenting stand in this regard is merely an example of the careless high-handedness of a political outfit that has come to power riding a nearly unanimous wave of public approval. The unfortunate tendency of power shooting to the head is apparent in the manner how the government absolutely refuses to re-evaluate its decision, deciding to strike back instead by arresting four agitating students from the Pune campus in the dead of the night.

Indian intelligentsia, that is constituted not only of those in the public sphere teaching or dabbling in the arts or students empathizing with their kin but the millions of thinking minds across the nation who are rightfully irate at such a blatant disregard of the people in power for the basic rights of individuals. Refusing to pay heed to the reasons of the community, the government chose to retort by introducing base diversionary tactics, bringing into question the integrity of the students and accusing them of wasting 'people's money' by highlighting the disparity of government funding between FTII and other premium centres of excellence.

Thus followed the hasty order of student evaluation which predictably escalated the scale of protests, resulting in the final act of atrocity on Monday midnight, August the 18th.

As the FTII issue rages on in Maharashtra, the West Bengal state government negotiates with a dissenting body of students at the Presidency University who seemingly took a cue from their FTII counterparts to dig up a two year old issue which, although valid, is facing tough scrutiny from a large portion of the alumni, media and the students alike due to its timing and listless string of demonstrations. Taking centre stage is the issue of vandalism and the mode of dissent of a perceived 'outsider' who came to the institute from a show of solidarity with the FTII movement, for which he put on a brassiere and shorts with film rolls wrapped around his undergarments - an obvious allusion to Chauhan's acting credits post-Mahabharata.

UPDATE

As of the first week of October, the government has attempted to placate rising tempers by naming eminent filmmaker and FTII alumnus Rajkumar Hirani as the head of the Academic Council. However, students were not dissuaded by this consolatory gesture and continued their agitation to oust Chauhan. The government and the students have convened thrice to seek an impasse in the matter. Negotiations continue.

This stunt bore no relation to the Presidency protests but the photograph of the bearded man in a brassiere entering the Presidency premises was circulated all over the media like hot cake, further alienating the protesters from the general public. The dissenter himself gave a half baked explanation of the entire incident over Facebook before deactivating his account, citing his extraordinary academic credentials as a 'certificate of character'. It would have helped if he stood by his actions instead of going underground and declaring that he is off to a university in the US for higher studies.

However, one needs to turn back only a few months to revisit a student movement that took the entire city by storm. The Central Government ought to take a leaf out of the State's book regarding the manner in which they handled the #HokKolorob movement at the Jadavpur University, relenting after the usual stubborn stance and sacking a Vice-Chancellor who had the gall to call the cops upon dissenting students and have them mercilessly thrashed all over the campus, again in the dead of the night.

Let us hope that the Central Government comes to its senses by taking a sensible stance on the FTII issue without further delay. The prompt exoneration of the arrested students who are out on bail and finding a suitable person who will take over the responsibilities of Chauhan must be a priority to usher in the 'Achhe din' that was promised. That is why the country voted for them, is it not? [CC]

FEATURE

ISIS and the 'Art' of Culture Cleansing

Rounak Chatterjee

Rounak Chatterjee takes an uninhibited look at the acts of Culture cleansing propagated by the ISIS and why it is the need of the hour to stop the terrorists who have crossed every line that defines Humanity

Perhaps the most lasting aspect of factional terrorism is the amount of cultural genocide it inflicts, which not only scar a few generations but has a cumulative effect on the lives of every single future generation too.

It is this deranged desire to rewrite history by eliminating its physical manifestations and/or practitioners that prompts outfits like the ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) to execute Khaled al-Asaad, an 82 year old antiquities scholar, who gave up his life to defend the secret of where a major stash of artifacts belonging to the ancient city of Palmyra had been hidden for safekeeping.

The incident does have the ring of a prologue to a grand adventure saga befitting an Indiana Jones film. What it lacks, of course, is that braveheart figure of an individual who has enough of the devil in him to con his way into enemy territory, rescuing the past and in the process, secure revenge for the man who was brutally slaughtered and hung on a pillar of his own beloved city.

It is our misfortune that life does not always imitate popular art - poetic justice is not rendered on a daily basis and the sinners who sin in the name of "God" do not always get to face the divine wrath of the almighty.

*The destruction
At Palmyra*



ISIS, in conjunction with the customary beheading caught on camera for the world to witness, mass executions and countless abductions (including Indian professors), has been on a murderous spree of cultural annihilation as well. They expressly wish to erase every trace of pre-Islamic culture, Shi'ite, Sufi and Christian shrines in the region they have forcibly occupied and have already inflicted enough damage to the seat of some of the oldest civilizations in human history. From the ancient Assyrian gateway in Al-Raqqah to laying waste to the Mosul Museum; they razed to the ground the ancient city of Nimrud and desecrated several tombs & shrines including those of Fathi al-Ka'en, prophets Daniel, Jonah and Jijris besides destroying several Sufi shrines in Tripoli, Libya.

Part of their agenda also is to smuggle many of these artifacts which fetch a decent amount in the international dark markets, which would then be utilised in funding their sadistic dreams. A blight in the name of the followers of Islam everywhere, ISIS has joined the leagues of the Taliban, infamous for destroying the historical Bamiyan Buddhas in 2001 & the Nazis, whose hatred of books and incessant attempts at a misguided culture cleansing is a well-known fact!

While the Western nations, including the United States (which, ironically, is the chief crusader of the anti-ISIS coalition), have had the dubious record of being involved in smuggling or forcible acquisition of artifacts bearing great historical and monetary value to either sell them to the highest bidder or put them in their museum displays, the tendency of destroying them with an objective to eradicate history itself must be condemned and put to a stop at all costs.

While the audacity of this group of Godless terrorists occupying pockets in Iraq, Syria, Sinai, Afghanistan and Libya keep escalating, criticisms can easily be directed at those powerful Western nations who have been instrumental in creating the vacuum that the ISIS has risen to occupy.



Top: The slain antiquities scholar Khaled al-Asaad who was 82 years old

Right: A crumbling historical edifice and its oculus in yet another of the destroyed sites



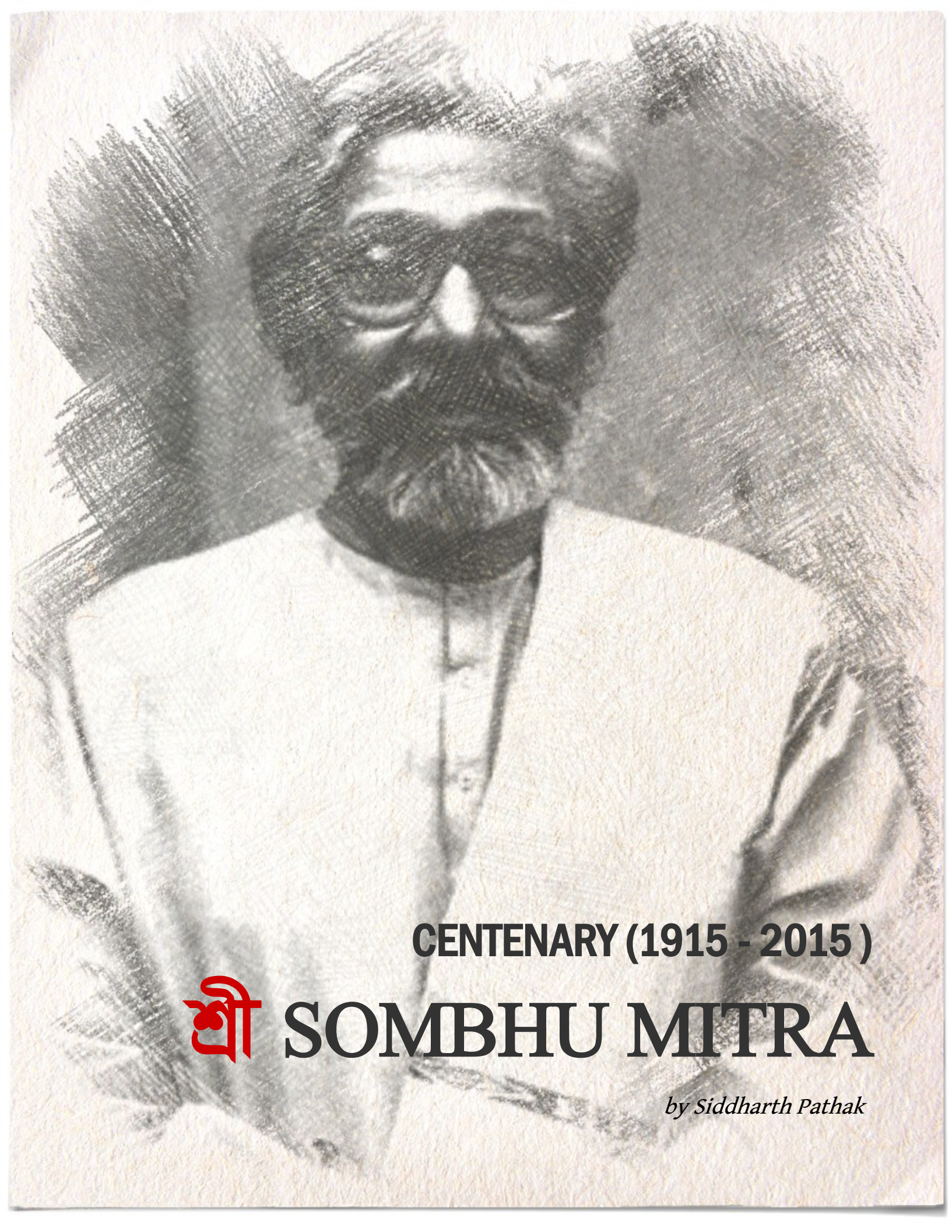
The death of Khaled al-Asaad is a tragic truth that can never be undone. What the world needs to do, however, is not let the man's sacrifice go in vain. The erudite scholar had spent the major part of his life studying and preserving the treasures of Palmyra. It was easier for him to withstand the interrogation of the terrorists for a month and give up on his life than hand over his lives' work to a band of deranged psychopaths.

Asaad's story, as mentioned earlier, is all but a prologue and nothing is really 'safe' yet. ISIS has already destroyed a large percentage of archaeological treasures in the occupied territories. It is fairly obvious that they will keep doing the same until they are dealt with in a manner befitting their deeds.

The Islamic world and the rest must stand in unison against these terrorists who are growing in strength and number every single minute that is being wasted on discussing the course of action that ought to be adopted against them. Recalling Mr. Dylan it is high time we ask ourselves, 'How many deaths will it take till he knows... That too many people have died?' [CC]



A specimen of the series on Bulls by Sunil Das



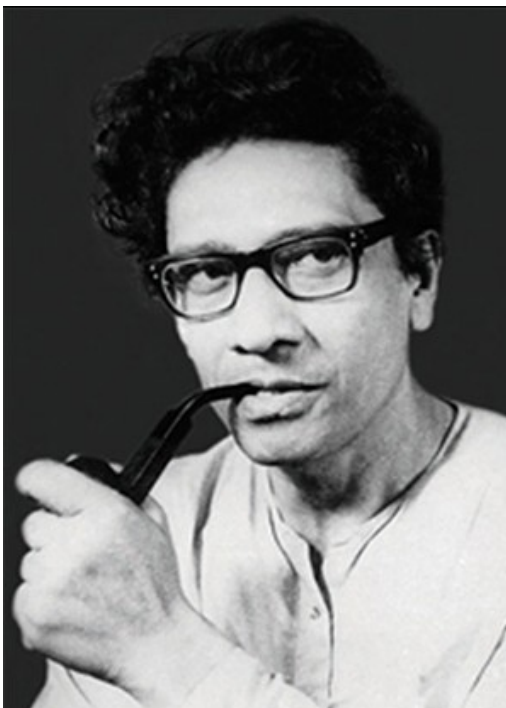
CENTENARY (1915 - 2015)

श्री SOMBHU MITRA

by Siddharth Pathak

“...Man, perhaps, laid the foundations of society out of a sense of necessity. But it is in the nature of man that he is compulsively driven to overcome the dictates of mere convenience. In the early days of civilization, as he needed to draw water, he invented the urn. The urn was filled, but not his heart. So he began now to decorate it with color, geometric patterns, and his imagination. What an incomprehensible and strange craving...”

Shree Sombhu Mitra.



The transition of Bengali theatre from its purely commerce-based identity to where it was artfully employed by predominantly political outfits such as the IPTA (Indian People's Theatre Association) as a means of communicating ideologies en masse, did not do much in lieu of working towards perfecting the form of art they were utilising for specific ends.

While profits had been the driving force behind the functioning of the 'commercial theatre' scene that controlled the majority of the prosceniums in the city, left-bound artistic endeavours began to put politics and their ensuing agenda on top, steadily pushing away stalwart artistes such as Salil Choudhury, Ritwik Ghatak, Debebrata Biswas and of course, Sombhu Mitra away from their stringent fold that never prioritised theatre as an art form nor believe in any form of art that failed to uphold and glorify purely red ideals.

In 1944, as Bengal struggled to recover from the devastating famine of '43, Sombhu Mitra would have the privilege of co-staging Bijan Bhattacharya's seminal masterpiece 'Nabanna', a work which effectively highlighted the plight of impressionable farmers at the hands of the marauding proletariat and garnered commendable response wherever it was staged in Bengal.

He would also feature, along with wife Tripti Mitra, in the 1946 film 'Dharti Ke Lal' (Directed by fellow IPTA member Khwaja Ahmad Abbas), which was a contemporary analysis of the great Bengal famine of 1943. Despite these well known success stories, Mitra had eventually become exhausted of the set of compromises he had to make in his art due to the assorted po-



*Above: Sombhu (Right)
and Tripti Mitra*



*Left: The Bohuru-
pee Emblem*

*Below: A still from
Raktakarabi*



litical doctrines. The makeshift stages, the lack of resources to sustain a proper 'travelling troupe', the sheer restrictions imposed on the content of the productions; were weighing hard on the sole thing that truly mattered to Mitra.

Sombhu Mitra's quest for a perfect state of the auspicious high in his adopted medium of art, inspired him to break off from the communist theatre fold in 1948, seven days after the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, along with Ahindra Chaudhuri & Tripti Mitra and establish 'Bohurupee' – a theatre troupe that would go on to initiate a theatre movement whose primary objective would be to create art for the elusive 'art's sake'.

THE BEGINNING

Sombhu Mitra was born in Calcutta on August 22, 1915. The sixth child of the Geological Survey of India employee Sarat Kumar Mitra, he lost his mother Shatadalbashini Mitra at the tender age of twelve.

Mitra's penchant for the dramatic arts was invoked when he was a student at the Ballygunge Government High School & later the St. Xavier's College in Calcutta.

He joined the Rangmahal Theatre in North Calcutta in 1939, followed by stints at the Minerva, Natyaniketan and Srirangam respectively. The lack of contentment with the quality of dramatic art that was being practised was the prime reason why Mitra turned away from Commercial theatre and ultimately joined the IPTA.

THE MANY FACETS

'Bohurupee' (literally: Multi-faceted) officially marked the beginning of the 'Group Theatre' movement in Bengal, which characterised theatre that did not wish to capture the fancy of audiences by billing names that would attract colossal crowds but tried to become the ideal form of 'Gananatya' (Theatre of and by the people) by introducing novelty in theme, content and execution, primarily with the aid of non-professional actors

who had grouped together for the collective love of the artform.

Of course, highlighting social issues and serving critiques of the society was a prerogative of these organisations, as espoused to a large extent by Bohurupee itself, besides Utpal Dutt's uber-political 'Little Theatre Group' (another off-shoot of the IPTA, incidentally formed a year before Bohurupee), Ajitesh Bandopadhyay's 'Nandikar' or Manoj Mitra's 'Sundaram'.

Bohurupee survived an intense struggle for survival during its initial years. Shunned by both factions of the political spectrum for its largely dissociative identity, Bohurupee was perceived as a threat by commercial theatre groups, which were afraid that its productions would act as a palate cleanser for their patrons who had developed a fine taste for the mediocre, melodramatic drivel they would continually serve.

Stories of Mitra and his wife sustaining on tea and boiled vegetables with their celluloid appearances paying the bills and delaying predicaments are part of the saga of 'Bohurupee', which came into the national limelight after staging the plays of an individual who was as polarising as Bohurupee itself had been for multifarious *raison d'être*.

Bohurupee had begun their journey by staging two of Tulsi Lahiri's plays and Mitra's own 'Ulukhagra' (The Nondescript). 'Pathik' (Wanderer) and 'Chhenra Taar' (A Broken String) managed to attract attention and were even lauded by critics. Mitra, of course, was destined for a broader canvas and the choice of playwright he made next would effectually redefine Bengali theatre and put Bohurupee on the nation's theatre map.

The Nobel winning Rabindranath Tagore, despite a body of work that defies blind categorisation, had been a figure much revered and reviled by opposing Bengali factions. Whereas a section considered him a demigod for his invaluable contribution to Bengali culture, some leftist groups considered him to be a stooge of British imperialism.

Whatever his standing might have been among the Bengali intelligentsia, it was a fact almost universally acknowledged that Tagore's dramas were simply un-stageable.

Mitra tested the waters by adapting Tagore's novel 'Char Adhyay' (Four Chapters) in 1951, before taking up the herculean challenge of staging one of the most complex and political of Tagore's plays. Rakta Karabi (Red Oleanders). Premiering on May 10, 1954 under Mitra's direction, it not only established the mighty Tagore as a 'successful' dramatist but was also a raging success which received nearly unanimous commendations for the curiously stylized delivery of lines, Tripti Mitra's ethereal stage presence and the hypnotic baritone of Mitra himself, unseen on stage as the tyrant king.

Mitra's troupe went on to produce several other Tagore dramas, including 'Visarjan' (Immersion) and 'Raja' (The King), which were directed by Mitra. Tripti Mitra staged 'Dakghar' (The Post Office) and 'Ghare Baire' (Home and the World) while Kumar Roy directed 'Malini'.

Bohurupee did not ostracize European dramatic works as Sombhu Mitra staged lauded Bengali versions of Henrik Ibsen's 'An Enemy of the People' (Dasachakra) in 1952 and 'A Doll's House' (Putulkhela) in 1958.

Mitra's penchant for the tragic was coming to the fore but it would be a while before he decided to invoke the spirit of Sophocles on the Calcutta stage.

RAJ KAPOOR

The choice of Sombhu Mitra and Amit Maitra for directing RK Films' social satire 'Jagte Raho' was yet another stroke of genius by the superstar actor/director/producer of Bollywood Raj Kapoor.

Yet, the 1956 film, which played well with Kapoor's adoring Soviet audiences, was presented in International Film Festival Arenas with the requisite directorial credits being effectively stripped off to make it appear as an all out 'Raj Kapoor' experience.

The intensely guarded Sombhu Mitra was known to retreat into a shell whenever the subject of him being a film director or actor was broached, even in relatively close circles.

TRAGEDY

Nowhere was Mitra's glorious stage presence more evident than in the titular role of Raja Oedipus in 1964, which was the Bengali rendition of Sophocles' classic Greek tragedy 'Oedipus Rex'.

It will be grossly unfair to write about a legendary life led and compare it to an unfolding Greek tragedy, but Oedipus can, in hindsight, be held as a focal point of Mitra's artistic trajectory, which was followed by several of noted playwright Badal Sircar's plays which were not received with adequate enthusiasm. Sircar would later go on to indict that Bohurupee had 'messed' with his dramas, even as the group successfully staged several of Sircar's monumental plays such as 'Evam Indrajit' (And Indrajit, 1965), 'Baki Itihas' (Untold History, 1967) and Pagla Ghoda (The Mad Horse, 1971).

Mitra would again take centrestage with the virulent rendition of Vijay Tendulkar's Marathi drama 'Shantata! Court chalu ahe' in 1971. 'Chop, Adalat cholchhe' (Order, the court is in session). The meta-theatrical drama which effectively blurs the distinction between fact and fiction was received with unadulterated fervour by the Calcutta theatre-goers.

Sombhu Mitra mysteriously quit Bohurupee in 1979. While it is presently a reality acknowledged, even admitted by his daughter Shaoli Mitra, that Mitra was unceremoniously ousted from the group, the reasons for the same remain unclear still. Often blamed are the unique family equations that pervaded the group. Shaoli had quit Bohurupee even before her father did, while Tripti Mitra was serving as the President and Kaliprosad Ghosh, Shaoli's ex-husband, as the secretary. Which exact incident led to the ouster remains shrouded even as it can be assumed that Mitra's unwavering will and unwillingness to bend to a higher will had led to him being cornered in an organisation which had been co-founded by Mitra.

LEGACY

An enigmatic figure, largely unsympathetic to the whims of the media and 'uncharacteristically' silent regarding his peers and their artistic endeavours, Mitra did command the genuine appreciation of luminaries who dominated the Calcutta stage in his times.

Utpal Dutt, who tore at Mitra often enough for being an 'escapist' to have foregone the political aspirations that Dutt held dear till his final breath, did not shy away from praising Mitra's 'Rakta Karabi'.

Rudraprasad Sengupta showed his appreciation by playing the pivotal role in assimilating multiple theatre groups to stage Bertolt Brecht's 'The Life of Galileo' under the direction of Fritz Bennivitz with Mitra portraying the Italian man of science, post his official ouster from Bohurupee.

Even though Mitra separated from his wife, the duo continued to work in collaboration. Mitra even brought his wife Tripti home during her final days and we can only assume that the two buried their differences before Tripti Mitra's demise in 1989.

Mitra's most famous piece of dramatic writing remains 'Chand Baniker Pala' (The Play of the Merchant Chand, 1978). The indigenous-content driven play (adopted from the Hindu rural epic 'Manasa Mangal'), primarily meant for audio productions, remains a cumulative high for Mitra, who expounds his insistent philosophy of standing up for one's beliefs through Chand Banik's unrelenting refusal of worshipping the Snake Goddess Manasa instead of Shiva and the consequent wrath of the Goddess that befalls Chand Banik and his family.

Staunchly refusing a government ploy to publicise his death, Sombhu Mitra had officially stipulated the presence of a regular hearse instead of a state-sanctioned fad where his body would be kept on display at Rabindra Sadan, the mecca of Calcutta's cultural callings. Not only did he forbid a ritualistic 'mukhagni' and funeral, he also directed (contrary to the norm) that his clothes should not



Above: A still from Putul Khela

Left: Mitra (left) and Amit Ganguly in Dasachakra

be changed before cremation.

Having led a life sans compromises, it was only fitting that Sombhu Mitra decided to part on his own terms on May 19, 1997.

2015 marks Sombhu Mitra's birth centenary. Let us conclude this remembrance with the ardent wish that his uncompromising spirit invoking perfection washes over the promising artistes of this generation and those alike who strive to live life on their own terms.

A SELECT LIST OF DRAMAS DIRECTED BY SOMBHU MITRA

- 1944 – Nabanna (Written and Co-directed by Bijan Bhattacharya).
- 1950(?) – Ulukhagra (Written by Sombhu Mitra)
- 1950 – Chhenra Taar (Written by Tulsi Lahiri)
- 1951 – Char Adhyay (Based on a novel by Rabindranath Tagore)
- 1952 – Dasachakra (Henrik Ibsen, An Enemy of the People)
- 1954 – Rakta Karabi (Written by Rabindranath Tagore)
- 1958 – Putul Khela (Henrik Ibsen, A Doll's House)
- 1961 – Visarjan (Written by Rabindranath Tagore)
- 1964 - Raja (Written by Rabindranath Tagore)
- 1964 – Raja Oedipus (Sophocles, Oedipus Rex)
- 1965 – Evam Indrajit (Written by Badal Sircar)
- 1967 – Baki Itihas (Written by Badal Sircar)
- 1971 – Pagla Ghoda (Written by Badal Sircar)
- 1971 – Chop! Adalat Cholchhe (Vijay Tendulkar, Shantata! Adalat Chalu ahe)

A SELECT LIST OF AWARDS CONFERRED TO SOMBHU MITRA

- 1957 - The Crystal Globe for 'Jagte Raho' at the 1957 Karlovy Vary International Film Festival
- 1966 - Sangeet Natak Akademi Fellowship
- 1970 - Padma Bhushan
- 1976 - Ramon Magsaysay Award
- 1982-83 – Kalidasa Samman (Madhya Pradesh Government)
- 1989 - Desikottama (Visva-Bharati University)

Honourary D.Litts from Rabindra Bharati University and Jadavpur University.

Grand Prix Award at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival for Mitra's contribution to films.



*A column that **defends** what are generally regarded to be **afflictions**, plaguing the extant **cultural** setup.*

Of course, the magazine does not necessarily subscribe to the views expressed in the article.

*Remarks/counter criticisms can be mailed to **CultureCultin@gmail.com***

for publication in our next issue.

Naked Aggression

Shrestha Burman



Alexandra Shevchenko of FEMEN

The assaults are not so much on the senses as they are on our sensibilities that prompt 'classical' feminists to raise a scandalous hue and cry over the breast-baring antics of the French (who never say 'no' to nudity) in response to the staging of a conference on 'Women and Islam' in Paris that delved into the cushy subject of 'How Men should Manage their Wives'.

It is quite understandable how the aforementioned champions of women's rights view the neo-feminists who crashed the Paris sausage fest to register their disapproval by using their 'bodies' as a canvas of expression since the classical view has been to protest the male gaze and objectification by largely subtracting the natural facets of a woman's physical inheritance.

That nudity has become a brave new method to stoke and counter the patriarchal burden of concealing one's 'assets' is evident in the myriad acts of mainstreaming menstruation, glorifying breastfeeding and other 'unconventional' expressions of nudity in popular culture.

Of course, the most popular form of nakedness in our hallowed culture being pornography, it was hilariously noted that men (*and* women) of nearly all ranks and ages outweighed the call for the blanket ban on internet smut that was recently implemented and subsequently repealed by the Indian Government.

So even as nudity is vehemently defended for personal enjoyment on private screens in the name of 'Human Rights', it appears that accepting its contribution to anything that is not graphically sexual in nature is beyond the capability of many, including a significant number of those who proudly call themselves 'feminists'.

It is futile to blame opinionated mindsets instead of delving into the very roots of feminism that advocated the denial of essentially feminine attributes in order to gain an elusive 'equal footing' with our male counterparts.

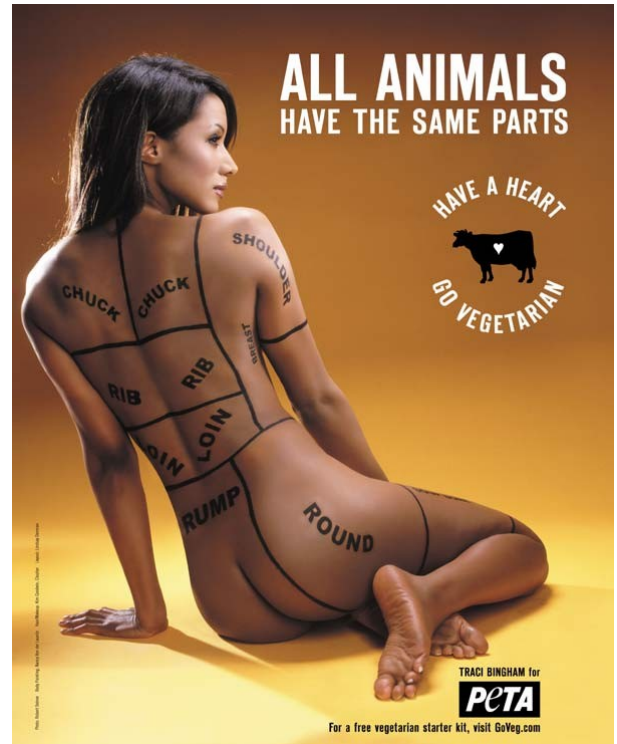
Curiously labelled 'lipstick feminism' by naysayers, the seeds of this adverse attitude had been embedded in the seminal work of a certain individual who (rightfully) becomes even more relevant in this day and age as women all around the globe become conscious of the injustices meted and the innate rights that have been denied.

Simone de Beauvoir, the author of *The Second Sex* (Le Deuxième Sexe, 1949), in an interview with Alice Jardine, emphatically declares, "I consider it almost antifeminist to say that there is a feminine nature which expresses itself differently, that a woman speaks her body more than a man."

Consequently, the neo-feminist literary theorist Luce Irigaray, in her defence of *Écriture Feminine* (The Feminine Language) simply says, "Woman simply equal to men would be like them and therefore not women"

The necessity for the abolition of phallogentrism (the prioritisation of the masculine) is inherent to the cause of both waves of feminism, be it the suffragette, who strove to seek equal property and voting rights in order to constitute a 'true' democracy, to the second wave neo-feminists of the 1960s whose agenda featured a range of issues such as sexuality, the concept of 'family', workplace and reproductive rights and other de facto inequalities including marital rape.

Thus it is confounding to pinpoint exactly what provokes a group of individuals to condemn the efforts of another while both seek to find solace and are working under the umbrella keyword 'feminism' to initiate a global change. The often misquoted Machiavelli comes to mind as he writes (interestingly, about *men*), "In the actions of all men, & especially of princes, where there is no court to appeal to, one looks to the end. So let prince win & maintain his state – the means will always be judged honourable, and will be praised by every-



Top: A PETA Advertisement

Above: Simone de Beauvoir

one.”

A lifetime is often too little to witness or engineer a true revolution that stands the test of time; to witness the proverbial ‘end’ that is being worked towards. But that, historically, has never stopped mere mortals from trying to make an indelible mark all the same.

As gimmicky as the PETA Ads are that promote the cause of the co-habitants of our planet, it is judiciously defended by the Animal Rights outfit in its manifest in words that serve as a clear justification of the means they tend to adapt at times: “Like Lady Godiva, who rode naked on a horse to protest taxes on the poor in the 11th century, PETA knows that provocative, attention grabbing actions are sometimes necessary to get people talking about issues that they would otherwise prefer not to think about.”

Nudity as a means of protest or raising a pertinent issue is not restricted to feminism or animal rights activism. The method has been extensively utilised in anti-war demonstrations including ‘Breast not Bombs’ and ‘Bare Witness’. The largely political bicycle rallies organised by ‘Critical Mass’ have gradually gained a worldwide appeal and is even a feature of the Annual Burning Man Festival in Nevada, United States.

Nudity has been used as a veritable weapon by Ugandan women protesting their loss of land, to those in Manipur, India, who hit the streets to bring to national attention the allegations of rape against certain elements of the Indian Army.

The operation by activists of FEMEN during the Paris conference on ‘How Men should Manage their Wives’ is the latest in a series of similar demonstrations by the organisation that was founded in 2008 in Ukraine by Anna Hutsol. The group, forced to relocate to Western Europe, was instrumental in exposing rackets promoting sex tourism in the Eastern European nation and also provided valuable momentum to the Euromaidan movement (Ukrainian revolution) in 2014 that overthrew the Viktor Yanukovych regime.

The methodology of FEMEN, perceived to be ‘crude’ as worst and ‘controversial’ at best, pulled precious mainstream media attention towards the causes they were fighting for. The official ‘explanation’ was framed thus:

“This is the only way to be heard in this



*Top:
Manipur,
India*

*Left:
World Naked
Bike Ride*

country. If we staged simple protests with banners, then our claims would not have been noticed.”

It is alleged that the dire desire to be ‘noticed’ and the ‘quick limelight’ is what prompts a section of women to become visual objects to satiate the male gaze. The items of overt sexuality have admittedly assumed connotations that are far from the use that these ‘others’ are vying for.

Let us say it is the final resort of those who have been stripped of all hope. Whereas millennia can appear insignificant in a concept as macrocosmic as the universe itself, it is infuriatingly frustrating that even after nearly 70 years of the publication of Beauvoir’s feminist manifesto, women are segregated and oppressed still, struggling to voice themselves under the tyranny of a patriarchal stronghold that advocates ‘concealing’ what it conspires to plunder as night falls.

It is the very act of hiding that envelops us in fear, stoking the murderous curiosity of the tactfully deranged. It is by embracing and celebrating what is natural that can help humankind take that crucial step towards emancipation of the feminine soul. [CC]



POETRY

FLASH FICTION

SHORT STORY

NOVELETTE

SERIAL

TRANSLATION

Literature

FLASH FICTION

Artwork: Suhas Krishna

Less than Three

Penelope Webb

He was fond of expressing himself via distinct emoticons. He would frequently use the heart motif <3 to communicate his eternal love for Martha. The first time the technologically illiterate Martha saw that, she mistook it to be an old mathematical expression, subtly implying that *his* ex-flame Gertrude had finally bid him adieu.

As April bloomed, Martha's hankering wish to make sure they were indeed *less* than three assumed a desperation she knew not her pining heart could muster. But they were all in vain.

Martha had been the rebound chick anyways – she knew so from his blatant disregard for grammar in the prologue to their relationship. Arraigned as a grammar Nazi in close circles, Martha had taken an exception to her principles, looking up what the less than three emoticon actually meant, over the internet.

Martha and him – they were the two he meant, did he not?

Yet, as a broken heart became her order come May, she finally realized that less than three was not a confirmation of the happy two but a slow but sure descent into the solitary state she was so used to.

Martha was single again. [CC]

FLASH FICTION

Capsule
Sleep*Saiful Rahim*

The bullet train had run a little late and thus Mehtab reached Tokyo slightly later than he had initially anticipated. The meeting had been a bigger bore than he was used to and quite naturally, he was sleepier than usual.

The capsule hotel with its crypt-like boxes separated by thin wooden walls, was beckoning him for the first time since he had reached Tokyo three days ago.

The first two nights had been a claustrophobic catastrophe for Mehtab, who could not shake off the fact that the capsules resembled a hospital morgue from his memory more than anything else.

Of course, the morgue in his hometown Dhaka did not come with reading lamps or a cozy bookshelf for the dead but the low ceiling made it impossible for Mehtab to concentrate on relaxing his mind so it could slip into a peaceful state of hibernation.

The third night did not turn out to be as tortuous as the two before. Mehtab flipped through a dark thriller before a series of yawns overtook his senses and he finally drifted into a deep dream-state.

He dreamt of Dhaka - of the unofficial, un-civil war and his only visit to the morgue. In the dream however, he was not there to identify his dead brother; he was there as a patron. The morgue had been turned into a capsule hotel at the very heart of Dhaka.

Mehtab did hear his dead brother, of course. The spectral entity was snoring right beside his capsule all night long. The wooden wall was thin enough for snores to filter through and the noise finally jerked Mehtab out of his reverie.

He could have sworn the snores he had heard were real; the dreaming mind transposing a concrete detail into imagination - it had happened before, Mehtab could recall.

However, he could not recall exactly when the person in the capsule next to him had stopped snoring for good. As morning dawned over the land of the rising sun, Mehtab's neighbour was presumably taken off to the morgue by the local police.

Unlike Mehtab's brother, his neighbour had died, peacefully, in his sleep.

Yet, the man was going to rest in a similar steel capsule for the time being. [CC]

POETRY

Insomnia

It's terrible
I lie here wondering
why I'm awake, drunk again
The ceiling was screaming
at me

My teeth grind against each
other, back and forth
back and forth...
The jaw clenches hard
and moves slowly, steadily
against the top row
of teeth

My thoughts are flowing
through my brain at
the speed of light
Will I ever fall asleep?
How could I..

She is asleep next to me,
snoring
I don't mind, there isn't
a thing about her I don't like

My eyes are so awake and
dried out that they begin
to bleed
My legs manage to gain the
courage to lift my body off
of the sunken, shattered bed

I stumble my way into the
bathroom, visualize these
wretched eyes and begin
to rinse
The blood no longer runs
and instead a hybrid of
shitty sink water and tears
drain their way down my
cheeks

She walks in behind me
"Honey, are you okay?"
handing me a towel
"Just the usual"
"You should really see
a doctor," she said for
the 100th time, "you
aren't sleeping and your
eyes are suffering from it"

"That sounds like a good poem"
"Asshole" she said
I could tell she was worried,
she looked unsatisfied and
went back to bed

I carry my head low into
the bedroom, where I apologize
to her
She apologizes too, only
because I did first
Will I ever fall asleep?

She jumps on top of me,
undresses herself
We make love for the first
time in weeks
It's good, one of our best
Now it's 4AM and I'm more
awake than I have been
all night

She rolls us a joint, lights
it, and hands it to me
Laying my head back on
my pillow, I feel my thoughts
lessening and slowing down
My crusty eyes get heavy and
begin to close
I never fell asleep
It was the best sleep
I never had

Insomnia

Shawn Hatfield

POETRY

Point Blank

Siddharth Pathak

The problem is that they pose as students.
Matters would have been far simpler had they
been braindead bystanders -
Or avenging guardians with
machetes uncloaked...

The problem is that they carry helmets
on the pretext of riding bikes -
Claiming to have been touched by
the whistling winds en route -
Minds unleashed...

The problem is that they gain your trust.
Swearing by words which are your refuge -
Sharing opinions you house
in your heart of hearts -
Doors unlocked...

The problem is that they carry firearms
for the sake of mere convenience -
With beats gone hoarse
they shout your Name -
Secrets uncovered...

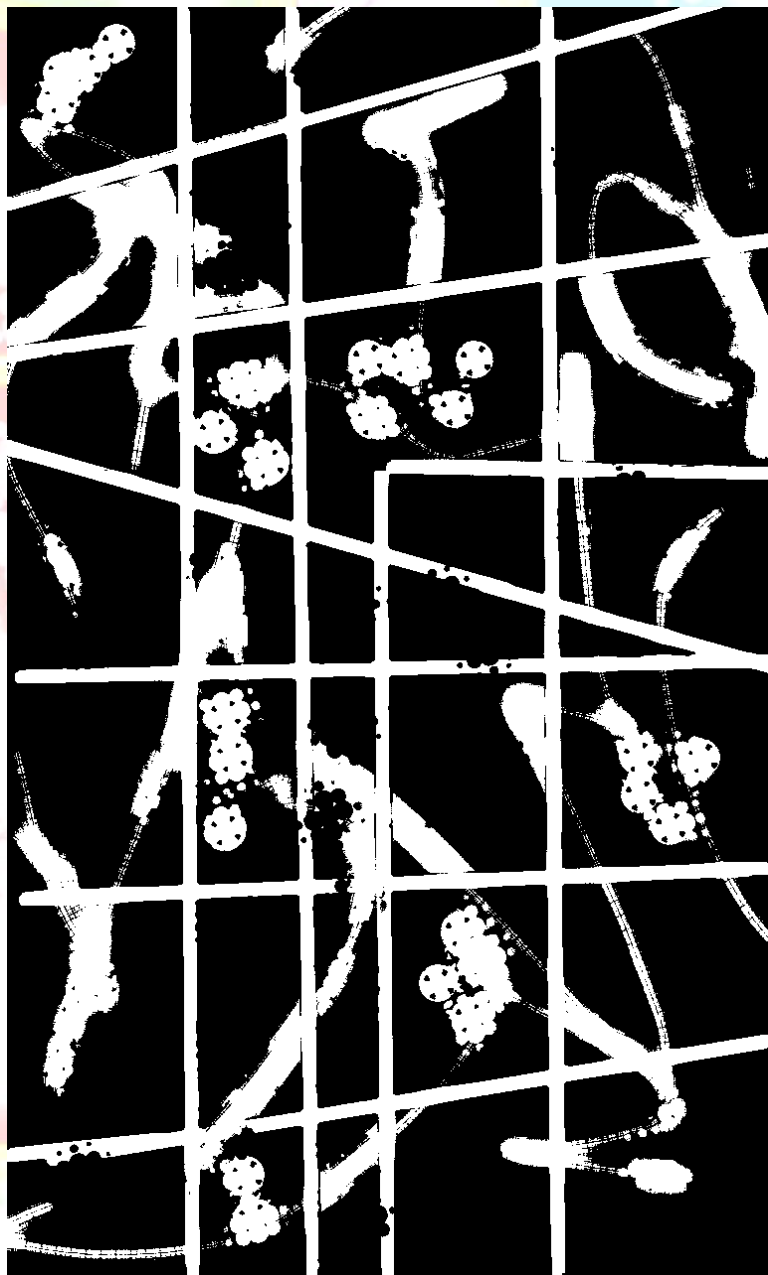
The best thing is that they shoot point blank,
the learners they can't seem to wait -
Till the break of dawn,
or the morning song.
By then, they think it's too late.

DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF M.M.KALBURGI (1938-2015)

SHORT STORY

Plethora and Wholesale Too

Herbert H. Hoffman



"Did you *find* everything?" the efficient young man at the cash register inquired as I pushed my shopping cart through. "Not only that," I said. "I found *everything*"

If you have never shopped in a wholesale coop you will not understand. A friend of ours recently made the big transition. He became a wholesale shopper. It was on a relatively quiet Wednesday morning and the personable manager of our local cooperative took him in tow and gave him a tour.

"I notice you are wearing white athletic socks. Socks are one of our specialties. Very popular item, highest quality. These socks are engineered for either foot, left or right, which simplifies laundry folding. Also an advantage should you, God forbid, have to have one foot in a cast. The socks are packed six pairs to a pack for \$9.99, or just a little more than 80 cents a sock", the good man informed our friend, helpfully.

"But I actually came only for..." our friend attempted to respond but was powerless in the face of the man's enthusiasm.

"Yes, of course", the guide continued. "We also carry children's wear. At this time we feature a neat little-man's fire-fighter coat in

three sizes: baby, toddler, and small. The coat has pre-singed sleeves and exudes a convincingly lifelike smell of smoke. I don't know the price off hand, I would have to check but I assure you they are not expensive, when you consider."

"But I actually came only..."

"Of course, of course. No these are not socks, they are wash cloths. They are very fine but we sell them by the gross." He paused a moment to let the joke sink in. "Towels likewise," he continued. "And while we are on the topic of hygiene, do not forget that we are best known for our toilet paper. I mean, 30 rolls for 21.99? Just six bits each time you, ah, restock the dispenser. It's almost fun to be generous on these terms. No doubt you have things to hang up in your closet", he continued without taking a breath, "and if you are like me you never have enough clothes hangers. Rejoice. Those days are over. We have hangers in packets of 35 for just 7.99, or a quarter each. Small price to pay for a properly stored prized garment." He did have to take a breath at this point.

"But I actually..."

"True, true. It is so important to communicate these days. I bet you still have a landline phone with three handheld units? We can do you one better. Over here, our new Panatronic has a basic unit with 5 (five) hand-holds. Talk about multitasking. A bargain at \$129.99. And lest you drown in the waste paper that the mailman delivers every day we suggest this new crisscross shredder for 99.99. It has a new non-stop feature. You must be careful with that one. Be sure to read the directions. It is not like your old one that you had to shake or it would not start. This baby starts when you need it but it will not stop once it runs. Be sure you know where you have plugged it in so you can pull the cord if needed. And keep your tie out of the way."

"But I..."

"You are right. Let us step across to aisle 3250. Yes, it is a very big store. That is why our floor staff uses Segways to move around. You will be surprised at the variety of alcoholic beverages we offer. You may remember the days when one bought beer by the six pack. Those days are over. Today, we sell nothing smaller than twenty-four packs, and the beer comes from the four corners of the world, typically at about a dollar a bottle. You cannot buy water that cheap. Hard liquor, particularly whisky, sells very well which is no surprise at 22 dollars for the 1.5 liter bottle. How sweet life is when you parcel this out into ten generous shots at \$2.20 each! As Charles Dickens said, drunk for a penny, stone drunk for a dime. Ha, Ha. Just kidding."

"I don't really..."

"You are right, of course, I don't either. But we also have sweet things for the ladies. We sell a fine lemon liqueur at a reasonable price. It comes from a distillery that started up in Los Angeles when prohibition ended and is still in business. Yes, you heard that right: ginger lemon liqueur. That is the first thing they could think of in California the day prohibition ended."

"Really now..."

"Wine, however, is also something we take serious. Quality and flavor are much on our mind. That is why we do not shy away from offering really good vintages. Our Bottega Hastala Vista 1978, for example, goes for \$74.99 a bottle, a bargain if you know your wine. Regular liquor stores sell it for as much as \$75.00!"

"I really came just..."

"I know. A man needs to eat. Food is another offering we are known for. Take hamburger patties for your next outdoor party. We have the best. They are packed twenty-five to a tray. If you have a couple of teenagers you may have to buy two trays. New York steak goes for \$17.99. We wrap them up five steaks to a packet. Eat like you mean it, as they say. Bread is still a staple, all considered. We offer the finest. All our breads are packed at least two loaves to a package. Bake your own? No hay problema. Flour comes in fifty pound bags at \$11.99. The healthiest breakfast food you can buy anywhere are rolled oats. Ours come in 10 pound boxes at \$7.89. Coffee? We don't even stock cans smaller than 48 ounces. It will last you a long time at one tablespoon per cup. I myself like it a bit stronger. Do you take milk? We sell it in gallon jugs, two to a pack. If you need it only for your coffee I can guarantee that you will live longer than it stays fresh. We sell butter for your bread as well. It is sold as two-pound bricks, two to a package. Peanut butter, being such a general favorite, is sold only in three pound jars, two to a pack. Almond butter is an option we offer, should you be allergic to goobers."

"I actually... I mean..."

"No, no. Bread and meat is not all we expect you to eat. Inspect our fish counter, by all means. We have a wide selection of fresh and frozen fish, also fresh frozen and formerly fresh and frozen, many of them fresh from the farm. Some are formerly wild and then fresh-frozen, or even just plain, really wild fish (barracuda, usually, but they are dead, no danger in touching). I apologize for the terminology, but ever since the FDA has started employing retired fishermen it seems that the descriptive terminology gets bigger with every telling. And cheeses. Do we have cheeses? There are 300

kinds in France. We stock a good many of them, plus cheeses from Switzerland, Denmark, and Holland, as well as Swiss cheese from Norway, French cheese from Denmark, and German cheese made in Wisconsin. No, none from China. As yet. We hold the line in that department. All our cheeses are authentic as proven by the original labels. You should see how many shoppers crowd around the sample table when the lady doles out samples of our French Comté, the staple from the French Jura. As a matter of fact, there are sample tables all throughout the premises. It is believed that the sample tables are the reason why so many people join this coop in the first place. Where else can you feast for free, not only on cheese, but also on pizza, freshly baked before your eyes, crackers with jam, sausages, raisin bread, ice cream, chocolates, health food novelties, and what seems to be toothpaste. Wash it all down with cranberry juice and smoothies, made fresh for you so we can demonstrate the Wondergrinder that sells for only \$48.99 after rebate. Believe me, only spend-thrifts would pay for lunch in our restaurant section, unless they really prefer sitting down to eat."

"Really, I just..."

"All right. Let us not forget that besides providing lunch one must also provide for the cleanup. We carry every conceivable brand of detergents and soaps as well as brooms, rags, disinfectant sprays, air fresheners, smelling salts, wipes, tissues, dishwasher paraphernalia, water softeners, plastic bags, and cleansers. And we will be able to supply you with AA batteries provided you can use 84 of them at the same time. Sorry, no four packs. No doubt you have a computer; if not, we stock a variety of laptops. Some even come with operating systems. At any rate, you will probably like to know that we also have printer paper. I already mentioned the shredder. The two things go together. Most people waste the first two printouts of everything they write, don't you think? Cell phones are so popular. We always attract a crowd in front of that section. People tend to get hysterical if they don't have the latest. They need it Monday but new models come out only every Tuesday and Friday. Life is tough for consumers. Now, if you follow me over here, we have a complete display of TV sets. Wide screens, narrow screens, two dimensional and 3D as well. Sorry, no four dimensional screen displays. They are not out yet, I believe. Speaking of entertainment, on occasion we even sell grand pianos. No, I am not kidding. The schools may have dropped all music programs but we are determined to salvage what is left of culture, no matter how old fashioned. Oh, and have I mentioned that we can



measure your eyesight and supply corrective lenses? Also that we have a full service pharmacy and a hearing aid clinic. As soon as we find the space we will add a wellness and family planning center. We don't have a dental clinic yet but we sell an electric toothbrush with spare scrub heads. It is a very good deal at 88 dollars, depending of course on how many teeth you have left. Anyway, here we are, Sir. Oh, by the way this piece of furniture over there is our very latest offering for the home. We call it the Super Sink-right-down-in-it Lounge sofa. It seats three or four, depending on hip measurements."

"Oh thank you, thank you. Let me sit down. I cannot stand any longer. My head swims. Can I have a Tylenol?"

"I am sorry, Sir, but that would be against our wholesale-only contract. Simply stated, we operate on the Bert Lahr principle which states that you can't eat just one. We cannot dispense 'a' Tylenol, only our standard half year supply bottle of 365 tablets which you will find in aisle.... Sir? Sir? Hey, Jim, give me a hand, will you? This gentleman just passed out on me. Acute *hyperpleresis merchandisi*, I think. You know how it is. New coop member, day one." [CC]

Artwork: Suhas Krishna

Ayalan

Adisa Obasanjo

Let it mark the Ayalan
of a future sans the beach
where you come floating;
A snake-bitten soul
pushed away on a raft of
banana stems like some
ancient Indian superstition
of Hope

Let it sound the Ayalan
of a world without the bones
that come down striking;
The possessed souls
pushed away from the core
by fanaticism that has
assumed the human garb
of Devotion.

Let it script the Ayalan
of a faith without the fear
that latches on suckling;
A bloodthirsty leech
draining away the God
that crosses the sea in a corpse,
fleeing the hallowed kingdom
of Doom.



Two Poems

JIBANANANDA DAS

TRANSLATED BY
Syed Amir Milan

*f*or a Thousand Years She Merely Plays

For a thousand years she merely plays like a firefly in the dark;
Darkness is ordained for all eternity;
Moonbeams on the sand – sporadic shadows of the firs
like the pounded pillars: of Dwarka – standing lifeless, pale.
Our bodies smell of sleep – ties of life they are all done;
'Do you remember?' she asks – I merely wonder, 'Banalata Sen?'

twenty Years Hence

What if I come across her again twenty years hence.
 Twenty years hence, again –
 Perhaps by bundled paddy
 in November end –
 Then the twilight crow returns home – then the yellow river
 becomes soft and humble among the sedge catkin bulrush – in the
 field.

Or there is no harvest to reap;
 there is no engagement,
 hay from the home of ducks
 straw from the nest of birds
 get scattered; Droplets of night, cold and the dew in munia's home.

Life has left us a good score ahead –
 If all of a sudden I find you in a rustic bend –

Perhaps the moon at midnight arrives behind a cluster of leaves;
 Thin and willowy, jet black stalks streaking across its face,
 of gum or peach,
 perhaps tamarisk – or mango;
 I wouldn't remember you twenty years hence!

Life then has left us twenty years by –
 If then we meet again, you and I!

Perhaps the owl creeps down upon the field then –
 In the dark alley of a Babul tree,
 somewhere among the windows of Peepal,
 he hides you.

Like a drooping eyelid, a kite drops down and rests its wings –

The glistening, golden bird – hunted away by the dew –
 What if I find you all of a sudden, in that fog, twenty years hence.

JIBANANANDA DAS (1899 – 1954) IS THE FOREMOST NAME AMONG POETS WHO HAVE WRITTEN IN BENGALI SINCE POST-TAGORE UNDIVIDED BENGAL. THE HARBINGER OF MODERNISM IN BENGALI POETRY, DAS WAS AN ECLECTIC AUTHOR WHO DEXTEROUSLY DABBLED IN POETRY AS WELL AS FICTION. IN SPITE OF BEING A PROLIFIC AUTHOR, HIS 'INTROVERT' PERSONA DID NOT LET HIM PUBLISH THE MAJORITY OF HIS WORKS DURING HIS LIFETIME. IT WAS ONLY AFTER HIS DEATH THAT A MASSIVE COLLECTION OF WRITINGS, LOCKED IN TRUNKS, WERE DISCOVERED AND INTERMITTENTLY PUBLISHED.

NOVELETTE

Mrs. Hudson's Magic Carpet

Jagannath Chakravarti

I

The carpet was a dirty shade of mauve. Well, Mrs. Hudson thought further, it could be that the carpet had once been a perfectly beautiful shade of lilac which presently deserved the attribute 'dirty' because it was, quite simply, caked in a thick layer of dust.

Martha had a handkerchief shielding her nose and mouth from the thick layer of dust enveloping the carpet. The rug was stashed, rolled into a pin, inside the transitory garbage dump at the edge of the sliver of a garden welcoming the residents and visitors of 66, Gandhi Avenue.

"And you're absolutely certain you did not dump it here?" Mrs. Hudson was looking at Martha with a distinct look of suspicion. It was common knowledge that Martha had the deplorable habit of getting rid of things rather unceremoniously once she was done with them.

Martha had done the same with her rocking chair, chucking it out of her third floor window to the collective dismay of her neighbours and the town authority alike. She even ended up paying a hefty fine for the deed. That did not stop her though, oh, no! A few nights later, she chucked the boyfriend out of her flat when he came back late one night, drunk and (Mrs. Hudson suspected) smelling of another woman.

"That's not mine" Martha blurted out semi-coherently, a

series of lines on her sleek forehead suggesting that she was appalled that Mrs. Hudson could even think that she, of all people, could own such a dirty old rag.

Mrs. Hudson sighed in despair, inwardly admitting that Martha was telling the truth. She was looking forward to picking up yet another confrontation with this abhorrent little girl who was as promiscuous and immoral as they came.

There were no scarcity of such elements in this particular Indian town, but Mrs. Hudson had not imagined in a thousand years that somebody like that would one day own a portion of what used to be *her* house. Well, it had been her house, a gorgeous Georgian mansion, until a trick of real estate turned her 150-year old house into an apartment building – mere matchboxes.

Mrs. Hudson did get a fair deal, though. She not only retained two flats in her possession, but had also received a large amount of money as a part of the deal.

Yet Mrs. Hudson had not expected such crude specimens of humanity as Martha, or Mr. Irani, the bald, creepy man with the one glass eye, as her neighbours. It was particularly disconcerting that even though Mr. Irani's left eye was made of glass, it seemed to convey every emotion of the man with as much sincerity as the right. It did not look real to Mrs. Hudson at all but it was somehow alive. She secretly wished that the man wore dark glasses, but mind-reading had (thankfully?) not been one of the virtues of creepy Mr. Irani's virtues.

"I suppose it wasn't Mr. Irani, do you think?" she had meant it to be a rhetorical statement, only directing it towards Martha at the very last moment as a common courtesy. After all, Mrs. Hudson was raised right.

"He has been out of town for a week" Martha answered through her delicately manicured fingernails which were still clutching the off-pink handkerchief, "Don't you remember?"

Of course she remembered now. She had simply forgotten.

Mrs. Hudson kept track of the people in her house primarily because that is what a diligent landlady should be doing. Sure they were the owners of their respective real estate chunks, but she owned TWO flats besides holding the dubious

distinction of being the 'original' owner of the property! She had a right to spy on her neighbours.

Mr. Irani had left the building on the 7th. It had been a Thursday. Mrs. Hudson remembered because Thursdays were something she never looked forward to.

Thursdays were the days when the smooth-talking crook Roberto Suarez would be showing up at their apartment. To some, a local messiah; a loyal, trusted friend, adviser and in a land bereft of morals, a philosopher to boot. Only Mrs. Hudson knew him for who he really was: a crook, a low-lying pimp who bore a long list of illustrious job titles to his name – real estate mogul, author of multiple ponzi schemes, chairman of the managing committee of their 'society' and whatnot. He was also known to be a supplier of exotic goods such as ancient artifacts & souvenirs and probably women and drugs too. After all, it was nothing new in this part of town. The proximity to the sea, the steady stream of shameless tourists exhibiting themselves on the beach – they *had* to be on drugs!

In all likelihood, Martha took them too. Maybe that scoundrel Roberto was her go-to-guy too. Mrs. Hudson knew for a fact that he was the one who had helped Martha acquire that God-damned Ouija board. The little dark-haired girl had a little bit of an evil streak in her. Mrs. Hudson presumed she had a fascination for dark magic, passing it off in the garb of 'interest in the occult'.

Martha and her friends tried their hand at séances on Thursday nights too. Not that Mrs. Hudson was afraid of that, oh no! She wasn't afraid of such weak little people who turned to the Devil, or anyone else, for strength. Mrs. Hudson wasn't afraid of anyone who did not believe in themselves but she did mind the racket they ended up causing from time to time in their bid to summon spirits.

"Well, let's not worry about it", the weak girl spoke, "Tomorrow's Thursday. The garbage truck is supposed to stop by. They will take it away." Martha did not wait for Mrs. Hudson to reply. She had one of her short, flowery summer dresses on which meant she was probably heading to her parlour where she worked as a hairdresser or

something. Mrs. Hudson wondered why she would need to dress like a coquette in order to go and do some women's hairs.

At times, Mrs. Hudson wondered how Martha came into all that money to pay for her apartment. Surely a hairdresser doesn't earn that much and besides, the stupid girl had a recurring habit of going for the proverbial 'bad boys' who eventually left her after splurging on her for a few days and fornicat—never mind! Mrs. Hudson firmly believed in chaining down some thoughts before they dared to raise their serpentine heads.

Martha crossed the little patch of garden that was a mere shadow of the sprawling orchard it used to be, and went out into the street. The carpet remained inside the garbage dump that stood by the building, near the little wooden door looking into an alley adjacent to the apartment block. The garbage collector would come via this little door, collect the assorted rot of the households and dump it at the back of his truck for good. The truck came on Thursdays. It was the one thing about Thursdays Mrs. Hudson did not really mind.

II

Mrs. Hudson boarded the elevator and came up to the third floor. The other flat she owned happened to be on the ground floor itself. It was, of course, a necessary precaution for the eventual moment when technology would inevitably fail, however briefly, and she would be forced to drag her gout-ridden body up the stairs all the way to the third floor. Emulating Sisyphus did not fit her idea of a happy dotage. She always had one room prepared in her otherwise empty apartment downstairs to house her during a crisis. A small bed, an armchair, candles, matches and a selection of brown paper-covered detective novels would ensure her survival during a prolonged power-cut or the apocalypse, when she was stranded way below her high abode.

By evening, after a rather lengthy siesta, Mrs. Hudson had effectively shaken away every memory of the dirty lavender carpet from her mind. She woke up to a faint, familiar fragrance which seemed strangely out of place. It smelled of lilac in hot summer.

And then there was the sound of the guitar. She knew where *that* was coming from. The Ka-

poors of the second-floor had a young son who used to be Mrs. Hudson's favourite before he brought himself a guitar and began to spoil her Thursday afternoons by teaming up with a bunch of no-gooders to practice a form of music he liked to term 'Death Metal'.

The 17-year-old had tried to make Mrs. Hudson see the virtue of his ways but by 19, he had come to terms with the futility of his endeavour. Presently, both Mrs. Hudson and the 23-year-old Sam Kapoor liked to pretend that they had never really known each other.

Sam was the first in a stack of dominoes that soured Mrs. Hudson's equation with what was once her favourite family. When he bought this apartment, Rajiv Kapoor had been a dashing middle-aged man of 45, with a beautiful wife who was some twelve years his junior and their little son Sameer.

Rajiv Kapoor had reminded Mrs. Hudson of her husband. Rajiv had appeared quite like that young man from her memory who had left his whole life in the nation's capital to come and settle in this God-forsaken seaside town out of a largely misguided desire to reconnect with his roots.

Mrs. Hudson, nee Miss Stowe had no idea that his husband was *the* Hudson who was the sole surviving member of the semi-wealthy Hudson clan of this town. Their courtship had lasted six months. Six chaotic months in which Miss Stowe did everything conceivable to stay afloat. By then, she had changed her profession seven times, three of which she did not dare confide in her future husband.

In hindsight, Mrs. Hudson reckoned that he would not have cared. The hands that caressed her, sent her in waves of ecstasy and escape; the same fingers that would shape into chords, eliciting a magical series of vowels from that ill-carved musical instrument, could not be moulded into a disciplinary medium that would rightfully redeem the ghosts from her past.

In a mere six years, Sam had taken to the guitar as easily as it came to the seasoned Mr. Hudson. Mrs. Hudson did not mind these Wednesday evenings at all, when Sam would practice in private, blissfully unplugged and mystifyingly melodious. His room downstairs faced the west too. It

was directly beneath Mrs. Hudson's.

If only his band's music weren't so loud. If only their music did not sound like a congregation of sinners redeeming for their sins in the lowest circle of hell.

From a purely philosophical perspective, Mrs. Hudson had to admit, however grudgingly, that she understood their music fairly well. She was, nevertheless, adamant about never enjoying the same. According to her, Mrs. Hudson had lived through her fair share of hell and it was the last place she ever wanted to revisit.

Mrs. Hudson's purgation had been her formative years in Eastern India. She hailed from a family that graced the oxymoron 'poor Sahibs', as a chronically depressed cousin who suffered from an acute case of identity crisis would constantly remind her throughout her childhood.

Her family could not wait to see better fortunes – pastures appeared greener every-where else. They were the offspring of that generation which had failed, despite their best efforts, to sink; to seal themselves in the protective cocoon of 'lost glory'. All they wanted was to go back west, and look back in anger. If only. Rather, they ended up being the lot who fostered the debilitating assumption that they were refugees in a home that was no longer their own.

No act of genocide or communal hatred caused them this misfortune. It has been caused, simply, by a lack of funds. They were a poor, miserable bunch of human beings, the whole lot of them.

The identity crisis that Ms. Stowe had inherited blossomed during her youth, which in turn propelled her from the claustrophobic by-lanes of Ripon Street in Calcutta, the squalid quarters which was more suited to serve as the sets of a sad piece of cinema which the miserable few would watch in awe and where everybody dies in the end. No one could live there. It had been her lowest circle of hell.

She had chosen to move forward. She chose this seaside town on the opposite coast of India. Her primary objective for coming here was to find for herself the 'suitable husband' and it had sounded like a rather good plan on paper. She knew for a fact that this town, and its surroundings, was frequented by a pompous assortment of

Western tourists throughout the year. Tourists who had enough to splurge, never mind the shoddy exchange ratio.

She learnt quickly, however, that most of these men were not the 'marrying type' and even though she attempted to test the waters a few times, she dared not venture far into the sea. Ms. Stowe did not have the opportunity to learn how to swim, growing up in the cramped Ripon Street.

In her heart, Mrs. Hudson wanted a husband who would eventually take her to the West. She did not mind if it were not the British Isles in particular, anywhere but the East would suit her fine. At first, she had loved this sea-facing paradise. The charm had lasted until she spotted the chinks in the armor and realized that this was simply another circle of hell, in disguise.

Her theological upbringing notwithstanding, she could not fathom the inherent charm in the incessant consumption of mind-altering narcotics or alcohol, coupled with an endless tide of sexual encounters. Here no children played at the beach, no castle dotted the sand and there were no kids or doting parents to protect the imaginary castle from the inevitable waves of the Arabian Sea.

She wanted her husband to take her to a little town where the roads would be wider and not littered with little shops selling everything from cellular recharge coupons to the milk of green coconut.

Mrs. Hudson had high hopes of 'changing' her future husband who was perplexingly content to come back to his ancestral home in this awful little town. He had not enjoyed his life in the capital, with its temperamental nature and 'abhorrent' people. Incidentally, Mr. Hudson had spent a few of his teenage years in Calcutta and had nothing but good things to say about the nation's erstwhile capital.

Mrs. Hudson detested practically everything about this country. She did not care about India, or her neighbours, the subcontinent, the entire Eastern world for that matter. Everytime she would open her school atlas, her eyes would drift westward: the archipelago that was home. The world, the system that stood for order -

The order of her thoughts was broken by a serial electronic buzzing. It was the doorbell. Mrs. Hudson knew who it was and her first in-

stinct was to ignore the hasty rings. It was her cleaning lady. Lakhshmi, her name was. Mrs. Hudson found it funny how even the poorest of Indians ended up making a sound case for irony by the way they named their children.

Mrs. Hudson knew three Lakhshmis who worked as lowly maid servants in this small, randomly populated seaside town alone. Lakhshmi also happened to be the Indian goddess of wealth and prosperity.

“Why did you at all bother coming in at such an ungodly hour?”

The perky maid-servant simply answered with a string of ‘Sorry sorry Madam’, ‘So sorry Madam’, stealing past her frame into the apartment.

Mrs. Hudson shouted from the door, ‘You were supposed to come three hours ago. It’s already five. How am I supposed to get ready for dinner with a heap of dirty dishes in the sink? What were you thinking? I swear I’ll get rid of you next month. Mark my words..’, Mrs. Hudson carried on for a while before pausing to let Lakhshmi recount her side of the story.

This Lakhshmi belonged to that generation which still had a hint of dream in their eyes. On top of everything, she had got married a few months ago and has been even more irregular ever since.

Mrs. Hudson had a fair idea how young married couples could be and she could not really blame them, but she would not let her indulgence shake off the fact that it was, at the end of the day, disrupting her order.

Mrs. Hudson preferred to enjoy a little siesta in the afternoons, but only after Lakhshmi had shown up and performed her assigned duties. It was nearly five-thirty. With the dishes still dirty, how was she to prepare her dinner and have it sharp at seven?

She had demanded an explanation. In spite of her best efforts, Lakhshmi had to make sure that she received one.

Lakhshmi had been intrigued by the rolled-up carpet that stood unceremoniously in the garbage dump downstairs. But for the dust, she had reckoned that the carpet was in a fine condition and would increase the ‘glaze’ of the wooden hut that she had moved into recently with her new husband Ricardo, further down the beach.

Lakhshmi had hauled the carpet from the bin in the garden to the elevator, and had taken it up to the roof. There she had dusted it for the good part of an hour. After positioning it to soak up the dropping sun, Lakhshmi was apparently arrested by a series of sneezes that was caused by the ‘years of dust’ that she had to brush off the carpet.

So she had gone down to the first floor to Dr. Akhtar’s, who had promptly given her a strong medication to control the agitated allergies.

“Once I go in his flat, I have to do his work, na? I skip his flat in the morning too. What do I do, Madam? And you *know* what day it is, na?”, Lakhshmi tried to reason.

Mrs. Hudson did not care. “But of course the first thing you should’ve done was to find out who put that goddamned thing in our garbage dump before you decided to take it in order to ‘glaze up’ your home!” Mrs. Hudson did not really mind that her maid was getting rid of the carpet instead of the garbage men but she was in no mood to let out affection either. At the moment, she had graver matters to deal with.

“We have a rule in this building, Lakhshmi. We are not to get rid of such large, dirty old items by stuffing them in that small bin. We must wait for Thursdays and Sundays when that goddamned truck comes. Can you imagine that thing jutting out of the bin like an eyesore, that too right beside my bed of petunias?” Mrs. Hudson went on. She could not stop.

“And what if it’s *not* one of us? Have you even considered that? Then somebody else is throwing their rot in our bin again! We’ve got to find out who that is and teach him a lesson!”

Lakhshmi nodded her head in assent. Her big, round eyes and unreadable face taut like an officer of the law receiving orders from a superior. This was what Mrs. Hudson liked about her. Lakhshmi did have trouble maintaining the regular order of affairs, but when given a specific responsibility, especially of the sleuthing type, she was one to follow direct orders.

By the time Mrs. Hudson finished dinner, Lakhshmi had brought the disconcerting news that none of their usual suspects were fitting the bill this time around. She was already employed by Dr. Akhtar and the Kapoors, and was able to confirm via her anonymous source that neither Martha, nor the out-of-town Mr. Irani had anything to do with the carpet. She had even given a clean chit to the Sen

family and finally, Mr. Alter, the reclusive old author who did not socialize with anyone.

III

By the time Mrs. Hudson went up to the rooftop and saw the carpet fluttering a foot above the air, flitting like an enticing coquette at the start of her act, basking herself in the fading film of twilight, dusk had spread over the little Western Indian seaside town.

A deeper dusk would fall by the time she came up to the roof in high winters but even in late summers, she managed to catch sight of the dying, misty orange aura of the setting sun.

On Thursdays, she would steal up to the roof, presumably in her soft orange evening gown, to find herself in supremely odd company. She would be met by an awkward bunch of young men, led by the grown up, stubbled Sam Kapoor. They would take frequent breaks to come to the roof during their rehearsals to smoke what suspiciously appeared to Mrs. Hudson as marijuana cigarettes. They did look like the normal ones but kids these days would stuff and transform the plain old cigarette after emptying its tobacco, to turn it into a marijuana 'joint'. She knew so for a fact! Mrs. Hudson had seen it on television.

She could never be sure about the smell, though. After all, Mr. Hudson had been in the habit of smoking a rather ancient hookah, an ill-habit he had picked up during his three-year-stint as the chief counsel of an erstwhile Maharajah in some provincial stronghold, before moving to Delhi.

The hookah smelled fine, however. There had not been this earthy, pungent odor clouding her senses. The tobacco was sweet, and even though she would barely take a drag on the occasional days, it would fill Mr. Hudson's study in the most enchanting waves of aromatic magic.

At times, the tobacco had a strange effect on Mr. Hudson. Mrs. Hudson remembered quite a few heart-stopping instances during her lifetime when her husband had decided to make love to her in his study, putting the chastity of the sanctum sanctorum of his chapel of knowledge in clear jeopardy.

Mrs. Hudson often wished the smoking musicians would offer her a drag like her husband often would. It was only common courtesy, wasn't it?

Mrs. Hudson would not mind them spending

on her a word or two. She could care less if those words were not pleasant. After all, the type of boys they were, it was only natural that they would pass a snide comment rather than offering a polite 'How do you do?'

At least that way, she could pick up one of her fights.

The young men would not offer a single remark. They never did. They would ignore her as nonchalantly as Mrs. Hudson pretended to.

Thursday evenings were, quite simply, the worst.

Wednesdays, on the other hand, were the best.

Waking up to the acoustic tunes, serving herself dinner before the pleasant background score and then going up to the rooftop - hovering on the western side as the sun set while little Sameer played his paean to the departed two floors down.

The sun had already set this evening; it had set a while ago and in the meantime, somebody had come up (Mrs. Hudson had a fair idea who) and lit a series of ceremonial earthen lamps on the waist-high parapet.

The light had cast the entire roof in a cloud of simmering gold.

The light was swimming around her. Mrs. Hudson was swimming in a sea of golden twilight. It was a sight unlike anything she had seen on this rooftop before.

But why did it strike her so? She has seen a variation of this particular scene every year for quite a few years now. Mrs. Sen never failed to observe even the smallest of festivities and as far as Hindu festivals were concerned, Diwali had to be right there on top of her checklist.

Mrs. Hudson had swam westward on, where little Sameer was no longer strumming his elegy to the sun. His guitar now hummed a rather exotic tune, predominantly Eastern. Mrs. Hudson recognised the music to be faintly 'Arabic' in origin and although she had never really paid attention to an Arabic tune before, the impending night *and* the light -- helped her imagination along as she vividly pictured herself sitting in some lonesome desert by the heat of a bonfire, nibbling on a sugary date, while her companion sat across from her on that little boulder, enchanting her with some local music.

It was then that Mrs. Hudson's eyes fell on

the carpet. At first she presumed it to be a play of the lights. The elevation, the elongated shadow - all tricks which could be easily explained by a physics teacher or some amateur cinematographer on an experimental spree.

Or else Lakhshmi must have propped the carpet on something, but that failed to explain the unsteady levitation. The carpet was hovering soundlessly, unlike the remote controlled helicopter that little Sameer used to fly from this rooftop when they were young.

Mrs. Hudson did not dare go near the carpet, no; it looked a tad too *natural*. There was something elusively uncanny about the sight. On her dreamy, musical voyage over the sea of Diwali lights, she had hit upon an island which was not supposed to be there.

How was the goddamned thing off the ground? She had to bend down, you see. Slowly, carefully did she arch her back, bringing her eyes all the way to the level of the carpet to see if it was really hovering on thin air.

In an instant the divine lights had become unsettlingly surreal; the trance-like music was now but an ominous Eastern tune. She was bent in half when she became fairly convinced that the carpet was indeed *alive*.

The inertia of her unconscious made sure her back kept bending. She reached her cue when a pain shot through a point in her back - all the way up to her brain as a memory uncorked itself to dispel Mrs. Hudson into a pool of discovery and wonder.

The pain... she remembered it all now. The pain, yes. She had been hauling the mite-infested chest downstairs. How could she forget? It was only last evening!

She had been clearing out the attic, which was actually a rather small-ish loft wedged atop the narrow space above her kitchen and bathroom, with a little help from the occasional gardener Gopal, a man of remarkably frail physical construct. Mrs. Hudson had asked Lakhshmi whether Ricardo would like to pitch in for some quick buck, but Lakhshmi had insolently hinted that her husband was too good for such a job.

Mrs. Hudson had helped Gopal haul some of the items downstairs. Well, all she had to do was take them to the elevator, but the mite-infested box had taken a toll on her all the same. Before

Mrs. Hudson could have reached the elevator, it had caused a little prick of electric shock in one of her back muscles. It could happen to anyone, of course. Surely it wasn't because she was getting old?

But then, how could she forget? She had seen Gopal take away several rolls of bedding, incessantly complaining of their unnatural weight. Mrs. Hudson instantly recollected that she had seen the carpet among them too, only then she did not *realise* that it was a carpet. She had assumed it was simply yet another piece of rolled up, discarded bedding belonging to some nameless Hudson of the ancient past.

A booming laughter from somewhere below brought Mrs. Hudson back as she swiftly stood up, despite her pain and walked towards the edge, only to find Mr. Kapoor exchanging ceremonial hugs with that crook Roberto Suarez near the entrance to 66, Gandhi Avenue. Suarez had exploited the occasion to dress up in a suave white suit, *kurta-punjabi*. His fine clothing could not hide his real self from Mrs. Hudson. It really was not the best time to think about all that but this man happened to be one of the chief reasons why Mrs. Hudson had fallen out with the Kapoors.

Even the handsome, extremely likeable Mr. Kapoor had transformed into a money-laundering crook under the tutelage of that damned Suarez. Mr. Hudson knew all about their little Ponzi scheme. Sure they had given stupendous premiums in the first few quarters, but Mrs. Hudson had a fair idea what lay in store in the long run.

The fact remained that Mr. Kapoor had *changed*, something Mrs. Hudson had so desired in her husband who had been a loving, caring, damn near perfect husband up to the point that he was just too happy being who he was; until the tiny fact that Mr. Hudson did not really 'mind' the East as much as the missus did, came to the surface.

As Mrs. Hudson turned back to set her eyes upon the carpet again, what met her auburn pair caused nothing short of a shock.

In the ensuing moment, as if led by a conniving evening breeze, the carpet had moved towards her from the northern enclave of the roof. It had raised itself a couple of notches too. The carpet was presently hovering as high as her bed probably was.

The communication had been performed *sans*

words. The carpet was inviting her to take a seat.

Mrs. Hudson wasn't thinking about her childhood propensity to fall prey to her own instincts as she sat gingerly upon the scrubbed fabric - the mauve appearing a murky shade of brownish yellow in the flickering light as Mrs. Hudson prepared to make herself a little more comfortable. It was hardly more begrudging than her bed, Mrs. Hudson reckoned, holding on to the edges for dear life.

The carpet was big enough to accommodate at least nine people who could be consuming as much space as Mrs. Hudson presently occupied, although how the carpet managed to withstand her weight and the omnipresent pull of gravity was beyond Mrs. Hudson's comprehension.

Mrs. Hudson realised that her fingers had gone numb (or was it simply cold?) on the warm, bristling edges of the fabric. She would later swear that she recognized the faint hint of an exotic Arabic perfume emanating from the carpet.

And then the damned thing took flight. Beyond belief would be an unnecessary exaggeration as the carpet took off gently, believably enough for Mrs. Hudson and its swiftly transient molecules never missed a single beat. However she transferred her weight on the material, it met her with an equal amount of thrust.

Mrs. Hudson gradually began to feel at home on the carpet. By definition, it had to be *magical* and it also ensured a calming effect settled upon the person riding it, Mrs. Hudson would conclude later. She had a fairly clear idea regarding what was going to happen next.

Gently it flew... like an experienced chauffeur guiding the dame at sunset to her dinner, maneuvering the flying vehicle swiftly into the air but never losing the sense of the rider's centre of gravity which is so essential for the requisite comfort of any passenger.

The carpet rose to about a hundred feet in the air, taking off from a tarmac earmarked by the glowing Diwali lamps. Mrs. Hudson had relaxed, but not without her fair sense of reasoning. Flying so close to the buildings was a markedly discomforting proposition, especially on a Diwali evening when the sky is rife with the light of firecrackers.

It was as if the carpet sensed Mrs. Hudson's apprehension and undertook the shortest and comparatively deserted route towards the ocean.

They rose another hundred feet or so as they

flew over the still waters of the evening. The beast beneath was sleeping, its breath but a gentle breeze that gave birth to tiny wavelets who found it difficult to compete with the prevalent mortality rate.

It was a bittersweet feeling, looking at the twinkling coastal town on the western front of India with all of its debauchery, foolishness, sin, chaos... and this happened to be the best that it could get in this country for Mrs. Hudson.

It was a peculiar feeling for her when the carpet made concentric circles around the derelict old lighthouse further south, down the beach. Mrs. Hudson had not seen the lighthouse alit in her lifetime, but as the playful carpet neared the top, past the procession of broken window-panes at the crest, Mrs. Hudson thought she spotted the trace of a faint light inside. Not that it was possible. The place had been boarded up long before Mrs. Hudson came to this town. Nobody had seen the world from up here in years, not until today.

On her way back, she presumably decided to take the route over the narrow patch of unmanaged groves and coconut bearing trees covering the far east of the town.

Not only would she reach her home in no time, she would also be spotted by a few less people.

By the time the carpet had interpreted her thoughts and brought her back to her home the exact way she would've preferred, darkness had fallen over the town.

There must have been a strong wind in the meantime because when Mrs. Hudson came back down on her rooftop, Mrs. Sen's Diwali lamps had all been snuffed out.

IV

It was after she had completely disengaged from the carpet, back on her own two feet, that she was able to marvel at the implausible reality that hovered innocently before her.

'What in the name of the devil... it can't be...!', Gone was her meditative relaxation. She was presently on the verge of hyperventilation. Mrs. Hudson felt an imminent panic attack, like the ones she used to have back home - Ripon Street.

Assimilating all the will that she could muster, Mrs. Hudson willed the carpet to stop levitat

ing. It was still hovering, rather shamelessly, on the level of her bed - a gentleman-caller holding the carriage door open, after they had settled upon a price!

The carpet was levitating like one of those hapless victims in the horror movies where the stories chiefly dealt with a person who was possessed by the Devil himself.

Demon or not, the carpet was nevertheless a piece of magical enchantment. If the written word be trusted, Mrs. Hudson had to conclude that this belonged to a place which was presently being ravaged by conspiracy, fanaticism and war. She was thinking of the Middle East, of course, or was it a Chinese tale retold by the Arabs... she wondered.

It was a while before the carpet kissed the roof like a flag in mourning, lowering itself peacefully in sync with Mrs. Hudson's rising fear. It was a carpet. It was simply a carpet, after all. Just a conglomeration of fabric woven into a goddamn CARPET! It had been dusted and cleaned by Lakhshmi who would take it home with her tonight after her babysitting duties involving the bedridden, thirty-year-old unmarried daughter while Dr. Akhtar went out on his weekly evening-out. Wednesdays were his nights of sin too.

So what if Mrs. Hudson had spent one of them indulging herself in an enchanted flight on a magic carpet. She did not go around hiring a male gigolo to satiate her perverted needs, although that certainly would have been more natural for her than it was for Dr. Akhtar! She was a woman after all! And she could afford a fine specimen too. Lord knew she possessed enough money and means, to hire one. Besides, she wasn't exactly old! Mrs. Hudson's aerial indulgence could not have been *that* damaging a sin now, could it?

How did the uber-religious Mrs. Sen miss the carpet? Did she not see it? But then she the sort of stupid woman who would have ended up shouting her find to the whole town.

Had not Lakhshmi, the clever Lakhshmi, got a whiff of its magical properties while she rid the thing of dust? Out of sheer gratitude, magic reveals its secret - it would have made a fine back story too.

But it was *her* carpet after all! That was a thought which was at once relieving and potent enough to lure the thinker into an abyss of creeping discomfort.

It was a disconcerting thought - the darkest spot in a black sea speckled with earthen lamps. The moonless desert that was the night sky had the occasional sparkling sand particles - dead light creating the falsehood of enlightenment.

Mrs. Hudson strode over the carpet in brisk little steps and went to the door.

Thoughts... thoughts... the only thing in this universe which can turn people crazy. Thoughts were the fancy of beasts - the beasts of humanity who did not deserve peace.

Mrs. Hudson had an obligation to be better than that. She was someone who, in spite of her parents' financial constraints, was raised right. Sure she had her years of rebellion, the thoughtless, yet passionate minds making mistakes aplenty.

She had her aeon of penance until she was rescued by the most charming and loving English gentleman you could possibly imagine.

In spite of his modest means and limited prospects (he had, after all, left a lucrative job in Delhi), the moment she had met him, Mrs. Hudson had known for a fact that he was the person she was going to spend her life with. And yet, he could not have been the man of her dreams at all. The man of her dreams would help her fulfill her dreams, would he not?

By the time they had weathered it all, the struggle to take back possession of what was rightfully their own, the quest to make the derelict mansion livable again; the pangs of expecting a child, the pain of accepting the fact that he was not to be born and she was never to bear a child again; all of it brought them together.

The endless troughs were interspersed by a series of crests that they had gifted each other out of love.

He had his literary conferences, and they would travel throughout the nation. Somehow, he had never received an opportunity to go to the West. He wasn't *popular* enough, nor did he care. After all, his was a field that wasn't in vogue, especially during a point in time when the Soviets were crumbling.

Naturally, he had made quite a few trips to Kolkata, one of the last Left bastions in the nation. Those were the trips during which Mrs. Hudson bluntly refused to accompany her husband. It was during one of those trips, the very last one as it

turned out, when Mr. Hudson had that heart attack. It was of little relief that he had not passed away in godforsaken Calcutta but had died at home - a home that Mrs. Hudson went on to demolish so she could finally escape to the West. That one had been the last mistake of her life. She regretted it at the back of her mind every waking moment. She could cry in that ghastly, dark elevator that took her one floor down to her apartment.

After she had safely locked herself up in her flat did she silently peruse the incredulity of her situation. The magic carpet was undoubtedly a *property* of the Hudson family.

All that she could not accommodate in her tiny rental while the evil sorcerers transformed her mansion into a depressing apartment building; the things she could not take with her - she had decided to sell. The things which could not be sold were either thrown away or were dumped in the tiny spare room of that rental on a first-come first-served basis. When the flats were ready, the carpet must have made its way into her loft again.

Mrs. Hudson's plan had been simple. Yes, she had sacrificed that palatial house to lay her hands on that magical figure of bank balance which had been promised to her by the devil in disguise - the imp Roberto Suarez. He had been a small time promoter then and had experienced an chance financial rainfall as he rebranded the local supermarket on the corner of Main Street into a brand new product. The *mall* had begun to see success. Suarez was insistent that he got a few more projects rolling. The formalities took a while but Suarez - the crook, did not betray his promise.

The very day Mrs. Hudson bid adieu to her home had been the day Suarez handed her that check for the full amount they had agreed upon. In a mere two days and a half, her bank passbook officially reflected her innermost desire: to possess enough money to settle in any semi-modest locale in the West.

She half expected Suarez to swindle her out of her fair share, the crook that he obviously was. But then the logical side of her mind took over the reins and she concluded that Suarez was in fact trying to gain the only thing that could cement his transformation business in the long run - a manufactured credit score of goodwill. Clearing the cheques in time was perfect for his agenda. Besides, didn't the devil always lure with

propositions of fulfilling a pending wish? So what if they came in the august years of one's life?

Mrs. Hudson prided herself on being an emotional human being whose wealth was her stringent sense of morality. She had, quite simply, felt guilty about demolishing what used to be her husband's abode, and hers too.

She had taken up a place a rather long way from Gandhi Avenue where she would not have to endure the purgation of seeing his house, his memories torn apart brick by brick from that ancient edifice.

When she returned fifteen months later, Mrs. Hudson had immediately confirmed her regret on finding the artless stack of bricks that stood in place of what had been their pristine *home*.

Greed, oh greed... a by-product of what these heathens called '*maya*' - they really weren't that far off.

Mrs. Hudson had fallen prey to the allure of something which seemed meaningless in hindsight. Where would she go? Where had she hoped to escape to? She had aged after all and it did bring along its fair share of realisations.

Where could she really escape to? To jolly ol' England? For quite a long time in her life, she lived through her English language TV shows diligently, trying to find comfort in those make-believe versions of the western world which made her feel consciously a little closer to the crises and tribulations of a distant population.

Mrs. Hudson knew for a fact that her motherland and the pond across had been reduced to a melting pot of world cultures - Indians, Bangladeshis, Pakistanis, the Chinese and of course, who could forget the erstwhile Africans? On top of that there were the conniving Arabs making lives just a tad more difficult all over the west.

Mrs. Hudson could only find solace in her warm, firm convictions, however brutal they might be on her psyche. It was therefore natural that she found the reality of owning a magic carpet deeply disturbing.

It was evidently an artifact of dark magic - made out of that same cloth that had made Roberto Suarez one of the most successful entrepreneurs in this little coastal town. The man had made a deal with the devil who had ordered him to raze the old to erect a feeble new.

Memory was God's greatest gift and the

worst sinners were those who dare lay a hand on them. But then, if Suarez had made a deal with the devil, had not Mrs. Hudson lived with an article that *must* be attributed to HIM for the larger part of her life?

The thing must have belonged to some ancestor of her husband's; a distant relative perhaps, or a visitor. Mrs. Hudson did not care about lost stories. Some stories were better under locks in a secure vault beneath the sightless guard of oblivion. It would be comforting to think of it as a black hole no light could escape from. One needed to stay as far away from them as possible for the vital object of serenity.

Thus it was not very important who had made the carpet, or how it had been charmed to fly, or who was it that made it a Hudson heirloom in the first place. The carpet was an anomaly. And like all anomalies, it had to be corrected.

The idea came to Mrs. Hudson like a divine ray of light. Betraying the attributes of a woman much younger than her Indian passport claimed, she rose to her feet and half-ran to the kitchen. There was a rusty old drum which still had some kerosene in reserve for that unforeseeable dark day when electricity and her share of liquid petroleum would finally betray her dinner routine.

Apocalypse wasn't a scenario which was hard to imagine for those who had lived through droughts, in the field or within oneself. At least the kerosene would allow her to enjoy her last supper before the world collapsed in on itself.

Lakhshmi did have the habit of stealing the occasional eggs, potatoes or even onions; loose change that might be lying around and even stealthy gulps of fluids such as Mrs. Hudson's fruit juice, wine or, for that matter, her kerosene. But the small drum still had enough to set the damned carpet on fire.

There were the ceremonial lamps too, weren't there? The breeze from the take-off and the landing had blown the flames out. There had to be oil left in them still. There would be no dearth of fuel.

She did not forget to shove a box of matches inside the left pocket of her gown.

Mrs. Hudson was on her way towards the front door when she was compelled to stop well short of her destination. The seeds of yet another

worst sinners were those who dare lay a hand on them. But then, if Suarez had made a deal with the devil, had not Mrs. Hudson lived with an article that *must* be attributed to HIM for the larger part of her life?

The thing must have belonged to some ancestor of her husband's; a distant relative perhaps, or a visitor. Mrs. Hudson did not care about lost stories. Some stories were better under locks in a secure vault beneath the sightless guard of oblivion. It would be comforting to think of it as a black hole no light could escape from. One needed to stay as far away from them as possible for the vital object of serenity.

Thus it was not very important who had made the carpet, or how it had been charmed to fly, or who was it that made it a Hudson heirloom in the first place. The carpet was an anomaly. And like all anomalies, it had to be corrected.

The idea came to Mrs. Hudson like a divine ray of light. Betraying the attributes of a woman much younger than her Indian passport claimed, she rose to her feet and half-ran to the kitchen. There was a rusty old drum which still had some kerosene in reserve for that unforeseeable dark day when electricity and her share of liquid petroleum would finally betray her dinner routine.

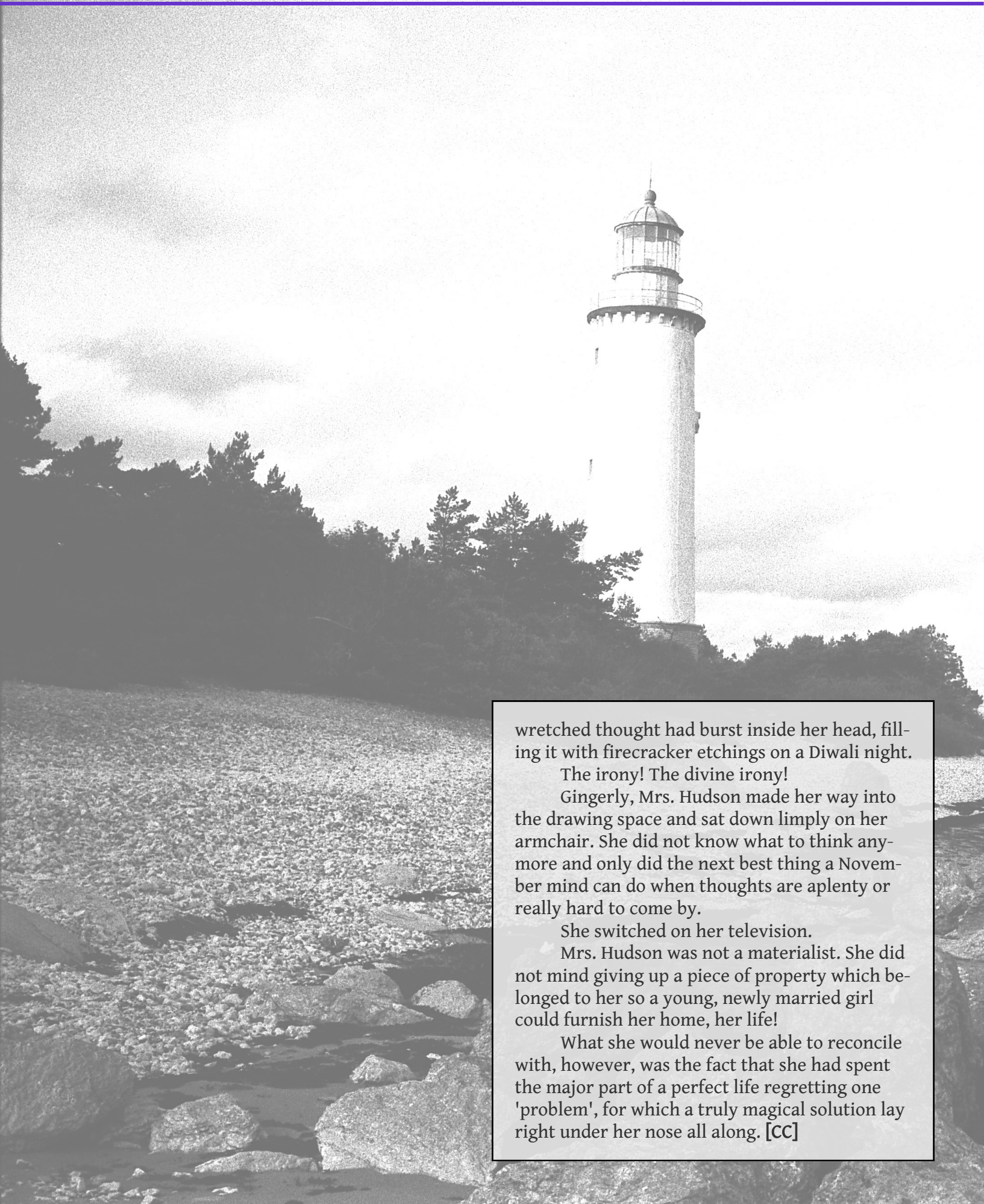
Apocalypse wasn't a scenario which was hard to imagine for those who had lived through droughts, in the field or within oneself. At least the kerosene would allow her to enjoy her last supper before the world collapsed in on itself.

Lakhshmi did have the habit of stealing the occasional eggs, potatoes or even onions; loose change that might be lying around and even stealthy gulps of fluids such as Mrs. Hudson's fruit juice, wine or, for that matter, her kerosene. But the small drum still had enough to set the damned carpet on fire.

There were the ceremonial lamps too, weren't there? The breeze from the take-off and the landing had blown the flames out. There had to be oil left in them still. There would be no dearth of fuel.

She did not forget to shove a box of matches inside the left pocket of her gown.

Mrs. Hudson was on her way towards the front door when she was compelled to stop well short of her destination. The seeds of yet another



wretched thought had burst inside her head, filling it with firecracker etchings on a Diwali night.

The irony! The divine irony!

Gingerly, Mrs. Hudson made her way into the drawing space and sat down limply on her armchair. She did not know what to think anymore and only did the next best thing a November mind can do when thoughts are aplenty or really hard to come by.

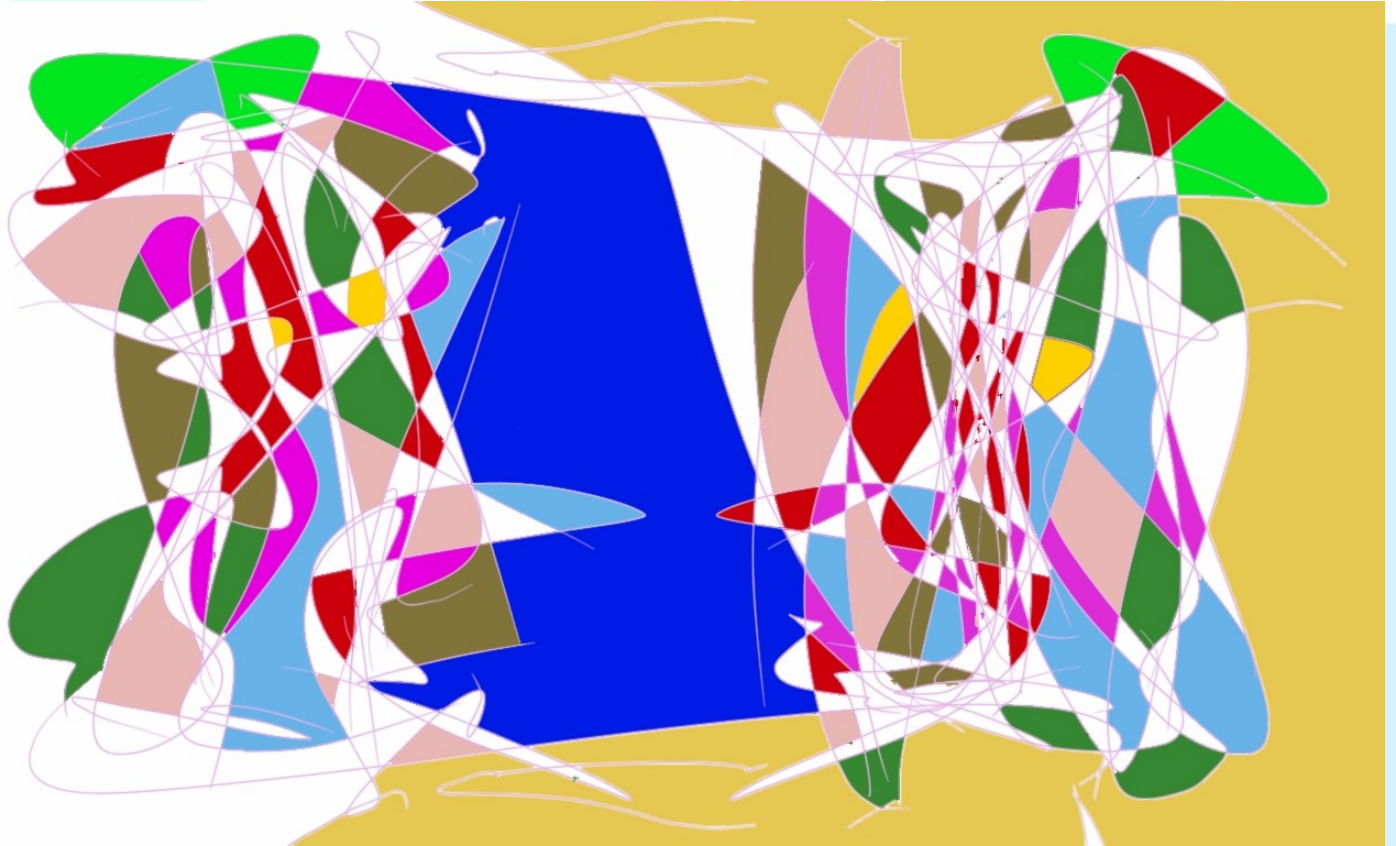
She switched on her television.

Mrs. Hudson was not a materialist. She did not mind giving up a piece of property which belonged to her so a young, newly married girl could furnish her home, her life!

What she would never be able to reconcile with, however, was the fact that she had spent the major part of a perfect life regretting one 'problem', for which a truly magical solution lay right under her nose all along. [CC]

SERIAL

Artwork: Jagannath Chakravarti



Cross-Eyed Sleep

Siddhartha Pathak

EXPOSITION

David Mondal has always possessed the singular idea in his head that human beings sleep with their eyes crossed under a veil of the assorted lids and lashes. His theory of cross eyed sleep has by far gone untested but that has never stopped him from expounding his assumptions to nearly everyone he has ever known.

David remembers coming to the foresaid conclusion and sharing it with his best friend Rahul, way back in the 1990s when he was no more than a stripling lad of thirteen. He had excitedly recounted his discovery to his disinterested parents,

a wide-eyed girl whose virginity he had taken by force behind an abandoned factory and even Kajal, the lascivious prostitute he had fallen in love with in his youth.

David has climbed up several of the rickety steps of success since his humble days of picking pockets or ganging up to invade a slumbering household. He had nearly been beaten to death one time during an episode of *ganapituni* when his sleight of hand had failed to fool the unseeing spectators and he was caught with his hand stuck awkwardly in an unnamed back pocket with a bus full of deceptively violent souls looking on.

The robberies were far less risky since they would normally target homes in the middle of nowhere at the dead of the night, several stations away from their respective hometowns whose names were a well-guarded secret even amongst their innermost circle.

Their haul would be graciously rewarding and they would board the first train of the morning a happy bunch, until the day David's co-conspirators drugged and left him to his fate inside a train compartment.

The night before had been especially fruitful; they had attacked a farmhouse belonging to some rich honcho who used the place to house his mistress and stash his ill-gotten gains. David had been denied every penny of his share, his only gain from the venture being a memory of the couple of turns he took with the mistress who had been ready to do absolutely anything with a *desi* gun pointed at her temple.

Looking back at the incident, David no longer experiences that ancient fire of rage he had initially felt towards his partners in crime for screwing him out of his fair share. Since denying him his *hissa* had been their prerogative, David realises now that they could as easily have thrown him off the moving train. It would have been so much simpler than serving sedative in a bottle of Cola but they had nevertheless adopted the most convoluted and humane method.

In hindsight, it is David who feels that he owes his erstwhile friends a word of thanks instead of the eternal miseries he had wished upon them then. That incident had been the one which steeled his resolve of flying solo and also took him to the big city for the very first time in his life.

Calcutta was not as far from his hometown as it was distant to him, like a dream that has very little chance of coming true. The overwhelming skeleton of the Howrah Bridge had been neutralized by the sight of a familiar river body; the cacophony of the bustling Howrah station drowned out by the pathetic cries of beggars missing limbs, dotting the station premises like loose hair in a comb. David could give them some money but the shock of waking up at the terminal station with a hundred bucks in his pocket instead of the thousands he deserved, numbed his propensity for sincere charity.

David could easily have taken a train back to his hometown but the city of his dreams had beckoned him to stall that eventual moment. Its sheer diversity; the co-habitation of glitz and desolation, of penance and prosperity, of saffron-clad *sanyasis* and girls in tight jeans invited him to stop by and breathe in the musk that emanated from every orifice the city possessed. It was not long before David decided to ditch his plans of returning home and make the city his new

abode.

The big city tested him as it tested every single soul who ever dreamt of making it here. David realised soon enough that it was easier to leave the city than survive in her tumultuous womb.

Ever her own children, bred in her veins and no stranger to her myriad shenanigans often chose to snap their umbilical cords and head for the greener pastures of Bangalore, Mumbai or Delhi. The deserters would often complain that Calcutta was a dead city – a soulless patch of existence that simply did not deserve the love of her progeny.

The surrogate that David was, his precious hundred was exhausted soon enough. Snatching handbags and picking pockets sustained him for a while before he got embroiled in a brutal turf war with a local snatcher and received that deep scar near his elbow which forces him to wear full sleeves to this day.

The gift of oblivion was one of the virtues that aided David in his path towards success but the scar ended up being a regular reminder that gnawed at his insides night and day, before his teenage self decided to do something about it.

Shyamal, the perpetrator, had the fairly regular habit of heading to a murky hooch den just outside the respectable quarters of Bajeshibpur. He would take his day's earnings to the liquor lair after dutifully delivering the agreed upon share to the local overlord. Three days of reconnaissance was all it had taken for David to hatch a neat little plan to exert revenge upon the fellow teenager who had gifted him that ghastly scar.

The plan was good enough to have been made by a goddamned architect.

David would lie in wait in the mosquito-infested shrubbery that grew along the path Shyamal would take on his way home from the hooch den every night. The 90s were not as well-lit as the place probably is now and the particular patch David had selected was especially notorious for

reasons not entirely natural. Even the daredevil Shyamal would mutter '*Ram Ram Ram Ram*' under his breath while he crossed that particularly dark patch between the den and the local bazaar, in a bid to ward off any evil entity that might be lurking in the shadows.

David would not only be applying a mask of mosquito repellent cream and mustard oil on his hands and feet but would also cover himself from head to toe in a white bedspread with two slits for customary vision. The rest would go as expected.

Shyamal, of course, would go into an intoxicated fit of fear, exacerbated by an avenging David who would climb on top of him, choking him through the bedspread with a vice-like grip befitting the supernatural spectre he would pretend to be.

Shyamal would struggle at first, yes, but even under the pressure of David's oily hands, he would be too paralyzed by fear to fight back with his characteristic ferocity.

The plan did go accordingly. David had merely failed to account for the arrival of a man riding a bicycle which happened by just as the final remnant of life was being exorcised out of Shyamal. David, of course, did anything but panic. He gingerly rose up after murdering Shyamal and convincingly enough, uttered a shrill, choking cry with the aid of his immature vocal chords which made the curious onlooker jump off his bicycle and run away towards the very direction he had come from, struggling to utter the Lord's name due to the sheer shock from bumping into real evil.

That night had not made Shyamal the cold blooded executioner that he is.

It had been the night Shyamal discovered where ghosts come from.

POSSESSION

The two-tier air-conditioned train compartments, David feels, are cosier than any business-class air-line experience one can buy. There were no excuse

-seeking flight attendants interrupting him during his crossword puzzles or the final chapter of a nail-biting paperback thriller that he might be reading; the customary waves caused by the moving train being the best anaesthetic there is, it convincingly outscores the deathly air pockets that would often spoil David's aerial siestas.

He particularly prefers overnight journeys, the ones that would get David to his destination as soon as he would wake up at the crack of dawn.

The waking up at dawn thing was a habit that he had inherited from the man who had rechristened him when he was fifteen. If only Father Lucius could see how easily David has chosen to forget the other lessons the good parson had attempted to instil in him.

A smile would crease his cheeks every time he would recount his divine guardian and the happy years he had spent at the home for children that Father Lucius had marked his entire life for. Even though David has not visited *Alorkone* in more than a decade, he would often see the place in his dreams, the ones which would generally be interrupted by inconvenient air pockets or the night train coming to an unsteady halt in the middle of the great, impenetrable darkness.

David, who is by now used to getting only anonymous payments for his professional services, does send similar unmarked donations to the home that had helped him overcome the darkest days of his life. As recently as last month, David donated as much as ten percent of his paycheque which he had received for his last assignment. The amount that he ended up donating came down to a nifty fifty thousand rupees.

The assignment that David is presently drawing the blueprint of is nowhere near as convoluted as the Indore assignment had turned out to be. The well-guarded hospital had been practically impossible to infiltrate and even when he found a way to do so, the rumour of a pandemic virus nearly convinced David to ditch his mission and return to a safer zone. Ironically, the deadly reports had ended up assisting David in completing his task as

it gifted him the idea of donning a mask and a generic patient's outfit to outwit the sensible guards of the realm who were too busy keeping the pandemic in check to double down on a masked man who, as his disguise suggested, had already been admitted to the facility.

His makeshift wheelchair had helped him, of course. The guard manning the elevator did not even question the anomaly of finding a wheelchair-bound patient on the tenth floor without a medical attendant. All David had to do was point clandestinely at the golden crest on his uniform and utter like a man in mild distress, 'The nurse... *chali gayi...* a doctor called. *Aap thoda... 4th floor?*'

Of course, he would have preferred taking the stairs instead of indulging in such a risky playact. David, however, had found out during his recon that 4th floor was exclusively for the facility's most special patrons and thus, had its very own dedicated set of elevators and staircase. It had been a rude shock to him when he found out that the general staircase only opened up in front of the rooftop garden on the 4th floor with all but a large, boarded fibreglass window to merely see the beautiful natural assortment through. There were no entrances or any sign of life in that fairly narrow space between the glass and the door.

With the emergency and general departments overflowing with potential patients showing portentous symptoms, not many of the staff were available to keep a watch upon the uber-patients that this particular private hospital boasted of.

It is peculiar, David had thought, that the proverbial peak of a disease that ails the masses even turns the greediest into anxious souls who want to shed their personas and overturn the onslaught on the collective health of the society.

The exceptions were few. They were rare. They were the ones who, in reality, were 'gifted'. David has the gift of anticipation. He can virtually foresee the events that would unfold in the short space of time that he 'works' in. Was he proud of his work? Probably not. But he knew that it was a work that *had* to be done by someone! It is an offshoot of

the oldest 'profession' that the male of our species have wilfully chosen.

There had to be someone who wielded the hammer when Jesus was nailed to the cross.

David had rightly assumed that the 4th floor would remain considerably empty at a time when the outdoor patients would flock at the hospital's altar on the ground for hallowed opinions while the royal visitors to the 4th floor would have been shown the door post their morning visit and lunch served to the inmates. They would be asleep by the time David convinced the elevator man that he was feeling *achha* enough to roll his chair to his cabin.

The guard did not have much of a choice. There was a terrified, angry and disappointed set of patients behind, willing him silently to keep the lift moving.

The man who was lying, frail and unconscious in front of David, barely matched the poorly scanned copy of the photograph that he had received in his email. The chart at the end of the bed, however, did confirm the identity of the patient and David did not waste any more time. Time is much more than money in case of David. In a certain way of looking at it, he practically has all the time in the world. But in order to keep it that way, he must put at stake his very life for short spurts of the clock that tend to have the illusion of an eternity. David cannot waste any of it. In his case, time is life.

As David's packaged dinner punctually arrives in the two tier air-conditioned sleeper car, he puts down his glasses and stashes the paperback thriller into the satchel at his side. David does not have a great fascination for food. Deprivation has its own virtues, he believes, and the fact that he has been denied the cravings of his gastric juices for such a long time in his life does make him less susceptible to the clutches of gluttony.

David prides himself on being a connoisseur if not a consumer and he won't be out of place in any upscale party celebrating the many avatars of food. Yet, he contentedly digs into the bland *mangsho-bhaat* with his bare hand, perfunctorily biting off the chicken legs and extracting the marrow, peppering the process with mouthfuls of rice and a

flat curry.

David does not care if any of his co-passengers find the process a little repulsive. One has a napkin shoved inside his shirt while he drank soup with a comically tiny spoon; another thinks two pieces of cucumber inside a 'cheese' sandwich can help her lose weight; the third is a palpable foodie, the extent of his midriff bearing testimony to the fact, further emphasized by his unwavering attention towards his food and the abject disregard for the way David conducts his dinner.

David cannot care less about what any of these people think. As long as he is living his life, not governed by the constraints of his work hours, he refuses to behave in any way that will force him to alter the persona he has so carefully constructed since his youth. Of course he had to let go of a few urges that were practical hurdles on his road to success, but the other traits that possesses *him* make him who he is. He must wake up at the crack of dawn. He must solve crossword puzzles. David must eat as if a famine is about to unsheathe its fangs.

Tucking in after everyone else switched off their reading lights, David lies awake under the covers with only his eyes looking out into the darkness. He is trying to think of nothing, faltering repeatedly at the prick of the work at hand. The client has probably sent the final set of details regarding the assignment in his inbox by now. His hyperactive mind, aroused at the thought of resuming work tomorrow makes him pull out the phone in his pocket to access the internet. The signal being weak, David waits for the browser to start functioning as he hears a set of words arranged in such a strange sequence that it immediately makes him think of *fate*.

The man right below his bunk is speaking to someone over the phone in spite of the terrible signal in this place. It is the frail connection perhaps, which forces him to speak out the words a little louder than he obviously intends to. It is certainly not something one generally says out loud, even in the presence of sleeping strangers.

'*Dhyan se suno*, I need you to find someone who can kill my wife...'

... To be Continued ... [CC]

POETRY

Two Poems

Circles and Cracks

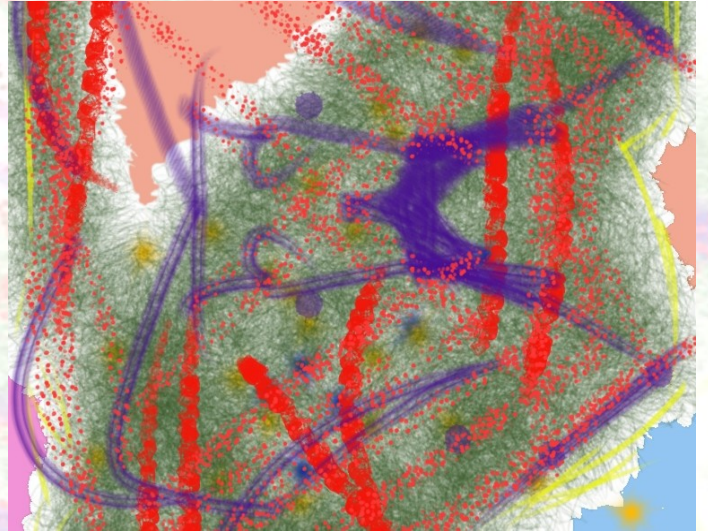
Aniket Kaushal

Her hair was a figment of my imagination.
 Her flowing white veil
 Masquerading as a black cascade
 In this utter darkness.

Her long legs trudged over
 My regenerating cells.
 The genetic footprint of use and abuse;
 And everything that precedes or follows suit.

Lost in a series of concentric circles,
 My futile pleas on deaf ears
 As we dance away eternity.

But there again she goes
 On her sixtieth stroll,
 Through the narrow, ever-expanding crack on my wall.



Warmth

Nothing but some warmth I need
 To do my destined deed
 In this great humanity of darkness
 Settling in the core -
 That translucent rapture
 Of adolescent harmony -
 Of innocent delights -
 Of creations we had no mercy for -
 Of waterlogged sandcastles -
 Of houses that cards built -
 Set straight like a Tagore play.
 All that warmth & glow -
 Beneath all this wool and bearskin!
 When
 All I need is a breath that tells me
 You're alive; somewhere within.

FEATURE



Photo: Augustus Binu

Aagomoni - The Festive Days

Arijita Dey

*takes an optimistic look
at the Durga Puja
celebrations about to get
underway in Bengal and
elsewhere, through a
pair of glasses that
refuses to give up a
chance to celebrate **Art**
as and how she sees it!*

October dutifully sees the city of Joy indulging itself to live up to its decorative title. Kolkata becomes a veritable city of joy in the seven-odd days of the Durga Puja and the several months leading up to it.

Being the primary festival of the masses, the event, which is notable for participation by members of myriad religious communities, is one that is celebrated with an earnestness that is easily reminiscent of the Christmas craze of the west and the Diwali delights in the rest of the country.

Everything from the Art of Fashion to the fashionable forms of the Arts are in practice as the fever of creative fervour that owes its origins to Lord Rama's untimely awakening and worship of the Divine Goddess, hits a palpably infectious mode with the 'Kumars' (in this case, potters) of Kumartuli and the other ghettos in Bengal unleash their artistic geniuses to imagine and reimagine the divine Goddess every single year.

The cycle of creation and destruction is aptly at play as the ingredients of the very idols that

underwent an immersion in the Ganges after last year's Pujas are recycled to be reassembled to again offer a corporeal structure of the divine.

The legend at play in these parts is a touching tale reminiscent of any typical Bengali household who prepare to welcome the married daughter and her immediate family as she comes back home for a visit from her husband's abode once a year.

Music and literature have forever held a pride of place when it comes to the Durga Pujas. While 'Puja' records and albums have been a staple of the Bengali culture since before independence, big and small publishing joints comes out with their versions of 'special puja numbers' (Sharodiya Sankhya) that are often painstakingly edited treasure troves of vernacular literature.

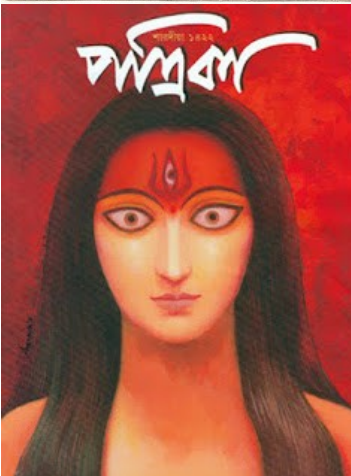
Expectedly, Puja has turned out to be a great time to release highly anticipated films and has historically been a favourable time to stage new theatrical productions as well and it happens to be a practice that is in vogue to this day.

In the last two decades or so, however, the object of worship and celebration itself has become a battle for artistic supremacy over its countless simulacra, effectively turning Durga Puja into the largest celebration of the masses surrounding what are transitory specimens of rich sculptural art. It would be rather partial to confine this remark to the idols themselves. The improvised temples of worship where the primary skeletons made out of bamboo poles are supplemented by ensembles venturing to stretch the limits of the thinking mind, succeed in authoring wonders that commands the undivided attention of the teeming masses queuing in anticipation, flooding the pandals (as the makeshift temples are popularly referred to) from within the city and without.

The proliferation of popular art – from the thematic Pujas to the glittering web of lights or the sensuous beats of the dhak, robbing the city of sleep for nearly seven days – are upon us.

Here is wishing our readers, stationed in Bengal or otherwise, a very happy and prosperous festive season.

[CC]

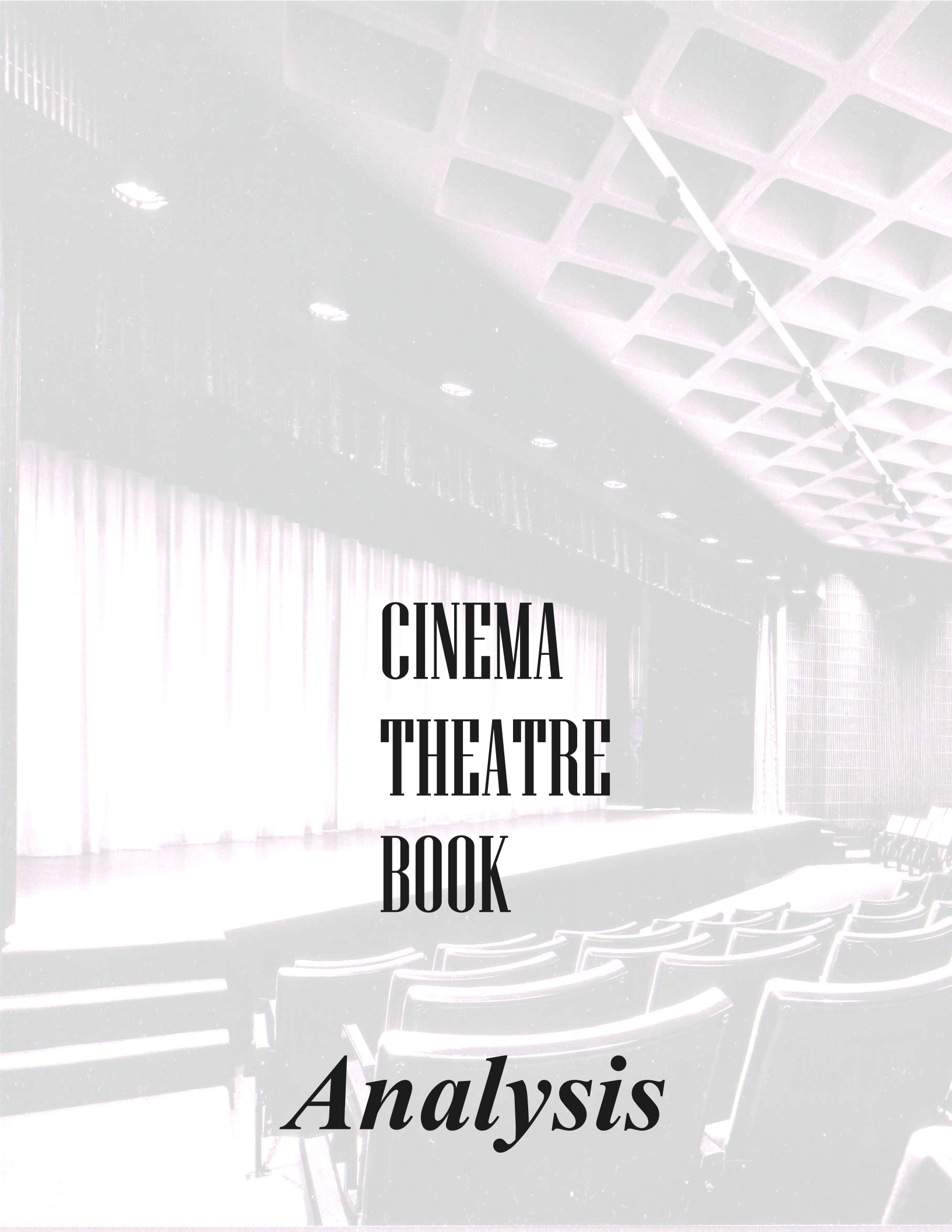


Left: A Puja special Publication
Above: A Puja record by Sandhya Mukherjee,

From the top: The scene at Kumartuli, an entrance to a Puja Pandal, William Princep's painting of a Puja celebration during the British era.



A specimen of the series on Horses by Sunil Das



**CINEMA
THEATRE
BOOK**

Analysis

THEATRE

A Classic in Monochrome

Jagannath Chakravarti

Compressing a 280 page novel into a 140-minute drama is no mean feat, neither is its execution. Even more so if it happens to be a cult classic such as Tarashankar Bandopadhyay's 'Hashuli Baker Upakatha'. In only his second major directorial attempt, Koushik Kar manages to pull off both the tasks with elegance, introducing changes one and plenty which, surprisingly, only add to the rich tapestry of the narrative.

Billed as 'black and white theatre', the curious move to present the majority of the performance in monochrome costumes and props lend the play much more than a reminder of the distance past. It is but a past for the survivors at the beginning of the drama too, who can only dream of the hashuli bak that once was - a bend in the river like that of a maiden's hasuli necklace.

The set, an assemblage of a bamboo thicket and the colourful, musical characters therein dotting the countryside, is a mix that only a Tarashankar novel could provide. Where there is the conservative yet good-hearted Banwari, the chieftain of the 'criminal tribe' Kahars, there lies his foil in the form of his protégé Karali (Kar himself), the representative of the new blood who prefer seeking greener pastures to giving in to their present, leaving the village to

work in the factory against the express wishes of the head of the village Banwari.

The clashes are between conservatism and chasing fate, between oppressive feudal overlords at home to getting the better of them away from it. The superstitious hearts of Hashuli bak do have best interests in them, but it is the fear of the wrath of God that brings out the devil in Banwari, whose all too human dilemma between indulgence and obedience manages to tear apart the fabric that held the village together. The pied piper, represented by Karali, is but the allure that drives the destiny of many, including Banwari, for whom and the rest of the village, the distance hiss of a snake is enough to drive them towards imagining ill portents of the future.

Set in the year 1941, as the 'foreign war' begins to disrupt life in the quaint Hashuli bak, there are forbidden romances, murders, curses, drunken wedding fiestas dotting the 'Upakatha' (folk tale).

The superlative performance of Shantilal Mukherjee as Banwari must be the talking point of the production. Even though he is a veteran actor of stage and screen, Hashuli bak explores and exploits



Drama: Hashuli Baker Upakatha

Group: Purba Paschim

Year: 2015

*Based on the novel by
Tarashankar Bandopadhyay*

*Adapted and directed by
Koushik Kar*

Language: Bengali



his potential to unseen terrains and the play is a must-watch simply to re-discover the fine Bengali actor.

Kar, as Karali, is noteworthy but due mention must be made of Suranjana Dasgupta, portraying the eldest scion of Kaharpara and the torchbearer of its ancient religious history and beliefs. Gambhira Bhattacharjee, portraying the cross-dressing Nasubala, deserves special mention as well.

A live musical troupe, led by the direction of Abhijit Acharya, complement the musical characters on stage and the catchy rustic tunes of Hasuli bak refuse to ebb, long after the curtain call.



The set design, lighting and choreography blend seamlessly into Kar's directorial vision, the erudition of which is evident in nearly every scene of the play, from the desolate prologue to the complex mise-en-scene during the cyclone episode or the harrowing beheading of Kalososhi, a sharp deviation from the source material but dramatically noteworthy nonetheless.

Purba Paschim's latest production is a laudable effort indeed, tilling the stage for a promising dramatist and a veteran thespian to cultivate their craft, promising 'colourful' times ahead in the Bengali theatre fold, much like the final scene before the curtain drops for good. [CC]



*Left:
Stills from the play*

CINEMA

A Surreal Swedish Treat

Madhurima Basu

Swedish auteur Roy Andersson's latest, after a reflective hiatus of seven years, is the concluding part of his "living"-trilogy, which had been preceded by 'Songs from the Second Floor' and 'You, the Living' respectively.

'A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence' is a slow-burning, surrealistic existential diorama that is an extension of Andersson's confessed investigation into the nature of life itself. Blurring past and present, Andersson's long takes, static camera and intricate mise-en-scene present what is a deliciously confusing mix of characters, locations and situations which oscillate seamlessly from dark humour to an air of tragedy.

The show opens with three instances of death, the great constant in human existence, the most thought-provoking of which involve a heart failure in a cruise-ship cafeteria, right after the soon-to-be dead man orders and pays for a beer and a sandwich. As the onlookers gape at the tragedy, the question of who gets the food that has already been paid for is posited in what may very well be one of the most memorable sequences in world cinema.

The largely disconnected and 'meaningless' plot is driven forward by the two traveling salesmen Sam (Nisse Vestblom) and Jonathan (Holger Andersson) who deal in novelty articles that is supposed to bring joy and a smile to faces, namely sets of vampire teeth (with extra long fangs), a laughing bag



Film: A Pigeon sat on a branch reflecting on Existence
Written and directed by Roy Andersson
Year: 2014
Language: Swedish, English

and a mask of 'Uncle One-Tooth', which is grotesque enough to scare a poor woman to bits. The fallout, dejection and overall sorrow in the life of the two men who peddle joy is almost reminiscent of Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon, their tedious life and the slow, philosophical breakdown of Jonathan a glaring reminder of the futilities galore in a given lifetime.

The past is woven into the collage with the 17th century warrior king Charles XII's war tune, which at once depicts a pub during the second Great War and the time of unnerving Swedish neutrality, where the lady of the house is offering a shot each in exchange of a kiss, while the same tune follows in the background as Charles XII himself presents at an identical, modern day watering hole for a glass of 'water' as he recruits a handsome young man for the battlefield where he gets the privilege of sharing the King's tent!

The defeated return sees the king and his men at their worst, as he enters the same pub for a visit to the toilet, only to find that the restroom is occupied. The women sitting around are intimidated that their husbands have died in the war and hence they would be given the *gift* of a widow's veil.



Top, Right:
Stills from the film



The monotony of life, the certainty of death and the apathy that we hold towards it is ingeniously dealt with in the tableaux where a makeshift smelting furnace with the insignia of 'Boliden' (A reference to a Swedish mining and smelting corporation with a shady history) is seen to take in real people (led, conspicuously, by English speaking officers) instead of the precursory metal ore, while a group of visibly well-off individuals witness the scene from a distance, sipping on champagne.

It is fruitless to find any 'wholesome meaning' in a brush work dealing with the appalling absurdity of life and the suddenness of death.

Andersson attempts to piece together a bird's eye view of life that has conveniently confused (as a child in the film narrate what a pigeon on a branch may be musing upon) existence with 'money'.

A solitary take of two lovers on a beach along with their pet dog is perhaps the solitary symbol of hope sewn into the narrative.

Andersson's film is a view from inside a glass box, like that in a museum in the very first shot where a stuffed pigeon rests, as he attempts to make sense of a world via characters that are visible, but are always too far from the screen to get a proper glimpse of, not unlike the way we tend to function in today's world, meaninglessly mouthing without a shred of conviction: 'It's good to hear that you're doing well...' [CC]

BOOK

A Charming Continuation

Madhurima Basu

It is not often that the posthumous continuation of a beloved series by a different writer is received with effusive enthusiasm. It had not been easy for the fans of Stieg Larsson's 'Millennium' series easy to accept the legal handover of the author's intellectual estate to his father and brother instead of his long time partner Eva Gabrielsson, who publicly ridiculed the estate's choice of David Lagercrantz as the author to continue Larsson's immensely popular crime novel series involving the dynamic punk hacker Lisbeth Salander and the quasi-autobiographical journalist Mikael Blomkvist.

On paper, Lagercrantz is liable to appear as a rather unflattering choice for continuing a saga created by a man known for his far-left ideals and prolific anti-right activism. Lagercrantz, even with his openly left leaning stance, is of royal descent while his most notable work till date has been the ghostwritten autobiography of footballer Zlatan Ibrahimovic.

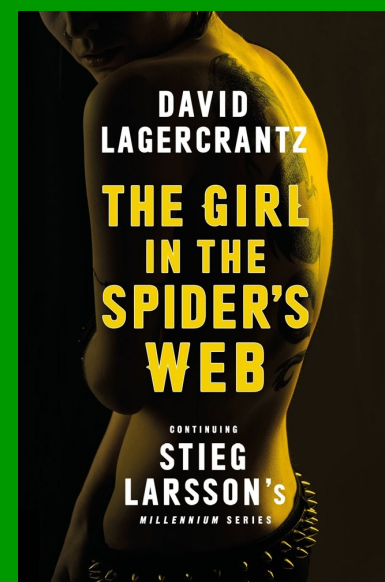
In spite of his apparent lack of preferred credentials, it is obvious that the man has internalised the world of Larsson with feverish precision, yet not foregoing his own sense of reason, performing edits and incorporating approaches that may ruffle some 'fanboy feathers' but nonetheless works in his favour as far as the final draft is concerned.

'The Girl in the Spider's Web' boasts a wonderfully convoluted plot that is a fitting addition to the previous three in the series. The leading thread is that of genius scientist Frans Balder and the crisis that he is thrust into following his remarkable research involving artificial intelligence. That leads us to a relatable episode of incessant snooping by the American National Security Agency and the magnetic intuition and remarkable skill-set of Salander to counter that. Thrown into the mix is the struggling

journalist Blomkvist, who is approached by Balder to tell his 'story'. There is, of course, Blomkvist's part-time lover and editor Erika Berger, along with contract killers, beloved recurring characters such as Bublanski and a charming August Balder, the autistic eight year old son of the scientist who struggles his way into fine arts and complex mathematics.

The narrative is lucid and full of intrigue enough for the pages to fly by. Lagercrantz does not compromise on the complexity of the plot, with sub-threads such as that of Salander searching for the remnants of her criminal father's erstwhile 'empire', successfully managing to arrest the reader's attention.

Lagercrantz lends a certain sophistication to Larsson's largely 'pulpy' delights by toning down the gruesome violence of the original trilogy to a large extent. It is also notable how Blomkvist is no longer the image of the greatly unbelievable 'chick magnet' whom every woman tends to swoon over. Lagercrantz looks at the relationship between Blomkvist and the married Erika Berger with rather over-sized morality glasses but it is easy to excuse this one slip for what is an engaging and page-turning crime novel. [CC]

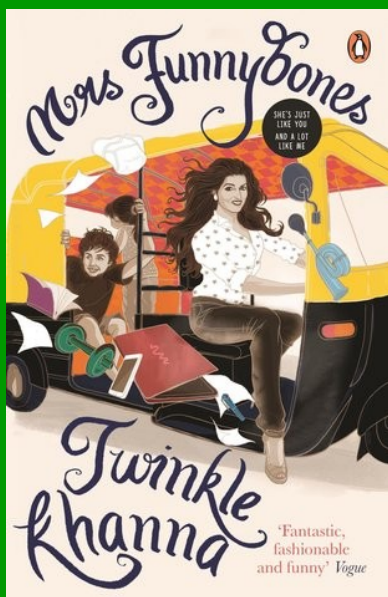


Book: The Girl in the Spider's Web
 Written by David Lagercrantz
 Release Date: August 27, 2015
 Publisher: Quercus
 Price: Rs. 599

BOOK

Madhurima Basu

Twinkling Humour



Book: Mrs. Funnybones
 Written by Twinkle Khanna
 Released on August 18, 2015
 Publisher: Penguin India
 Price: Rs. 299

The fact that Twinkle Khanna can be funny is no great revelation. Her delightful columns in two prominent national newspapers have already exposed her ‘funny’ bone to readers who have gradually come to accept her for more than her ‘star daughter turned “failed” Bollywood

actress turned star wife’

identity. Khanna’s columns that disclose her takes on her family, the world that she belongs to and the society at large have distinctly displayed the traits of a thinking woman who has the ability to perceive life as a comedy, a rare and refreshing quality to possess in a world overtaken by a palpable pseudo-sensitivity.

‘Mrs. Funnybones’ is a compilation of the best of her columns and a host of fresh reading material. Khanna manages to shed her star image gracefully in the course of her observations, empathizing effortlessly with the cause of the quintessential Indian woman with the aid of her eloquent penmanship while simultaneously drifting in and out of confessional mode as she talks about everything from the infinite hues of motherhood to her childhood accounts of colour therapy sessions; discoursing on menstruation and discussing her famous ‘man of the house’ Akshay Kumar.

However, one is liable to be disappointed if one dives into the book expecting to find oodles of celebrity insider dishes. Even her superstar of a husband is merely a supporting act in her series of anecdotes. The ‘stars’ who are indeed there have been at the butt end of her searing wit, right from Saroj Khan and her derrier in the first essay (which gets compared to that of Kim Kardashian’s) to even her mother Dimple Kapadia and her disconsonant email forwards. Under the scanner of her pen comes Mr. Kumar’s all too familiar habit of snoring and uproarious descriptions of tinseltown social gatherings.

It is easy to relate to her frustrations as she recounts her mother’s attempts to make her shed the flab, even as Khanna veils the memory in the genial blanket of humour. It is even easier to empathize with her point as she narrates the violent propensities of her son thanks to the behaviour of the Members of Parliament. Then there is the problem of handling the help staff, whether at office or at home, a plight every woman (of the house or the world or both) can identify with.

Khanna’s innate sense of feminism is apparent as she writes about the *Karva Chauth* and mocks the idiocy of fasting until moonrise for the husband’s health while the Indian Space Research Organization successfully sends MOM to Mars (a pun on the Mars Orbiter Mission). Ringing with deep truth and hilarious is her take on the religious discrimination towards the menstrual cycle as she writes, *“Menstruating doesn’t cause pickles to spoil, temples to collapse or food to rot, nor is it contagious, though it would be rather nice to infect the male population with this so-called ‘curse’ for a month or two, just to sit back and view what I am sure would be a highly entertaining spectacle.”*

Twinkle Khanna may not be a literary virtuoso but it is hard to keep a straight face as one breezes through the alphabetically ordered essays. Mrs. Funnybones is a spirited read during which one is left marveling at her gifted sense of humour and is every so often awed by her intriguing take on life as she writes in a bout of inspired introspection, *“I wish we lived like children. Run till you are out of breath, flop on the grass, stare at clouds... walk on your hands because the world looks different upside down, climb little hills and roll down the other side, do somersaults . . . just because you can. What do we do instead? We surround ourselves with all these big and small blinking screens, while our bodies and minds slowly forget how to tumble, how to wonder, how to live.”* [CC]

THEATRE

Reimagining History on Stage

Jagannath Chakravarti

In a society such as ours where controversy does not wait for the hat to be dropped, it is perhaps fitting that veteran dramatist Bratya Basu took the onus upon himself to script what may very well be the first Bengali drama dealing with alternative history.

Simply titled 'Boma' (The Bomb), Basu's latest chronicles the transformative years in the life of Aurobindo Ghosh, the radical revolutionary leader turned spiritual guru, who had been accused of and tried for being the mastermind behind the fables Muzaffarpur bombing that took away the lives of two innocent British civilians and elevated Kshudiram Bose to martyrdom.

As the spiritually inclined Aurobindo Ghosh begins to distance his philosophy from that of the extremist elements belonging to the Anushilan Samiti, the reins of the association is unofficially grabbed by his younger brother Barin Ghosh (Krishnendu Dewanji), a megalomaniac of historical proportion whose lust for power is interestingly symbolized by Basu through a shamanic dance ritual on stage with the divine destructive feminine herself, Goddess Kali.

Principal to the plot are the ancillary characters that include Ullaskar Dutt, whose knowledge of manufacturing bombs is the key to the events that unfurled to Upen Banerjee and Hemchandra Kanungo, an idealist whose military and political



*Drama: Boma
Group: Kalindi Bratyajon
Year: 2015
Playwright/Director: Bratya Basu
Language: Bengali*

training from the Russian emigre made him a major component of the revolutionary outfit. Central to the plot is the character of Kalpana (literally - 'imagination'; portrayed by Poulomi Bose), who is not a historical figure but a brainchild of Basu and is the most prominent representative of the female militia that India's war for independence gave birth to.

Employing modern methods of the art, including an on-screen projection of major events during the timeline concerned, Basu attempts to transcend his previous directorial attempts, even as one wishes the animation was a notch better.

A simple but effective stagecraft paves the way for a rather sketchy opening and a bland discourse on events of the day from a melee of British officers. The one who effortlessly makes a mark from the other camp is Satrajit Sarkar as Charles Taggart, an efficient officer of the British forces who is instrumental in capturing the revolutionaries later on.

Even as Poulomi Bose and Koushik Kar breathe life into Kalpana and Hemchandra Kanungo with graceful restraint, the highest praise must be reserved for Krishnendu Dewanji, who shines as Barin Ghosh, stealing the stage with a sparkling frenzy of a performance, his blind passion and tragic flaw of character making a lasting imprint on the minds of the spectators. Dewanji will be



*Top:
Stills from the play*

remembered for 'Boma', his performance has ensured that. Basu's special cameo turn is as Chittaranjan Das, the 'deshbandhu' (friend of the nation) who, as a young lawyer, defended Aurobindo Ghosh during the course of the Alipore bomb case.

The billed 'star' of the show, Debshankar Haldar, has a notoriously small part to play but as the drama draws to a close, it becomes easier to understand why it was necessary to cast Haldar as the enigmatic Aurobindo Ghosh.

Although appearing misogynistic at first, it actually is strangely fitting that Kalpana, the imaginary betrayer among the revolutionaries turns out to be the one to question the method in which the rebel party operates itself in their service to the motherland, paving the way for Haldar to deliver the finest lines the play has to offer.

The nature of political ideology, which exists in an inherently personal sphere and its tumultuous co-existence with the party, which demands unwavering loyalty towards its leader, who may be subject to the same consternations of fear, greed or the elusive bid for immortality as any individual might, has been beautifully enumerated by Basu through the often-revered and often-chastised figure of Ghosh, the rebel turned saint, who is more often than not seen as the leader that ditched the cause of his nation. The defense is a heartfelt treatise on

individualism and the choices that have the right to be made.

Although lacking the bite of a 'Winkle Twinkle' or the transcendental quality of a 'Ruddhasangeet', Basu ends his 'political' play with a profound philosophical insight into the very workings of party politics. Let it be said that the play will run to packed houses as a piece of alternative history and magnum theatrical opus in its time, but might very well be analysed in the future as a defense of Basu's 'other' identity. [CC]

CINEMA

An Italian Dreamscape

Rounak Chatterjee

That meta-films are a specialty of Nanni Moretti has been evident ever since the release of 'April' (1998). He followed it up with *Il Caimano* (2006). Moretti's latest, the Margherita Buy starrer 'Mia Madre' goes further than he has yet travelled into the psyche of the creator as he seamlessly creates a cinematic experience around the 'serious' female filmmaker Margherita (Margherita Buy).

Meta-films, by definition, reference the self – a trait not too many filmmakers refrain from exploring in their work. That Moretti stars in his 'Mia Madre' alongside the cited protagonist, who is a sibling to his character lets Moretti put himself in a unique cinematic standpoint indeed.

The plot primarily revolves around Margherita, of course, as she battles to complete a film on class struggle, where a distillery company's workers are fighting tooth and nail with their new 'American owner' who must lay off a few workers in order to run the ship as smoothly as he pleases. Margherita is juggling her latest magnum opus with the fact that her unwell mother has been admitted to a hospital, where the doctors promptly declare her to be terminally ill. As Margherita struggles to come to terms with the imminent demise of her supremely erudite mother and the whimsical buffoonery of the American actor Barry Huggins (John Turturro), who plays the new American owner of her film's fictional company, she steadily in introspective dream situations and a mighty spell of creative block that pushes her enough to rethink the choices she has



*Film: Mia Madre (My Mother)
Directed by Nanni Moretti
Written by Nanni Moretti, Valia Santella, Francesco Piccolo
Year: 2015
Language: Italian*

made in her life and the way she interacts with fellow human beings.

Not only is the film a sensitive portrayal of misguided actions and derivative decisions, it is also a deeply symbolical narrative that posits subtle inquiries of the creative process and the very values and events in a person's life that makes one strive towards a particular artistic goal. It had been a mere habit of Margherita to instruct her actors to let the 'actor' in them shine through even while they play a character, entirely defeating the perfect process of inculcation that many auteurs would blindly swear by. And yet her 'words' are seldom taken literally as her actors, like the director herself, would usually lose themselves in the shadowy depths of the creative process instead of dealing with the nitty-gritty, that is until Margherita has to contend with the forgetful and abrasive American Barry Huggins.

It is merely Margherita's own philosophy that shines through her bit of 'advice' as she has been the one who is adept at reacting (acting, really) from a sideline, unwilling to internalise her own situation, even as it threatens to ruin her work and tear at the strings of her heart that pines to express itself, especially as the death of her mother inches closer. Her determination to teach her daughter the 'classical' yet 'dead' language Latin, her inability to

accede to the demands of the quirky Huggins and later discovering the child within; her aloof relationships that go undefined and unexplored beyond the carnal basics and pre-constructed break-up lines are mute evidences of Margherita's denial of herself.

Moretti, interestingly, plays a character who is facing the same core crisis as that of his sister Margherita, but he is merely 'standing beside the protagonist' in this case and takes an emotional enough decision at his mother's hospitalisation which would have far-reaching effects in his life. That the actor is Moretti should shine through, according to his sister, he is convincingly concise while essaying the existentially sound Giovanni, who ends up appearing as a strange foil to Margherita.

A nearly flawless piece of art, 'Mia Madre' boasts the thespian bravado of Margherita Buy, whose poignant portrayal of the eponymous Margherita gradually invites the viewers inside her fascinating space that is distinctly being vied for by two different personalities. While one is followed mechanically by her team of supporting creators, the other is heartbreakingly alone in her bid to satisfy Margherita's idea of herself.

John Turturro as Barry Huggins has essayed the role of a lifetime, imbibing the whimsical American actor to the T, providing the film with a cleverly converse sense of relief that goes on to have a beautifully touching finale of its own.

The faultless editing by Clelio Benevento ensures that Moretti's latest is a crisp, intellectually stimulating exercise throughout. Mia Madre would certainly be remembered as one of the most profoundly introspective films of Moretti and definitely one of the best Italian films of the decade. [CC]



Margherita Buy and John Turturro



Giulia Lazzarini (left) as Ada, Margherita's mother and Beatrice Mancini as Livia, Margherita's daughter.

CINEMA

Beyond the Stage...

Jagannath Chakravarti

Italian dramatist Luigi Pirandello's seminal masterpiece recounts how six characters show up at a theatre in search of an author who can tell their tale. Debes Chattopadhyay's debut feature finds him taking the onus upon himself to narrate a tale that has gathered dust in the annals of Bengali theatre since the late 70s – the story of a brilliant actor who was mercilessly taken away from the stage when she was at the peak of her thespian prowess.

The revered and prolific theatre director who has gifted us such gems on stage as the historical 'Winkle Twinkle', the path-breaking 'Phyataru' or the ethereal 'Surjo-pora chhai', Debes Chattopadhyay's nascent days as a theatre worker saw him publish a special issue on the life and times of Keya Chakraborty and it remains one of the most well-researched dossiers on the Nandikar actor (who does not even have a Wikipedia page dedicated to her) whose death by drowning in 1977 sent waves of shock and grief all across the theatre commune.

Natoker Moto (Like a Play), however, is not the official biography of Keya Chakraborty. The protagonist in this film is instead named Kheya Chakraborty while her husband's name has its famed prefix dropped and he is simply 'Prasad'; legendary actor-playwright Ajitesh Bandopadhyay becomes Amitesh.

The narrative follows the investigation into the



Film: Natoker Moto - Like a Play
Written and directed by Debes Chattopadhyay
Release: August 21, 2015
Language: Bengali
Rating: 8/10

mysterious drowning of Kheya during the shoot of her maiden celluloid stint, conducted by a man who is woefully unaware of the workings and philosophy of group theatre and the quality of art being put on stage. This objective starting point gradually transports the viewers into the extraordinary life and psyche of the young stage actor, from her troubled childhood to her lovestruck college days; her association with group theatre, turbulent married life and beyond.

Chattopadhyay delicately breaks down the conventions of a typical biography by fusing elements of theatrical performance into sequences primarily portraying 'reality'. Kheya's life is indeed a stage, as events seemingly out of a drama script keep dotting her life – whether it is her inherent sense of fairness that compels her to rescue a boy who is being beaten up by a group of extremist students, to her passionate stand against her husband whom she decides to leave.

The allusions galore not only pepper the film with references for the enthusiastic drama geek but are seeped in deep symbology. Kheya's performance in Anton Chekhov's 'The Proposal' compels Amitesh to propose that she should come to his group 'Natakar' if she ever intends to take up theatre seriously. The justification of Kheya being swept off her feet by Prasad is rendered in a beautiful turn of events as Kheya, essaying Bertolt Brecht's Polly Peachum

(‘Parul’ in translation) from *The Threepenny Opera*, presents her defence for falling in love with Mack the Knife. Antigone’s words of defiance directed at Creon, astutely addressed towards her director Prasad during a rehearsal, is a moving assertion of her independence and how she is not cut out to settle for anything less. Her determined bid for liberty at a time when ‘independent woman’ was an oxymoron of the most disturbing kind, is expressed with poise and passion through the scripted words that have been assigned to her.

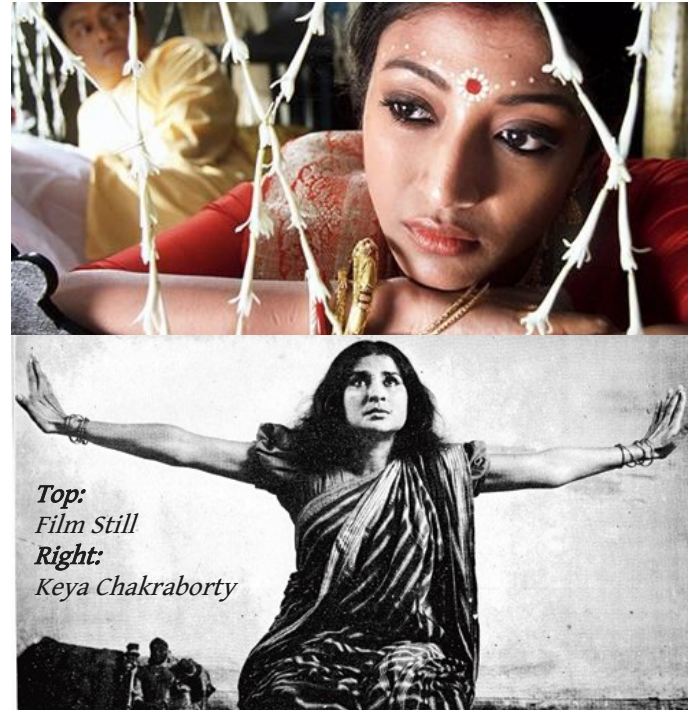
The inventive screenplay and its characters have been duly brought to life by a dedicated set of actors from both stage and screen. Paoli Dam, a talented actor in her own right, has probably delivered the finest performance of her career yet, imbibing Kheya’s outline like a second soul. Especially praiseworthy is her unaccompanied vocalizations and her graceful acts on stage, as Polly or as Shen Te & Shui Ta from Brecht’s ‘*The Good Person of Szechwan*’. The hard work that she must have put through to bring Kheya to life deserves sincere applause.

Saswata Chatterjee plays Prasad by the numbers, switching shades at will, bringing forth the twin forces of leadership and cunning cruelty with elan.

Roopa Ganguly is surprisingly apt as Kheya’s mother, playing the grief with wonderful restraint. Sujan Mukherjee is noteworthy as the Bengali professor Manoranjan too, his understated emotions towards Kheya subtle enough to be left to the musings of time. Ushasie Chakraborty essays the poet Sabita Sinha (an allusion to poet Kabita Sinha) with assured composure. The very anchor of the film, Rajatava Dutta, portraying the character of the investigation officer Bhabadulal, is perfect to a tee. Dutta’s little snippets of reactions, whether during the interrogation scenes or the awestruck wonder after witnessing ‘*Sher Afghan*’, is priceless.

The only glaring miscast seems to be that of Bratya Basu as Amitesh. As good a playwright as he is, Basu certainly has not been the best choice to pull off the larger than life character who is supposed to resemble the mighty Ajitesh Bandopadhyay.

The music, a heady combination of Western neoclassic and Bengali film music of the 60s, has been



dexterously executed by Debojyoti Mishra. The famous Moushumi Bhowmik number ‘*Ami sunechi sedin tumi...*’, a cult classic, accompanies the closing credits and rounds off the film beautifully.

An intricate cinematography by Indranil Mukherjee and the judicious edit by Bodhaditya Banerjee has ensured that Debesh Chattopadhyay’s premiere feature is a seamless film experience indeed.

Piecing together the differing takes on the tragedy from myriad viewpoints, a ‘truth’ regarding the tragedy has been arrived at that is certainly not going to add any fuel to an existing fire of gossip. Chattopadhyay’s intentions are quite clear. It is not to defame an institution or any particular individual but to criticise the very tendency of murdering legacy, a disease our society is particularly susceptible to.

Bengali theatre shall forever remain indebted to Chattopadhyay for putting the ceremonial soil on a grave that the ‘King’ has expressly asked to be left untouched & forgotten. No matter Sophocles or Shakespeare, life is a stage for all: just like a play – and it is comforting to know that it shall remain in human memory as long as humanity (or art) survives. [CC]

CINEMA

Shades of Black

Rounak Chatterjee

The primary challenge that any filmmaker has to contend with when one attempts to make a gangster flick is to live up to the unrelenting standard set by one Martin Scorsese. Since director Scott Cooper chose to make what can essentially be called a 'semi-biopic' on the life and crimes of the South Boston Irish mobster James 'Whitey' Bulger, his film is bound to attract comparisons with the one Scorsese film that managed to secure him the coveted Academy Award for Best Director after a string of unfulfilled nominations.

Scorsese's 2006 adaptation of the Hong Kong film 'Infernal Affairs', 'The Departed' was not only based in Boston but shades of James Bulger and his myriad antics were the starting point for Scorsese as he painted Jack Nicholson's Irish crime lord Frank Costello.

Reportedly attempting to make a film not on criminals with hues of humanity but about humans, who simply have a penchant for criminal activities, Cooper does end up glorifying, if not glamorising, the despicable brutality with which Bulger conducted his reign of terror – supported in part by his quietly apathetic brother (who also happened to be a state senator) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation itself, who looked the other way more often than not since Bulger was a confidential informant for the bureau who would keep them apprised about his rivals' courses of action.

Bulger also had the distinction of being something of a folk hero in his neighbourhood, the majority of whom being Irish, probably felt a sense of loyalty towards the man for being a powerful racial repre-

sentative, even as he poisoned his own quarters with a free influx of drugs.

Glorifying crimes is not why 'Black Mass' falls short of expectations. A film with a trailblazing antihero admittedly has its own charms. However, the punch is necessarily missing in the screenplay by Mark Mallouk and Jez Butterword (based on the book by Boston Globe journalists Dick Lehr and Gerard O'Neill), which has an unkempt feel to its order, despite moments and situations that can be weighed in gold. Especially noteworthy are a few of the earlier scenes which pits Bulger with his wife and young son; or the heartwrenching sequence where Bulger comes to terms with the imminent death of the said son. These treatments are credibly executed, however erratic the trajectory of Bulger's rise and subsequent downfall might have turned out to be in the long haul.

One of the finest actors of our generation, Johnny Depp, portrays the vicious James Bulger with an intensity befitting the merciless mobster. Greying hair slicked back, clinging to the top of his nearly bald head, coupled with opaque contact lenses give Depp's persona a quintessential 'deathly' appearance that aids him significantly in essaying the fearful attitude and countenance of Bulger. Depp is surprisingly majestic in this threatening avatar,



Film: Black Mass
Directed by Scott Cooper
Released on September 18, 2015
Written by Mark Mallouk and Jez Butterword (based on the book by Dick Lehr and Gerard O'Neill)
Language: English

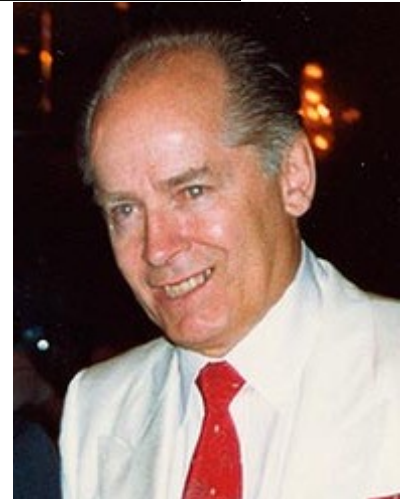


effortlessly indulging in acts that bear the potential to subtly scar any sensitive psyche. It will be of little surprise if Depp goes on to win a host of official accolades for such a searing portrayal which will undoubtedly rank among his best.

Dakota Johnson as Bulger's wife Lindsey shines in the few scenes she shares with Depp. Also notable is Benedict Cumberbatch as Bulger's senator of a brother William, whose presence is remarkably convincing, if brief.

FBI operative and the Bulgers' childhood neighbour and friend, who happened to be the one to bring the Irish mob boss under the purview of the bureau, John Connolly is efficiently enacted by the Australian thespian Joel Edgerton (the only major character in the film whose Boston accent does not appear 'forced'). Connolly's desperate ambition to bring down the Italian mafia rings, which leads him to the ill-fated alliance with Bulger that escalates to an uneasy high and subsequent collapse, is meticulously brought to life by Edgerton. As a matter of fact, the consequences of a chunk of the criminal activities unseen on screen is depicted with the help of Connolly's reactions to the same and it is apt to say Edgerton performs his gamut of responsibilities to perfection.

With a musical score by veteran composes Junkie XL that is faintly reminiscent of the Scorsese films and editing (by David Rosenbloom) that could have



Top:
Johnny Depp as James
'Whitey' Bulger

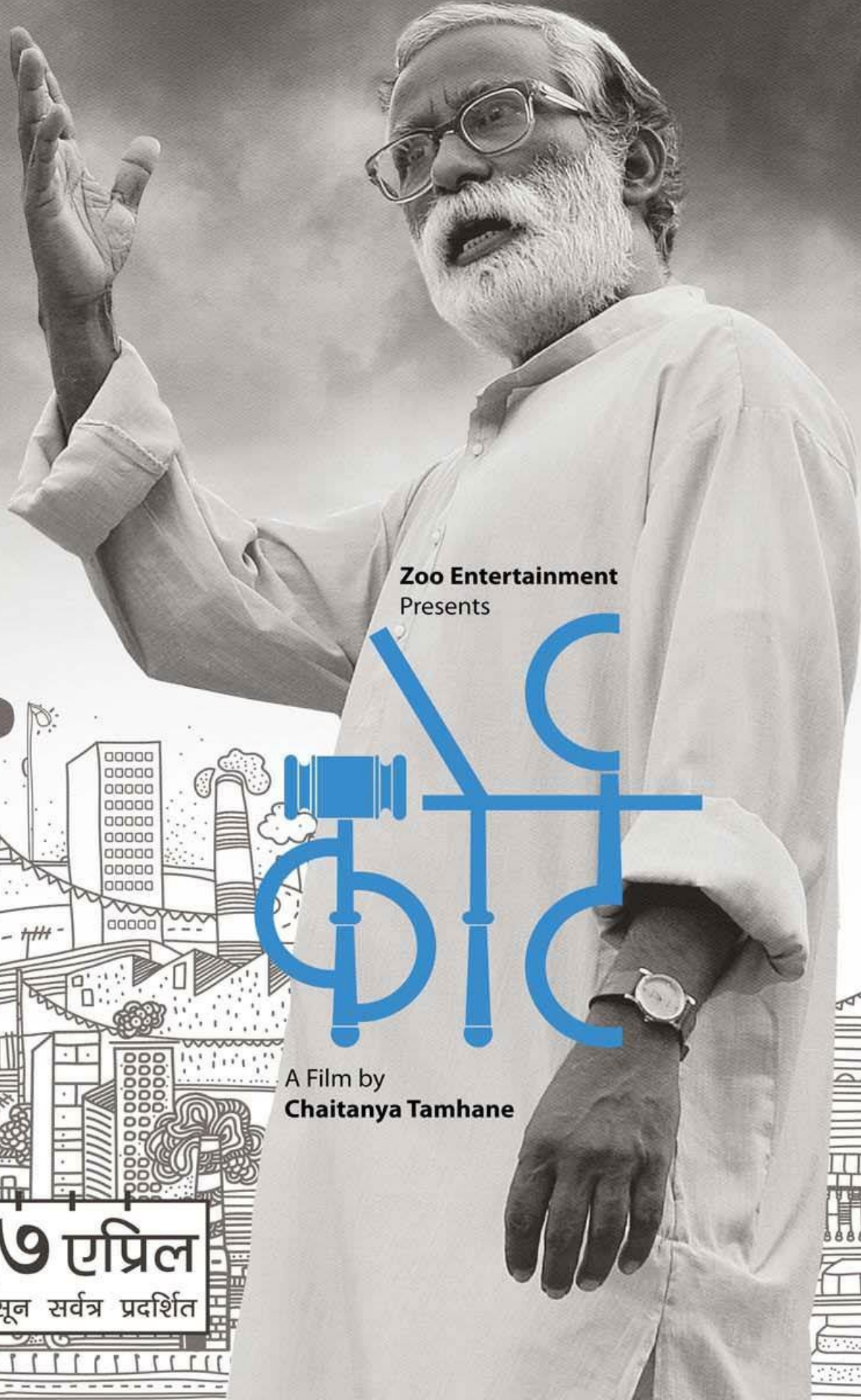
Above:
The real James Bulger

benefited from the economy of a Thelma Schoonmaker, 'Black Mass' is certainly not the most entertaining or edifying of the gangster films but it is certainly worth a watch and a good word or two thanks to impressive on-screen performances from a set of actors who have given it all to a cinematic effort they have chosen to believe in. [CC]



ZOO ENTERTAINMENT

★१७★
आंतरराष्ट्रीय
पुरस्कार प्राप्त



Zoo Entertainment
Presents

काद

A Film by
Chaitanya Tamhane

१७ एप्रिल
पासून सर्वत्र प्रदर्शित

SAURBHANDEKAR

INDIAN OFFICIAL SELECTION TO THE 2016 ACADEMY AWARDS

COURT

Sundar Raghav



Debutante Mumbai filmmaker Chaitanya Tamhane's choice of filming a rare Indian courtroom drama paid off as soon as it premiered at the 71st Venice International Film Festival on September 4, 2014, earning the effort the top award in the Horizons category and fetching the Luigi De Laurentiis (Lion Of The Future) award for Tamhane.

'Court' has marched on in the festival circuits, winning accolades aplenty in Vienna, Antalya, Singapore and topped it all with the distinction of winning the Best Picture in the 62nd National Film Awards, the highest honour for a cinematic endeavour in India.

Showcasing concerns of politically motivated injustice rendered in a bid to stifle freedom of expression in the World's largest democracy, 'Court' is essentially the story of Narayan Kamble, a social activist whose weapon of choice is folk music. Kamble is accused of abetting the suicide of a sewage worker by singing about the plights of India's downtrodden Dalit community.

The absurdity of the premise is drenched in a

reality that threatens to expose a fabric of our nation which even an influx of modernisation and several democratic regimes have failed to address in a manner befitting the predicament.

A quintessential independent feature, Court was made without the blessings or support of Bollywood bigwigs or even the burgeoning champions of the indie film scene in the west coast of India. Hiring non-actors with 'special credentials' on their resumes had been the other gamble that paid off for Tamhane.

Dalit rights activist Vira Sathidar, who has been reportedly arrested and interrogated by motivated police personnel in the past, portrays Kamble. The other stellar act, that of the worker's widow Sharmila Pawar, has been delivered by Usha Bane, herself an affected widow of an ambulance driver who was killed in a mishap.

In spite of ringing allegations that there was an attempt to sideline 'Court' during the jury selection, it has officially been selected as India's entry for the 2016 Academy Awards. Here's wishing the film all the success it deserves. [CC]

CINEMA

The alleys of Obsession

Jagannath Chakravarti

The much speculated and lauded debut of Bauddhayan Mukherji is quite the novel idea on paper. Spanning an impressive one hundred years, Mukherji's three tales of obsession would unite three vastly different stories from diverse eras to chart the course of a certain trait of human beings that is animalistic at worst, but is curiously only a single chord beneath our most divine capability of 'Love'.

While the first two tales are adaptations of two stories by Bibhutibhushan Mukhopadhyay and Syed Mustafa Siraj respectively, the third is an original handiwork of the director himself.

The first tale, titled 'Nabalok' (Underaged), is a bittersweet story of childhood infatuation as narrated by the older self of the protagonist Shailen (Suman Mukhopadhyay). Employing *mise en scènes* that provoke nostalgic reminiscences of the great Satyajit Ray, Mukherji crafts what happens to be a poignant, visual treat with bewitchingly subtle sexual connotations; earmarked by a remarkable subdued performance by Barshan Seal as Shailen, the little child in 'love' and the charmingly layered portrayal of Nayantara, his muse, by Ananya Sen. Mukherji makes judicious use of Bibhutibhushan Mukhopadhyay's distinctive voice, the same which made his novel 'Nilanguriyo' one of the finest love stories written in the language. Mukhopadhyay's words find a profound lease of life thanks to the reverent baritone of the astute Suman



Film: Teenkahon (Three Obsessions)
Director: Bauddhayan Mukherji
Written by Abhinandan Banerjee & Bauddhayan Mukherji
Release: September 11, 2015
Language: Bengali
Rating: 7.5/10

Mukhopadhyay, the uncharacteristic, bitter passion in his voice towards the end exposing the 'innocent' child's largely humorous shenanigans to keep Nayantara to himself, as something that is difficult to contend with as innocently.

The second tale, set during a rainy evening in the twilight years of the 1970s, narrates the tale of the recent widower Gyanesh Mitra (Sabyasachi Chakraborty), who comes calling at the home of Sukomol Basu Ray (Joy Sengupta), the very person to have an illicit affair with Mitra's wife who ended up committing suicide. As the veritable chamber drama gradually unfolds the shades and myriad follies of the two men in question who embark upon investigating the reason why the lady blamed both of them for her death in her suicide 'note', a distinct view of the core theme is brought to the fore as we explore the sort of obsession that can even compel a person to 'let go' of his object of fascination at will so one can ironically hold on to it for good. The fine lines bordering expectation, responsibility, love and of course, obsession, are expertly analysed and dissected in 'Post Mortem', which is undoubtedly the finest act of all three. Sabyasachi Chakraborty takes the cherry with what is perhaps the greatest cinematic performance of his illustrious career, with Joy Sengupta providing adequate company.



*Top, Left:
Film Stills*

The final story, titled 'Telephone', strove to be a rather complex tale of obsession on quite a few levels. From carnal obsession to that of the cellular phone, each play a major part in the tale that depicts the ambitious police officer Joydeb Guha (Ashish Vidyarthi) who finds himself in a virtually loveless marriage with Anamika (Rituparna Sengupta). Even as Guha indulges in a high-flying extra-marital relationship with a classical dancer, he is presumably brought back to the ground after Anamika gives birth to their first child – a son. In a bid to add layers to the obsession graph, Mukherji decides to script an ending that was designed to cause a major impact but which ends up appearing as an ill-conceived *deus ex machina* serving the sole purpose of gratifying the central theme. In spite of remarkable performances by the powerhouse Ashish Vidyarthi and the precise Rituparna Sengupta, 'Telephone' slips at the lip and leaves an aftertaste that is less than pleasant for the palate.

It is a shame since Mukherji's blueprint is appreciable enough even though the final piece of the puzzle fails to elicit the desired outcome. The exploration that began with a child's obsession to that of a very old man at heart did demand a darker take on the subject the third time around, if only Mukherji were able to convincingly pull off the 'perfect crime' through Joydeb Guha.

Nevertheless, *Teenkahon* is certainly a rich work of art and is undoubtedly one the most impressive Bengali films to have released this year. Beautifully shot by Abhik Mukhopadhyay and pieced together with panache by Arghyakamal Mitra, *Teenkahon* shall remain a seminal piece of work thanks to the graceful depiction of the Bibhutibhushan Mukhopadhyay short story and the delectable act by veteran thespian Sabyasachi Chakraborty. [CC]

CINEMA

A Beautiful Life

Sundar Raghav

Releasing just after the Independence day celebrations, Ketan Mehta's *Manjhi – The Mountain Man* boasts an Indian story that deserves a grand treatment on the silver screen. It happens to be a true story of immense humanity that necessitates a larger than life depiction which Mehta (lauded for his 'Rang Rasiya' or 'Mangal Pandey – The Rising') is no stranger to.

The film depicts the life of Dashrath Manjhi, a deceptively simple Indian man from Gehlaur in Bihar who spends an unimaginable 22 years of his life to carve a road through a mountain single-handedly so the villagers can get to the nearest town with considerable ease.

As easy as it is to describe, the road that Manjhi has to traverse is beset with nearly insurmountable difficulties. From being labeled a madman by his father and the rest of the village to self-amputating a toe on his foot to stop the spread of venom after a snake-bite; from walking all the way to Delhi during Emergency to intimate the Prime Minister about the misappropriation of road construction funds, to being labeled a smuggler who breaks the mountain on a daily basis only to make a living off the rocks.

Exposing the sham of governance on every level, the very concept of a 'fair' hand that wields power has been challenged and is easily dwarfed by the humane grit of a Manjhi. Take for example Mrs. Indira Gandhi, done riding the 'Garibi Hatao' wave,



*Film: Manjhi-The Mountain Man
Written and directed by Ketan Mehta
Released on August 21, 2015
Language: Hindi
Rating: 8/10*

swiftly throwing the entire nation into a state of Emergency; the scene where she meets Manjhi is especially noteworthy and symbolical as the stage from where she is giving a speech from is about to crumble, only to be held in place by Manjhi and a few other 'Gareeb' onlookers who quickly lend the stage the support of their shoulders.

Even as the presumably illiterate Manjhi drapes an anti-Emergency banner to shield himself from the seasons during his 'Delhi chalo' days, the opposition marches behind him and instantly uses him as a face of their own agitation at the Janpath. The extreme third front in the form of Naxalites refuse to listen to the ramblings of the ridiculed Mountain Man as the thirst for revenge veritably trumps the voice of one of the very people they had been fighting for.

Nawazuddin Siddiqui, in one of his finest and most grueling performances yet, is perfect in every shade as the character transitions from being a truant village youth in love to being a man on a mission who has begun to show creeping signs of that madness that drives extraordinary human beings.

Radhika Apte as Phaguni, Manjhi's wife and muse,



*Right, below:
Stills from the
film*

whose death following a fall from the mountain originally steels Manjhi's resolve to tame the beast and carve a path through it, is ethereal is nearly every sequence, although one is left wishing she were able to exercise her acting chops in more diverse ways than she got to.

Ashraf Ul Haque as Magru (Manjhi's father) plays the pathetic figure with earnest dedication while Pankaj Tripathi is striking as Ruab, the zamindar's son.

The music by Sandesh Shandilya is noteworthy, the curiously entertaining 'Phaguniya' number refusing to fade from memory even as the film draws to a close.

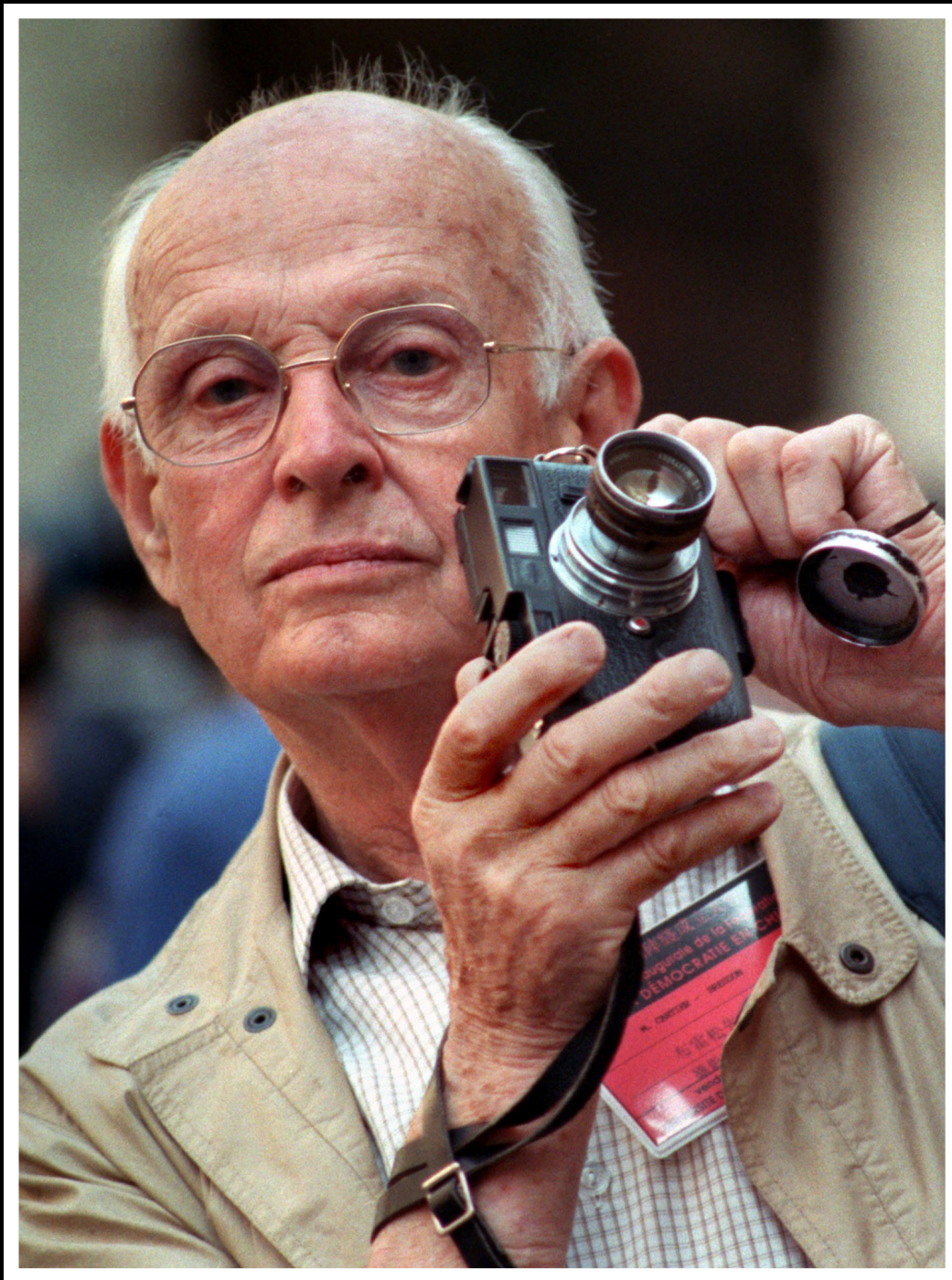
Ketan Mehta, who has shot in real locations for authenticity, has gifted us a tale worth visiting and revisiting, not only to understand the socio-political realities of any backward rural society in post-Independence India but to reflect upon a man who must not be forgotten. Siddiqui's piteous equation of hatred and concurrent love for the mountain which is the final reminder of the love of his life, will remain one of the strongest *histoire de amour* ever to be portrayed on the Indian screen. Let Mehta's take on the superhuman tenacity of the Mountain Man be hailed in the way Manjhi (who died in 2007) himself might have done: *Shandar... Jabardast... Jindabaad!*



[CC]



Mixed media on embossed paper by Sunil Das



LAXMAN RAMAMURTHY

IN SEARCH OF

THE DECISIVE MOMENT

HENRI CARTIER-BRESSON



“To me, photography is the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event.”

- Henri Cartier-Bresson

In a life no short of moments that are worth a spot in an engaging highlight reel of his times, Henri Cartier-Bresson (August 22, 1908 – August 03, 2004) dabbled in everything from music to painting; from fighting for the cause of France in World War II to

escaping a Nazi POW camp after three gruelling years; from indulging in a heady relationship with a sexually liberated friend’s spouse to descending into his own ‘heart of darkness’, coming within flirting distance of death after the words of Joseph Conrad inspired him to head for the proverbial ‘dark continent’.

A pioneering practitioner of candid street photography, Cartier-Bresson incorporated elements of classical artistic forms in his exercise,



which was in turn an intellectual gift of Cartier-Bresson's 'teacher', the Cubist painter and sculptor André Lhote whose ambition it was to integrate elements of French classical tradition with the worldview of the Cubists.

Cartier-Bresson, however, found a lease of life away from the structural confines of Lhote and in the realm of the surrealists who recognized the unquestionable truth and appreciated the capricious diversity of meanings of 'ordinary'

photographs, largely derided as an art form till the time.

Cartier-Bresson briefly indulged in documentary filmmaking before immersing himself head-on in photojournalism. His first assignment had been the coronation of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth in 1937 for a French weekly for which he famously took no photos of the king and only documented the enthusiastic subjects thronging the London streets for a view of the monarch. He also documented the Spanish civil war of 1936-39.

After the founding of Magnum photos with friends Robert Capa, David Seymour, William Vandivert and George Rodger in 1947, Cartier-Bresson assigned himself to India and China, where he would extensively photograph and cover focal points in history such as the funeral of Mahatma Gandhi in 1948 and the transitory years of Chinese political history, documenting the final six months of the Kuomintang administration and the first six months of China's Maoist regime. Cartier-Bresson photographed revolutionary leader turned ascetic Sri Aurobindo Ghosh in Pondicherry and captured Indonesia's independence from their Dutch overlords.

Cartier-Bresson documented the student rebellion of Paris in 1968 and it was the last major event of international influence that he would cover, retiring effectively in early-70s to return to painting.

Having worked near exclusively in black and white, the life of Henri Cartier-Bresson is as much a lesson in photography as it is a lesson in life itself, whose penchant for finding and filming the defining moments of life was an extension of his bid to understand the same and appreciate the slices of time that make life worth living.

In a career spanning 30 years, even after photographing events that would shape the trajectory of the 20th century and portraits of personalities such as Albert Camus, Ezra Pound, Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso, it is interesting to note that Cartier-Bresson's most memorable works are the candid shots that he would take with the aid of his small, Leica 35mm rangefinder camera with a traditional 50mm lens. Cartier-Bresson's choice of weapon was a masterstroke in itself as the smaller size of the camera enabled him to command an anonymity that allowed him to capture what has been later described as the 'decisive moment', a composition in time that has been, in fact, gifted to the photographer who must recognise it in a flash and capture it for posterity.

Kashmir, India

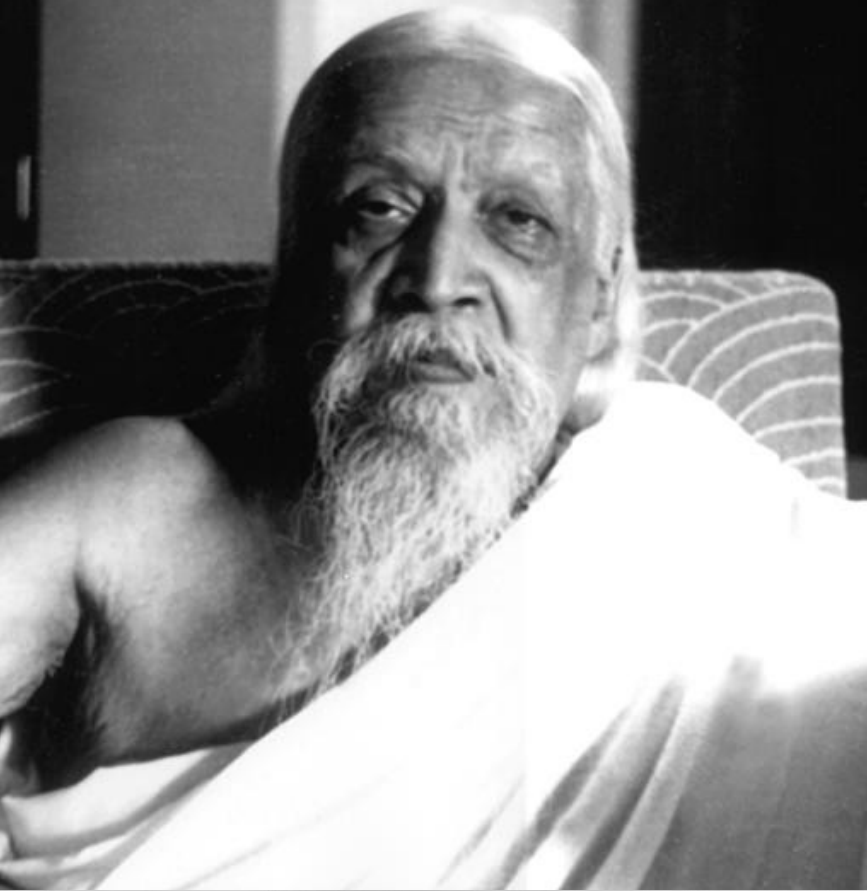


Seville, Spain



Sri Aurobindo

Right: Coronation of King George VI



Torcello, Italy

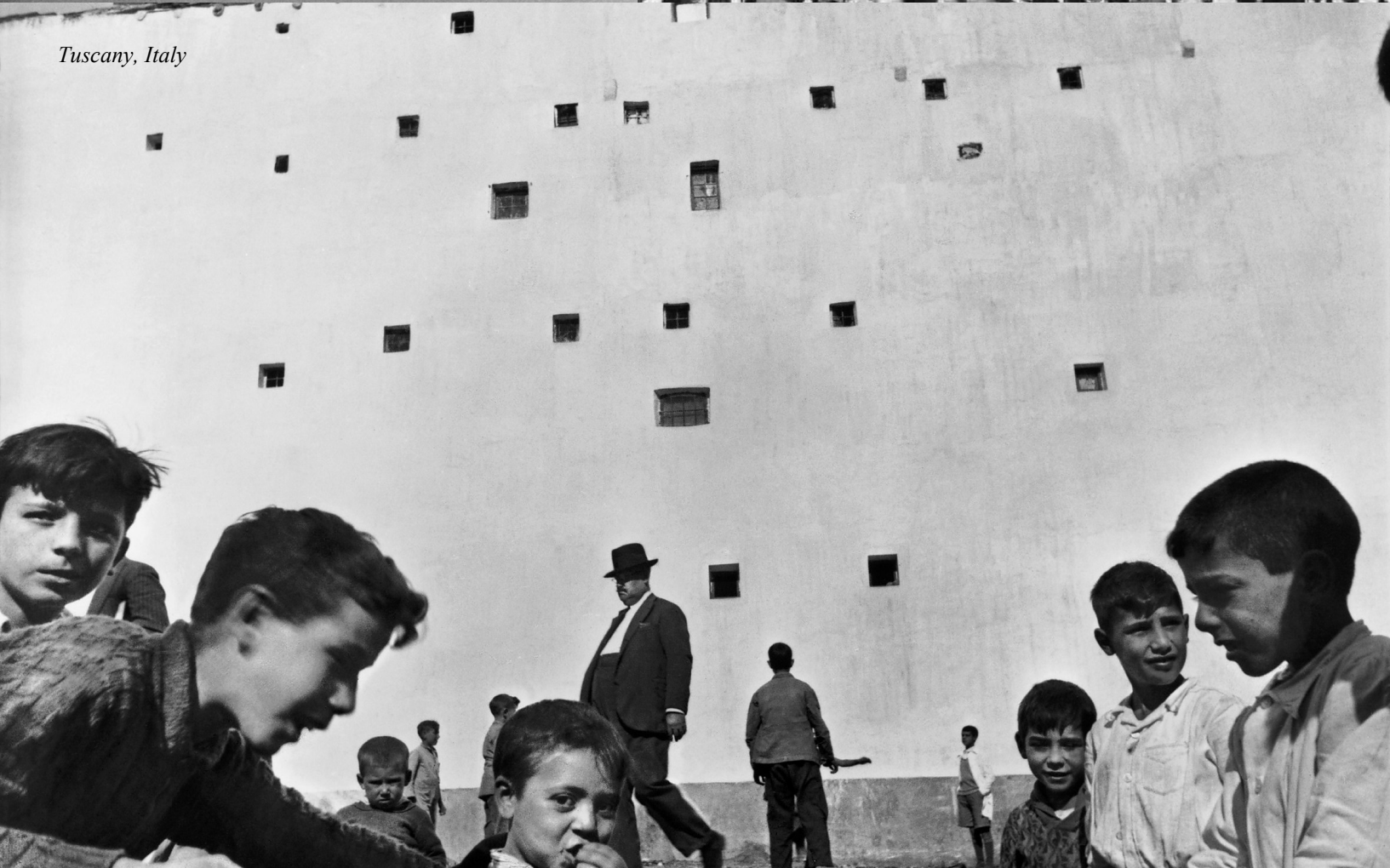




Derrière la gare de Saint-Lazare



Mahatma Gandhi's funeral



Tuscany, Italy



Ahmedabad, India



Naples, Italy
[CC]



The Spirit Page

*A column that proposes to switch theological **prisms** in each issue to understand **life** as we know it in a **light** unseen as yet.*

We begin with a simple but profound piece by one of the greatest philosophers of India,
SWAMI VIVEKANANDA

Is the Soul Immortal?

*"None has power to destroy the unchangeable."
 — Bhagavad-Gita.*

In the great Sanskrit epic, the Mahabharata, the story is told how the hero, Yudhishtira, when asked by Dharma to tell what was the most wonderful thing in the world, replied, that it was the persistent belief of man kind in their own deathlessness in spite of their witnessing death everywhere around them almost every moment of their lives. And, in fact, this is the most stupendous wonder in human life. In spite of all arguments to the contrary urged in different times by different schools, in spite of the inability of reason to penetrate the veil of mystery which will ever hang between the sensuous and the supersensuous worlds, man is thoroughly persuaded that he cannot die.

We may study all our lives, and in the end fail to bring the problem of life and death to the plane of rational demonstration, affirmative or negative. We may talk or write, preach or teach, for or against the permanency or impermanency of human existence as much as we like; we may become violent partisans of this side or that; we may invent names by the hundred, each more intricate than its predecessor, and lull ourselves into a momentary rest under the delusion of our having solved the problem once for all; we may cling with all our powers to any



Swami Vivekananda

one of the curious religious superstitions or the far more objectionable scientific superstitions — but in the end, we find ourselves playing an external game in the bowling alley of reason and raising intellectual pin after pin, only to be knocked over again and again.

But behind all this mental strain and torture, not infrequently productive of more dangerous results than mere games, stands a fact unchallenged and unchallengeable — the fact, the wonder, which the Mahabharata points out as the inability of our mind to conceive our own annihilation. Even to imagine my own annihilation I shall have to stand by and look on as a witness.

Now, before trying to understand what this curious phenomenon means, we want to note that upon this one fact the whole world stands. The permanence of the external world is inevitably joined to the permanence of the internal; and, however plausible any theory of the universe may seem which asserts the permanence of the one and denies that of the other, the theorist himself will find that in his own mechanism not one conscious action is possible, without the permanence of both the internal and the external worlds being one of the factors in the motive cause. Although it is perfectly true that when the human mind transcends its own limitations, it finds the duality reduced to an indivisible unity, on this side of the unconditioned, the whole objective world — that is to say, the world we know — is and can be alone known to us as existing for the subject, and therefore, before we would be able to conceive the annihilation of the subject we are bound to conceive the annihilation of the object.

So far it is plain enough. But now comes the difficulty. I cannot think of myself ordinarily as anything else but a body. My idea of my own permanence includes my idea of myself as a body. But the body is obviously impermanent, as is the whole of nature — a constantly vanishing quantity.

Where, then, is this permanence?

There is one more wonderful phenomenon connected with our lives, without which "who will be able to live, who will be able to enjoy life a moment?" — the idea of freedom.

A SELECTION OF QUOTES BY SWAMI VIVEKANANDA

All knowledge that the world has ever received comes from the mind; the infinite library of the universe is in our own mind.

All that is real in me is God; all that is real in God is I. The gulf between God and me is thus bridged. Thus by knowing God, we find that the kingdom of heaven is within us.

All power is within you. You can do anything and everything. Believe in that. Do not believe that you are weak; do not believe that you are half-crazy lunatics, as most of us do nowadays. Stand up and express the divinity within you.

As long as we believe ourselves to be even the least different from God, fear remains with us; but when we know ourselves to be the One, fear goes; of what can we be afraid?

All who have actually attained any real religious experience never wrangle over the form in which the different religions are expressed. They know that the soul of all religions is the same and so they have no quarrel with anybody just because he or she does not speak in the same tongue.

All truth is eternal. Truth is nobody's property; no race, no individual can lay any exclusive claim to it. Truth is the nature of all souls.

Be perfectly resigned, perfectly unconcerned; then alone can you do any true work. No eyes can see the real forces; we can only see the results. Put out self, forget it; just let God work, it is His business.

Be strong! Don't talk of ghosts and devils. We are the living devils. The sign of life is strength and growth. The sign of death is weakness. Whatever is weak, avoid! It is death. If it is strength, go down into hell and get hold of it! There is salvation only for the brave.

Continued on page 98

This is the idea that guides each footstep of ours, makes our movements possible, determines our relations to each other — nay, is the very warp and woof in the fabric of human life. Intellectual knowledge tries to drive it inch by inch from its territory, post after post is snatched away from its domains, and each step is made fast and ironbound with the railroads of cause and effect. But it laughs at all our attempts, and, lo, it keeps itself above all this massive pile of law and causation with which we tried to smother it to death! How can it be otherwise? The limited always requires a higher generalization of the unlimited to explain itself. The bound can only be explained by the free, the caused by the uncaused. But again, the same difficulty is also here. What is free? The body or even the mind? It is apparent to all that they are as much bound by law as anything else in the universe.

Now the problem resolves itself into this dilemma: either the whole universe is a mass of never-ceasing change and nothing more, irrevocably bound by the law of causation, not one particle having a unity of itself, yet is curiously producing an ineradicable delusion of permanence and freedom, or there is in us and in the universe something which is permanent and free, showing that the basal constitutional belief of the human mind is not a delusion. It is the duty of science to explain facts by bringing them to a higher generalization. Any explanation, therefore that first wants to destroy a part of the fact given to be explained, in order to fit itself to the remainder, is not scientific, whatever else it may be.

So any explanation that wants to overlook the fact of this persistent and all-necessary idea of freedom commits the above-mentioned mistake of denying a portion of the fact in order to explain the rest, and is, therefore, wrong. The only other alternative possible, then, is to acknowledge, in harmony with our nature, that there is something in us which is free and permanent.

But it is not the body; neither is it the mind. The body is dying every minute. The mind is constantly changing. The body is a combination, and so is the mind, and as such can never reach to a state

Despondency is not religion, whatever else it may be.

By the Vedas no books are meant. They mean the accumulated treasury of spiritual laws discovered by different persons in different times. Just as the law of gravitation existed before its discovery, and would exist if all humanity forgot it, so is it with the laws that govern the spiritual world.

Change is always subjective. All through evolution you find that the conquest of nature comes by change in the subject. Apply this to religion and morality, and you will find that the conquest of evil comes by the change in the subjective alone. That is how the Advaitic system gets its whole force, on the subjective side of man.

Each work has to pass through these stages: ridicule, opposition, and then acceptance. Those who think ahead of their time are sure to be misunderstood

beyond all change. But beyond this momentary sheathing of gross matter, beyond even the finer covering of the mind is the *Atman*, the true Self of man, the permanent, the ever free. It is his freedom that is percolating through layers of thought and matter, and, in spite of the colourings of name and form, is ever asserting its unshackled existence. It is his deathlessness, his bliss, his peace, his divinity that shines out and makes itself felt in spite of the thickest layers of ignorance. He is the real man, the fearless one, the deathless one, the free.

Now freedom is only possible when no external power can exert any influence, produce any change. Freedom is only possible to the being who is beyond all conditions, all laws, all bondages of cause and effect. In other words, the unchangeable alone can be free and, therefore, immortal. This Being, this Atman, this real Self of man, the free, the unchangeable is beyond all conditions, and as such, it has neither birth nor death.

"Without birth or death, eternal, ever-existing is this soul of man." [CC]

WRITE FOR US

CultureCult has started out as a monthly magazine and for it to remain so, we need you, the writers, amateur or otherwise, with a deep enough desire to express, to help us out.

The initial call for submissions received more response than we had imagined but we are guilty as a glutton to read more from you.

If you liked our little effort and wouldn't mind terribly to extend a friendly hand, the doors are open for you.

We are accepting fiction as well as non fiction pieces. In our first phase of acceptance, the last date for submission in the fiction category is November 30, 2015.

The non fiction pieces may be submitted at any time.

Submissions can be mailed directly to CultureCultin@gmail.com

Before submitting however, PLEASE read the complete set of guidelines at www.CultureCult.in/Submissions

Altamira, Spain. Cave painting of a Bison
Painter: Unknown

