

The ODDBALL'S

WONDROUS

capers

Spaced-out insomniacs, psychic cartographers, government babus and Calomine X salesmen are some of the eccentric characters that populate Sarnath Banerjee's world. Sayandeep Chowdhury discusses his contexts and influences.



Locally and A 202 is delighted to discover a robbery suspect, jaded playground for future games.

A 202, before visiting family, has made his last trip. He has kept them all at bay.

Marine and coming A 204 peculiar. She has to be precise the daily, except for her success in bed.

Every morning A 206, he has some form. Sport and culture. He has a good eye for his own. He has a good eye for his own. He has a good eye for his own.

After being diagnosed with Type II diabetes, A 208 has become a business failure.

A 203, born in a good family and slumps into slightly unwell.

A 207 is a senior officer of the P.S.D. but his real school in life is to recover and quietly sit.

Every morning A 209, he has some form. Sport and culture. He has a good eye for his own. He has a good eye for his own.



Sarnath Banerjee. Photograph by Hemant Sarbottam.

The act of seeing is active; it is an act of choice. We see what we look at and so relate to it. We also become aware that we can be seen, and so are aware we are part of the visible world.

— John Berger. *Ways of Seeing*. 1972.

There lies the old, decrepit, wobbly city, subterranean and in a state of stealth, under the relentlessly mercenary, middle-class dystopia of the visible cosmopolis. There lies that libidinal space of epicurean busybodies, of contrarian cognoscenti, of drifters and charlatans and unrepentant dissidents. If that city, that undetected city could speak – could utter from the gutter – in which its hanging balustrades blush, its yawning gargoyles hellow and its heedless denizens quote sharply from forgotten histories, it would have spoken Sarnath Banerjee's way. In the course of his three books of fiction, he has established a self-conscious tug-of-war between the spoken and the seen, between what Roland Barthes calls the centrality of the text and the controlling visuality of the image.

In an interview with Sci-Fi writer Samit Basu in 2006, two years after the publication of *Corridor*, his first work of fiction, Banerjee said, "(In a graphic novel) the text and the image often run independent of each other, sometimes they even conflict or contradict the other. In some of the best comics, the text and the pictures

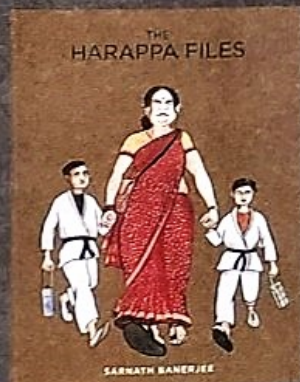
are locked in some kind of creative tension. This, I feel, is very much the grammar of comics." In two of his subsequent and acclaimed works, *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers* (2007) and *The Harappa Files* (2011), Banerjee has warmed up to that grammar with ease, developing not only an increasingly mature storytelling model, but also a feverish frame, a way of gathering within his sharply pencilled boundaries a veritable feast of words and images that lock themselves in a productive union to produce a crowd of meanings, a multitude of possibilities. A government habu sits on a heap of discarded typewriters in his office (*The Barn Owl's*), a Delhi street is lined with identical looking apartments clatching onto each other (*The Harappa Files*), raining. Lifebuoy soaps soak the Sunday routine of the middle-aged middle classes (*The Harappa Files*), a collage of Arnold the Barbarian and Heroine Ash in bridal clothing has the quote, "Therefore, it wasn't a surprise... that on their wedding night, Shintu and Dolly played scrabble" (*Corridor*). Among other things, this unsettling, decentred, sophisticated pastiche that the union produces gives his stories an edge, laced as they are with an unflinching sense of irony and humour.

Born in Calcutta and educated in Delhi and London, Banerjee's early work *Corridor* helped launch him on the Indian literary scene. His oeuvre also includes animation and filmmaking. But that has never made him lose sight of those he started out with – his immeasurably mercurial characters. The almost-there losers, the spaced-out insomniacs, psychic cartographers, moonlighting government habus with hush-hush assignments, wandering babas, kazis and Jews who effortlessly soft-land across the ballast of time, itinerant mind-travellers and unlikely secret agents populate his narratives, along with the tauntingly tautological and alluringly alliterative Digital Dutta who is a primer in himself. Banerjee continues to take sides with losers and his fiction, in a Carnavalesque way, gives speech to the unsparking, history to those outside history and muscle to those in the margins.

Banerjee is currently busy finishing 48 installations to be put on display across East London as part of the Frieze Foundation project for the London Olympics 2012. Sarah McCrory, Frieze's

curator, picked up Banerjee after she saw his work in Turin two years ago. What also helped was the fact that Banerjee had studied at Goldsmiths in London. Only partly taking note of this pedigree, Banerjee chose to work, characteristically, on how East London will look during the Olympics – East London, which has been on the margins of arriviste triumphalism so intrinsic to many other London neighbourhoods. Banerjee was quoted by *Mint* newspaper as saying, "[East London] is full of people who're disenfranchised, people who're wondering what the Olympics shenanigans might mean to them. I've never been one for large conceptual gestures. My art has always been deeply rooted in the middle class."

So, in this project, he forgoes the easy allure of beefing up the Olympics motto of participation and sportsmanship. That's a story too often told. In his own cheeky way, he prefers to frame those who just missed the mark and that too in the 'lowly' sports: the javeliners and pingpongers, the long- and high-jumpers, the boxers and pole-vaulters, all caught in moments of anger and guilt, fear and loathing, and even self-pity. As *Mint* writes, "[One of his] narratives is about the thoughts in a boxer's head when he's cornered against the ropes. 'How many more of those do I have to dodge before I hear the sweet sound of the final bell?', the losing Cinderella Man is



Sarnath Banerjee. *The Harappa Files*. HarperCollins Publishers India and The India Today Group, 2011. Previous page: Sarnath Banerjee. A-302. Acrylic and ink on paper (two parts). 42" x 42". 2011. Collection: Cecilia and Rohan Parikh. Image Courtesy the Artist and Project 88.



Sarnath Banerjee. From *The Harappa Files*. HarperCollins Publishers India and The India Today Group, 2011.

heard asking himself. This boxer is not really far from the eczema-slaying, Calomine X salesman plying his trade on trains (*The Harappa Files*), who is boxed out of the ring by the arrival of cotton shirts!

Such surreptitious, understated, stolen moments of personal history make up the map of Banerjee's fictional territory, a territory that includes not just specimens of the homo sapiens, but also the spaces they inhabit and occupy – Calcutta's built heritage that stands tall on pillars of whim (*The Barn Owl's*), the crepuscular Connaught Place in *Corridor* or the solipsistic residents' welfare associations in *The Harappa Files*. Add to them those offices of ghostly de-bentures, the plunging plumbing pipes, the muffled gas stove, the giggling corporation tap and other civilizational paraphernalia.

Banerjee indulges in the multiple selves of the city and the recalcitrant nature of civilization. There are more Delhis hidden inside the slim volume of *Corridor* than we would ever know. In *The Harappa Files*, there is a secret mission to archaeologize these multiple selves that hormonal churning threaten to wash away. In *The Barn Owl's*, many Calcuttas collapse and diverge over three centuries of making meaning around the city's infernal regions.

This fascination for the nether regions of the city's Unconscious goes to explain why Banerjee does not look for the noir in the alternative, post-everything universe of

Gotham or some such place, as is *de rigueur* in much of the revivalist graphic novel genre in the West, thanks to comic greats Alan Moore, Frank Miller, David Gibbons and Neil Gaiman. Banerjee's noir is the blunderbuss called the city itself and in this he would, in all probability, find himself closer to David Beauchard of *Epilaptic* and Gilbert Hernandez of *Palomar*, authors who have invested their artistic genius in chronicling the everyday life of a differently abled boy and the Latin American experience in a mythical Mid-Western town respectively. With his satire and irony, Banerjee should be in the league of Warren Ellis and Darick Robertson, creators of the *Transmetropolitan* series. In some ways, he is also in the minority group of graphic novelists who do the pencilling, the colouring, the imaging and the entire narrative design all by themselves – he sits in the august company of Art Spiegelman, Marjane Satrapi and Herge.

But it would be a disservice to his art if we discount Banerjee's other influence – the masterful tradition of humour in the Bengali language. The rollicking, tongue-and-cheek, gregarious colloquiality of *Hutum Panchar Nokshta* (Barn Owl's Sketches) by the 19th century distinguished man of letters, Kaliprasanna Sinha, formed the basis for *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers*. But Sinha is not Banerjee's only influence from the literary tradition of the tongue he inherited at birth. One can locate at least three other literary greats staring at him with kind, fraternal indulgence –

Gaganendranath Tagore, Sukumar Ray and Rajsekhar Basu. Gaganendranath, Rabindranath's nephew, was the first bonafide satirist and illustrator in the Bengali language and his *Adbhut Lok*, *Virup Vajra* and *Nabakullor* formed the first pantheon of works satirising what Gaganendranath called the "deformities of his age". Sukumar Ray's astonishingly counter-discursive 'nonsensical' text-and-image universe in *Abol Tabol* and *HoJoBoLo*, and Rajsekhar Basu's world of risqué, alternative histories (punctuated with Jatindra Kumar Sen's delectable sketches) are so full of transgressive possibilities that it's only natural that one who reads Bengali and has a fascination for absurdities would take to these individuals with the wide-eyed enthusiasm that a newly born has for talking toys. Digital Dutta of *Corridor* and *The Barn Owl's* fame, mind-traveller and aspiring game-changer, is also an earnest reminder of Premendra Mitra's immortal Ghanada, the peripatetic, phlegmatic storyteller who happily inserts himself into history's grand narratives and affects significant course correction in its attempts at forging a reliable telos!

Banerjee's eco-system is full of such multilingual influences as is the case with most Bengali artists who dig deep into bourgeois worlds and look back in anger (and laughter) at their glorious insecurities. From this legacy, Banerjee manages to cull a subversive idiom, richly drawn and intelligently textured. His lush frames are, at the same time, doggedly iconoclastic and disarmingly self-loathing, his bizarre is in the everyday, his language is perched tantalisingly close to its fissures, his stories a gathering of splinters, his narrators perpetually unreliable and aphasic.

Laced as Banerjee's pictures are with such charms, drawn with unmistakable warmth and infused with atmospheric irony, they make him not just a pioneering graphic novelist in India but also one of its able custodians. But that's only half the story. Banerjee is also a fine practitioner of post-modern fiction. In an otherwise stultifying atmosphere of conventional narratives, his works stand out for their vitality, raciness and irreverence; for employing a new gaze to look at objects and people; and for engendering a curious relationship with the history of visual culture.

