

I always told myself that fame can wait

Prabir Bhattacharya

The name Manishankar Mukherjee was thought to be difficult to pronounce. So he changed it to Sankar. And the name stuck like a second skin all his life — as the lowly clerk, the author of national and now international repute and a high profile corporate job as the CPRO of one of world oldest electric supply companies. But who was he who changed his name? “Noel Frederick Barwell”, came the reply from the other side of the large mahogany table — from a smiling, portly, happily bespectacled man we have come to know as Sankar, the author of some of the most unforgettable classics in Bengali language and as is now increasingly clear, in any language.

“He was the last barrister of Calcutta High Court”, Sankar added. The baritone, balded Scot employed him at a raw age when Sankar, wandering from nic to nac, job to job arrived at the doors of the Temple Chambers at the High Court where Barwell had his office.

Sankar must have made this conversation often and he has never made any concessions towards his praise for this giant of a man, in looks and in stature that was Barwell. “He was in many ways one of the last gentlemen in the older sense of the term — a man of impeccable habits and person, he could befriend one in no time and did not waste time on needless formalities. I would have remained a clerk had I had not been accosted by Barwell. When he was no more, I thought of absurd ways to pay tribute to him. I went asking painters to paint a portrait of his, visited the local councillor to help build a statue. Both failed. But I grew restless. I had to tell the world about this man. So I decided to write about him. I realised in the process that in writing about my mentor, friend, philosopher and guide I had started telling a story of larger intent, a story of the court, whose premises were perpetually crowded by those with rather dubious relation to the law. So was born *Koto Ojanare*, which has now been translated as *The Great Unknown*.”

He must be elated that now, in less than three years since his *Chowringhee* became a rage in international literary



circles, two more of his books have been translated, *The Middleman* being the one in the middle, all three having been published by Penguin India. “Of course it is a great feeling. Great honour. Suddenly you see the cartography of your readership expanding at one go. I have always been very grateful to my Bengali readership for what they have given me. I have never found readership wanting for my books in Bengali. In fact the felicity of my readership have prompted many to say that I am a mass market author. I cater to the lowest common denominator. I could never put a brave face and challenge such rants because inside I believed may be they were right.

And all of it changed with *Chowringhee*? “Yes. Being accosted by complete strangers in strange lands and being feted for a book I had written almost fifty years ago is something that took time to sink in. I was in London when *Chowringhee* was launched internationally and every big paper in the UK

carried full page articles or reviews about the book. I was overwhelmed, to say the least. I had always maintained that my hinterland was till Asansol. And now here I was and the world around me was going gaga over discovering the Bengali author late in his life. I wondered and wondered, is this really happening?”

Sankar stopped, perhaps to think for a while. But they must have asked what took him so long. Didn't they? “There is a funny story here. I was asked at this event in London the same question. I said that there are two reasons why I am so late in arriving. First, my Bengali middle class arrogance. I have always thought that I am beyond the arriviste aspirations of the average humbug and fame if any at all, should come to me rather than me going there. The second concerns a lesson I had learnt from a Horlicks advertisement in my young days. Those days Horlicks wasn't available and an ad showed an empty

Horlicks bottle with the slogan, ‘Not available now but the wait will be worth it.’ In a similar vein, I have looked at the empty bottle of fame all my life and said to myself that the wait must be worth.”

Was it worth? “Till the last drop”. *Chowringhee* gave him an international readership, which he never thought was possible. “But not just a foreign audience. In Delhi, I learnt that I had even made some Bengali readers.” Bengali? “Yes, the newer generation, said an elderly gentleman at an event in Delhi, had thought that nothing worthwhile is being written in Bengali which they can take pride in. While this was not true but still they had harboured such a feeling. They apparently found *Chowringhee* worth reading. I thought so be it. Why not?”

So he must in agreement that publishing in English is a different ball game than the vernaculars. “Of course it is. I will tell you a story here. In London I was staying at a hotel in Cromwell Road,

a place not far from where Rabindranath Tagore stayed on his visit to London about a century ago. You know what he was there for? To see if he can publish his poetry which he had just translated into English. He was keen to reach out to an audience beyond his own because he knew unless you are known in the West, half of your effort as a writer is wasted. You know Satyajit Ray had said the same thing to me once. He called me to read an effusive article on his film based on my novel *The Middleman*. He was ecstatic. I asked why are you so happy? He had said that unless there is approval from the West, it is difficult to do good work sitting here. As with Tagore or Ray, in my own very humble way I have realised why being translated into English actually means that you have arrived.”

That is a rather sobering thought given that almost always there is this pitched battle between the custodians of English and other Indian languages about who has the best writers in the kitty. “Interestingly”, Sankar continued, “Tagore's son Rathin had misplaced the translated manuscript inside the tube in London. He did not have the heart to tell that to Tagore. The day before they were to meet Rothenstein, someone asked Rathin to go and check the lost & found. And there it was! Just think of it. Had the English translations of Tagore been lost, who knows, we would have still not been known outside Bengal!”

Such stories galore in any session of adda with Sankar. Is this penchant for charming anecdotes that makes your biography of Vivekananda such a best-seller. “I do not know but yes, I was not too keen to say the already said so I wanted to look at the life of this man closely and his struggle to become a man of great knowledge and insight from a restless young man from a humble middle-class background. Also, has been very fond of his mother throughout his life, till his last day.”

And when is he writing the history about the perennial Bengali favourite sweets, having researched into its beginnings for some years now. “Very soon. A publisher has evinced interest and I am thinking that I should respond wholeheartedly.” May the wait be worth it!

Our sahib is the last torchbearer

‘This is the high court.’ I gazed in wonder at the tall steeple of the buildings: so this was the high court. I turned to Bibhuti-da who had brought me here to get a job. No ordinary one at that; I was going to work for a British barrister.

There were numerous letter boxes at the entrance to Temple Chamber. Some gleamed with freshly acquired youth, while others stood unembellished, dilapidated and tarnished, waiting for the nailman since the times of the East India Company.

It was a huge building. But it resembled a beehive — every room housing an attorney. It was impossible for sunlight to gain entry to some of them even during the day and, as a result, the Calcutta Electric Supply Company was flourishing. Especially since most of the occupants worked day and night.

The lift had a strange damp smell. It seemed to belong to the prehistoric era. If more than three people expressed a desire to ascend together, there were strong chances the doors would open straight in heaven. Many people had queued up for the lift. Attorneys wearing black coats and barristers carrying black gowns. Untidily clad ‘babus’ who worked for the attorneys and lucrative clients in the form of

corpulent Marwaris dressed in translucent dhotis and caps.

Sixteen years ago, when he arrived at Temple Chamber, Bibhuti-da was twenty years old. He had joined an attorney's office as a typist on a salary of five rupees. On the several occasions when he happened to ride the lift with a certain overbearing British barrister, Bibhuti-da had shrunk into a corner in fear.

One Saturday, around half-past one, Bibhuti-da was shutting down in the machine when the bearer approached him, ‘The barrister in the next room is calling you.’

‘Could you do an urgent typing job for me?’ the barrister asked. ‘There is a typewriter here.’ Agreeing right away, Bibhuti-da began typing with rapt attention. Suddenly he heard, ‘My son, would you like an orange?’

Startled, he looked up to see the barrister standing with an orange in his hand. He was stunned: what kind of man was this Englishman? Did the sahibs ever share oranges with their typists? When he finished and was about to leave, the barrister pushed a five rupee note into Bibhuti-da's hand. ‘Your fees.’

‘But I don't have any change with me.’

‘No, no, there is no need for change. The whole amount is for you.’

Bibhuti-da couldn't believe it.

Five rupees for one-and-a-half hour's work — that's what he earned in a whole month. He continued to earn extra money every once in a while by working this way.

This was the first time in my life that I was meeting an Englishman. Six feet tall, pink-skinned, his bearing erect even at this age, a completely bald head and a smile on his face.

Bibhuti-da led me into the sahib's room. ‘This is the boy I had spoken about.’

‘All right, have you explained the work to him?’

‘No, not before he had met...’

The sahib nodded and, glaring at me, said in a grave voice, ‘You're right. Yes, yes. I must ask him some very difficult questions and that too with a Scotch accent.’

‘What!’

Bibhuti-da understood and said, ‘No, no, the sahib is not going to ask you anything. He is joking.’

The barrister asked me my name. On hearing my full name he said, ‘That's too long a name for me to call you by. I need a short portable name.’ Closing his eyes he started thinking.

‘Choosing a good name is very difficult! But, yes, I've got it — Shankar. Do you have any objection to this name?’

This was an extraordinary connection. I had gathered from Bibhuti-da that my sahib was the last English barrister in the Calcutta High Court. And not only this, Bibhuti-da shared with me many more facts.

It was many years ago when Lord North's Regulating Act gave birth to the Supreme Court. The judges took their first steps on Calcuttan soil from a ship docked near Chandpal Ghat. Sir Eliza Impe led these champions of justice who had travelled from England to Bengal. Impe was stunned by the huge crowds of curious natives lining the streets, most of whom were shirtless and unshod. Sir Impe had remarked to the other judges, ‘Brothers, look, the people in this country do not have clothes! They do not

even have socks on their feet within six months!’

Many such ‘six months’ had passed since then. And Impe had forgotten all about the natives' feet. Socks were a distant luxury when the people were waiting for even a square meal a day. Sir Impe was, at the time, busy running after his childhood friend, Hastings, in the hope of bagging the contract for the construction of a bridge. Some mischief-makers named him ‘Bridge-building Impe’. His order to hang Maharaja Nandakumar immortalized Bridge-Building Impe in history.

Another group of people had followed Impe to this country and set up base around the Supreme Court. They were the attorneys and barristers. Whether they really harboured any intention of introducing the English system of law and justice to Bengal is not known. Perhaps it was only the attraction of riches that drew them here, but, in time, they laid the foundation for and honourable tradition. And the Calcutta Bar's proud history began.

During those years, legal practice was not as easy as it is now. People had not learnt to respect the nascent court of law. Filing and winning a case was in vain as the losing party did not heed the court's verdict. They preferred to fight matters out. The keepers of law realized that something would have to be done about the situation. What was the use of setting up courts of law when the people did not treat them with respect?

The elite English of those days were not far behind the natives in their eagerness to violate the laws. Depending on the situation, they were open to accepting bribes in cash or kind. In his own respective area, each of them was a miniature ‘His Highness’. The judges were amazed by the princely airs of the hitherto well-behaved, prudent young men from their own motherland.

A gentleman called Ramchandra Banerjee informed the court, ‘My Lord, Alexander Mackenzie from Bihar had borrowed thirty-seven thousand

rupees from me many months ago and is refusing to repay the loan now.’

The Supreme Court decreed that Mackenzie would have to return the money.

Mackenzie was no ordinary man; he was the magistrate of Bihar. On hearing the news, he said, ‘What audacity! How dare they issue a decree in my name? I will not pay a single paisa!’

The sheriff of the Supreme Court left for Bihar to arrest Mackenzie. But halfway there, he met with preparations for a small battle. Mackenzie's followers were armed with bows and arrows, swords and shields and guns. They descended on the sheriff's men with war cries, forcing them to run for their lives.

But the Supreme Court did not give up; their honour had suffered a blow. The sheriff was sent to Bihar again but this time with an army of his own. If the need arose, General Wood and his men would battle Mackenzie's forces. Realizing that the situation was not in his favour, Mackenzie repaid Ramchandra's money to the last paisa.

However, over time the might of the English army was no longer needed to enforce decrees. Soon, people came to appreciate that there was more to gain by following the laws of the land. They began approaching the court in order to settle monetary and land disputes rather than fight out matters amongst themselves. The nation's tally of murders and injuries decreased considerably. The business of professional goons, who had so far been hired to settle disputes, suffered and a new breed of intellectual fighters was born — those who upheld the laws. Judges, barristers and attorneys in large numbers migrated from England to join the legal world of Calcutta.

The wheel of history has turned many times since. Warren Hastings and Eliza Impe, Cornwallis and Wellesley were no more. Even the East India Company, which had laid the foundation of the British empire, did not survive. And then, one day, the blows from the daily labourer's pickaxe obliterated the

old building of the Supreme Court from the heart of Calcutta. The new high court came up on Old Post Office Street.

But old traditions continued unhindered.

Imperious barristers and famous attorneys joined the high court. Grand buildings flanked Old Post Office Street — Temple Chamber, Lindley Chamber. Many cases, numerous clients — the place has been buzzing for over a century.

‘This neighbourhood is a strange place,’ Bibhuti-da had said. ‘Apart from clients, judges, lawyers, barristers and attorneys many other people frequent this place.’

‘Perhaps you already know some of it, but let me tell you anyway. Most outsiders do not understand the relation between attorneys and barristers. It is called the dual system or something similar. In the primal section the client first interacts with the attorney. It is a must to file a case at the high court. The attorney prepares and files the case and then sends the brief to the barrister who pleads the case before the judge. Any correspondence between the barrister and the client has to go through the attorney, the middleman.’

Bibhuti-da added, ‘Many believe illegal activities are carried out in this neighbourhood in the name of the law. That lawyers lie and attorneys extort their clients. Or that in lawsuits among brothers, it is the attorney who builds himself a house while the plaintiffs take to the streets. These are not all false, but then the people here are not all thieves either. There are many who have never resorted to lying, for whom truth is life's only capital.’

‘Our sahib is the last torchbearer in a line of great men like Woodroffe, Sir Griffith Evans and William Jackson. He is the last English barrister of the Calcutta High Court. A trend that began in the eighteenth century and is coming to an end in the twentieth.’

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