

ANOTHER SUNIL GANGOPADHYAY (ONYO SUNIL DA)

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(English Version)

I simply cannot recall when I first met Sunil Gangopadhyay, because like many others of my generation, we inherited him as part of our intellectual and rebellious legacy. Krittibas Goshti was not a literary movement to us : it was a way of life, to those who could not understand how to live with 'slow' and 'sleepy' Rabindra Sangeet and with listless, archaic poetry or even (in the age of revolution) with feudal Khayal, Thumri, Tappa or Dadra. Sandipan, Shakti Chattopadhyay, Sunil Gango, Sankho Ghosh and Tarapada Ray.....their outbursts, their angst, their literary outpourings and their Bohemian life-style were more relevant and more realistic. How many outrageous and exaggerated tales hasn't one heard of them, especially about Shakti da?

When I met Sunil da in one of Tarapada Ray's gatherings, he was young and had black, thick specs, and a wandering eye. Tarapada babu was more vivacious, witty and could grab endless hours of attention, with his punch lines, while Sunil da was never loud, or ever strained to impress. He would be more relaxed, with a glass, in a corner, sweetly explaining to a young fan how lovely her eyes were. His easy going style brought in a rare fluidity in his writings and his unpretentious conversational style that got you into his story, with an effortless ease.

As students, we were busy with our exams or preparing for life, having missed several years during the Naxalite and post-Naxalite turbulence, and so big novels were out of the question. But short stories, poems or doses like 'Neelohiter Chokher Samney' were just too good to be missed. Simple stories, with such comfortable grace! By then, Sunil da of 'Krittibas' was getting more 'domesticated'. I was delighted when I was being called by my first name, rather than "Oi chhot photey chheleti": "that frisky kid", which was awful for a grand 'Magistrate' to bear. Oh, I forgot: I had just been able to solve a relatively minor problem of Sunil da, that Soumitra Mitra had brought to me. I think I was then a young SDO or ADM in a district near Kolkata. When I met him next, I was given an extra helping of spirits and a little more respect.

Years rolled on and he became more and more famous, with the coveted Ananda Puraskar, Atmaprakash, Pratidwandi, Aranyer Din- Raatri, Sei

Somoy (translated into English as 'Those Days') and the prized Sahitya Akademi Award. It was so nice of him to send me the English version of the last book, translated by Aruna Chakravorty, with the words "Aamader Ingrej sahebe jonyo": "To our English sahab", which was great but confirmed my suspicion that his firm opinion was that I barely qualified as a Bengali!

It was after 1998 (or was it 1999?) Parliament elections, both of which I had to conduct as the Chief Electoral Officer of West Bengal, that he sent me a 'Pujo Sankhya' (the extremely popular 'Festival Issue' of Bengali literature. My friend ran effortlessly through it and pointed out to a story in which he had written about a character named after me. I was on top of the world (gosh: I got so many calls!) but my good wife, Nandita, who took a dim view of our late nights and our 'spirits', was not impressed at all. She seemed to have a ready pin to prick my ego, whenever it swelled a bit. But Sunil da was so lucky, as Swati Boudi was ever so considerate! I often rue the fact that even I could have become a great poet or a wonderful writer, only if Nandita had been tolerant and encouraging: like Swati di!

The Basant Utsav or the spring festival of Holi that is always so vibrant in Shantiniketan was more so that year that Sunil da and a bunch of our common friends we spent together that year. My activities are still very hazy in my mind, and had it not been for a few pictures taken by a friend (not all of which showed us in a charitable manner), I would not even have recalled the vivid details, with which Sunil da and our gang had played a very colourful Holi.

Time moved on, and now we come to the serious part. I had just taken over as the Culture Secretary in Delhi in late 2008 and Sunil da had been elected as the first Bengali Chairman of the Sahitya Akademi: after nearly 60 years of its existence! So much about the haughty 'pride' of the Bengalis in their language and literature! And Sunil da's victory over M T Vasudevan Nair was also not (let us say) a pleasant or event-free one. True, Prof. Suniti Kumar Chattopadhyay had also been Chairman of the Akademi, but that was for a very short term, because he had to fill in the post, when the previous Chairman had died mid-way through his tenure.

After an assertive Gopichand Narang, Sunil da's easy-going ways were a surprise and a relief to many. But to me, it was a constant source of problems, because he was more at home in Kolkata, than be a 'lord' in Delhi. He was available all the time, even past mid night, on the mobile and would take my call. His refrain was : "Arrey baba, why are you asking me to do

this bureaucratic thing, why don't you just tell Krishnamoorthy" (his Secretary). But this gentleman was hardly ever available, or amenable to reason. I had to pester him again, on behalf of the Republic of India and finally he would say, in sheer exasperation: "OK, Jawhar: you write some fancy English sentences and tell me where to sign. It is well past 9 pm already and you should not be working so late. There are more interesting things to do in life."

As Secretary of Culture and as Chairman of the Sahitya Akademi, we did not see eye to eye on many issues. Despite his genial nature, Sunil Gangopadhyay was very clear that he was head of an autonomous body and that the bureaucracy had an uncontrollable, genetic urge to encroach upon autonomy. Thus, many of my well-meaning efforts were also scrutinised, again and again by him, often with a question: "Tell me, what is your real matlab (agenda)?" As soon as I had explained that my intentions were really genuine, some mischievous people would get to him and raise issues about 'autonomy', 'bureaucracy', 'domination', etc., and we would be back to square one.

But, our official debates never marred our personal relations. In fact, if we had any strong argument (with Sunil da, no argument can be bitter, only strong), he would hijack me for the evening and by mid-night, we would both be in right spirits and in the best of relations. I remember a couple of times when he and Swati Boudi dropped in at our place in Delhi for small gatherings or parties, but on the whole, he was not very comfortable in Delhi.

As Chairman, Sahitya Akademi, I must credit Sunil Gangopadhyay for being the first to introduce 'Coordination meetings' with all the State Academies, many of which were languishing, because of a variety of reasons, mainly politics and neglect. After the grand success of the first round, he promised to hold the second round this year: but he is not around any more. He also took profound interest in children's literature and instituted the first 'National Awards for Children', which is now in its third year. "Dekho: among these, some will emerge as great writers", he would say, with a pat on my back. And I would turn around, retorting "Sunil da, you are now sounding like a Dadu: a grandfather!" But, Dadu, he could never be: despite his advancing years, he remained a vibrant, rebellious, playful adolescent.

Like they said about Marquez, Sunil da could talk about a story, think about another and finally write a third, which had no relation to

either the first or the second. He would joke, smile, flirt or enjoy whatever was in his hand, with a twinkle in his eye: but behind the twinkle, he was actually 'photographing' the nuances and quirks of human behaviour. These would provide materials for a short story or a poem, or find expression in a novel. He studied his fellow men and women with the ease of a panning cameraman, and he introduced them as his characters, with the expertise of a born story-teller.

The meetings of the Sahitya Akademi have often been very heated, but not when Sunil da was around. His infinite patience, often annoyed many of us, especially when we knew that what was being said aloud was just a lot of hot air. I think Sunil da had a switch behind his ear, which he quietly put off in these meetings and kept smiling: while composing his next piece as the garrulous speakers went on prattling, for hours together.

I was looking forward to see how Sunil Da would celebrate Tagore's 150th year, because of his widely known public views on the poet laureate. We started the year with a 'Debate' in the Akademi on the relevance or otherwise of Tagore. Though I was Secretary of the National Celebrations Committee, that functioned under the Prime Minister and the Finance Minister, I surprised many by posing several uncomfortable questions on this sensitive issue, but Sunil Da was more composed. He did not make any bones about the fact that he had strong opinions on Tagore as a writer, but his evaluation was so mature, that most of the other speakers appeared to be almost so unabashedly hagiographic in their adulation of Tagore.

He went on to organise a unique project in 24 different Indian languages, where experts poured their heart out in their own tongues: as to show how they viewed Tagore in their own contexts. He would often talk about this project to me and I believe it is complete and lying somewhere for his 'Introduction'. I only hope he has written it, because it would enrich the volumes that are a valuable addition to the literature on Tagore: as seen by others.

One day, in a relaxed mood at the IIC in Delhi, we hit upon a brilliant idea: why not bring out pocket books, with bit of style and at affordable prices, the best of Tagore's different works, in English. Poems, short stories, plays, dance dramas, essays, et-al: that would attract the young, all over the world. He agreed and had thus, in one definite step, gone over his well-known and perennial reservation about English: as the juggernaut that

was crushing out all the Indian languages. Swapan Mazumdar took a long time to edit these and I would not like to comment on the bureaucracy of the Akademi, led by its redoubtable Secretary.

When the first volume was about to come out, Sunil Gangopadhyay insisted that I should write the 'Foreword'. I told him that this was an 'undue honour' for which I was not adequately qualified, but he cut me short saying, "Nekami koro na: chot pot kare nabiye dao" (don't play hard to get: write it out quickly) and let us celebrate today evening". I did both, but I wonder whether the 14 other volumes have come out or not.

After all, most of the selections of these pieces from Tagore's countless works were made by one of the most critical eyes: those of Sunil Gangopadhyay himself. I had insisted that he should do it, but he had demurred for months together. I finally cornered him at his son's place in America and he relented. He dictated his choice of each genre almost effortlessly over the phone, covering so many varied aspects of the genius of Tagore. And my duty was to copy them down like a school boy: not as a Secretary to the Government of India vis-à-vis the Chairman of the National Akademi of Letters.

As Sunil da spent most of his time in Kolkata, Kishore Krishna Banerjee, the Director of our Raja Ram Mohun Roy Library Foundation, was the link between us. He knew where to trace him and how and when to get him. He even grabbed Sunil da once, straight from the Kolkata Book Fair where thousands of his fans were pining for him and took him to a Meet on Thalassemia: and Sunil da did not protest as it was for a worthy cause.

One day, not too long ago, Sunil da rang up to say that he had an invitation from Iceland (of all places) and was keen to go, mainly because Swati di felt that it is really out of the way and exotic. We made all necessary preparations and he actually enquired quite a few times. I passed on the clearance to him and jokingly suggested that he could even go just a little further up to the North Pole, and then walk a few steps from the top of the world: all the way to God. "Not a bad idea", said Sunil da, the confirmed atheist. For some inexplicable reason, this trip never took place: but Sunil Gangopadhyay soon chose an even shorter route to God. May his soul rest in peace!