

Saluting a Mentor — Basanta Choudhury by Jawhar Sircar

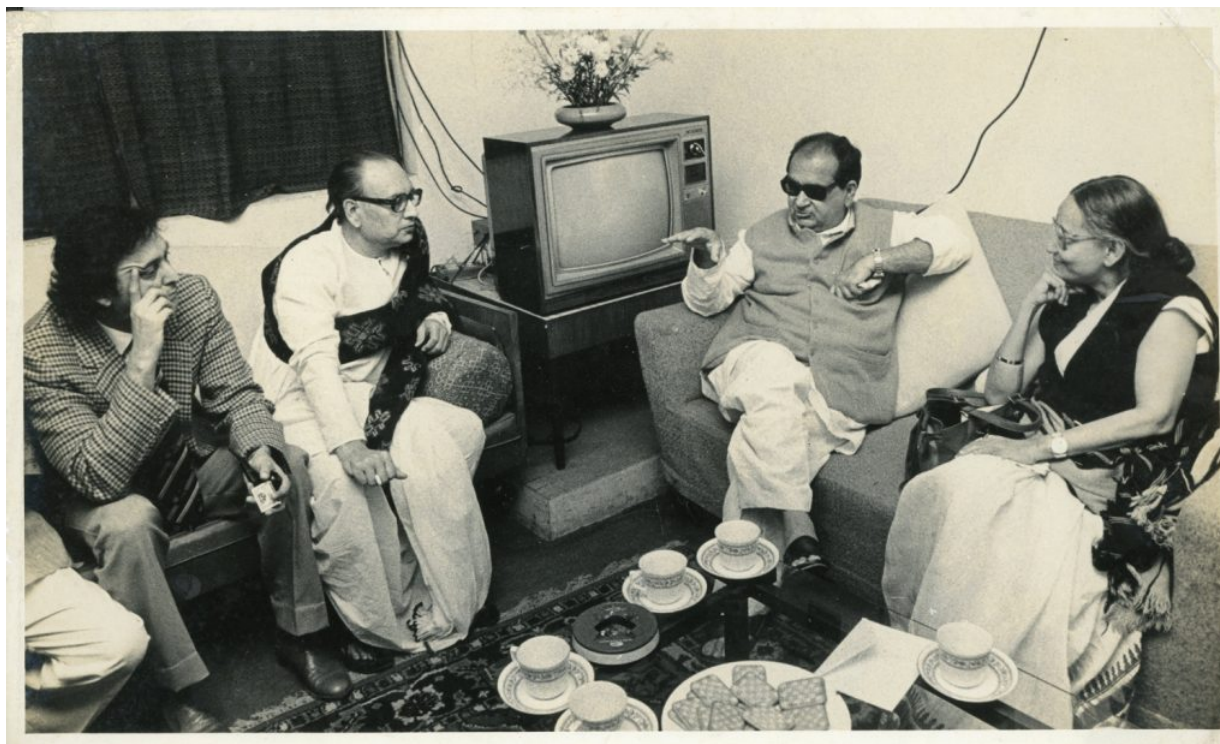
Jawhar Sircar

In Writers Buildings, there was a sense of shock when word of Basanta Choudhury's death spread through the centuries-old corridors of power. This was exactly 21 years ago and many of us moved on to the [Nandan](#) film complex, Basanta Choudhury's workplace in some sense, to express a collective sense of grief. I had known him for over two decades and had become fairly close in the last few years, enough to take cheeky liberties. What all of us really regretted was that he had left us much too early. The obituaries that rolled out soon thereafter confirmed my guess — he was just 72 years when he died — which was outrageously unfair, to a veritable fountain of talent and scholarship.

Like everyone else, I had seen him first on the screen, and until 1979, he remained primarily an unforgettable movie actor, always at a distance. His role as Raja Rammohun Roy is etched forever in the public imagination, and somehow, even after so many decades, the two great sons of Bengal remain inextricably linked. He was surely “of Bengal” but he was not born “in Bengal”. His birth was in 1928 in distant Nagpur, and he must have acquired his flawless Hindi there, in his childhood and youth.

It was a treat to see his command over a language that defeats the most valorous of Bengalis, who just cannot match the inscrutable gender of nouns with their verbs, and can hardly ever transcend the overwhelming accent of the Bengali language. Not only was his Hindi perfect, so was his impeccable delivery of English. He elevated both languages with his god-gifted baritone voice. This is what impressed me and I told him so when I met him for the first time — and also that I despaired that I would never hear the two languages pronounced the way they should. He burst instantly into a loud laughter and said I reminded him of Henry Higgins's stinging indictment of accents, elocution and language. He had gone straight to Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, which is famous particularly for its film version, ‘*My Fair Lady*’. And then, he spoke extempore for the next twenty minutes or so on this rather less-discussed subject.

That explains what Basanta Choudhury really was — a thespian who had soared to unusual heights. He combined the roles of a theatre actor, film star, elocutionist, scholar, expert, numismatist, antiquarian, collector and historian so effortlessly. And his tall handsome frame was presented in his sartorial excellence, in a shining white dhoti and a kurta or panjabi as we call it, replete with a remarkable shawl perched on his shoulder. He would light up whichever party, reception or cultural meet he would stride into, with his unmistakable regal bearing. No doubt about that. But what overwhelmed those around him was his unique skill in picking on any topic and expounding on an unknown or lesser-known aspect of it — not with any overbearing pedantry but in a witty, easy conversational style. He knew a lot, across a mind-boggling array of subjects, and that is what marked him out in a profession which did not house too many intellectuals.



From left Soumitra Chatterjee, Basanta Choudhury, HKL Bhagat and Sova Sen

It was as an intellectual that I had engaged him first. I was just 27 years old, in 1979, four years into the Indian Administrative Service. I had been posted as Sub Divisional Officer in charge of Barrackpore, the southern borders of which were well into the metropolis of Kolkata. This urban tract stretched from Salt Lake, Lake Town, Dum Dum and Baranagar in the south and it meant that I visited Kolkata proper, whatever that meant, quite frequently. This gave me

some opportunity to see my parents and catch up with friends as well.

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During this phase, a common friend, Bibhash Gupta, took me to a fascinating scholar and cultural historian, Radha Prasad Gupta. Bibhash Babu was a philatelist, antiquarian, collector and an expert on the history and culture of Kolkata while Radha Prasad Gupta or RP, as he was called, was a master in almost all these areas, except perhaps, philately. He was famous even then for his erudition, and within a very short time, he drew me close — teaching me a lot. RP's immediate circle consisted of three absolute stalwarts of cultural enquiry in Kolkata and on the Bengali culture as such — beside other domains like art and literature. They were Basanta Choudhury, antiquarian Shubha Tagore, journalist and author Nikhil Sarkar. The four were joined, on and off, by — lo and behold — Mulk Raj Anand from Bombay.

I soon discovered a new, exciting world, as RP and Basanta-da poured their knowledge over me. I hardly understood then how fortunate I was when they took me for chats at Subho Tagore's flat. This was in the ancient but magnificent LIC-owned palatial building, at the crossing of SN Banerjea Road and Chowringhee. I remember both my visits to this unforgettable apartment, so full with Tagore's priceless collection of all types of pipes and smoking devices and countless other artefacts and paintings. RP, Basanta Choudhury and Subho Babu were joined on one occasion by Nikhil Sarkar and Bibhas Gupta. Had I known then that this was, indeed, a very precious meeting of some of the finest minds of Kolkata, I would have begged, borrowed or stolen a camera to capture it on celluloid.



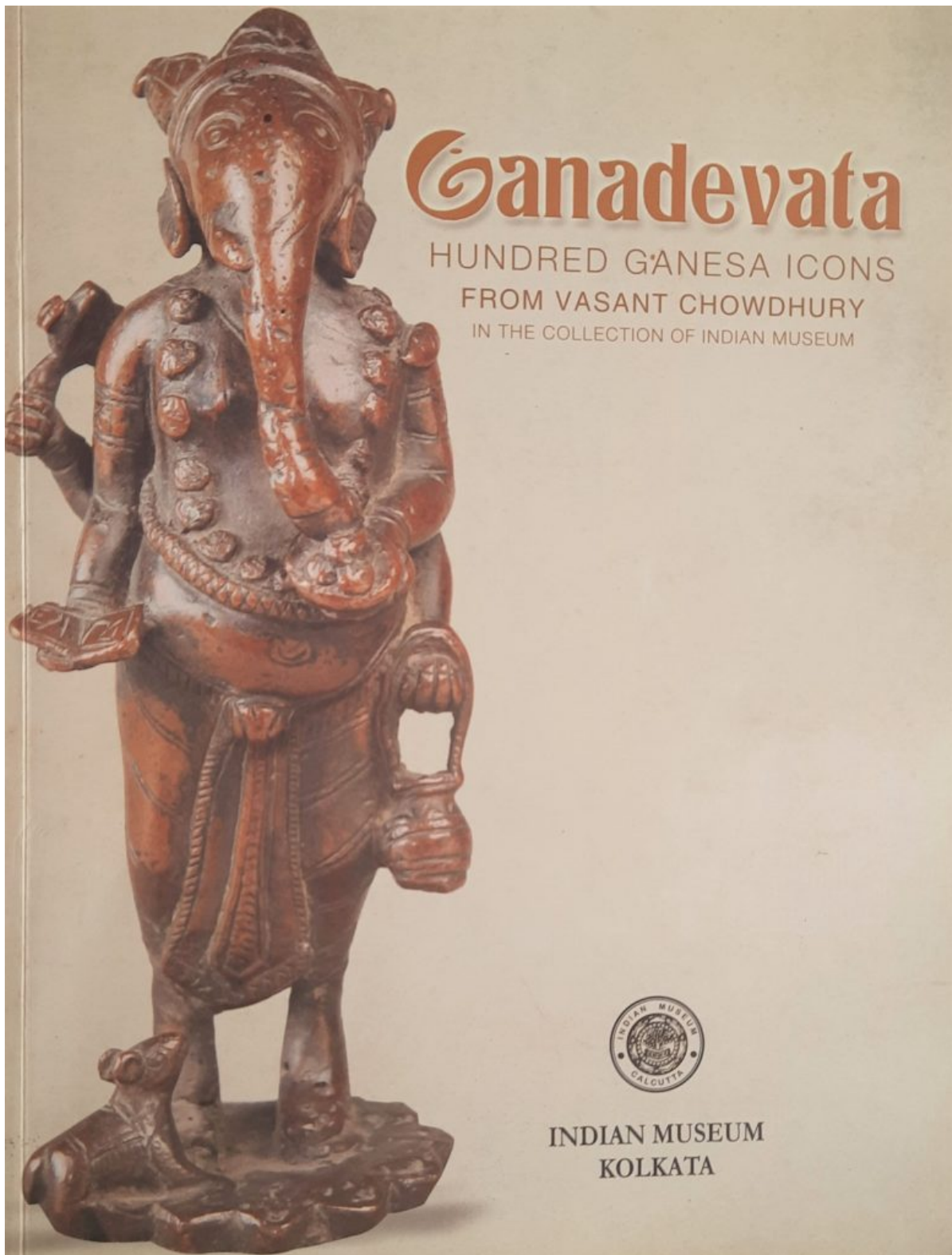
From Left Gyalmo Hope Cooke, Mahalia Jackson, Amala Shankar, Basanta Choudhury at an event organised by American Consulate

Anyway, on their persuasion, I started reading a lot of books and articles — between my exacting duties of maintaining law and order in a perennially problematic area and of executing endless welfare schemes. I stumbled upon a magic world of culture and found in it a perfect antidote to the inescapable tension of trying to administer a volatile population. It also helped reduce the frustrating boredom and frustration of forever complying with a rule-bound bureaucracy.

Basanta Choudhury often regaled me with rare gems from the history of Kolkata and its captivating history and culture, while RP added other stories — in his inimitable manner of speaking, in chaste, antiquated but almost-forgotten dialect of 'old North Kolkata'. Beside listening and asking, my task was also to pour, at appropriate intervals, exact amounts of cognac into an oversized balloon glass for Basanta-da. RP preferred Old Monk rum and I helped him fill up his plebeian tumbler. Basanta Chowhury often moved away from 'old Kolkata' and led me on to the people and the culture of the lesser-known southeastern region of 'undivided Bengal', Tripura and the Arakan.

He was an acknowledged authority on this area and an internationally-known coin collector of these territories. He had written so many erudite articles on them. His forays also took him to the North-Eastern states of India and he would occasionally take out a carefully-protected coin from the side pocket of his crisp white kurta or 'punjabi' and show it to us. Sometimes, it was an intriguing Ganesh and Basanta C was widely known as a pioneer in collecting Ganesh images of

different shapes, sizes and forms. This was long before it became a fashionable hobby. The point is that whatever he loved he also took pains to learn a lot about it and to specialise in the sector. His fantastic collection of Ganesh-es were donated to the Indian Museum and are now a part of its famous collections.



Catalogue of the Ganesha collection donated to the Indian Museum

But, I forgot to mention what he was best known for, beyond these talents, namely as a film actor. Basanta Da's first film, Mahaprasthanar Pathe, was released in 1952 —the year I was born. Among his most memorable films (other than Raja Rammohun Roy, that I have mentioned earlier) are Bhagaban Shri Krishna Chaitanya, Deep Jwele Jaai, Anushtoop Chhanda, Abhaya O Srikanta, Jadu Bhatta, Andhare Alo, Diba Rattrir Kabya and Devi Chaudhurani. I remember some of the tales he narrated to me in Delhi, where I had moved between late 1986 and December 1991. He explained his role in a forthcoming film, Antarjali Jatra, and then elaborated on the subject of redundancy in old age and the ritual invitation to death.



With Neelanjana Ghose and Goutam Ghose during the filming of *Antarjali Jatra* (1987)

A few months later Goutam Ghose premiered this film in Delhi and practically hijacked me to see Basanta da and others act in it. I will never forget how perplexed my wife, Nandita, was, later that evening in 1988, when Goutam da trooped in with the actress of his film, *Antarjali Jatra*, her mother and other members of his team. Once my wife had tidied over her major problems like how to seat all the guests and how to feed them, Goutam da (who had got food over as well) and Shampa Ghosal, the new star, recounted how Basanta Choudhury and Shatrughan Sinha had bowled over the cast and the villagers who had crowded all over.



Booklet of *Raja Rammohun* (1965) starring Basanta Choudhury

Within weeks, I also heard their part of the story from the two stalwarts, who visited Delhi soon thereafter. On another occasion, he was in full form as we settled in with some fine cognac. It was nestled in an impressive bulbous glass, a set of which I had bought mainly for VIP guests like him. Basanta Choudhury would hold us spellbound — taking occasional sips from the glass and drags from the very fashionable cigar that he held between the fingers of his left hand.

He discussed Rituparna Ghosh's *Hirer Aangti* (The Diamond Ring) in which he was then acting, but my wife would keep asking him questions about how exhilarating it must have been to work with Suchitra Sen, in films like *Deep Jwale Jaay* and *Devi Chaudhaurani*. I was more interested in how the directors behaved with a towering personality like him. He must have acted in almost a hundred films in his four long decades of acting — and also received so many awards.



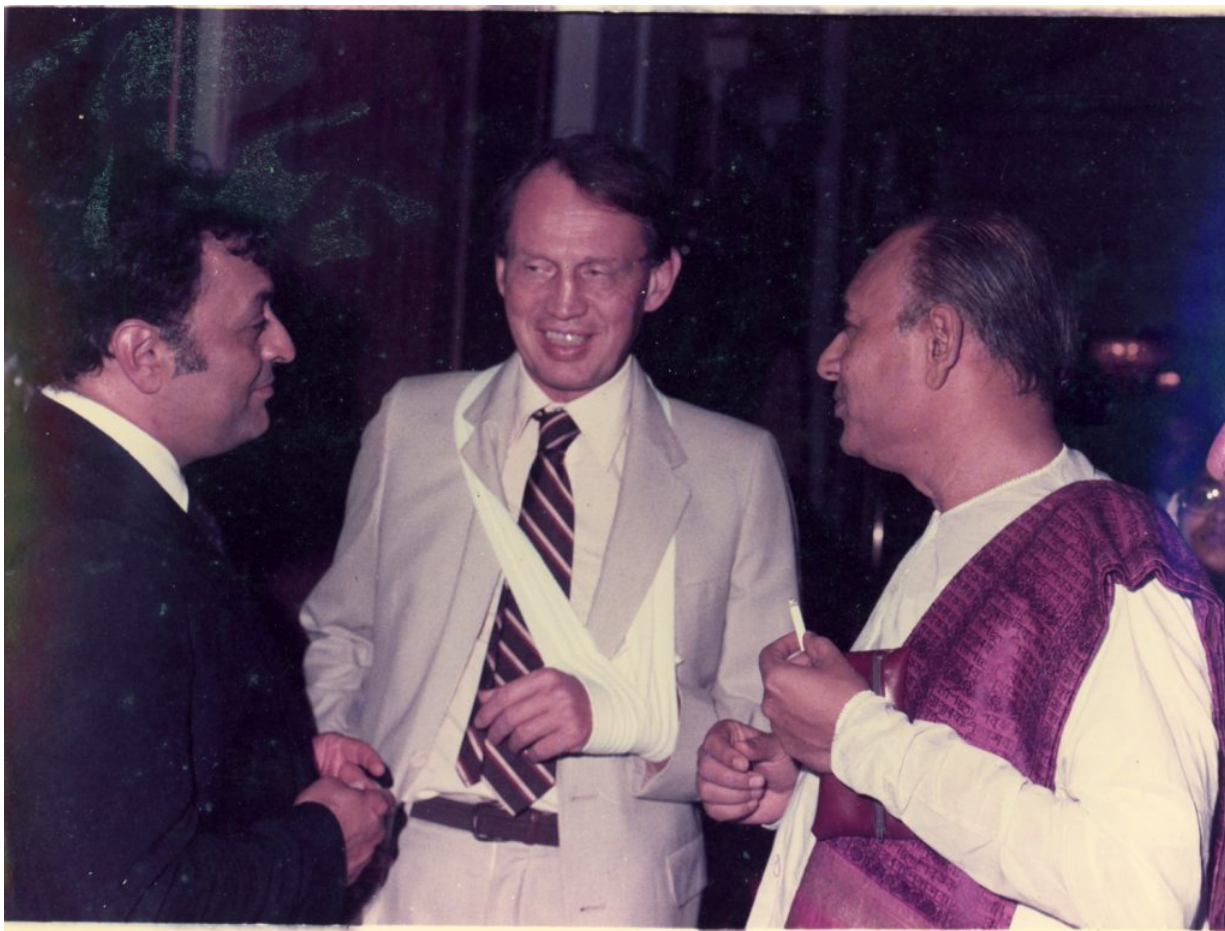
With Gyanesh Mukherjee in *Hirer Aangti* (1992) by Rituparno Ghosh

Like every true actor, he was not confined only to films and was also equally comfortable with theatre and radio. I remember many a tip that he gave me on diction and delivery, as I had also dabbled with radio — from 1971, my early days with Akashvani Kolkata's *Yuva Vani* channel. He explained how not to drop a single syllable and yet not sound artificial at all. We went over our private rehearsals, quite seriously. When theatre, jatra and cabaret came too close to each other for comfort, in Kolkata in the 1980s, Basanta da was quite at ease with the first two. He would drop in occasionally at my huge British-era bungalow at Bardhaman, where I happened to be the District Magistrate. This was in 1985 and 1986 and he was on his 'jatra tours' to different small towns of Bengal. I learnt from witnesses that he was the main attraction and that people had bought up all the tickets well in advance, just to see him act and hear his voice. A true thespian till his last day.

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In 1997, I was placed on the Kolkata International Film Festival's Advisory Committee, where he was the Chairman. In fact, he was Chairman of the entire Nandan Film Centre and we began to meet more frequently. He was an ideal person to preside over such meetings as he let everyone speak and tactfully avoided spats that are so common in the world of cinema and in the performing arts. We took pride in organising spectacular film festivals, thanks to the chief minister's personal interest and a very enterprising team.

After it was all over, I would whisper an invitation into his ears — to come home for some decent drinks. I proceed ahead of him as he preferred to drive his own black Austin. The rest of the evening was more than well spent. I am reminded of a story that Vir Sanghvi recounted after his death — of how he tackled the pompous. It was at a grand dinner party at the Oberoi Grand that Vir and he were accosted and disturbed by a socialite lady, who was hell bent on monopolising the conversation and was constantly dropping names. Basanta da turned to her and introduced Vir as a very famous Bollywood film star she must know. Not only was the lady sufficiently overawed but the pair could then talk among themselves, without her conceited interruptions. He proved he could act in real life, too.



With Zubin Mehta and an official of the US Embassy wearing his pink embellished shawl

Choudhury's collection of Kashmiri and Persian [shawls](#) were truly enviable and he picked up masterpieces from the North East as well. They suited him as someone who could carry them with befitting elan. Even Satyajit Ray admired his taste in this domain. It is said that he borrowed some from him or that Basanta da helped him procure rare pieces for his movies. The pride of place went to a silk shawl from Varanasi that had the Lord's name embroidered all over, like a namavali.

I am shocked at my impertinence those days, as I would often lift a shawl off his shoulder and place it on mine. Even as onlookers observed quite aghast, he complimented me for my newly acquired treasure — he had no other choice. I would then grandly inform him that his shawl had been 'nationalised'. What on earth? I proceeded to explain quite cockily that if the government (sarkar or sircar) ever needed something it would dispossess the owner. That property was nationalised, wasn't it? As he looked quite perplexed, I would return the shawl and place it on his shoulder. But I also requested him to kindly remember to mention it in his will that he would give it to me. He said he would favourably consider the proposition, but the cruel, untimely hand of death gave him no such chance. But, God is lucky — for Basanta Choudhury must now be regaling Him with some of his most attractive of stories.

Images courtesy: Family of Basanta Choudhury

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