

Classic Poetry Series

Buddhadeb Bosu
- poems -

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Buddhadeb Bosu(30 November 1908 - 17 March 1974)

Buddhadeva Bose (also spelt Buddhadeb Bosu) was a major Bengali writer of the 20th century. Frequently referred to as a poet, he was a versatile writer who wrote novels, short stories, plays and essays in addition to poetry. He was an influential critic and editor of his time. He is recognized as one of the five poets who moved to introduce modernity into Bengali poetry. It has been said that since Tagore, perhaps, there has been no greater talent in Bengali literature.

Biography

Buddhadeva Bose (BB) was born in Comilla, Bengal, now in Bangladesh. His ancestral home was in the village of Malkhanagar in the Vikrampur region (in Munshiganj District, Bangladesh). His father's name was Bhudeb Chandra Bose and mother's name was Benoy Kumari. His mother died just few hours after his birth and his father for a year became a bereaved wanderer. He remarried few years later and settled down. So, Buddhadeva was brought up and raised by his maternal grandparents Chintaharan Sinha and Swarnalata Sinha. Literally they remained his soul parents. He was schooled at the Dhaka Collegiate School in Dhaka, in addition to high schools in Comilla and Noakhali. He passed the Matriculation examination in 1925. He secured the second place in the Intermediate examination. His early life was associated with Dhaka where he lived in a simple house at 47 Purana Paltan.

BB went to the University of Dhaka for studying English language and literature. He was a resident of the Jagannath Hall. After completing his MA in English from the University of Dhaka with distinction marks that remains unsurpassed as yet (2007), he moved to Calcutta in 1931. Initially he had no regular job and resorted to 'private tuition' for livelihood.

While a student he became associated with the famous poetry magazine Kallol. The modernist literary movement of 1930s is often referred to as the Kallol era. He was also worked as an editor of the literary magazine Progoti (started 1926).

He married Pratibha Basu (1914/1915 - October 4, 2006) (née Shome) in 1934. They had three children, Meenakshi Dutta (b. 1936), Damayanti Basu Singh (b. 1940) and Suddhashil Bose (1945–1987). Pratibha Bosu was an accomplished singer in her teens but later concentrated on literature and became a distinguished writer in her own right.

Buddhadeva Bose taught at the Ripon College (now Surendranath College) an affiliated college of the University of Calcutta and later worked as a journalist in the capacity of an editor for The Statesman. In 1956 he set up the Department of Comparative literature in the Jadavpur University, and was on its faculty for a number of years. He was also a visiting professor at many universities in the United States.

One of his most important contributions to the Bengali literary scene was the establishment of the Kavita (Poetry) - the flagship poetry magazine in Bengali, which he published and edited for 25 years.

BB has been described a disciplined, almost obsessed, worker by Nabaneeta Dev Sen. After meeting Buddhadeva Bose, Clinton B. Seely remarked that Buddhadeva was a very intense person. He spoke quickly, with emotion. He laughed wonderfully. He was interested in everything... He was what I would come to refer to "jyanto," "alive," "vibrant," "energetic." Conversations were often at fever pitch. He was bubbling over with things to say.

BB who grew up almost as an orphan showed deep sense of love and care for his children. In a letter to his daughter Damayanti Basu Singh who just flew to the USA for studies he wrote: "Rumi, since this morning, I am really worried. Have you kept your money and traveler's cheques in a safe and handy place? I should've checked everything at the airport, but just didn't remember to do so. Exchange the pounds I gave you in England. For your small expenditures spend the loose change that you have in dollars. With the money I gave you and the first installment of your scholarship, open an account in Bloomington. Don't deposit the traveler's cheques in the account. You'll need those for your trips across the country. And make sure you don't lose the slip with the cheque numbers written on it. ...Baba." Damayanti wrote that '... And I remember that Dad used to write late into the night. He used to place books beside the table lamp to block the light so that it wouldn't disturb our sleep.'

Literary Life

His first book of poetry, namely, "Bandir Bandona" was published when he was only seventeen years old. Although he worked as a teacher at different colleges and universities, he devoted his whole life to literature. This is symbolized by the name of his residence in Calcutta which was Kaviata Bhavan ('The House of Poetry'). His first novel, "SaDa", was published when he was 18, in 1930. He wrote more than 40 novels, but his epic novel "Tithidore", published in 1949, became his most admired novel which is now considered a classic. He published

more than 160 titles during his lifetime. So far 200 books have been published. However, many pieces remain to be anthologized as yet. He was a hard worker and writing was his life. He began his day at 9 in the morning and would regularly work until 10 at night. Work, for him, meant writing.

Literary Style

Without undermining his genius, it can be said that Buddhadeva Bose wrote poetry essentially under the influence of Western literature. But, in his early works he showed clear influence of Rabindranath Tagore. But both in terms of theme and style, he reflected marked influence of renowned Western poets of whom Baudelaire should be named foremost. He was also influenced by Ezra Pound, William Butler Yeats, Rilke and T. S. Eliot. Allegedly, he believed in 'arts for arts sake'. He was a perfectionist as a writer and emphasized on technical perfection of his works. Although he mostly wrote in free verse, his command on rhyme and rhythm was great. As an excellent editor of his historical magazine "Kavita" (Poetry), the first magazine in India devoted only to the cause of modern Bengali Poetry, he demonstrated his amazing ability to identify the best talents of the 20th century Bengal. His prose style was also established on a diction developed by himself. His novels remain modern even by standards of the 21st century. He established a style of appreciative literary criticism that remains unparalleled. Also, his verse plays, written at the end phase of his life, created a poetic style all his own.

Accusation of Obscenity

While the literary circles of Bengal did not hesitate to recognize him as a leading post-Tagore literary personality, Buddhadeva Bose achieved mass popularity when his novel Raat Bha're Brishti was banned by the government on charges of obscenity. It depicted a love triangle which explicitly allowed sex to play a critical role in human relationship. Eventually, the High Court absolved the novel of the charges of obscenity. Raat bha're Brishti has been translated by Clinton B. Seely. with the title 'Rain through the Night'.

Literary Organizations

In his school days BB took various literary initiatives. He was the editor, principal contributor and scribe of the Pataka, a hand-written literary magazine published by the school students. Since then he was continuously engaged and involved in many literary organizations including publications of literary journals and books. While studying at the Dhaka University he was elected as the literary secretary of the students' association of his hall of residence, namely the

Jagannath Hall. In this capacity he edited the *Bashontika*, the annual literary magazine of the Jagannath Hall. BB published one of his memorable poems, namely, 'Kankaboti' in the *Bashontika*.

BB actively participated in the Progressive Writers' Association in the late 1930s. He also joined the Anti-Fascist Writers and Artists' Association in the early 40s.

Translation of Baudelaire

In 1961, BB published a carefully selected poems of French poet Charles Baudelaire translated by him into Bengali. It was titled *Charles Baudelaire O Taar Kobita*. In the introduction to the translations, BB made a notable analysis of modernism in Western literature.

Bengali Gastronomy

It may sound bizarre that a scholar like BB could write a book on Bengali gastronomy. In fact it was a long essay that BB wrote in the *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, serialised in 1971 (1–4 January) under the title *Bhojon Rashik Bangali*. It is her daughter Damayanti Basu Singh who in 2005 published the essay in the form a small book and herself provided recipes of the dishes referred to by BB. Damayanti said, 'My father, Buddhadeva Bose, was a small man and a frugal eater. He was never greedy for food, but used to be upset if there wasn't a generous spread on the dining table.' Quoting Goethe, BB would say, 'my eyes are larger than my appetite'. So there was always both variety and excess of food even for the daily meals. The essay was translated by BB himself into English and was published in *The Hindustan Standard*, published from Calcutta.

Playwright

In his early days in the school in Noakhali, BB with his fellow mates had formed a 'drama group'. No wonder that he took special interest in writing plays. He wrote more than five plays. However, recognition as a playwright came late, after the death of the playwright in 1974. It is Salil Bhandopadhyaya of Thatron Theatre Group, Calcutta, who produced some of BB's plays like *Tapeswi-O-Tarangini*, *Kolkatar Electra* and *Anamni Angana* and drew attention of people to BB as a playwright. The Hindi translation of BB's *Protham Partho*, produced by Circle Theatre Company, has been described to be one of the best presentations on the Delhi theatre.

Recognition

Apart from formal recognition mentioned below, BB remains the most important literary personality of the 20th century Bengali literature, after Rabindranath Tagore. Buddhadeb became the central figure in a cluster of poets who came to embody Bengali modernism in early 20th century. In emphasizing BB's importance, Ashok Mitra commented, 'These days we buy tickets to hear a poet. There was a time 60–70 years ago when a poet was considered to be unemployed and mad. If Buddhadeva Bose had not come up with a poetry magazine, things would not have been the same. There would have been no Jibanananda Das but for Buddhadeva Bose.'

Buddhadeva Bose received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1967 for his verse play Tapaswi O Tarangini, received the Rabindra Puraskar in 1974 for Swagato Biday(poetry) and was honoured with a Padma Bhushan in 1970.

Works

So far about 200 titles have been published, including 'collected works' in several volumes. Some of them are mentioned below.

A Stranger

Dead are those girls - had breasts like water-lilies;
And the pond so cool with grass and moist snails-
Small; - but beyond knee-deep water was the storm.

Dead the friends; - evenings no longer deepen
Spacious and slow, in glad verandahs,
Nor the talk is tightly tossed, like rafts upon the waves -
A game; - but leading upto voyages.

And the animal's cave is closed. No bribes can open the door.
Reduced to a worm is the tiger's redness.
No more the warm wet flow of the stupid child.

Only while the rain
Blurs the trees where witches shake their hair,
And the walls of coupling cats grows sharp like needles-
At midnight, upon the pavement
Is left a heart,
A stranger
A raw lump of feeling slow to learn.

Buddhadeb Bosu

Frogs

The rains have come, and frogs are full of glee.
They sing in chorus, in loud, jubilant voices.

Nothing to fear today: no drought, no dearth of worms,
Nor serpent's jaw, nor stones of wanton boys.

Cloud-like, the grasses thicken: in the fields the lush waters stand;
Louder leaps their hour of brief immortality.

They have no necks, but their throats are rich and swollen;
And o, what sleek bodies, what cold gem-like eyes!

Eyes staring upward, fixed in meditation,
Ecstatic, lidless, like rishis' gazing on God.

The rain has ceased, the shadows slant;
Hymn-like floats their singing, on the slow, attentive air.
Now dies the day in silence, but a sombre drone
Perforates the twilight; the thin sky leans to listen.

Darkness and rain: and we are warm in bed:
Yet one unwearied phrase mingles in our sleep-
The final sloka of the mystic chanting,
The croak, croak, croak of the last fanatic frog.

Buddhadeb Bosu

Now The Battle Is Against The World

Now the battle is against the world, this world,
with me on one side, on the other your eyes silent, deep;
between us the meandering, dizzying path of this world.

The people of the world stretch out their hands to draw
a red line between us; they divide us with their arms
stretched out like quivering, poisonous snakes.

Before my eyes, your breasts sway like halcyon
dreams; like day-dreams your hair unravels upon
my chest; my heart quivers like a bird

caught in the storm; whom shall we fear?
We know what lies beyond the next bend- -
it is you- -you and me; then for whom else

shall we have eyes? To my eyes your breasts
are like halcyon dreams; on your breasts
my hands eager, warm; at my touch your breasts

flood over, like the mighty currents of a blind, invisible
river; they wipe away all vestiges of this unruly
world; only the powerful torrents of this huge, dark

river remain, where we are the victors, we are one, you
and I- -how beautiful, how divinely beautiful these words- -
You, - - you and I.

Buddhadeb Bosu

Sonnet For Winter, 48

There is nothing out there; draw the curtain close.
Those are only to lull you -- grass, dirt, puddle, sky.
Not that your potted plant, pet songster are any less false.
Fall into yourself, sink into your own black hole.

Objects are decoys, safer to be deaf as stone,
No Tao can teach you what you don't already know.
As Sinbad with his load of old man of the sea
Get used to this daylong donkey's toil of crafting rhyme.

Winter casts its anchor; what need to wait for more?
Coast and seaport come to life on an once immaculate wall;
Hours, gongs, bells, changes merge into one.

Flinging away its cloak of light and moonlight,
The earth slips into obscurity so that you can create
Your own unmoving sun and earth and moon on the page.

Buddhadeb Bosu

Sonnet, 3 A.M

Only the private is holy; the soft light
On the yellowing page of a book, the print
Legible as stars on the open page of the sky
Or the languid letter you write at midnight to a faraway

Friend, stern only to timorous sleep. Do you think
Jesus was director of a philanthropic foundation?
Or Buddha the babbling, balding, amiable president of an NGO?
Beyond the incense and flywhisks of those

Gaunt keepers of salvation, their Lofty Holinesses, the Most Ancient and Supreme
Guardians of the Truth,

They have escaped their disciples, cool
as clouds.
There is more in half an hour's indolence
Than in galloping away after the grail.

Buddhadeb Bosu

Still Life

Golden apple, is there a reason why you are?
After the kiss, striking the air with luster?
Or an aspara's rounded breast, darkened with the rapture
And held in the hand of a god whose sight is gone?

So much, yet just begun! This autumn seems unending.
Enough! But more. Even the skin is meshed
In eager sweetness. This glad befriending
Works through the loss undiminished.

And is that all? So think the sleepy ones.
But when some lust-encumbered eye
Sees through bowl and orchard, tears across the veils,

And in a strange spell of light, becomes
In you a forest, a spacious sky—
We too then wish we were something else.

Buddhadeb Bosu

To A Dead Woman

"I will not forget"- -vows so arrogant
life does not forgive. So, let leave vain promises.
A fleeting spark you were, may your liberation spread along
unimagined pathways, the enchantment of your lovely face fade,
fade into the grass, the leaves, the dance of the seasons,
the oceans, the blue of the sky.
In this night, in the solitude of my heart I keep aflame
only these words- -You were here, once you were here.

Buddhadeb Bosu

To The Seasons

Having overcome the accidents of Winter, Summer, Spring, and the Rains,

I welcome at my heart's evening the void, the null, the absolute zero

No longer prey to the whimsy of the seasons, I rejoice
In freedom from function,
liberty from thought, lightness of death

No longer wronged by the contingent, the wails of the grieving,
Laughter and shrieks of the whirling months, I yield at most
To the malaise of old age, to the body's loss of humors

Markings in a dead script on a calendar no longer in use

In a ruined palace my moving finger points to rusty locks hanging
From rows of the chained doors of long deserted chambers

Dimmed is the former chiaroscuro, my heart is monochrome
A late autumn landscape with gray fog shading into a pallid moon

In my ears the ageless sea confirms what I already know
I have for company only the void, the vacuum, the zero

Buddhadeb Bosu