

In Memoriam

Sunil Gangopadhyay (1934 - 2012)

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Even though his relationship with Tagore remained fractious, Sunil Gangopadhyay's multifaceted literary abilities continue to remind us of Tagore's versatility. All genres of Bengali literature were touched by his genius.

Born in Faridpur on 7th September 1934, Sunil's first poem was published as early as 1950. Although other genres engaged him subsequently, poetry was to remain his enduring love and Sunil's major contribution lay in establishing the Bengali poetry magazine *Krittibas* in 1953. *Krittibas*, co-edited with Deepak Mazumder and Ananda Bagchi, was to provide a platform for budding Bengali poets of the post-Tagore generation. This new poetry demonstrated the transition to a defiant, rebellious language of turmoil of the angry 50s and after, creating a new idiom for Bengali poetry after Tagore. Sunil was thus the leading figure in a new fiery 'Young Brigade' that included among others Jyotirindra Mitra, Sankha Ghosh, Shakti Chattopadhyay and Sandipan Chattopadhyay. In his first editorial for *Krittibas*, Sunil had written "the collection of the scattered experiments of different young poets can regenerate a new emotion and boldness in Bengali poetry while retaining the distinct voice of each poet". The frankness and the zest of this generation could be traced in Sunil's first book of poems *Eka Ebong Koyek Jon (Alone and In Company)* published in 1958. By this time, Sunil had already published his first short story *Bagh* and enrolled for a degree in Economics.

In 1962, Sunil met Allen Ginsburg and developed a deep attachment with him. He toured America and Europe subsequently as part of a visiting authors' delegation to meet Salvadore Dali, Steven Spender and an ailing T.S.Eliot. The modernist moorings were by then more firmly etched in Sunil's writings.

The peregrinations brought Sunil's interest to a new genre that combined the novel and travel writing, leading to the most famous of Sunil's *non de plume*, Neel Lohit. Sunil was to use two other such personas of Sanatan Pathak and Nil Upadhyay. Travels to the nooks and corners of Bengal with his bohemian troupe of friends, familiarized Sunil to the ways of life of a huge section of the population and generated a wealth of experience that he plumbed through the multiple author personas that he invented. What is noticeable in such writings is the keen eye for detail, the acute sense of picking up an inflection of the language and an insight into the aspirations and frustrations of various groups of citizens across classes and ethnicities.

Sunil's poetry of love, especially the Nikhilesh and Neera poems continued to carve a niche for him among readers at large, and were translated into various languages. Amit Chaudhuri has recently noted the coming together of the erotic and the public, the politics and the lovemaking, the city and the female self in the backdrop of the noisy, turbulent Kolkata of the 1960s and the 70s:

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I dreamed that one day, the world's mothers would serve steaming rice to all the small, small, children

Those bullets and explosions on noisy College Street

You alighted from the bus, and at that instant, inside, the festive gunpowder went off

With a jump, someone cleared the park railing, and lay down as an ascetic might

His face in the grass.

The anger and disillusionment in his milieu found their way into his many early novels set in the background of the metropolis, providing a graphic insight into the urban Bengali consciousness. It was this combination of detail and insight in novels like *Aranyer Dinratri* and *Pratidwandi* that drew filmmakers like Satyajit Ray to Sunil's texts. The cinematic renderings made Sunil a household name in Indian literature.

When Sunil joined the Anandabazaar group, his association led to an avalanche of literary activity in journalism. Apart from hardcore journalistic pieces, there were his regular serialised novels and the mandatory novels for the puja publications. During his coverage of the funeral of Indira Gandhi and the riots in Delhi, his keen sense of detail was combined with analysis and a distinctly humane angle. However, Sunil's career as a novelist was to tower above his other contributions.

Sunil's interest in children's literature prompted the Kakababu stories published regularly in the well circulated children's magazine *Anandamela*.

Interestingly, all the major writers of this period were experimenting with this genre, including Sirshendu Mukhopadhyay and Samaresh Basu. Sunil's protagonist Kakababu or Raja Roychowdhury was a man with a crutch, an iron will and a zero tolerance for crime. The sheer will power of the protagonist with his zest for adventure, a keen ear for history and an attraction to travel transformed the experience of children's literature into a simultaneous interest in history and geography, a feature that links Sunil's writing with that of Satyajit Ray's Feluda stories. Texts like *Bhayonkor Sundor* or *Sabuj Dwiper Raja* also sensitised young readers to the fragility of our ecosystems and the necessity to be alert to the beauties of topography. Sunil's effort in this sphere was groundbreaking, particularly in the unobtrusive way in which he brought learning, ethics and entertainment together.

Sunil's later career saw a turn toward the historical novel and the maturity of his creativity was combined with the density of his research. He had been fascinated with the complexities and evolution of the Bengal Renaissance and his texts like *Shei Shomy (Those Days)* and *Prothom Alo (First Light)* brought history alive for contemporary readers. The enduring popularity of these novels led to *Moner Manush (The Man of my Heart)* — Sunil's rendering of the life of Lalon Fakir. The extraordinary tapestry of history and narrative was woven around the wealth of songs that he had researched for, for this text. The novel was immediately filmed and enjoyed a huge fan following. After Saradindu Bandopadhyay, rarely has Indian literature witnessed such a

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sensitive yet mesmerizing rendition of Indian history. By now Sunil's prose style was etched in the minds of his readers; conversational, penetrating, simple and lucid, yet bearing the gravity of emotion or the dry lightness of humour. Whether Sunil's historical fiction alone could have been a literary legacy for a generation is still a matter of considerable debate.

Amidst his multiple literary activities, Sunil had always retained a keen interest in contemporary politics. Inclined towards the intellectual left, he had earlier actively protested against any form of atrocity. Later, however, he had refrained from attending meetings or processions, but his pen was as sharp as ever when commenting on a host of issues including a spirited defence of the government's policy on Singur. In his final years he was a regular columnist for the *Ananda Bazaar Patrika* where his frank assessment of political events was combined with a delightful zest for the trivial detail and the anecdote.

The man Sunil was extraordinarily generous and his lasting legacy remains in his efforts to inspire and promote budding authors and publishers. Numerous younger authors have narrated accounts of Sunil going all out to help them with recommendations, if he found their writings to be worthy. He rarely turned down little magazine editors and argued that it was his duty to protect fledgling publishing ventures. The spontaneous outpouring of grief at Sunil's death is testimony to the tremendous goodwill that he had generated among younger poets and authors. His towering status never came in the way of recognizing talent and nurturing it. A winner of numerous awards, Sunil Gangopadhyay carried his fame with amazing grace and lightness.

As Vice Chairman and Chairman of the Sahitya Akademi in the final years of his life, Sunil had taken an active interest in administratively facilitating Indian literature across various languages. Interested in translation, he had brought a new life to translation across various languages with a particular eye for bringing up new authors. At Visva-Bharati I had been fortunate to host Sunil Gangopadhyay during a number of such visits of younger poets and I was struck by his interest in their poetry and the inspiration that he provided them. His amiable personality had been instrumental in harmonizing a disparate group of poets and authors at usually noisy Sahitya Akademi meetings. One of his last major interests had been to develop a project of translating Rabindranath's texts into various Indian languages. Like Tagore, Sunil had been a great advocate of the cultural diversity of India and had seen literature as a bridge that could facilitate familiarity and understanding, leading to a mitigation of conflict.

For Sunil Gangopadhyay, the journey of Neel Lohit has reached completion. He has left behind a corpus of texts that are amazingly versatile, that document the history of a number of decades. Beyond the contours of that history his characters and personas outline human aspirations, love and conflicts in a language that is lucid, lively and resonant. For his readers he continues to live in his creation:

***Neera we have much farther to go, don't get lost,
There are many births to change, don't get lost,
Neera, immortal girl, don't you get lost now.***

(The translations of the Neera poem is by Amit Chaudhuri)