

DEATH OF A POET

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Today, as usual, I picked up the newspaper from the dinner table. My wife keeps it handy on it for me. She knows my habit of reading newspaper, while she's working away in the kitchen attached to the dinner room, to prepare tea and breakfast for me and for herself. We talk about diverse things over tea and breakfast, at the table. Our son, our only child is studying away at an engineering college over in Kolkata. We keep this time reserved for a conjugal chat, for the rest of the day we remain busy. I in writing poetry and criticism and participating in literary activities and she with household work

While I was glancing through the newspaper, my ears attuned to the jingling of utensils moving about in the kitchen, my eyes was stuck by an obituary of Rebati Guha which said he died yesterday evening in a hospital. It flung me extremely surprised, for I had not expected his death so quick, though he had been admitted to the hospital a few days ago. I had meant to visit him at the hospital today. The newspaper had said his condition was not so serious that it would occasion his death so soon. Looking up from the newspaper, I shouted to my wife who was sieving tea into a cup, 'Look, Sumita. Rebati Guha died yesterday evening.' She received the news nonchalantly, as if she were habituated to hearing of deaths occurring everyday around her. I felt sort of disappointed; I had thought she would show interest and empathize. Many a time I had told her how much I adored him and how his poetry inspired mine. 'Yesterday I heard of his death over TV.' she said indifferently. She had already sieved the tea into two cups, 'You didn't tell me he died!' I said, exasperated and offended 'You know how I...' She cut me short. 'My ears have already go rotten, hearing your rigmarole,' she said. She came over and placed on the table one of the two cups and a saucer containing two baked breads, one on the other and some curry on top and hers and sat across from me. We were munching breads and occasionally sipping tea to wet the pieces crunched to let them go down the gullets. I was inwardly fumbling about for words with which to open the morning conversation. 'It seems you didn't like Rebati Guha,' I said in an attempt to drag her into the conversation. 'The question of my liking or disliking Rebati Guha doesn't arise,' she replied, munching on a piece of bread, her stare fastened on the saucer, on a half-eaten bread, her tea cooling. 'I dislike your indulgence in poetry. It has flung me into the humdrumness of existence with our son studying away from us.' She now looked a different woman. When I married her twenty years ago, she looked really beautiful, though she is of middle stature and her complexion is blackish. Her hair hangs long down her back. Her eyes are wide; Our son has inherited the wideness of eyes. Still the beauty has retained itself about her person. She now ties her hair in a bun. She says her hair hanging long down her back doesn't look good on her at this age. 'You dislike my poetry!' I said, quite bewildered and disappointed. I'd never before heard her say she

dislikes my poetry! She looked up. 'I didn't say I dislike your poetry,' she said, smiling a dry smile. 'I said I dislike your indulgence in poetry. By indulging in poetry you've enslaved yourself to an inordinate passion for being awarded and felicitated.' She resumed chewing on the last crumb of bread. Yes, I got a few national and international awards and was felicitated, too. That doesn't mean I've enslaved myself to them. Did she feel jealous of my achievements? I wondered. On second thoughts I could not put it down to jealousy. My literary pursuit has gradually distanced me from her and disappointed her and my books, trophies bear the brunt of her disappointment. When I said to her in a conjugal riff a few months ago, 'you're now mocking me at my awards and books, but after my death they will tell you what I really was.' 'I'll dispose of them,' she said. 'I'll have no use for them, mind!.' Stifling my feeling, I attempted to say something to contradict her accusation, but her indifferent and antagonistic look thwarted it.

The conversation got disjointed by her trite remark and it was impossible to carry on the conversation.. I rose to my feet, leaving her sipping her tea

Ensnared on my chair in my reading-cum-writing room I relapsed into reminiscing of how I encountered Rehati Guha.

I had heard of him the first time, when I was studying away at Kolkata University, staying at my maternal uncle's, I conceived the idea of translating into English a novel of 'Bonophool's, under the title 'They Still do Exist'. 'Bonophool' is the nom de plume of Balaichand Mukhopadhyay, a famous Bengali litterateur. My literary propensity had manifested itself at the age of fifteen when I had attempted an English translation of Ganadevata (The Temple Pavilion), a novel of another famous Bengali litterateur, Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay's,. I could not complete the translation, because my translating into English such a great novel when I was merely a student of Class X was attributed to my craziness by my parents and I was beaten and ridiculed out of it . But there was no one about here to ridicule me out of translating Bonophool's novel, for my maternal uncles etc. did not bother about what I was doing. Then I often visited British Council Library and brought books home on loan. One day there in the library I spotted a novel 'The Age of Wonder' by Richard Jones, a British novelist. I read it through and enjoyed it. I had just finished translating the novel. Suddenly an idea dawned upon me of getting the novel revised by Richard Jones. Thinking I would lose nothing, should Richard Jones decline to revise the translation, I did send the letter out to him care of Macmillan, UK, publisher of the novel. Mr. Jones replied to tell me he would revise my translation under the condition of the quality of the translation. However, I sent manuscript out to him.. He did revise the translation and appreciated the way I translated the novel. He gifted me a copy of his novel, The Age of Wonder

I picked some friends at the university. One day one of the friends informed me some Rehati Guha, a poet from Agartala would be felicitated at the Paschimbanaga Bangla

Academy; he had read this news at Ananda Bazar Patrika. He gave me this information, not because they knew of my literary propensity, I had not told them of it, but because Rebati Guha happened to be a poet from Agartala, Tripura to be felicitated. “Will you go over there to attend the felicitations on Rebati Guha? Samir asked. ‘The University will be closed on the day he’ll be felicitated.’ I nodded but could not attend, because I was sent away on an errand by my uncle

The real problem presented itself to me when it came to publishing the translation. No publisher I approached would publish it unless I myself financed publication. I knew my parents – my mother also earned as a government teacher – won’t financially help me in publishing the translation. After obtaining the Master Degree, I had intended to stay on in Kolkata so as to involve myself in Bengali literary activities, basking in the literary atmosphere then obtaining in Kolkata and trying at the same time to find a publisher willing to publish the translation without my financial help. But I was summoned back to Agartala to face an interview for the post of a subject teacher at a government higher secondary school. I was selected at the interview and sent over to Khowai, a sub-division There I associated myself with a literary group called ‘Aajkaal’ and contributed poems and short stories, all in Bengali, to local magazines and leading newspapers.

Exasperated at the criticism of my unintelligible handwriting by my colleagues, I bought a portable Ramington type writer and translated into English on the type-writer itself a short story of a famous Bengali novelist, Manik Bandyopadhyay’s under the title ‘The Teacher’. It was published in Indian Literature, a bimonthly journal of the Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi. I had obtained the permission of his literary executrix, Mrs. Kamala Bandyopadhyay, though. With the publication of the translation I stepped on the first rung of the literary ladder.

In the first half of the eighties Sunil Gangopadhyay’s story ‘Garam Bhaat’ (Hot Rice) published in Bengali periodical ‘Desh’, Kolkata sent a stir through the literary world. Thanks to the publication of my translation ‘The Teacher’ in Indian Literature,

I planned on an English translation of ‘Garam Bhaat’ Though a doubt assailed me as to whether Sunil Gangopadhyay who had ascended the literary ladder to its peak would give me permission to translate this story, I wrote and requested him to and he replied and granted me the permission. The translation was, too, accepted for publication in Indian Literature. The second success egged me on to translate one after another short stories by other Bengali litterateurs and the translations got published in Indian Literature and other journals. In course of time I switched over to creative writing and criticism in English.

In the hubbub of literary activities I had completely forgotten about Rebati Guha.

I got married and had the son born.

It was when I was transferred to Agartala that the name of Rebati Guha came back to my mind and I came face to face with him.

In Agartala, too, I got associated with a literary group called Bangla Sahitya Samsad. One day, it was decided that Bangla Sahitya Samsad would organize a poetry festival and Rebati Guha would be invited to chief-guest it. He was then much-respected poet and considered one of the best Bengali poets in Tripura,. His seven poetry collections had already been published, He was much awarded and felicitated. I myself knew of his being felicitated over in Kolkata. I volunteered to go over to his house and invite him on behalf of our literary group.

He welcomed me in with finely-tuned sensibility and gladly accepted our invite. He was of medium stature and wearing white trousers and white shirt. He didn't look bright, as I had expected. He was an ordinary sort of man. His hair considerably greyed, I became a bit disappointed.. However, we engaged ourselves in an intimate conversation over cups of tea his wife had brought in. She went back to her household work, leaving us in the conversation. In such conversation are featured self-aggrandizements.. At the end of the conversation he requested me to translate a few poems of his and I agreed.

After this meeting I met him several times particularly at seminars or literary festivals, but he didn't mention about my translating his poems. I didn't remind him of his request, though. Just two months ago in a wedding we were both invited to, he said, 'Remember I requested you to translate a few of my poems into English, Subir?' We were sitting on two chairs side by side. I nodded my head. 'I'm compiling best poems from the seven previous poetry collections,' he continued, 'and meaning to publish a separate collection.

I wish to publish an English version of this collection. Would you please translate it?' I once again nodded my head. 'I'll ring you up, when I'm finished,' he said.

But he couldn't ring me up. In a few days he was admitted to a hospital and died

To jerk me off my reverie rang my mobile phone. I picked it up. 'Have you not read of Rebati Guha's death, Subirbabu?' I heard Pradip asking from the other side. 'Yes, I have,' I replied. 'Come along to his house at once. We're waiting there for you to take the body over to the crematorium.'

The calling bell rang, "who has come early in this morning?" I wondered My wife opened the door, as she usually does. She came over in advance. 'Your four friends have come,' she said in a whispering voice. 'Don't forget about going to the vegetable market!' I had just taken my tea. Our conversation did not last long. The vegetable stock had almost been exhausted. My wife had hurried me to go to the vegetable market. I had readied myself to go out.

My four friends, Pradip, Samir, Suman and Amit materialized in my room. .

'What has made you come down here?' I said a bit angrily. "'You ought to have phoned me your coming down to my house? I'm going out to the vegetable market, as you see.'

They looked embarrassed. ‘As you know we, the admirers of Rebati Guha, have decided to publish his last poetry collection,’ Suman said. ‘Three days ago we talked to his publisher, Angshuman Kar about it. He said that rebate Guha had wanted for him to publish it. He told him that he would also get him to publish an English version of the collection and that you agreed to translate it.’

‘Yes, I did,’ I said, surprised. I had given up on the idea of translating it, now that he was dead,

‘This morning Angshuman Kar requested us over phone to go down to Rebati Guha’s house by 10 am,’ Pradip chimed in, ‘and take you along with us.’ He paused and added, staring full into my eyes, ‘He stressed your presence at the gathering at Rebati Guha’s house.’

I looked up at the wall watch. We had forty-five minutes at our disposal.

Before going out I winked at my wife. She understood what I wanted to say, seeing the dress I was wearing: ‘Manage with what we have for the time being.’ She stared away, not intending to show her face to my friends.

Angshuman Kar was waiting at a little distance outside Rabati Guha’s house for us. When we announced our presence, his wife took us into his room. ‘I won’t be a minute,’ she said and shuffled out

We found ourselves extremely surprised, on entering his room. The room had been drastically changed, metamorphosed, so to say. It looked denuded of all trances of his presence. All his books had been replaced on his book selves by school and college books and old newspapers. Two selves were empty.

‘We heard Rebati Guha’s conjugal life was not happy,’ Angshuman Kar said, to break the silence. ‘His wife was not pleased with his writing poetry. But I had never dreamed before she would retaliate on him by denuding his room of all signs of his presence.’

No one else commented

She translated into reality what my wife had said, I thought. She’s no different from my wife.

Rebati Guha’s wife entered, in hand a tray and handed round cups of tea on saucers and biscuits.

‘We’ve come down here to take the manuscript of his last poetry collection,’ Angshuman said, sipping tea. ‘We mean to publish it.’

‘Where will you get it,’ she said, her eyes glued in a fixed stare upon his face. ‘We’ve disposed of it along with his books’.

‘You’ve disposed of his last manuscript and his books!’ he exclaimed. He somehow managed to keep hold on the saucer and put it down on the table. We also put down ours, our hands, too, trembling. An expression of unbelief loomed large on the faces of those present. ‘You hate poetry so much!’

‘I do not hate poetry at all,’ she said, as nonchalantly. ‘I, I mean, we hated his passion which shattered our familial happiness. Besides...’ she stopped short.

‘I couldn’t understand it,’ Angshuman Kar said, the expression of surprise still clinging about his face.

We noticed this time her face writhed into a semblance of smile. ‘He enslaved himself to an inordinate passion for being awarded and felicitated,’ she said.

I started up almost to my feet. ‘Did she ever happen to have met up with my wife?’ I wondered.

RESEARCH INNOVATOR