

Clinton B. Seely, *Barisal and Beyond: Essays on Bangla Literature*. New Delhi: Chronicle Books, 2008. 322pp. ISBN 81-8028-036-5.

The author of this book is the protagonist of a charming inter-cultural romance. He is one of fewer than a handful of living Westerners who fortuitously fell in love with Bengali literature and made a distinguished career of teaching it – at the University of Chicago in his case. A major in Botany from Stanford, he volunteered for the Peace Corps and spent a year and nine months (1963-65) training high school science teachers in Barisal, in present-day Bangladesh. In the process he picked up Bangla (or Bengali) and, through the desultory chitchat that Bengalis call *adda*, gathered some idea about the greatest writer in the language, Rabindranath Tagore. At the end of his stint he enrolled for a PhD at the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilisations, University of Chicago and discovered Bengal's greatest modern poet, whose hometown was his familiar Barisal. His thesis, published as *A Poet Apart: A Literary Biography of the Bengali Poet Jibanananda Das (1889-1954)*, won him West Bengal's most prestigious literary award. His other publications include three translated volumes, of which the one of Michael Madhusudan Datta's epic, *The Slaying of Meghnada: A Ramayana from Colonial Bengal*, got him the A.K. Ramanujan Book Prize for Translation.

The present volume is a mixed bag of essays and lectures covering a number of significant aspects of Bengali literature. Though the focus is predominantly on modern or post-Plassey literature, Seely's grasp of the earlier traditions of Bengali writing is palpable in several essays. His use of the earlier writings serves a salutary purpose, bringing out the organic connections between them and modern Bengali literature and thus effectively countervailing the thesis of loyal colonial subjects like the late Nirad Chaudhuri that the latter is thoroughly Western in sensibility. "Say It with Structure: Tagore and *Mangal Kavya*" analyses the parallels between the play "Land of the Cards" and the conventions of the medieval *mangal kavya* genre. Of the four essays dealing with Michael Madhusudan Datta, one comprehensively reveals the "Indian Sources of Inspiration" behind his magnum opus, the epic *Meghnadbadhkavya*; the critical view for long had been that Michael was a "European" poet who wrote in Bengali. Two essays on Jibanananda Das go for intriguing hair-splitting, though the one on the correct geographic location of *maalay*, which features in Das's best-known poem, "Banalata Sen," as well another poem, "Nirankus," leaves me unconvinced.

The generally accepted rendering of *maalay* is that it refers to Malaya. This is how Seely himself rendered it the first time he translated the two poems. The poet himself in his English translation of "Banalata Sen" renders the phrase *maalay sagare* as "to/ The seas of Malaya." But Seely has second thoughts, prompted by a reader's comments, which he has followed up with an examination of dictionaries and atlases. Confusingly, *maalay* can be the adjectival form of *malay*, which can refer to the Malabar region. Seely decides to revise his translations accordingly, for two main reasons. First, if *maalay sagare* is retranslated as "to seas up the Malabar Coast," all the geographical references in the poem are contained in India as it was at the time of

composition, thereby making it “a strongly nationalistic poem.” Second, in the poem “Nirankus” there is an anonymous *malayali*, a word we do not find in Bengali dictionaries but is clearly best rendered as Malayali, a word widely used in India to refer to a speaker of Malayalam, the language of the Malabar Coast. Seely therefore retranslates the poem, changing “the Malayan coast” to “On the coast along the Western Ghats.”

I find the reasoning quite spurious. Das was never strongly nationalistic – his sense of rootedness applied to undivided Bengal rather than India as a whole – and it is difficult to see why he should wish to limit the peregrinations of the speaker in “Banalata Sen” to India, especially when the opening line describes him as “roaming the paths of this earth” (Seely’s translation). More importantly, it is absurd to think that by “Malaya” in his own translation, Jibanananda – a college lecturer in English – could have meant “Malabar.” As for “Nirankus,” I agree that “Malayali” and not “Malayan” is the correct rendering of *malayali*, but that does not mean we have to shift the locale from Malaya to Malabar. There have long been sizeable numbers of economic migrants from Malabar in Malaya, and Das, exiled from his native East Bengal could, I imagine, readily empathise with the Malayali exile as he cast an anguished gaze over the desert of the sea. As for the uprising mentioned in the third stanza as having taken place in the late nineteenth century, it could refer to troubles in the Malay region, of which there were scattered instances, rather than anachronistically to the Malabar rebellion of 1921 as Seely suggests.

“Viewing Bangla Literature,” a brief but beguiling essay, provides hints rather than an argument, and would have benefited from a fleshing out. Contrasting the Indian concept of a “darshan” and the “gaze” much talked about in contemporary theory – the power relations are reversed from one to the other – Seely moves on to sum up Said’s thesis in *Orientalism*, and then provides examples from the works of Shamsur Rahman, Jibanananda Das, and Shaheed Quaderi of Bengali poets subjecting their own culture to a voyeuristic gaze. Finally, facing up to his own problematic situation as a foreign scholar-critic *vis-à-vis* Bengali literature, he endorses an Indian critic’s judgment calling for the cultivation of “cultural inwardness.”

“A Muslim Voice in Modern Bangla Literature: Mir Mosharraf Hosain” deals comprehensively with the only noteworthy Muslim writer belonging to the period of the Bengal Renaissance. His *Bishad Sindhu* (“The Sea of Sorrows”) is a novel of epic proportions dealing with the martyrdom of the two grandsons of Prophet Muhammad at the battle of Karbala, and raises interesting critical questions regarding genre and diction. Seely also shows how the literary career of Hosain (1848-1912) registered the increasingly uneasy relations between the Hindu and Muslim communities.

“Translating Between Media” is a sensitive comparative study of Tagore’s story “Nastanir” (“The Fouled Nest”) and Satyajit Ray’s cinematic translation, “Charulata.” The essay on “Raja Pratapaditya, Problematic Hero” ranges over a wide range of texts including the Bharatchandra’s *Annadamangal*, an examination of which in the light of Propp’s morphology of folk tales is also the opening piece of the collection. The penultimate essay is the weakest, in my view at least: “Serious Sahitya: The Prose Fiction of Bangladesh’s Rizia Rahman” does not rise above plot summaries and

unsurprisingly fails to provide evidence of the “richness” it claims for its subject. The “Epilogue – Comings and Goings: From Madhusudan to the Diaspora of Today,” with its juxtapositions of travelling and stay-at-home Bengalis, Michael, Tagore, Jibanananda, Syed Shamsul Huq, Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, is a coda appropriate to our particular moment in cultural history.

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