



The Puppets' Tale

Manik Bandyopadhyaya



THE PUPPETS' TALE

a novel by
MANIK BANDYOPADHYAYA

TRANSLATED FROM THE BENGALI BY
SACHINDRALAL GHOSH

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Translator's Preface

MANIK BANDYOPADAYAYA (1908-1956) was one of that select band of writers in Bengali literature who in the twenties of the present century broke new and hitherto forbidden ground by depicting the realities of the life of the common people till then avoided by the older and 'respectable' writers. A social edifice built up and maintained almost intact over the preceding seven centuries was breaking down under the impact of industrialisation, urban development and changes in the economic pattern. The human aspect of this disintegration—the conflicts and tragedies of personalities which it involved—commanded the attention of these writers who were mostly young and devoted to their cause in the face of hardships and opposition. The young rebels struck out resolutely against the prevalent sentimentality and romanticism and in the course of a decade succeeded in establishing a major trend which quickly influenced the course of literature in other Indian languages. The youngest member of this group, Manik Bandyopadhyaya, was only nineteen when he made his *début* as a writer of fiction. A friend's casual remark led him to try his hand at writing a short story. The appreciative editor of a prominent literary journal not only published it but went so far as to call on the young author to offer his congratulations. This encouragement proved decisive for his future career; he left his undergraduate science class and became a writer.

Having discovered his *métier*, Manik now gave himself up to his literary pursuits which, while bringing him instant recognition, also made him the centre of a controversy. A considerable portion of his output of more than fifty volumes of novels and short stories pictures life in the rural areas

of Bengal in which he had lived in boyhood and early youth. He differed from his contemporary realists in that he was an objectivist ; he wrote, as he himself once said, from direct experience : 'there is no place in my writings for fancies—in my opinion, imaginary things are without truth or reality.' This deliberate naturalism made him a man apart. It is probable that he was influenced in this by his early acquaintance with Maxim Gorky's works in English translation ; certainly his earlier works, such as the one presented here, show the same deep undercurrent of pity, meticulous observation and determined eschewal of sentimentality. His later works, however, are tinged by a cynicism engendered by his own hard life, failing health and ideological obsessions. His daring portrayals of social disintegration and the decay of human values made him once again a controversial figure. But his objectivism has left a powerful impress on many of his younger contemporaries who have followed the trend he set in motion.

It is interesting to note that among Bengali novels chosen for translation by UNESCO, two written by two contemporaries deal with life in the village—the present novel, *Putul Nacher Itikatha* (literally, 'Annals of the Dolls' Dance') by Manik Bandyopadhyaya, and *Pather Panchali*¹ (brilliantly rendered into a film by Satyajit Ray) by Bibhuti Bhushan Bandyopadhyay. Although each is, in its own way, a great human document, it is difficult to conceive of a greater contrast in outlook and temperament. Manik's book is, so to say, a naturalist's report on the behaviour of human ants, while Bibhuti Bhushan's is a romantic paean to the unconquerable spirit of man in the face of all odds. Not that the latter took less note of the stark realities of life around him than the

¹ Now in Press : George Allen & Unwin, London ; Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana, U.S.A.

former ; but while Manik looked levelly about the horizon and saw the dusty earth and people, the other up above the tree-line and beheld the stars.

II

For a better appreciation of the present novel, first published in 1936, it is useful to start with a general idea of the topography of the region and the cultural environment of the people portrayed in it. More than one-half of the province of Bengal (split up since 1947 into two different provinces of India and Pakistan, respectively), comprising the Ganges-Brahmaputra delta, is so closely intersected by rivers and canals that communication by road and rail is severely restricted. Nearly all traffic is by steamer and country boat, the latter being traditionally the transport of choice for people and cargo. As late as the third decade of the current century, to which the story belongs, there were, except for administrative headquarters of districts (areas covering 5,000 and more square miles), no civic traditions, and large villages with populations of 5,000 to 10,000 or even more, had existed for centuries without any recognisable municipal administration. In the past, the typical village was a self-sufficient economic unit ; the population represented the different trades and occupations needed to meet such basic requirements as food, clothing and shelter. This pattern was, however, breaking up steadily at the time and unemployment and poverty were spreading rapidly. Literacy was very low, and what little arrangements were being tardily extended by the Government for rural education, were of very poor quality. Public hygiene was unknown, and medical services were so inadequate that the lives even of those who could afford to pay

for those services were at the mercy of ill-educated quacks. Women were kept segregated, and love was a major social sin, expressly forbidden except as between husband and wife after marriage, which was necessarily of the arranged kind. Women were subjected to cruel social penalties for breaches of wifely morality.

But educated or uneducated, the villager's lives, behaviour and thoughts—private as well as public—were by and large governed by customs, traditions, conventional superstitions and taboos which possessed the force of penal law. The caste system, stratifying society into hereditary classes each with its social privileges and disabilities, was the most important of these. But however unjust or fantastically repressive it was, even the worst sufferers under it, not to speak of its beneficiaries, submitted to its harsh restrictions with resignation. Religion, in the sense of spiritual inquiry, was rarely to be found; compliance with social regulations, covering manners, customs, rituals and moral codes, was the test of a good life. One was supposed to live, not for the fulfilment of one's self, but for the family, the clan and the caste-class, and faithfully to continue and transmit the inherited line of traditions and conventions.

In such circumstances the individual could not be expected to be intellectually free or to develop personal tastes and inclinations. Neither overt action nor expression of thought was permitted to stray beyond the bounds of convention. Yet emotions and impulses could not be totally repressed, and found tortuous ways of expression beneath the surface of conformity. The rebel either went out of the community or humbly atoned for his rebellion. The impact of new cultural ideas spreading from urban

areas, where modern education was becoming ever more popular, was slow and insidious. The new ideas were resisted bitterly and long. Cultural conditioning so crippled personality that a sensitive mind, like that of the principal character of this story, whose urban education and culture conflicted with his family upbringing had to endure lifelong frustration and a tragedy no less intense for never reaching a dramatic climax. The characters in *The Puppets' Tale*, inhabitants of a rather sequestered village, live insensitive, petty lives—marionettes moving on the stage of the world to the compelling pull of strings by hand invisible behind the screen.

Things have very much changed since those times. Rural life in India since independence is being basically reorganised on a different level of economy and culture. Caste discrimination has been outlawed, although it still survives. Education is spreading rapidly. Sweeping land reforms have eliminated landlordism and usury. Women have been emancipated and are legally the equals of men. Welfare services have been extended. Poverty is no longer as grim as it was before. Yet the drama of life four decades back in a village, far from the madding crowd, must interest readers of to day, the more discriminating among whom may recognise the distressing fact that, on the emotional level, man is merely exchanging old fetters for new ; that he has ever been a rebel but never free.

The explanatory notes which appear at the end of the novel will give the non-Indian reader a better idea of the cultural background of the story. Explanations of the unfamiliar words in the text will be found in the glossary at the end.

S. L. G.

THE PUPPETS

(Cast of characters in the story)

SASHI, a doctor, by caste a Kayastha

GOPAL DAS, his father

BINDU, Sashi's younger sister

NANDALAL, Bindu's husband

SINDHU, Sashi's youngest sister

KUNDA, a married female cousin of Sashi's

HARU GHOSE, milkman by caste, small farmer by occupation

MOKSHADA, his widow

BUCHI, Haru Ghose's elder daughter

MOTI, his younger daughter

PARAN, Haru Ghose's only son

KUSUM, Paran's wife

ANANTA, Kusum's father

KUMUD, a friend of Sashi's, milkman by caste

BANBEHARI, an artist friend of Kumud's

JAYA, Banbehari's wife

GOBARDHAN, a boatman, fisherman by caste

NETAI, **SUDEB**, **BANSI** and others, milkmen by caste

NABIN, fisherman by caste and occupation

JAMINI, a physician of the traditional (India) school,
Vaidya by caste

SEN-DIDI, Jamini's wife

KRIPANATH, her brother

JADAV, a devout Brahmin

PAGAL-DIDI, Jadav's wife

SRINATH, grocer by caste and occupation

BASUDEB BANERJI, a Brahmin

SITAL BABU and **BIMAL BABU**, village squires

RAMTARAN, lawyer at the district headquarters

AMULYA, a doctor

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HARU GHGSE was leaning against the trunk of the giant banyan tree on the bank of the canal when the god of weather frowned at him. Before he could possibly know what was happening, his greying hair and the rough, pock-marked skin of his face were burnt and singed, and in a flash the world he had known through fiftyone years of tender self-regard was gone for him as well as for the mute, insensible, century-old tree.

Even the thick foliage of the banyan tree could not keep the rain out for long, and presently Haru's body was drenched through and through. The ~~pungent~~ reek of ozone released by the thunderstorm gradually faded and the heavy fragrance of keya blossoms began to spread from the neighbouring bush. A sleek green snake which had been dozing, its sinuous body coiled around a keya leaf, leisurely uncoiled itself as the raindrops touched its body and slithered out of the bush. For a moment it regarded Haru with an unwinking, malevolent stare, then glided through the gap framed by his legs, to vanish into a hole in the trunk of the tree.

Haru was unlikely to be found where he had died, for no one lived in this area or had any reason to go there. Country folk are given to superstitious fears. This normal fear was intensified by the rank jungle and the utter solitude on this bank of the canal. The villagers' fear of evil spirits may have been groundless, but there could be no doubt about the reality of the snakes that abounded there.

Only during daylight would a handful of intrepid travellers to Bajitpur, the district headquarters, occasionally pass through the wasteland, seeking a short cut by the footpath which was all but hidden under an overgrowth of tall grass. If they succeeded in cadging a ferry ride across the canal from a passing boat, they could reach the Gaodia highway which led to the village only half a mile away. Occasionally, a lone woman came in the noonday hours to collect dry twigs for faggots. Once a week a pupil of Jamini the Vaid came there to gather medicinal herbs. In early winter, snake-

catchers from other parts sometimes turned up to catch live snakes. No one else ever passed that way.

The day was almost over when it stopped raining. A shy, faint tinge of colour appeared in one corner of the sky. Birds flew in to rest upon the boughs of the banyan tree but, seeing a swarm of winged termites flying out of a heap on the ground, made a sudden dive for them. Emboldened by Haru's continued immobility, a squirrel living in the tree scuttled down the trunk. Further away, a lizard on a branch of a small bush made a quick meal of some insects. Stealthily moving across the wasteland with a bird's corpse in its jaws, a jackal repeatedly turned its head to stare at Haru. In some mysterious way, they all knew ; they always know.

'Move the boat a little further down, Gobardhan,' said Sashi, 'near that small tree there. We can't haul it down straight here.'

The canal bank below the banyan was very steep and had moreover become slippery because of the rain. Gobardhan punted the boat with a pole to the site. The river, seven miles away, had risen by nearly five feet in the last twenty-four hours ; the current in the canal, too, ran rather strong. Steadying the boat by holding on to a branch of a tree, Gobardhan said, 'You come and sit in the boat, master—I shall get him down.'

'You fool ! Don't you know that you shouldn't touch it ?'

'Who'd know if I did ?' replied Gobardhan. 'It's beyond your strength to bring that heavy corpse down.'

Not a bad suggestion, Sashi thought. Haru's body would be entirely smeared with mud if it slipped from his hold. Would the corpse be more defiled if Gobardhan handled it ? Since Haru had died an unnatural death, there was no salvation for him anyway, whether Gobardhan handled it or not.

'Come along then, let's carry him down together. Make the boat fast by the tree ; otherwise it might drift away. Better light the lamp first, though : it's growing dark.'

Gobardhan lit the lamp, made the boat fast to the tree and climbed up the bank. Between them they carefully

carried Haru down to the boat. Sashi said with a sigh, 'Unfasten the boat now. And don't touch him again !'

'That won't be necessary anyway.'

Sashi, who was returning from town, had noticed, while in midstream, the figure of a man standing rigid against the tree on this lonely canal bank, looking like a spectre in the uncertain light of dusk. Only a lunatic would stand like that at that snake-infested spot ! Sashi's amazement and curiosity had proved irresistible when his shouted calls had brought no response, he had asked Gobardhan to steer the boat to the spot. Gobardhan had been unwilling at first, for he could not believe that a real flesh-and-blood person could be there at that hour. Sashi must have been mistaken, he had reflected ; and even if he had really seen something, it was best not to get involved but to return home in safety. But Sashi, who had studied at a college in Calcutta and was a doctor of medicine, had paid no heed to Gobardhan's objections, 'If it's a ghost, Gobardhan,' he had said, 'we'll tie it up hand and foot and tame it! Heave the boat to!'

It was still light. The silver sheen on the weed-infested water had not yet fully disappeared. Sashi had recognised Haru as soon as they had drawn closer.

'Look, Gobardhan ! It's our Haru ! How did he get here ?'

For a long time Gobardhan had been incapable of uttering a single syllable. At length he had whispered in awe, 'Is he dead, master ?'

'Dead. Struck by lightning.'

'What a pity all his hair has been burnt!'

If it were anyone but Haru who had died, Sashi might have felt amused to hear Gobardhan mourn over a dead man's hair. But he had been greatly shocked to discover Haru in this condition, away from the village. How sad that one who had his own children, friends and relatives, should have died such a solitary death under a tree, away from all of them ! Gobardhan's words depressed him still more.

Gobardhan's heart had been quaking with fear.

'What can we do waiting here, Chhota Babu ? Let us go and tell the villagers.'

'Should we leave him here like this ?'

'What else can you do ?'

‘What if the jackals should tear him to pieces before we could return with help from the village ?’

Gobardhan had shuddered at the prospect. ‘Well, then, what would you do, master ?’

‘Call out, on the chance that someone may hear and come.’

But there had been nobody near about on this foul evening to respond to this calls. The answering echo of his own shouts had startled Gobardhan, but had had no other effect. Only on market days at Rasulpur did a number of boats ply on the canal. But this evening there was no knowing how long it would be before a boat might come, if indeed one would come at all.

That was why Sashi had decided to carry Haru down to their boat, which drifted with the current as soon as it was made loose. Dipping the pole into the water with a splash as he stood at the prow, Gobardhan suddenly asked in great curiosity, ‘Tell me this, master : is it true that there is no salvation for him ?’

Sashi, who was steering, replied with a yawn, ‘I am sure I don’t know, Gobardhan’.

Taking the yawn as a sign of displeasure, Gobardhan did not dare to pursue the inquiry.

Sashi was not annoyed, but he was troubled. He was, of course, pained to have come upon Haru in his death, but it was his love for life that had been more profoundly shocked. Death affects different people in different ways. Sashi was not the kind of man to mourn for mortals, relations or no relations. On seeing someone die, he was not bothered by the thought that everybody—whether known to him personally or not, and not excepting himself—was fated to die some day. When he attended a funeral, he was not seized by any temporary fit of disgust for the world : life looked eminently desirable to him, and very enjoyable ; and he would regret on some occasions that he had not made better use of this great gift of life, and that much of what life had to offer would be uselessly wasted if one lived it half-heartedly. To his mind, this applied not only to himself but to everyone. It was in this, rather than in death itself, that he saw the really tragic harm to life.

The canal flowed straight to the very edge of Gaodia

village and from there turned east. The village landing-stage was situated on the bend. A small village, Gaodia was not much of a trading centre ; the landing-stage, too, consisted merely of a few steps roughly cut into the bank by spade work. Above the landing, there was an open tin-roofed shed in which jute was stored during the season before being transported to the warehouse of Nandalal, Sashi's brother-in-law, in Bajitpur. Three or four barge-loads of jute, and Gaodia's brief export season would be over, and the shed would stand empty for the rest of the year, to be used by men and cattle at will. Directly in front of the shed a local urchin had set up a stall which he tended all day long, exhibiting a few packets of bidis wrapped in coloured paper and a plateful of betel rolls covered by a piece of damp cloth.

A few big and small boats were moored at the landing, but there were neither lights nor men in any of these at this hour.

Gobardhan had feared that Sashi might have wanted to go into the village, leaving him alone to keep guard over the corpse in the boat. As soon as he made the boat fast, therefore, he said, 'So, master, shall I go down to tell the villagers?'

'Yes', said Sashi 'and be quick about it. Go first to the milkmen's quarter and ask Netai, Sudeb, Bansi and the others to hurry. Tell them I am keeping vigil by the corpse in the dark. Take the lantern with you : it's going to be very dark on the way, and the road is slippery.'

Gobardhan departed with the lantern. The evening had deepened, and although one might still detect a faint tinge of grey in the sky if one searched for it, darkness was falling fast. Fifteen or twenty minutes later, thought Sashi, and he could not have discovered Haru. Every time he passed through the canal he invariably scanned this abode of ghosts and snakes ; he would have done so this time, too, but would have mistaken Haru for a part of the tree trunk. Perhaps he would have merely felt a thrill of mystery on noticing the resemblance of a part of the trunk to the outline of a man and the unaccountable whiteness of Haru's cloth against the dark background. Haru would have been left there to rot, and who knows how long afterwards his bones, picked clean