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Sahitya Akademi

meet the author

Arun Mitra





This cruel river
Hisses like a snake,
Iron-breath piles up dark clouds all day long,
Forest-fear settles down on the banks,
The teeth of violence gnaw at the sweet roots.
Our hands join and become a challenging dam,
The furious expanse reverberates with vows of death.
(The Dam)

The predominant feature in Arun Mitra's poetry is his decisive reversal from the prevalent feeling and form. His poems read like soliloquies and in reading them, one identifies a voice no other than his own. This is achieved in two ways: The climate of ideas in his poems identifies itself with the contemporary social milieu. Thus his readers find their agony and aspiration expressed in his poems. The other thing that makes his poems unique is his diction. It seems as if his words can laugh and cry. While commenting on this, Subhas Mukhopadhyay observed, "Arun Mitra does not excavate words from the grave of books. The mouthy man is his dictionary".

Born in 1909, Arun Mitra passed his childhood days in the semi-rural mofussil town of Jessore. At the age of five, he was brought to Calcutta for schooling but the city could not make him a loyal citizen. At every opportunity, even in his college days, he would visit his birth place at the cajoling call of its natural surroundings. He repositied this pastoral bias in his memory for a long time and gradually it grew on him and formed the basic fabric of his literary self. The days of Jessore gave his life another direction too. His maternal uncle's house at Jessore where people of different ideological faiths used to visit, introduced him with the world outside. He came in contact with both the moderates and the radicals of the freedom movement and some leading literary talents of the period.

After graduating from Ripon College, Arun Mitra enrolled himself in the department of English of the Calcutta University but he could not complete the course for certain domestic problems. He had developed, on the other hand, a kind of aversion to formal

academic pursuits too. He would rather follow the tune of Bhisimadeb Chattopadhyay and Sachin Deb Barman from one college social to another.

Arun Mitra joined the *Ananda Bazar Patrika* in 1931 at the instance of Satyendranath Majumdar, the then editor of the paper, who was like a mentor to the young poet. The residence of Satyendranath Majumdar was a centre of throbbing literary activities of such young writers as Swarnakamal Bhattacharya, Bijan Bhattacharya, Binay Ghosh, Subodh Ghosh and others. Arun Mitra too joined the group and gradually came closer to the progressive literary movement of the thirties in Bengal.

In 1942, Arun Mitra left the *Ananda Bazar Patrika* and joined *Arani*, a fortnightly. In the same year he was included in the working committee of the Anti-Fascist Writers' and Artists' Association. His first collection of poems entitled *Prantarekha* (Border Line), was published next year. Since then almost fifty years have elapsed but people still remember the spell of such poems as 'Lal Istahar' (Red Manifesto) and 'Kasaker Dak: 1942' (The Call of the Kasak: 1942) as recited by the legendary actor Sambhu Mitra in public gatherings. Probably Arun Mitra acquired this passionate poetic voice and the glowing mood from his elemental dynamism of youth and unqualified and unflinching allegiance to his faith.

The poems of his next collection *Utser Dike* (Towards the Source), were written between 1943-48 and 1951-53. The famine, acute crisis in employment resulting from the world war, the rise of religious fanaticism, communal riots, partition of India, the revolt and repression in Tebhaga and Telengana constituted the backdrop of these



Receiving the Akademi award from Dr B. K. Bhattacharyya.

poems. Initially the poet tried to ignore the bleak present as a passing phase of history and even attempted to counter it with an imaginative bright future. But soon he realised that such an exercise tantamounts to escapism. So he faced the reality as such and came to terms with it with a burning soul.

In the early thirties Arun Mitra had started learning French to read Victor Hugo in original. His pursuits of French language and literature for nearly two decades ultimately led him to France in 1948, where his researches on the White Literary Group earned him a Ph. D. from the Sorbonne in 1951. On coming back to India in 1952, he joined the Allahabad University as a Professor of French. For exactly two decades, Arun Mitra was thus somewhat removed from the main stream of Bengali poetry. But he kept the fire burning and when on retirement in 1972 he came back and settled in Calcutta, it was like the return of the prodigal son.

The poems of the *Ghanishtha Tap* (Intimate Warmth) were written in the sixties. The national as well as international scenario at this crucial juncture of time did not appear quite inviting to him. He finds the situation suffocating. He sees goalless processions going

out of sight. But he waits with his hands on the sleeping seeds, he collects pieces of charcoal to ignite them in another winter, he dreams of breaking the stony days. In *Mancher Baire Matite* (On the Floor beyond the Stage), he declares that he remains awake, not on the stage, but beyond it on the ground, sightless, in the form of an intense friendship. There is every attempt to keep the optimistic strains ringing, but the poet cannot conceal his sighs either. His poems of the seventies were collected in *Sudhu Rater Sabda Nay* (Not Only the Sound of the Night) and *Pratham Pali Sesh Pathar* (First Silt Last Stone). Arun Mitra received the Akademi Award for his collection of poems entitled *Khunjte Khunjte Eta Dur* (Come So Far in Quest) in 1987.

At the age of 82, Arun Mitra is old and emaciated, but still intense and youthful. In one of his recent poems, he can still tell the tree to "set up the sun on your broken branch" and the river to "make the fairies dance on your dried bed". A relentless fighter against all that is ugly and untrue, Arun Mitra believes that "the fight began from that very moment/ when drops of milk went down the tender throat/ the fight against nothingness."

Arun Mitra believes that a poet

should not speak like the wise, but like the blind, touching. With his nerves and tissues and veins, he must be on the same plane where his readers are. A deep faith in man and creation and an astonishing sensuousness in reaching out to communicate remain the ultimate essence of Arun Mitra's creativity. In his own words, "Sometimes a few blades of grass bring up from the depths a wonderful possibility into the region of the sense. I know for certain that in our touches there is sunlight, there is rain. If you do not see any flow, any green, do not wait, but come near me. Let us arrange our veins and arteries over the dark fissures. Then we'll find our outlet. We'll see our words transformed into fields of corn and flowers".

A Select Bibliography

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With wife Santi





At a literary gathering

NOVEL

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In Sorbonne with other Indian Students

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A Chronology

1909 Born in Jessore (now in Bangladesh)

1930 Graduated from Ripon College, Calcutta

1930 Involvement with political activities at Jessore

1931 Joined *Ananda Bazar Patrika* as a sub-editor

1935 Served as a courier in the -38 underground activities of the Communist Party

1938 Married to Santi Bhaduri

1942 Member, Anti-Fascist Writers' and Artists' Association

1943 *Prantarekha*, a collection of poems, published
Joined *Arani* as a full-time assistant editor

1948 Went to France for researches on the White Literary Group at the Sorbonne University

1951 Received Ph. D.

1952 Joined Allahabad University as Professor of French

1966 Received the Uitorath prize

1972 Retired from Allahabad University and settled at Calcutta

1979 Received Rabindra Smriti Puraskar of the Government of West Bengal

1987 Received Sahitya Akademi Award for *Khunjte Khunjte Eta Dur*

1988 Member of Advisory Board for Bengali of Sahitya Akademi

1989 Member of General Council of Paschim Banga Bangla Academy

1991 Awarded D. Litt (Honoris Causa) by the University of Rabindra Bharati

At Study

