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meet the author

Manzoor Ahtesham



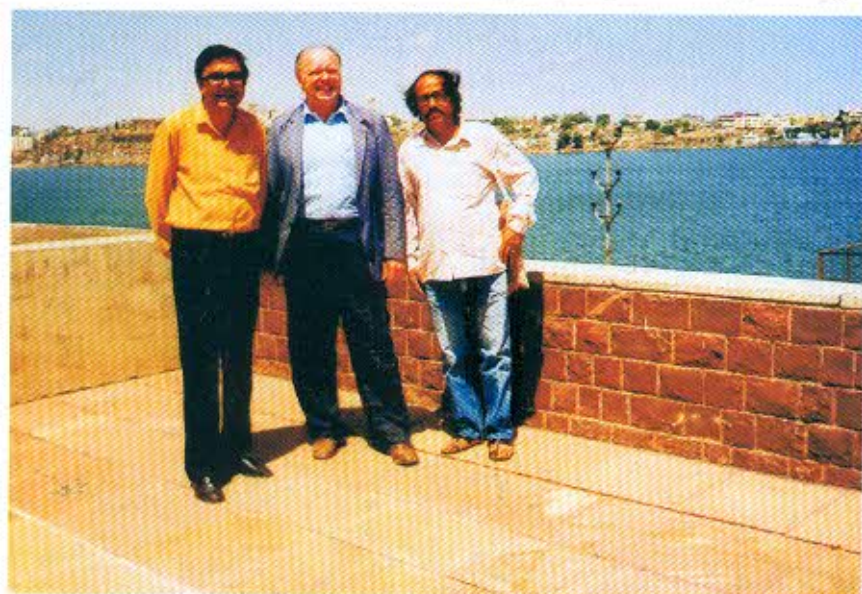
Few Indian writers of fiction in our time have written anything comparable to the Bhopal trilogy of Manzoor Ahtesham's — *Sukha Bargad*, *Dastaan-e-Lapata*, and *Bashaarat Manzil*, which commemorate the unique dying culture of a city and its changing ethos in response to overwhelming outside forces.

Bhopal is also Manzoor's birthplace; he was born here in 1948. This city was founded by Pathans settling in Central India. They ran roots here with their racial memories of a distant native place, their Pashto dialect, and their ethnic distinctiveness in an independent kingdom that later enjoyed limited autonomy in British colonial India, retaining its medieval and feudal way of life. These are the primary layers of Manzoor's fictional city. Over these quasi-mythical layers, he lays on further layers of recent history of independent, post-colonial India. This enables him to create a perceptibly unique cultural texture.

His characters emerge from a past, remote and phantasmagorical, buried in their collective unconscious. It haunts them and makes their search for identity problematic. Their religious iden-

tity makes them a minority in the pluralistic India. They live in a sort of metaphorical ghetto, strangers in an emerging mainstream shaped by unprecedented events.

Manzoor's own grandfather came to Bhopal from Swatt in North West Frontier Province (NWFP) around 1860. Five generations of the family—from the grandfather to Manzoor's grandchild—have since lived on here. Manzoor's father, a deeply devout soul and a religious scholar, was a witness to the impact of change of language on regional culture. The Pashto-speaking grandfather had a background in Arabian and Persian languages, the father spoke Urdu, Manzoor himself speaks Urdu, Hindi and English, while his children are equally proficient in Hindi and English. The forward-looking father had the enlightened vision and the willpower of moving with the times, his love for Urdu notwithstanding; he took care to enroll his children in a modern English-medium school. Manzoor writes in the Devanagari script in a language that neither filters out words of Sanskrit origin nor is over-Persianized. It is the evolving language of the city of Bhopal



With Lothar Lutze and Chandrakant Devtale
at Bharat Bhawan, Bhopal



Receiving Bhartiye Bhasha Parishad award from the then Governor of West Bengal, Prof. Nurul Hasan

itself. His style is of the post-Nirmal Verma kind: fluent, precise, evocative. It is almost-luminous at times though the themes of the trilogy reflect the dark and hitherto unilluminated inner zones of mainly middle-class Muslim lives with their burden of traditional belief and customs in contemporary India.

His novels open up a view of the heterogeneity of Indo-Islamic culture and its ongoing dialogue with the rich local culture of a traditional Indian city in the throes of modernization.

Manzoor's is a polycentric fictional universe. His omniscient narrator links the lives of his characters by criss-crossing narrative lines. As characters, these bear resemblance to those of the 19th century Russian and French fiction, sharply etched or delicately detailed, but spread over the scale of a mural. What holds them together is the author's vision of a city's decadence, revival, growth, and change of identity. This Bhopal could be any city in India or elsewhere. But it has a personality of its own, a geography, and local details that any reader having empathy and imagination can experience.

Manzoor, as a novelist, makes those demands on his reader. The latter should be prepared to be drawn deeper into his world and, in the process, rise above his prejudices and notions of stereotypes. She/he will then be amply rewarded with revelations and insights into the human condition such as only the highest quality of fiction can embody.

Sukha Bargad, acclaimed as a modern classic, was ranked sixteenth in the select list of the Best of Hundred Years of Fiction in Hindi picked by readers and critics polled by the journal *Hans* at the turn of the last century. It is the story of the identity crisis of a Muslim boy. He is beset with questions of one's place in Indian society. His sleepless nights are haunted by nightmarish images of a dead banyan tree, a symbol outwardly of unrealized potential, of frustrated hopes, but at a deeper, fundamental level—in the view of the renowned Hindi critic Dhananjay Verma—of the composite culture of India that evolved over centuries with the arrival of waves of migrant tribes and invaders. Each people that came made a distinctive contribution to things Indian. They

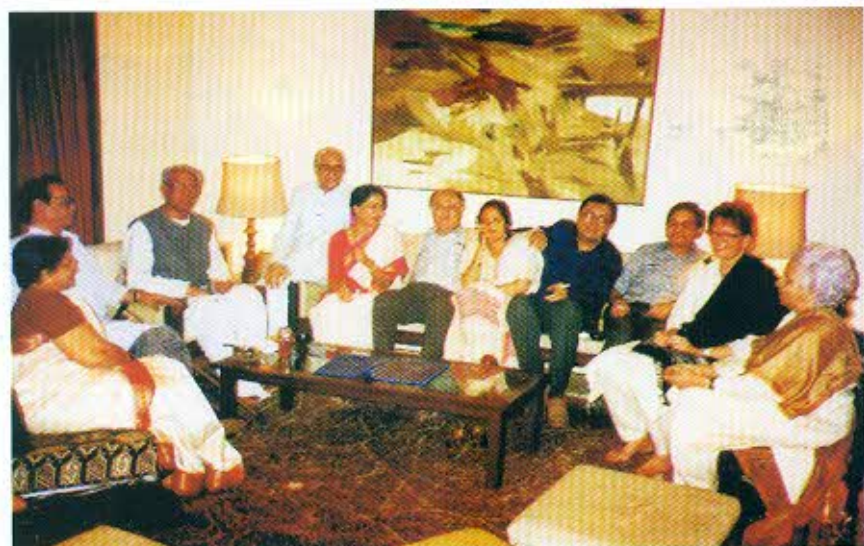


With Chitra Mudgal, Krishna Sobti, Rajendra Yadav, Archana Verma

found their own niche here. Today they stand out in their singularity, apart, and yet a part, an integral part, of the whole—so much like the many prop roots of a large banyan tree. It is this banyan, then, that the protagonist finds in decay. *Sukha Bargad*, translated into English as *A Dying Banyan*, was brought out by Rupa in 2005.

The second book of the trilogy, *Dastaan-e-Lapata*, is the story of one's persona one must live with, and keep looking out for, all one's life — a lookalike of 'I', the alter ego that always stays out of one's reach: it is the Lost One, the Unknown, the

Missing, which, despite the obvious differences between man and man, is essentially the same in all. The novel resonates with the sense of one's inability to find oneself as also whom no one else can find: everyone is lost both to himself and the world. In the words of Ulrike Stark, the narrative is "steeped in the Muslim environment" but is "no longer a novel about being a Muslim in contemporary India." It is "a rare example of self-reflexive fiction," which explores the theme of the "search of the missing self" and "engages in an ironic subversion of the concept of hero."



With Rajendra Yadav, Namvar Singh, Gagan Gill, Nirmal Verma, Sheila Sandhu at Ms. Sheila Sandhu's residence, New Delhi

Bashaarat Manzil, the third of the series, is a historical novel with political overtones. Our shared history is what is mirrored in this tale of a mansion that gives this book its title; it was the hub of activity in the pre-Independence Delhi. Reviewing the book for *Sahara Samay*, another renowned poet-critic Parmanand Shrivastava goes on to say that often the deserted, crumbling ruins reveal a truer picture of the place than do elegance and prosperity, and that the gloom reproduced in this narrative is enhanced by the constant Greek chorus playing in the background, so to speak.

Manzoor has written five novels, three collections of short stories, and, with Satyen, one play. His latest novel is *Pahar Dhalte* (2007). In addition to the

novel *Sukha Bargad*, several of Manzoor's short stories have been translated into various regional languages of our country as well as some into English and Russian.

Manzoor was the incumbent of Nirala Srajan Peeth—the chair of creative writing known after the poet Nirala—in Bhopal from 2001 to 2005. He was conferred the title of Padma Shri by the President of India (2003) in recognition of his literary achievements. His awards include Srikant Verma Memorial and Bhartiye Bhasha Prishad awards for *Sukha Bargad*, Virsingh Deo Award for *Dastaan-e-Lapata*, Vageshwari Award for *Tasbih*, Pabal Award (1995) for overall literary achievements, and Shikhar Samman of the State of Madhya Pradesh (2000)

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Receiving Padma Shri from the President of India,
Rashtrapati Bhawan, New Delhi

A Select Bibliography

Novels

- Kutchha Din Aur*, Rajkamal Prakashan, New Delhi, 1976
Sukha Bargad, Rajkamal Prakashan, New Delhi, 1986
Dastaan-e-Lapata, Rajkamal Prakashan, New Delhi, 1996
Bashaarat Manzil, Rajkamal Prakashan, New Delhi, 2004
Pahar Dhalte, Rajkamal Prakashan, New Delhi, 2007

Play

- Ek Tha Badshah* (with Satyen), National Publishing House, New Delhi, 1981

Short Stories

- Ramzan Mein Maut*, Sambhavana Prakashan, Hapud, 1982
Tasbih, Adhaar Prakashan, Panchkula, 1998
Tamasha Aur Anya Kahaniyan, Rajkamal Prakashan, New Delhi, 2001



With his two daughters Samar and Sadaf at home, Bhopal

Chronology

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|------|---|---------|
| 1948 | Born in Bhopal | |
| 1973 | First story <i>Ramzan Mein Maut</i> appears in Sarika | |
| 1976 | <i>Kutchha Din Aur</i> (Novel) published | |
| 1981 | <i>Ek Tha Badshah</i> (Play, with Satyen) published | |
| 1982 | <i>Ramzan Mein Maut</i> (Stories) published | |
| 1986 | <i>Sukha Bargad</i> (Novel) published | |
| 1995 | Pahal Award for overall literary achievements | |
| 1996 | <i>Dastaan-e-Lapata</i> (Novel) published | |
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