

Kunal Basu Unrehearsed
A Conversation with Amitava Roy
2004

To learn more about the author than is evident from his fiction, I asked Kunal Basu to answer a set of questions on his life, art, reading habits as a child and as an adult, the craft of fiction and so on, in the fashion of a typical Calcutta adda – a free flowing discussion about anything that comes to mind. The result was a breathtaking glimpse into the author's mind, creative temperament, opinions and emotions. All this is rich material for scholars no doubt, but compelling reading as well. Over to Kunal Basu...

Birth and thereafter

I was born, as I am given to understand, at dawn on the 4th of May, 1956, rather unexpectedly in our North Calcutta home, as my mother was hurrying to finish a manuscript for her publisher. It was a dangerous event that could've killed us both. Significantly, I was delivered by my aunt in my father's library, gawked at by an army of bemused authors from the shelves. In the excitement of the morning, my father forgot to register his son's birth with the authorities, which is why I've never had a birth certificate.

It's fair to say that I was born with the proverbial silver spoon in my mouth – the precious inheritance of a set of truly remarkable parents. My father, Sunil Kumar Basu, was a publisher and one of the early members of the Communist Part of India. My mother, Chabi Basu, wrote fiction and had penned the hugely influential, *Banglar Nari Aandolan* – the first published account in Bangla of women's movement in colonial India. I grew up in a bookish family, ears ringing with delightful commentary about authors, both dead and alive, great debates and delicious anecdotes. Early on, I read mostly Bengali books – adventure stories by authors such as Hemendra Kumar Roy; stories about pirates on the South China Sea, diamond smugglers and so on. It took subtle persuasion to get me to read in English, and when I did, I discovered a comparable genre: *Ivanhoe*, *Treasure Island*, *Three Musketeers*, *The Count of Monte Christo*...

More than an avid reader, I was an avid daydreamer, an avid artist and an avid kiteflyer. Our house in South Calcutta, where we had moved a few months after my birth, was frequented by an

extraordinary set of visitors who were my parent's friends – gentlemen and ladies of the arts, as well as political activists, such as Kamal Kumar Majumdar, Mrinal Sen, Barin Saha, Subhas Mukhopadhyay, Jyoti Basu, Ganesh Gosh and Radharaman Mitra. The music of Beethoven and Debabrata Biswas wafted through the air. The *addas* never ended but blended from one to the other. A precocious child, I'd eavesdrop on them, then, in private, imitate the visitors, argue like them, drop names and make up stories. A sickly child, I spent quite a bit of time in bed, with the *addas* fertilizing my imagination.

A special visitor stands out in memory – Anant Singh, the legendary freedom fighter, the fabled 'Bengal Tiger' who had tamed the British during the Chittagong Armoury Raid. He was old and suffering when I saw him, laboriously climbing the steps of our house. A lion in winter.

Academics and other necessary evils

Unfortunately, I turned out to be a good student. At South Point School, which I attended, a new visitor arrived: competition – competition for grades, competition to win the attention of teachers and girls. It was also the beginning of the most painful disassociation in my life – between passion and pursuit. My academic results dictated choices away from areas where my real interests lay. Instead of the arts, I studied the sciences; instead of withdrawing from the science stream at the end of school, went on to study engineering in university.

The result of such foolish academic choices was compartmentalisation. During the day I lived with Newton and Bohr; with Dickens and Bankimchandra at night. Deduction was work, induction play. I lived in parallel universes; bunked classes to act on stage or to publish literary magazines. Theatre and politics turned me into the ultimate truant. An unwritten principle emerged in my mind: success and fulfilment were separate beasts, never to coexist in the same forest. All around me, there were numerous examples of such fractured lives: Kamal Kumar Majumdar, the doyen of Bengali prose, having to earn his living through thankless teaching work; or the stunning actor/dramatist, Rudraprasad Sengupta, who I heard lamenting the absence of the ultimate luxury – living the life of a fulltime artist. It never struck me that the arts could become a life-

sustaining option; the challenge was to find a job that'd be the least disruptive of the arts.

While none of this makes much sense to me anymore, I think my passion refused to cede ground to my academic and professional pursuits. All through school, college, and employment, I tried to find a way out to reach my desk. Even the career move from engineering to management studies was a premeditated act of escape – from the regime of numbers to the republic of words.

Unintended side effects

I wasn't a natural for politics, despite having been raised in a political family. Too much individualism and too little respect for authority couldn't get me anywhere. But there was an ever-present conscience. The Emergency in 1975 saw me joining active politics which led to a period of 'underground' activism. These were dangerous but heady days. The thrill of the struggle far exceeded the routine of daily bickering that we know as politics. There were grand illusions, a glimpse of the utopia... Campus life meant carousing with forbidden books, carrying weapons in our side bags, whispering secrets into the ears of our comrades. There were trips to the margins that took us far from our comfort zones.

Regardless of the fallouts from that period, immersion in the movement was beneficial in my case as it prevented a banal studentship. It would've been dead easy for me to turn into a cuture-wallah, smug in the membership of the cult of the well read, the beautiful people, disdainful of the plebs. I could've ended up missing the whole point about the arts.

Politics took me where I wouldn't have dreamt going. It forced me to stand face to face with those I'd rarely meet in cafés and bookshops. It expanded my middleclass Calcutta ghetto, challenged my mind just as it stormed emotional hardware – introduced death and betrayal, lent dimensions to loving and believing. There were influences that were pivotal: Ranajoy Karlekar, who taught English at Jadavpur University – the unlikely academic, as instinctive in analysis as he was as a streetfighter. Muscles as ripe as his mind. In him I met the joyous critic, not the dour one. And Utpal Dutta – formidable and captivating, steeped in a profound sense of wonder. They and others have inspired and infected me, increased my risk quotient.

And then America

USA was the anticlimax. Politics had taught me to avoid becoming a politician, and the trip to America, ostensibly to do a Masters, was the sabbatical I needed to find my feet. It turned out to be rather confusing. There couldn't have been a more powerful dislocation – a cultured activist from Calcutta stranded on the sands of Florida. There were frightening moments – glimpses of the Non Resident Indian, and the failed seduction of the green card. But then, there was intimacy as well....breathless moments, stormy beginnings and ends. The return home was even more confusing. Like a harlequin, Calcutta had changed her wig – from friend to a stranger.

A full life reads poorly on paper. So it is with mine. There are too many contradictions to reconcile, too many diversions, many false moves, comings and goings. Some of it is inexplicable to the main actor himself. Certain periods have blurred in memory, such as the one between the return from America and the trip back – two years of aimless wandering, a time of bitterness and losses. These were fallow years when it came to the arts. I had strayed beyond what I thought possible, scarred by failed friendships and rotting romance.

Even more inexplicable was the haste with which I married Susmita soon after we met in 1982, and the haste with which our daughter, Aparajita (Ajlai) arrived – acts of providence beyond my atheist wit.

The literary basket

Friends accuse me of a Catholic taste. I read wantonly from my parent's library, and there weren't too many lightweights there. My favourites: *Germinal*; *The Kreutzer Sonata*; *Crime and Punishment*; *Narcissus and Goldmund*; *A Tale of Two Cities*; *Scarlet and Black*; *Heart of Darkness*; *Women in Love*; *Madame Bovary*; *This Side of Paradise*; *A Farewell to Arms*. Here are a few more from recent times: Marquez's *Love in the Times of Cholera* (don't you want to die for Fermina Daza?); Mario Vargas Llosa's *The War of the End of the World* (he was visiting Oxford recently, and Ajlai got to interview him for the student paper – lucky girl!); Isaac Singer' *Slave*; J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (NOT *Disgrace*); Amin Malouf's *Leo the African* (there are few authors as deeply romantic as him);

Ondaatje's *English Patient*; Gunter Grass's *Tin Drum*, and *The God of Small Things*.

Then there is the middle brow. Long after the world has forgotten them, I shall remember Nevil Shute's *On the Beach*, and *A Town like Alice*; A. J. Cronin's *The Spanish Gardener*; Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* ('Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again' – what an opening line!); Pearl Buck's *Good Earth*; Giuseppe Lampedusa's *Leopard*. And, of course, Somerset Maugham, although the literary establishment will bring out the guillotine at his mention!

Now let's turn to Bangla. It's Bankimchandra, who I most admire – the master of control and chaos, the consummate storyteller. He wrote to nobody's standard and created his own. Despite the controversy over *Anandamath*, I can't think of too many novels that work as well as it does. Nor can I think of too many cultures that have been fortunate to have produced as many literary stalwarts as ours in the 20th century, the likes of Rabindranath, Saratchandra, Tarashankar, Bibhutibhusan, and Manik. I also have a special corner for Samaresh Basu – underrated, sadly, among scholars.

This, of course, is a cryptic account of my basket, a truncated list of favourites. I haven't, for example, mentioned playwrights and poets or authors of short fiction, which might upset many. There's more certainly that I cherish, which brings me to the obvious question: what endears a book to me? Never a fan of reductionism – in science or in psychology – it's a hard question to answer. Surely there can be no guidelines or checklists. During a recent book tour in the US, I was embroiled in an argument with a reader who claimed all successful novels had the same set of distinguishing features – the same gene in both *Ulysses* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. If so, it must be a gene that's yet to be discovered. It's undeniable though, that I am drawn to stories and storytellers. And then, stories of a special kind – those that reveal the human condition in large dollops. Not classics of the kitchen sink, but classics – not those that make a small and interesting point, but those that make a large and thundering point. It must be a book I shall remember for expanding my consciousness in some significant way.

If granted the wish to write one great story and die, I'd write *Animal Farm*.

The basket of literary theory

It's empty. As a student, there was snob value to being a critic. At 18 or 19, we were in the demolition business. Filmmakers like Satyajit Ray or Mrinal Sen as well as authors who came to visit our university were our favourite targets. A few of my friends became notorious for perfecting the subtle art of strangulation by insults. Then, as in now, I have maintained a respectful distance from the brood of literary theorists and critics. It comes perhaps from the fear of having someone peer over my shoulders. I feel I must be free to trust my instincts when I write, not dutifully follow the dictates of some theory or the other. As such, life endows enough doubts to warrant yet another screen of self-examination. I am reminded often of Picasso... 'When I was 9, I could paint like Rafael. But it took me the rest of my life to learn to paint like a child.'

Increasingly, authors are being asked to become critical analysts of their own work. At the recently concluded Oxford Literary Festival, I was asked by a professor of English to locate my writing within the canons of world literature. Was I a modernist? A post-modernist, etc, etc. It instantly reminded me of a story my mother used to tell. Manik Bandyopadhyay was once asked a similar question after he had finished reading out one of his stories at a literary gathering. He re-read his story in response.

For those excited by commentary and analysis, it is, of course, a perfectly worthwhile endeavour. Indeed there are authors who have excelled in such – Eliot for example, and Coetzee and Llosa in recent times. When our daughter asked Llosa what matters most to a fiction writer, he replied...reading, writing and daydreaming. Precisely my sentiments.

Writing in English

I had never thought I'd write fiction in English. My first published piece was a short story in Bangla. There were a handful of poems and essays too, in Bangla as well, that were published during my university years. While in America, I had started to translate John Reed's *Insurgent Mexico* then realized that translation was not my calling. For me, writing meant writing in Bangla. And in English.

Bilingualism is a clumsy word. It fails to capture what some of us truly are: not simply conversant in both languages and capable of

writing a decent prose in either, but a valley that nurtures two rivers, flowing concurrently, intertwining in places, each spurred on by the other. It's like having two minds and two hearts – rather a single one of each, both marvellously promiscuous.

I had written book reviews for *The Statesman* – Milosz's novels, Brecht's poems – but it took quite a few years to simply pick up the pen and write *Lenin's Café* that was published in *London Magazine* in 1997. I remember the charming note from Alan Ross, the editor, written in his own hand. The Tollygunge man (his family had spent over a century in Calcutta, and he himself was born there) hadn't minded me, a Ballygunge man, writing in his mother tongue.

The ownership of language can be a contentious matter. To me, it's irrelevant. I wait for the words to form on paper to see whether they are in the mother tongue or in the other tongue.

Writing

Authors shouldn't pontificate about writing. It'd be ideal if they did nothing else but write. Never having been to writing school, I have little to say about writing, very few rants to air. The only point that I make occasionally is about the role of imagination in fiction writing, and how it's at risk of being devalued by the rising tide of information. Information as in social theory, anthropology, area studies, even memoirs. An author, of course, needs all the facts (and opinions) that are necessary to create a believable context for the plot to unfurl. The story is figure, the rest ground. Increasingly, figure and ground are being exchanged. Thus, the rise of 'constituency fiction' – Parsees writing about Parsees, gays about gays, and so on. It assumes that readers read fiction simply to learn about a context, a new and uncharted context perhaps, that they are really thirsting for information about some aspect of society not a story. Perhaps some readers do, and then there are others who don't mind the lies – the fictional part of fiction.

This isn't to proscribe one sort of writing or another, but simply to keep renewing the license of author to go wherever they wish with their imagination. During a TV interview in America, the interviewer challenged my credentials – writing about China and Malaya when I was an Indian (re: *The Opium Clerk*), about Islamic art and the Mughals (re: *The Miniaturist*) when I wasn't a Muslim, and about Victorians (Re: my next novel, *Racists*) when I wasn't even white. I

own the world by my imagination, I replied. These are grand words. But I believe them.

The other arts

I write novels and stories, but painting was my first love. I am driven no longer to pursue it, but it informs my sensibilities. I respond, first, to form and colour, texture and light, then seek meaning. Asked to describe a person, I'd most definitely begin with the looks. The physical world sets off the journey, and I strive to describe it as best as I can for myself and my readers. Research and experience are, hence, vital to my projects. I must be able to 'see' to write. If something isn't immediately visible, I must be able to see it in my mind's eye. Take the Mughal harem in *The Miniaturist*, for example. There were several trips to Fatehpur Sikri to gaze at the ruins, reading the accounts of journeys in the Islamic Orient, that helped me in filling the picture. It isn't base realism that I am after, but a strong enough glimpse of the context for me to weave my tale within it. I recoil from largely textual presentations – such as in Rushdie's novels – seeking rather the sensual, the phantasmagoric.

Not surprisingly, artists and sculptors are my friends in many cities that I regularly visit. Beyond contemporary artists, I seek out indigenous creators as well – carvers, mask makers, potters, weavers. I've written academic pieces about such experiences from time to time, but what I'm really after is that special quality called 'sight.'

And theatre. I'd like to believe that my mother had a role to play here. I still faintly recall being dragged off to rehearsals for the plays she acted in under the direction of Ritwick Ghatak. The lure of the stage must've caught me early. Throughout my university years and later in Montreal, where I lived for 13 years, I continued to dabble in theatre. This is despite the fact that teamwork is not my forte; I've always been a loner. But theatricality is vital to my writing. I try to set the stage, then surprise with twists and turns in the plot, create a sense of immediacy. A novel must read like a performance. What a great book it'd be if it had a dash of Brecht added to the plot and characters!

The theatre, itself, could be the setting as well. A few years ago I wrote a short story called *Miss Annie*. It was the unlikely tale of a Russian prostitute coming to Calcutta to dance in a burlesque show

– the likes of *Barbodhu*. In our college days, it was considered immoral to go to these places. In writing *Miss Annie*, I'd frequent such playhouses to chat with the actors and the directors, to get a feel for the cabaret artist's life on and off stage.

Growing up in the 70s, cinema ruled supreme. These were days of the cine clubs, 16 mm projectors, and esoteric conversations about Bergman, Bunuel and Godard. We almost never had tickets to these shows and gate-crashed with a plaintive request... *we are from the university...* The middle-aged and mild mannered cine club members always let us in. I remember watching Mrinal Sen's *Calcutta 71* at Metro cinema hall on its opening night with friends and walking back from Chowringhee to Jadavpur too engrossed in our discussions to mind the distance. There were infantile debates as well – over the relative merits of *Charulata*, *Bhuban Shome* and *Subarnarekha*. I never took sides.

Besides the old masters, my runaway favourite in recent years has been the Yugoslav director, Emir Kusturica. Starting with *When father Was Away On Business*, I've admired quite a few of his films – *The Hour of the Gypsy*, *Underground*, *Black Cat White Cat*. The topsy-turvy world that he portrays is strangely evocative of Calcutta... bureaucracy, disruptions, anarchy, secret societies, euphoria.... I wish I could lock up all my friends in one room and show them his films one after another.

As a child I had acted in two of Mrinal Sen's films – *Punascha* and *Abasheshe*. The 'smell' of the studio has never left me. The dark echoing halls, half-finished sets, attics filled with costumes, voices booming from microphones...the makeup room, the frenetic minutes of shooting followed by hours of waiting.... And I remember the beautiful actress who played my mother. I was a difficult child actor, Mrinal Sen tells me. I'd take delight hiding under the props, and finding me was as hard as finding a needle in a haystack. Cinema is the most magical of all the arts, and immensely tempting. I have had a few directorial/screen writing forays but the thought of working with a million others has helped to calm that fever.

Travel and other pleasures

As with the sibling arts, which are important for my mental health, so is travel. It's the mother of all addictions – the daydream enacted; the thrill of free floatation. Favourite destinations have emerged over the

years, although the hunt for more goes on. To me Java and Bali are the lands of the *Rupkathas* – the Indian fairytales I read as a child. Strangely, they seem more Indian than India, evoking the world of *Chand Sadagar* or *Khiner Putul*. These are places where I lose myself. Then there's Luang Prabhang in Laos, Siem Riep in Cambodia. Bagan in Myanmar, Malacca, Kuching – each drifting at the border of history and fable. A touch of melancholy, undiscovered riches, the chance of a strange encounter – they have it all.

In the 80s and the 90s, I used to travel frequently to China to teach and research management. It was a world that held many mysteries for me. There was a trip to Beijing during the Tiananmen Square incident that remains indelible in memory.

Somehow, Europe and America haven't managed to cast their spells on me. Besides the art in the museums, I thirst for very little there. In 1992 I went to Cuba during a period of extreme hardships brought on by the American sanctions. It was a deeply rewarding visit on many counts, not the least for a visit to Hemingway's Cohimar – the small fishing village where he wrote *The Old Man and the Sea* between bouts of marlin fishing. There was the maddening beat of the salsa, and long evenings in crowded bars arguing over the problems of the world.

And Mexico – the midnight mass on Christmas Eve in Oaxaca; or going over Morocco's Atlas Mountains then down to T E Lawrence's Arabian desert; shopping for masks in the bazaars of Ivory Coast; horseback riding in Mongolia; licking my fingers after a feast of chilli crabs in Phuket; and lying flat in bed and watching the sun rise over the Kanchenjhangha.

The persona of the travelling author appeals to me – the author as an adventurer. Like Hemingway, Maugham, Camus. My stories are born frequently on the road – mind hovering over a mysterious stranger.

Where next? Tibet, Samarkand, Isfahan, Mohenjodaro, Hampi, Congo....

Management

How does it all fit together – I am often asked. How does the novel writing business coexist with travels and the gluttony for life, and all the serious academic stuff. Is there a missing link between life and livelihood that I am reluctant to reveal?

As I have said elsewhere, my career reflects the accidents of my life, writing my passion. I haven't come to one from the other; there isn't a secret corridor between the two. This duality is my condition. I don't want to make too much or too little of it. Think of it as my oddity – a cleft on the chin. It could be disastrous if I tried to merge the two. Could I have done a business analysis of the opium trade to help me write *The Opium Clerk*? I wouldn't have tried! There are perhaps two windows within me that stay open and shut at different times. Heaven forbid they should muddle up their sequence – I wouldn't want my fiction to be managerial and my management to be fictitious! I live with the two by trying not to think too much about the disjunction between them. There are times though, when the Tsunami of fiction threatens to drown everything.

Ramakrishna Paramhansa once described the life of a housemaid to his followers. You will see her everyday, he said, busy at your home, cooking cleaning, scrubbing the utensils, washing clothes. Guess where she really is? In her mind she hasn't left her baby's cot, waiting for it to wake up, to feed it and play. So it is with my writing.

Oxford

Others have written about Oxford, it warrants no further commentary. Yet for an engineer and management academic, Oxford has never been as salient as say an MIT or a Berkeley. I had never dreamt of the dreaming spires. Absence of awe towards Oxford, that I see all too often among visitors and residents, has, I think, worked to my advantage. I have suffered less for the obvious shortcomings and avoided the trivia of gowns and high tables. I used to boast to friends in Calcutta that despite being a Bengali academic abroad, I have never a) studied or taught at Oxbridge; b) met Amartya Sen; and c) owned a house in Shantiniketan. Now, of course, the first two of these lie driven to dust!

Calcutta

A line from a poem by Jibanananda Das.... *Kolkata ekdin kollolini tillottama hobe*...used to grace billboards in the 70s. For me, she has always been the Rampant Goddess. As one might expect, the idea of Calcutta overshadows its real specs at any given point in time. It

has to do with the constellation of planets that orbit the city – Derozio and Madhusudan, the martyrs of the freedom and food movements, Jibanananda and Debabrata Biswas; it has to do with film festivals and book fairs...so much, so many, such extraordinary.... When asked to compare the city that I grew up in with the city that I now visit regularly, I divert the question. At best it'd come down to a banal comparison. At its core, Calcutta is robust. You get the best questions here; makes you feel good to be an author. Yes it is a city of extremes that has the best of my friends and the worst of my enemies. It is also a city where the gulf between the private and the public is minimal. Having lived for two decades in the West, I can attest to the charm of such wilful violation of privacy. Calcuttans, at times, make unreasonable demands. But it is the unreasonable that makes the city unique. Fortunately, it has learnt very little of British propriety despite the 200 years.

Calcutta will remain the Rampant Goddess as long as its cultural space isn't filled up to build multi-storied edifices of culture. There must be open ponds, sometimes rotting at others flowering with unexpected species. The legendary tolerance for anarchy and deviance must be nursed by the custodians; the city must remain true to the spirit of Khudiram – one arm raised to bomb the headquarters.

East plus West

Fortunately, I have never suffered from the 'immigrant's pang', never felt dislocated from my roots, never agonized over East and West. This smugness about place is born out of a convenient fiction that I have created for myself. Home, for me, is in the mind. A mind that turns everything over regularly, and couldn't possibly lose things by accident. It's a secure place, despite the chasms of memory. The rest is habitat. As a romantic, I am far happier changing habitats than moving home. There are many cities in which I have lived, many more that I hope to in the future. The habitats don't command allegiance, simply affection. I worry about being stationary in one place for too long. East and West isn't a puzzle to resolve. It's simply the locus of my marauding life.

Now

The desk is now both home and habitat. There's a novel to finish,

and others waiting to be written. All new stories must be held at bay, yet watched closely, lest they bloom into monster weed demanding urgent harvest. The pen is the busiest instrument here. The eye must continue to suffer. There will be crucial discussion with agent and publisher in days to come, but more crucial will be the task of keeping track of the plot before it loses its way.

That's where I am now – in a small flat in Oxford, facing a Maple tree, in the company of fast multiplying doves. This is my perch. For now.