

## Kunal Basu on *The Opium Clerk*: An Interview

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Dr Kunal Basu is a Fellow in Strategic Marketing and Director of the Advanced Management Programme in Templeton College, Oxford. A Masters in Engineering, a Ph.D. in Management is certainly not a career profile one associates with a writer of fiction. But for Kunal Basu fiction is his first love and writing remains his primary passion. His debut novel, a nineteenth century historical romance, entitled *The Opium Clerk* and his second *The Miniaturist*, display the emerging frontiers of Indian writings in English where Dr Basu has made a place for himself. The portrayal of Calcutta in his first novel evokes the times of the Raj and shows much research is involved in the making of the novel. My interest in the debut novel led me to this dialogue, which I hope, would enhance our appreciation of the novel. This interview was taken on 8th February, 2003 when he was in Kolkata. Subsequent correspondence was through email when he was at various places like Japan, Canada, Sweden and of course, Oxford. I am grateful to Dr Kunal Basu for his help and giving me his time despite his busy schedule.

**Q. *The Opium Clerk* deals with late nineteenth century Calcutta, *The Miniaturist* takes us back to a few more centuries to Mughal India and your next book is a Victorian novel set in early nineteenth century England and in Florence. Why do you go back in time and what do you wish to communicate to the reader?**

A. The three novels are indeed set in times that are different from the present. But I never start writing a novel with a historical period in mind. For example, before writing *The Opium Clerk*, I didn't tell myself that I should write an Empire novel, just as with the second book I didn't think that it was time for me to write a Mughal novel, or a Victorian novel for the third. I think stories, and the plot suggests the period. Since I thought of a story, which involves the opium trade, obviously the nineteenth century sprung to view. Similarly, in conjuring

up a tale about a miniature artist, the Mughal court garnered centre-stage. While my two novels and the third in progress might loosely be termed as historical novels, I have also written short stories all of which are set in the present and I am definitely not ruling out writing a novel with a contemporary setting. I must confess though, that I do have a fascination with history. I read history to fertilize my imagination, seeing it as a treasure trove of stories, of anecdotes and characters many of which are mere figments waiting for an author's embellishments.

**Q. Where did you conduct your research on Calcutta for *The Opium Clerk*?**

**A.** *The Opium Clerk* was written when I lived in Canada. I was then a professor at McGill University, Montreal, and all the research – reading a wide variety of books – was done at the social sciences and humanities library of the university.

**Q. There is a bibliography at the back of your book.**

**A.** Yes, these are slim pickings from a fairly long list. Fundamentally, *The Opium Clerk* is a work of fiction, so I didn't want to encumber the reader with an extended bibliography, just a few books that might be of interest.

**Q. You have referred to H. E. Busteed's *Echoes from Old Calcutta*...**

**A.** Right. Busteed I found very interesting for the minutia of colonial life. There were different kinds of book that were very useful. First, the history and economics of the opium trade itself. There are wonderful books written by historians, tracing the opium trade even before the British times, describing how opium went from Central Asia to the Orient, the role of the Dutch as the early opium traders, and how then it was passed on to the Portuguese. The British, as we know, came to dominate all others and covered the entire terrain – from Indonesia in the South up to the north of China. And the economics of the trade was important. Why did the British and the Portuguese engage in such a trade? How much did they gain, so on and so forth. In that part of my research, I was trying to understand the opium enterprise. It had nothing to do with characters or with events. The second part involved understanding the opium trade specifically in India. Although I refer to Indian opium as 'Bengal mud' in the novel, just as it was called then, interestingly enough, opium was never commercially grown in Bengal.

In fact, the quality of Bengal opium was found to be inferior so the British grew it in Uttar Pradesh, then called the Central Provinces, and also in parts of Bihar. It was processed in Patna and came down on barges over the Hooghly to Calcutta, where it was auctioned off. So Calcutta was the commercial hub for opium. The Indian connection, of course, led me to the Chinese opium wars. The third part of the research was to fathom what opium does to an addict? Having never consumed opium myself, it was a challenge to write the character of Lillian Crabbe. I needed to know about cravings, opium-dreams, etc. While most of that I have imagined, I have had to read medical tracts on the effect of opiates. Jean Cocteau and De Quincy have also been helpful, as have the Victorians – Dickens, Conan Doyle, and others. Then, finally, as the novel moves from 19th century Bengal to Canton and then to Kuching, I have worked on the historiography of the three cities. I must say though, that I am drawn more to evocation through imagery rather than exhaustive descriptions. I have tried to evoke the feeling of walking through an alley of Boubazaar at night, surrounded by the brothels and the baboos riding their *ticca garris*, the audience at the Emerald and the Star theatres, and the foibles of a Bengali joint family living in Jaanbazaar. As you know, Jaanbazaar was at the border between the White town and the Black. It was the middle tier populated by the Anglo Indians, the Parsees – the marginal. At the same time there were Bengali families, such as Hiranyagarbha's, who had their home in Jaanbazaar.

**Q. Hiran is an amateur palmist in your novel and palmistry as you said has a lot to do with destiny and predetermination. Palmistry is almost a metaphor in *The Opium Clerk*. Would you like to comment?**

**A.** My use of palmistry was deliberate. I was wondering what sort of private passion should I give to Hiran, just like Nabinaboo's homeopathy and Vinny's hobby of stamp collection, for example. There are three reasons for choosing palmistry for Hiran. The first is his tryst with the *tole*.

**Q. Ahiritola!**

**A.** His teacher at the *tole* is a practising palmist, so Hiran learns by observation what was very much a pseudo science in those days. So his social environment gave him that interest. Secondly, palmistry seemed to me to be a lonely man's passion. Hiran in many respects is a

loner. He goes through life observing people, but never engages himself till the very end. Even when he falls in love with his invisible letter writer in Canton, he never really plucks up enough courage to search her out. He sits and he waits. And in that respect the passion for palmistry seemed to complement his character. And the third, which you correctly pointed out, was the notion of palmistry as a metaphor. The brood of Hiran were then ruled by an alien power and the lines that were drawn on the fate of India were lines drawn by that alien power. Indians followed their destiny, just as the opium clerk Hiranyagarbha did, going from Patna to Jaanbazaar, from Janbazaar to Alipur, and then to Canton and back, following his destiny. He signed files, entered ledgers and pushed them on to other clerks, and so the mystery of the palm seemed to connote the helplessness and the destiny prone nature of the Bengali middle class under British rule. This was, of course, before the rise of the freedom movement, which changed all that.

**Q. Can we say that the dark infamous alleys of Calcutta signify the socio-cultural condition of the Bengalis of the time. So darkness acts as a metaphor in your novel. Do you agree?**

A. Yes. If you read descriptions of 19th century Calcutta, particularly the Black town, a place uninhabited by the British, they evoke narrow winding lanes lit by gas lamps at night, the distant sound of trams...

**Q. You have mentioned *ticca garris*....**

A. Right, and the grinding of the wheels of the *ticca garris* on the cobble stoned streets conjure up for me a world which was dark, but not dark as in foreboding or fearful. Its darkness stemmed from its separation from the brightness of the British Empire, which was glowing all over the world. This was the world of shadows, which actually formed the base on which the brightness of the British Empire was built. Not the majestic buildings of Chowringhee, but the dark lanes for me are most evocative of the Calcutta where the Bengali middle class lived in the 19th century.

**Q. Hiran's *Panchatantra* covers large section in the book...**

A. Fables are very important to me, especially in this particular novel. How does a Brahmin boy, Hiranyagarbha, who is a posthumous child raised by his mother in a large joint family, a boy who fails his *toleship*, ends up as a misfit in a mission school and wanders the city

with his Parsee friend, make sense of life? How does he navigate personalities and relationships? I have made him addicted to fables. Because fables, be they about a jackal in a cucumber field or an idle prince, help him to comprehend and to steer a course through life. So, for example, when he goes to the Crabbe household, he sees in Jonathan and Lilian Crabbe traces of characters he had met before, in his *Panchatantra*. There is this exchange in the novel where Crabbe asks Hiran why the warring birds – the crow or the owl – don't destroy the other... 'Tell me then Hiran baboo, why doesn't one destroy the other?' Hiran replies, 'Because they must survive for the jackal to live by their blood.' Perhaps, the fable of the owl, the crow, and the jackal help him to see the role of the alien and the natives too at the Auction House.

**Q. The Bengalis of Jaanbazaar are highly scornful of Douglas. Would you like to say something about the strong prejudice with respect to the Anglo Indians during those times?**

A. Yes. Actually there is a lot written on the perception of the caste Bengali towards Anglo Indians. Half-caste, blackie white, chillycracker – were commonly used as pejoratives. I don't want to elaborate on the reasons why the Indians might have resented the Anglo Indians who were often portrayed as the henchmen of the British, displaying a range of 'bad British habits' like brawling at night, setting upon the natives, and so forth. It was all the more reason why Douglas was shunned by Hiran's kin, when he brought him home to Jaanbazaar. In fact, on hindsight, it probably was the most courageous act that Hiran had ever performed, one that led to the painful rupture between him and his mother.

**Q. While writing about the relationship between Hiran and Douglas you have said "both seemed to have crossed the bridge between the white town and the black – from no. 15 to century old Jaanbazaar." Did this diminish the gulf between the colonizer and colonized?**

A. I think it did. After all, only human affection is able to bridge gulfs that are unbridgeable otherwise. Think of contemporary times... But the very fact that Hiran adopts this little boy and both develop affection towards each other, help them transcend the colonial divide and create their own world.

**Q. Your portrayal of the *gentoos* is quite sarcastic like the *gentoos* of the Auction House. However, they are not the *baboos* like Hiran. How do you distinguish between the two?**

**A.** Again, a lot again has been written on this. There were several tiers of people who worked in the British offices. Kavasji, the uncle of Hiran's Parsee friend, for example is neither a *baboo* nor a *gentoo*. He has separate quarters, his office is separate from the natives. The *baboos* were likely the lower echelon clerks, whereas the *gentoos* were the departmental heads, who thought themselves closer to the British. In reality, of course, they were all pen-pushers.

**Q. What about the musical instrument *esraj*, which recurs in the Calcutta section of the novel. Even in his dream Hiran hears the *esraj*. Does this have any specific significance?**

**A.** The *esraj* is one of my favourite instruments. It is as well, a typically 19th century Bengali household musical instrument. You'll find a lot of *esraj* in Rabindranath's works. Since Jonathan Crabbe had gone native so to speak – the colonial officer delving in the culture of the colonised – he learns to play the *esraj*. It is Jonathan Crabbe's *esraj* that Hiran hears in no.15 Alipore Road.

**Q. Would you like to say something about Jonathan Crabbe?**

**A.** In the two hundred years of Indian writing, in any of the Indian languages or in English, there is no significant British character. Yes, there was a separation between the British and the Indians during the Raj, they lived in separate neighbourhoods – the White town, the Black town, etc. But they still occupied similar spaces, worked in the same offices, walked the same streets, breathed the same air. Neither Rabindranath nor Bankimchandra wrote a substantial British character. Or Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay, Manik Bandopadhyay. Post independence Indian novelists too haven't grappled with a British character. Thus it was a fascinating challenge to write up Jonathan Crabbe. I could, of course, have portrayed him as a terrible man, the cruel boss of the Auction House. But I chose not to. For me, the power of the British colonial officer lay in his diabolical nature. On the one hand he seems to be a friend of India and the Indians, while on the other he is utterly selfish for himself and ferociously protective of the colonial enterprise. This is quite unlike the nazis who went to Poland and colonized the Poles. I have tried to imbue

Jonathan Crabbe with this duality, which makes him intriguing and unpredictable. He is a great admirer of India, and the conversations on the lawn of No.15 Alipore road show him to be a sophisticated man. He is considerate towards Lillian, and pays Hiran his due respects. At Nabinbaboo's house he interacts very favourably with the natives as indeed many British officers of that period did. At the same time he has his designs on opium, and is quite ruthless in terms of furthering his own interest.

**Q. You have continuously referred to the dark and infamous alleys of black Calcutta but darkness prevails at no.15 Alipore Road, Mr Jonathan Crabbe's house, too which is a part of White Calcutta. Whenever Hiran visits the house the readers are almost consciously reminded of its darkness.**

**A.** Yes I think it's a very interesting point. Hiran's world revolves within darkness. He lives in the dark alleys of the city. He goes to work in a dark Auction House, which probably resembles today's Writers Building. If you go inside Writers Buildings you'll see it's dark even during the day. Then he goes to his supervisor's house to teach him Sanskrit and the rooms there are dark as well. The geometry of Hiran's life is shrouded in darkness. I am making a sort of subterranean point here. In the last page of the book there is a quote – *Tamaso ma Jyotirgamaya...* 'darkness to light' – which implies that Hiran's world is dark at many levels. It is the physical world that he inhabits, as well as the psychological world, which is dark given that he is bereft of desire. To me, *The Opium Clerk* is a novel about desire – the desire for opium, and the desire for the enterprise. Only the protagonist, Hiran, has no desire. Thus he lives in a dark world within himself. But then, desire arrives for him too in the end. He sees light in the darkness of his life, and that light is the light of love for his adopted son Douglas.

**Q. Women, like Lillian Crabbe who is an opium addict, do not have a very strong place in the novel. She is Vinny's 'sleepy memsahib' and Nabinbaboo's 'patient', not a fully drawn portrait. Women do not exert much influence.**

**A.** I think that's a very relevant point. To me the impact of a character is not simply in terms of how much space it occupies in the narrative, but in the pivotal nature of its contribution to events. Saraladebi, I see as a powerful character. If Saraladebi had stayed back in Patna, the story wouldn't have happened. This young widow decides

to bring her son back to Jaanbazaar – a courageous decision for the times as returning widows weren't particularly welcome in paternal households then. She comes back with a little boy and insists that he becomes a priest, persevering even in the face of failure – Hiran's failure. There's a line from Kavasji in the novel... 'Don't dismiss the Hindoo, their power lies in their women.' Lillian Crabbe's power comes from her desire to transcend her class – the Lincolnshire lacemaker's daughter trying to erase the 'marks of stain' on her background through the dangerous seduction of opium. The third important woman for me is Ruth. Her desire is that of compassion. To care for those who have been oppressed. She writes this letter to Douglas... 'You are Black Crabbe, aren't you? Save those with a black fate.' She wants to stop the illegal trade of slave children. But I agree *The Opium Clerk* has no woman character who spans through the pages of the entire narrative. I am hatching a different novel now, which will.

**Q. What do you think is important in your writing style?**

A. I think imagery. Growing up in Calcutta, reading *Rajkahini* as a child, has always excited me with the possibility of painting with words.

**Q. My last question ... how do you reconcile your academic life as a business professor and your literary life as a writer?**

A. I don't try to reconcile them because they are not reconcilable. My professorial life reflects the accidents of my life, while literature represents my conscious choice. We all live with contradictions, don't we? All I can say is the two are not in conflict. In both lives, I read and I write.