

BOOKS



Looking Inwards

Canker.
By Sirshendu Mukhopadhyaya

Translated from the Bengali by Sachindra Lal Ghosh.
Vikas Publishing House 128 pages.

In contemporary fiction one often comes across heroes who withdraw from active life and escape into a private world of fantasy. They feel like aliens in the rat-race of the world and are overwhelmed by its absurdity. For them reality is not what they see outside but rather what they feel inside and a fantasy world alone can sustain this private reality.

Canker, written in Bengali in the late 'sixties, translated into English recently, is the story of Shyam, who, at the age of thirty, suddenly gives up his highly paid job and the sophisticated life style that went along with it. The apparent reason was that he could not bear his boss calling him a bastard.

This triggers off questions about his basic self — who really is he? It is true that he is 'Shyam Chakrabarty, son of Kamalaksha Chakrabarty, of village Bankhara in Bikrampur district of Dacca'. But that signifies nothing, because he has lost all contacts with both his father and his village, because of the restrictions on travel across the border and the exigencies of his career. True, also, that he is the one-time left-winger of his club's football team and is a former executive of Saint and Millers. But beyond these designations (which are already lost), what is his identity?

In an attempt to find and establish his identity he first tries to revive his contacts with his boyhood friends whom he deserted while pursuing the bitch goddess of success. But, now, each one of them in his own way is too absorbed in his own dream of fulfilment to respond to his predicament. In fact, their incomprehension of his problem is so great that one of them diagnoses it as "tumour trouble" arising from "excess of gas" and advises him to take "isabgul husks every night, plenty of milk and lemon juice in a tumbler of hot water in the morning."

Next, he tries to think of himself in a heroic role saving men from pickpockets and women from romances. But that too fails.

Frustrated, he recreates his childhood games but with deadly consequences. He avenges the grudge he bore against motorcyclists since his childhood by reflecting the sun with a mirror into the eyes of a motorcyclist causing a fatal accident.

While in such a desperate condition, he comes across a beautiful receptionist, Leela, on whom he be-

stows all his ideals of womanhood. In a way she becomes, for him, the only reality amidst the floating unreality surrounding him. But his harmless intentions are misinterpreted and he is mercilessly beaten up.

The theme of renunciation is nothing new in Indian literature, and Canker is underlined by this ancient theme. After resigning from his job, Shyam comes to resemble a sadhu. Along with rejection of the comforts and luxuries of his past life he abandons all care for the body as if expiating for his past sin of defying it.

But before he can become a true ascetic he has to overcome the temptations by which the world tries to lure him back into its fold. It is the girl whom Shyam once intended to marry, here plays the role of the seductress who tries, in vain, to distract him from his path of indifference.

Conquering the temptation and wandering aimlessly in the streets of Calcutta, Shyam resembles a monk in search of a holy abode to start his tapasya. Once he finds it under the lamp-post opposite Leela's office, Shyam begins his tapasya. Standing there everyday, not caring about the scorching sun or his high fever, he performs penance and undergoes physical tribulations which are necessary to appease the goddess. But, in this modern tapasya, there is no final benediction or salvation and the novel ends just as it begins with somebody calling him a 'bastard'.

Two things in this remarkable novel deserve special mention. First, the constant self-mockery with which Shyam looks at himself. This prevents any possibility of sentimentalism or philosophizing creeping into the story. There is hardly any statement made by Shyam which is not followed by his laughing at it.

Secondly, the dexterity with which the real and the surreal are fused which makes the novel unusual. The flimsy excuse given for resigning his job, Shyam's attempts to rationalise the whole thing, from the loss of his job to his causing the accident, in terms of cause and effect; the particularity given to names (of the furnishing company, of the many streets of Calcutta), all form a surface reality which leads the reader's attention away from the absurdity of the whole situation. In other words, it is an absurdist novel with a realistic surface.

Sachindra Lal Ghosh not only does an excellent job of translation but also provides a preface, helpful in placing the novel in the Bengali literary scene of the sixties. But one feels that he could have well avoided the explanations which impede the smooth flow of the narrative on certain pages.

Angry Chinese Women

WOMEN OF CHINA: Imperialism and Women's Resistance 1900-1949
By Bobby Siu
Zed Press, London, 208 pages
£5.95 (paper).

This book by sociologist Bobby Siu tells the story of Chinese women activists from 1900-49. It was an age when ladies with bound feet rushed into the streets to protest and demonstrate, and traditionally submissive peasant wives took up arms as soldiers in battlefields.

It was a notable revolutionary movement that has inspired women worldwide engaged in similar struggles. Unfortunately, it is also one aspect of modern Chinese history that has been poorly documented.

Siu spent seven years researching the subject. His aim is to offer "some suggestions, some inspiration and some hope for those who are concerned with human liberation". The result is an informative and scholarly study, though perhaps too meticulous in figures and dates for readers without a basic interest in the topic.

The book, which at times reads like a guide to political action, is definitely not for leisure reading. Yet its wealth of historical fact sometimes tells stories more vividly and effectively than dramatic writing.

The author contends that the resistance movement sprang from the encroachment of imperialism on China. This theme, however, is not eloquently argued. In the first half of the book, Siu highlights imperialism as the chief cause of many tragedies in China, particularly those involving Chinese women.

Abruptly, the author shifts to an endless listing of intense suffering: rapes, infanticides, child-wives, women refugees, maltreated female workers. To name but a few.

The second half of the book chronicles the women's movement itself, though the link-up with the first half is inadequate. Siu, for instance, could have shown in greater detail how imperialism compared with "feudalism" in inflicting hardship on Chinese women.

Still the author is to be commended for tracing the growth of resistance from sporadic protests to a highly

organised movement. But between 1902 and 1912 it was limited mainly to young women educated and active in political groups in Japan. Women's organisations started to form but were short-lived and had few members.

The 1920s was a period of spontaneous activism by women students and workers, who sometimes joined in alliances. Moving in chronological order, Siu shows how humiliating events like the 1919 Paris Peace Conference sparked anti-imperialistic feelings among Chinese women.

He differentiates between the educated, who were motivated to action by a sense of nationalism, and those who suffered inhuman treatment in factories. Peasant women remained unorganised, launched occasional protests against landlords and, in more desperate cases, robbed rice stores.

By the mid-20s, both the Kuomintang and the fledgling Chinese Communist Party had developed specific policies to mobilise women, but for different purposes and with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

The KMT, writes Siu, "was interested in promoting women's rights only to the extent that it benefited the party and its affiliated capitalist ventures." It aimed only at the educated and restricted its focus to moralistic, non-political and non-economic issues.

—Louise do Rosario



Chinese women, '40s: Chroneling a historic movement

Seabed: Dump for Nuclear Wastes

Scientists are discussing the suitability of dumping radioactive wastes into the sea. Two ocean sites being considered are the Abyssal Plain near Bermuda Islands in the Atlantic Ocean and the Shatskiy Rise in the Pacific, east of Japan.

Time was when scientists, in their anxiety to get rid of vast quantities of nuclear waste materials ordered them dumped in pits close to reactor plants or atomic bomb manufacturing facilities. But things have been changing fast with growing public resistance to this method of disposal of materials that are proven to be disease-causing and deadly.

People's resistance to permit burying nuclear wastes on land sites, many of which are in close proximity to human dwellings, has become so acute in recent years that governments have been sent scurrying to look for alternative methods of disposal of these materials.

While scientists in countries like the United States, Canada, France and the Netherlands feel the tonnes of nuclear waste that has already accumulated or will be collected in due course can be buried in deep, remote underground areas which have a proven seismological record of witnessing no changes for centuries, there are others who feel

similar areas in the depths of the sea may eventually prove the safe bet.

The option of turning land sites into nuclear graveyards may be sound for countries like Canada and the Soviet Union, which have vast desert land, uninhabited by man or animals. But the programme poses serious hurdles for countries like Japan and Britain which have no places on land, remote or stable enough for burial of high-level wastes.

Nuclear waste disposal plans under study by several countries call for canisters containing spent fuel rods, parts of dismantled reactors and other high-level radioactive materials to be dropped, pushed or drilled into soft clay under about 6 km of water. It is claimed that in that shielded environment they would safely cool and lose their radioactivity over a period of hundreds of years.

"The seabed may eventually be the only alternative because there is so much public resistance to dumping on land," said Dr George Needler, Director of the Atlantic Ocean Laboratory at the Bedford Institute of Oceanography in Canada.

Needler's observations were made at the fifth Joint Oceanographic Assembly held in Halifax recently.

According to Needler, there was no trouble finding places in the oceans that would remain stable for 2

million years—long enough to cool even the longest living radioactive waste—but the problem was to keep radiation from diffusing through into the environment.

Needler, who heads an international study of marine pollution sponsored by the United Nations, has carried out experiments to determine how much radiation could safely be dispersed into the ocean. Using low-level wastes, such as gloves of reactor workers, he dumped them into drums off the coasts of Britain, Japan and the United States. He said the radiation that escaped from these low-level drums was no more hazardous than the radiation that entered the environment from bomb tests of the 1950's. "It mixes through the water and cannot really be distinguished from background radiation," he added.

High-level waste is probably completely different and it could have substantial biological effects if large amounts of radioactivity from waste was to escape into water, Needler said. But like the hazards of smoking, the direct effects of extra radiation in the ocean are difficult to estimate.

As things stand two ocean sites which are being considered for conversion into giant nuclear graveyards are the Abyssal Plain near Bermuda Islands in the Atlantic Ocean and the Shatskiy Rise in the Pacific, east

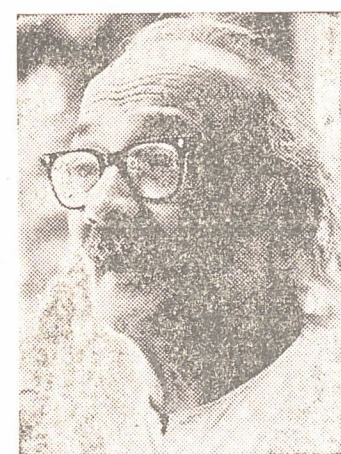
Bendre's Rare Poetry

It was a year ago, on October 26, 1981, that Karnataka lost a poet who could rank among the great poets of this century. Datatreya Ramachandra Bendre (Ambikatanaya Datta) was a fascinating man and a titan as a poet. Not since Kumaravyasa of the fifteenth century had Karnataka seen a poet of such power, such an appetite for experience, and such wizardry in the use of language.

To both these poets, Karnataka seemed to yield all its treasures. From the sheer joy of the love of a man and a woman to mystic experience which transcends language, from the magic of sexual love in Naanu Badavi to the cosmic vision of time in Hakki Haruthide, the challenging mystic experience of Jogi and the vision of Maathu-Kriti, Bendre's poetry spanned a rare range of experience. Kurudu Kaanchana is a blood-chilling vision of evil greed, but the poet prophesies the ultimate self-destruction of this cruel terror. The sheer joy of living, the thrill of love, the challenge of the world outside and the vast and watching universe — who could awaken us to these as Bendre did? In his last years he was immersed in the study of numbers, and the last time I met him he seemed bursting with confidence that he would be able to cross into realms of enlightenment few people had been permitted to visit.

The wizard is no more with us. He was so alive, to be near him was to be near a vital force, a bright flame. He gave you no opportunity to get in a word even edgewise, but you listened mesmerised. You sometimes resented things he said and did, you were even pained, but all the same you listened enthralled, because you knew you were privileged to be in the presence of a mind of rare brilliance.

How has the community reacted to the departure of this colossus? who had felt the spell of his poetry even though they had not seen him, who were at least dimly aware that through him a whole community was becoming articulate in new ways? The torrential downpour of letters from readers which descended on newspapers and the crowds that thronged the condolence meetings — I remember, at the meeting organised by the



Bendre: A Wizard with Words

Sahitya Parishat in Bangalore, we (the speakers) had difficulty in entering the hall — all bore testimony to the affection he had won. The first shock over, some of those seriously interested in literature addressed themselves to the task of a serious study and unsentimental assessment of the poet's work. Snehalayana, Ankana and the Christ College Karnataka Sangha came together in Bangalore to organise an admirable series of monthly programmes Bendre Namana. Some

Some periodicals have done a splendid job. Tainudi of Bombay (where, incidentally, the poet breathed his last), came out with a special issue devoted to Bendre. There were some good contributions. But what made the publication particularly attractive was the wealth of pictures it offered, some of

Some time back in this column I wrote on "Periodicals that matter" — periodicals which matter to the cultural life of a community. Some of these amply justified their reputation. Sudra presented in its special issue of November 1981, along with other studies of Bendre's poems, a very interesting discussion in which three of our foremost poets participated — Gopalakrishna Adiga, G. S. Shivarudra and Channaveera Kanavi.

Dedicated to the goal of projecting views and verdicts which have long been forced to remain inarticulate, the tone struck in Sudra was at first exuberant, sometimes needlessly brusque and belligerent. In the course of a decade it has shed some of its barbed wire and become more informative and thoughtful, more positive in its approach to problems. The discussion raises interesting questions — would he have better expressed the modern consciousness if he had been

influenced by English poetry?

The January-March issue of Rujuvathu contained some stimulating notes from Dr U. R. Ananthamurthy. Here is a periodical which, in a few months, proved the value of an inter-disciplinary approach to the study of literature and the problems of modern civilisation. It offers rich and varied fare, much of which creates an awareness of new dimensions to familiar studies. Dr Ananthamurthy's editorial note on Bendre brings him back as a man. A man who could sit

—Kannada—
Literary
Scene

By
L. S. Seshagiri Rao

and talk or laugh and quarrel with the people around him, and who, while seriously trying to transport his hearers to the mystic land of numbers, looked like a snake-charmer with his wand. It poses serious questions, offers a useful comparison between two poems, one of Bendre and another of B. M. Sri, on the same subject and sums up what he did for the language. That no other poet in Kannada has recreated the different levels of consciousness as he did is also mentioned by Dr. Ananthamurthy.

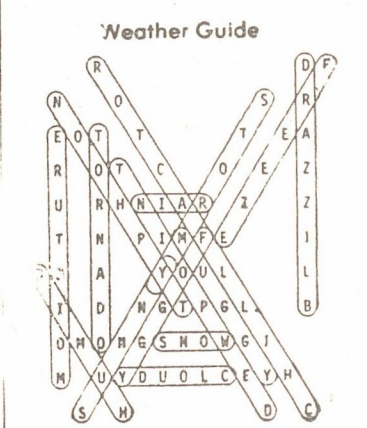
The May-July issue of Ankana is also devoted to Bendre studies. The articles contributed by K. L. Gopalakrishnaiah and Kirthinatha Kurtakoti deserve particular mention. The former considers the nature of the archetypal images in Bendre and argues that he employed them more effectively in poems of joy or exultation and that he did not achieve that vision of evil which colours the composition of the highest epic poets.

This is by no means an exhaustive report; it is not even a report. I have tried to indicate how the common reader and the serious students of poetry reacted to the death of a great poet.

But what about the government? It should not have been difficult to bring out, in the course of the year, just a 100-page collection of selected poems; the publication could have been subsidised as the works of Kumaravyasa and Kuvempu were, earlier. A friend has pointed out in a local daily the failure of the Karnataka Sahitya Academy and the Kannada Sahitya Parishat. The parishat presents itself before the public in the role of the People's University. It should not have been difficult to have Bendre's portrait unveiled and to have organised a symposium on the occasion. When giants like T. N. S. and Aa. Na. Kri. departed, the Parishat brought out a special tribute number of Kannada Nudi. Strangely enough, Bendre did not merit even this tribute.

Who could write poetry, who could read poetry with such gusto as Bendre?

Solution to Word Sleuth



—Suresh Jain