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# meet the author

Sirshendu Mukhopadhyay





Life is not a game. Life is not just to pass time like an outsider. Life is not just enjoyments of pleasure and wealth. Life has a deeper meaning. From a writer we always expect to hear of that depth. It is from him that we would want to know the meaning of life': says Sirshendu Mukhopadhyay, a fictionist of distinction in contemporary Bengali literature. He believes that those who wield pen in this country *ifso facto* inherit certain liabilities — to themselves, to their country and people. Observing all the facets of life, all its mysteries and fruitions, they have to seek and find those positive symptoms that rescue mankind from the sense of frustration, failure and melancholy and drive them towards a scintillating existence.

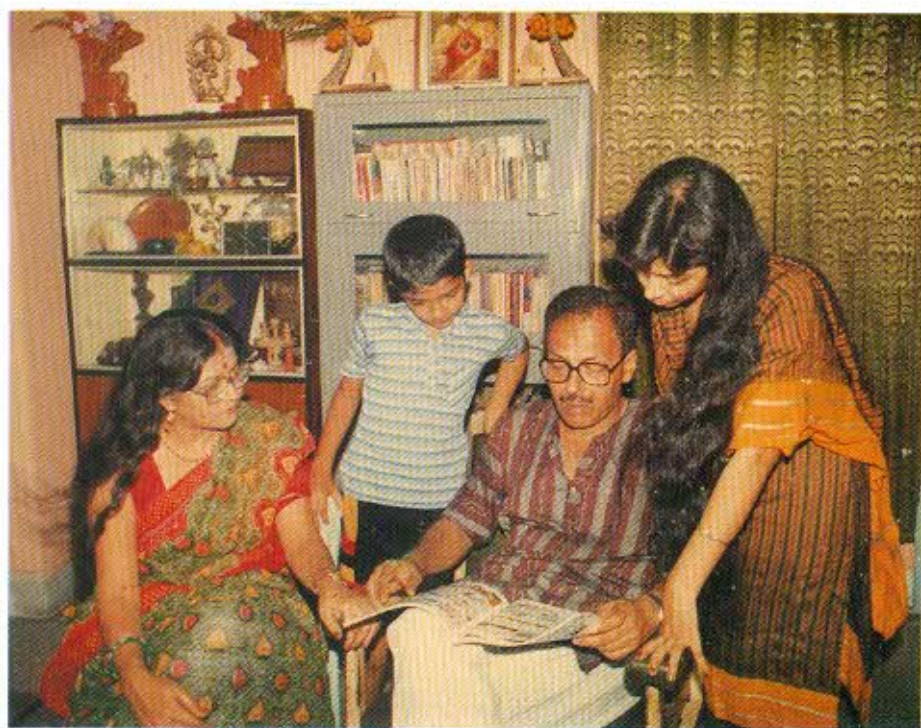
Born at Banikhara in Bikrampur pargana of the then East Bengal in 1935, Sri Mukhopadhyay passed a major part of his early years in Bihar, Assam and North Bengal. His father being in the Railway service, the family lived almost on wheels. Here one may discover some of these places of his childhood days — Katihar, Maljunction, Domohani, Maimansingha, Laming, Padu,

Jalpaiguri, Coochbihar — making their entries in his fictions.

Sirshendu Mukhopadhyay's first story captioned 'Bikeler mrityu' (the death of an afternoon) was published in *Ekata* (unity), the magazine of the Students' Union of the University of Calcutta in 1957-58. In the following year, another story entitled 'Jaltaranga' (Water-ripples) was published in a general issue of the Bengali-weekly *Desh*. In the same year his story 'Aguner ghar, jafrer chhaya' (The house of fire, the shadow of trellis) was published in the autumn issue of the journal. In the following year his story 'Swapner bhitarer mrityu' (death in dream), which he took one year and nine months to write, was published in *Desh* again. Most of his stories of this period assimilate a Schopenhauerean view of the world that holds that Science, which investigates this world, cannot itself penetrate behind appearances. The stories present a world, which is dominated by a strong, blind, striving, universal cosmic Will that expresses itself in the vagaries of human instinct, in sexual striving, and in the wild uncertainties of all animal behaviour. A rare kind of morbidity and a zeal for self-annihilation haunted some of his characters, which in some way proximate some of the protagonists of Dostoyevsky.

Going down the memory lane, Sri Mukhopadhyay explores his mind and mood of those days: 'I possessed the only asset of a Bengali middle class boy — eyes full of dreams, only dream. There was no attempt to realise those dreams. Most of the young men of this country grow grey with dreams. Thanks to adversities, I had certain agonies too in my life. The whiplashes of those agonies drove





with wife Sonamon, daughter Debalina, son Samrat

my self-absorbed mind in different directions. Where is the source of this life? Why this life? Why death? What is the form of the Infinite? All these questions stirred me always.' At last his agonies and dreams were reconciled. Thakur Anukulchandra, as if by a magic touch, arrayed his life, his writings and all that.

His first novel *Ghoonpoka* (Woodworm), which has been translated into 14 languages including English, came out in 1967. The title symbolises the life-experience of the protagonist, — the hollowness of the modern urban civilization, the emptiness of that which is considered meaningful in the 'real world'. But the world does not appear in the text. The novel, however, does not end with decay and degeneration, but with a vision of beauty and a promise of regeneration. It all starts with the word 'bastard'. Shyam Chakraborty, a rising young executive with a bright future falls into a deep depression on being called a bastard by his irate boss and gives

up his job a few days later. The word pulls at the roots of his existence and raises basic questions about the nature of his identity. He gradually transforms himself from a smart young man to a tramp, becomes a loner by choice, repudiates his girlfriend, kills an unknown motorcyclist for no valid reason, is obsessed by a young woman he hardly knows, follows her around, and brings about his own destruction in the hands of street ruffians who fail to understand his strange ways. Nabaneeta Dev Sen, a well-known Bengali novelist and critic, in her appreciation of the book observes: 'Sirshendu's protagonist believes in purging, in divine grace, and in rebirth. Death for him is not a closure but a fresh start. It is a tale of the reaffirmation of lost values, a quest for innocence and eternal truth. Rooted in Eastern Philosophy, in his desire to redefine himself and to establish a connection with the undying cosmic force, Shyam is a far cry from Mersault.'



In his third novel *Ujan* (An upstream course), the novelist recounts with nostalgic feeling his childhood days on the Bramhaputra river in the eastern part of Bengal. When he revisits the days as the perspective of the novel, he is hundreds of miles away from his birthplace but the red ochre of the alluvial deposit of the river still colours the grey present of the protagonist. He can never relive the life of those yester years but it should not be repressed either. But the novel does not end in nostalgia alone— it is an uncommon story of a man's journey in search of the basic truths of life.

*Kagajer Bau* (The paper wife), published in mid 70's, is one of his most significant novels. In a casual mode of novelistic discourse, the author describes the agony of the precious human heart which is often subjugated in the artificial materialistic demand. The moral and spiritual bond of matrimony between a husband and a wife is replaced by a legal document to reach the higher rungs of the socio-economic ladder. In the process the sensitive souls fall upon the thorns of life and bleed.

His novel *Manabjamin*, often referred to as a modern epic, was given the Sahitya Akademi award in 1989. The central character of the novel is Deepnath and the story is woven with what happens to the families of his brothers and sister, his own emotional involvements and his reflective reaction to these happenings. The novel gives us a vivid picture of the unrelieved tragedy of the Indian middle-class life in the urban milieu and also of the palpable limitation of its range. It has intensity about it which distinguishes it from the other works of this category. It is written in an impassioned style and the whole novel seems to be keyed to the same pitch to such an extent that every character in the novel tends to be equally clever and at times brilliant in his or her articulation. One may even get the impression that the central character spouts the author's attitude to the human situation as he visualizes it.

A prolific writer, Sirshendu Mukhopadhyay has published more than forty novels, twelve children's novels, and seventeen collections of short stories. Five of



At a literary conference



his fictional works have been filmed and one televised. Commenting on his literary achievements Amaresh Datta, a well-known critic, writes: 'Among the contemporary Bengali novelists who enjoy wide popularity, Mukhopadhyay occupies a place of distinction. He has a rare command over the language and has developed a style of writing which is characteristically his own; he is extraordinarily sensitive to the subtle nuances of thought and feeling and he knows not only how to tell a story and keep his reader's interest vibrant and alive till the end, but also how to lead the story to a valid conclusion through the thickets of complicated events and situations.'

## A SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

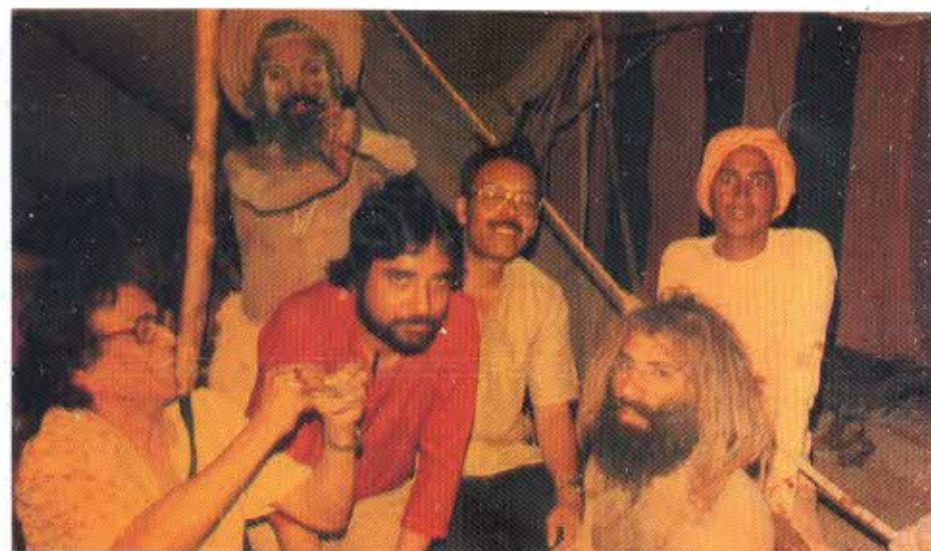
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With Samares Basu at Kumbhamela



Receiving the Sahitya Akademi award

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Hindi :

*MANABJAMIN*, tr Jukti Banerjee, Sahitya Akademi, 1996

## A CHRONOLOGY

1935: Birth at Banikhara in Bikrampur pargana of Dhaka

1952: Passed School Final examination

1955: Passed B.A. (Hons) in Bengali from City College, Calcutta

1959: First short-story 'Jaltaranga' published in *Desh*

1961: Joined Kalighat Oriental Academy as a teacher

1965: *Diksha*

1967: The novel *Ghoonpoka* published

1968: Married Sonamon  
The novel *Parapar* was serialised in *Desh*

1969: Daughter Debalina was born

1970: *Ujan*, third novel, published

1973: Received Ananda Puraskar. Published the novel *Din Jay*

1975: Received Vidyasagar Award of the Govt. of West Bengal

1976: Joined Ananda Bazar Patrika as a sub-editor  
The novel *Jao Pakhi* published

1977: The novel *Kagajer Bau* published

1978: Son Samrat was born

1982: Assistant Editor in *Desh*

1988: Received Bhualka Award. Visited U.K. and U.S.A.

1989: Sahitya Akademi Award for *Manabjamin*

1991: Visited U.K.