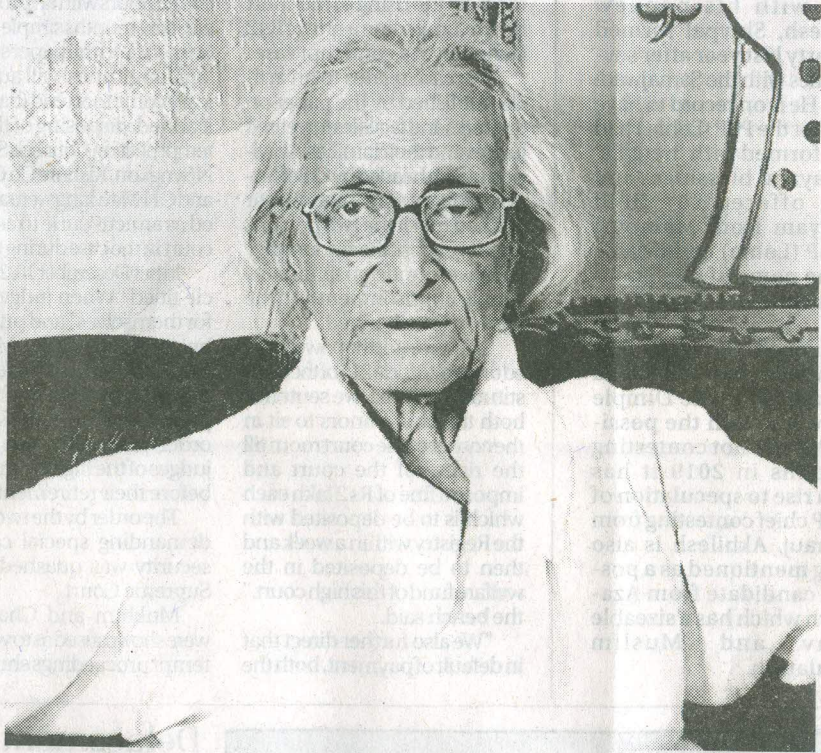


'Literature can't be held hostage to time'

Renowned Bengali writer Sanjib Chattopadhyay, 82, has been given the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award for 2018 for his book "Sri Krishna Shesh Kota Din" (Last few days of Sri Krishna), a dialogue with Sri Krishna. He grew up a lonely child amid the hilly landscape of Chota Nagpur after he lost his mother at the age of five. He along with his father then shifted to Calcutta, as India's freedom struggle reached its crescendo. In his works, he seeks to explore myriad layers of human lives through prisms of morality and spirituality. In an interview to DIPANKAR CHAKRABORTY, the versatile writer, famous for his satire and humour, spoke about his foray into the world of literature and his journey as an author. Excerpts:

Q: Can you tell us about your childhood days and how it impacted you as an author?

A: I spent lonely childhood days. My mother died when I was only five years old. Father did not marry for a second time. It was a big joint family humming with activity. We lived in an old-fashioned Dutch villa that the people called a ghost house. As a lonely boy I roamed around walking in and out from one room to the other. I saw the last rays of evening sun giving way to a dark steely silence of the night. I waited for my father to come back from office. In that lonely milieu I imagined myself being turned into a "bhoot" or spirit, transferred myself into the skin of other persons and observed his reaction from a distance. The "I" became "you".



Q: You have recently received the Sahitya Akademi Award for your work "Krishner Shesh Kota Din". What are your thoughts about it?

A: I never want to be pedantic. The commonplace title of the book itself will show. It is simple and easily understood by all, even by a child or a vegetable seller. Those who call themselves intellectuals, I have seen, they have a tendency to be indifferent to

the common people. I speak the language of common people and tell their stories, equally enjoyed by all. The book is part of a package.

Q: From where did the idea of writing the book come from?

A: The idea came to my mind one day as I sat pondering over the end of human life. Death is inevitable. It came to avatars, to Gautam Buddha,

to Krishna, the Lord, himself. All of them suffered the pain of a common man when the end came. Hence, the idea of writing about the end of Krishna flashed across my mind. Krishna was hit by an arrow in his leg and died an inglorious death due to gangrene and sepsis. I became His pageboy as I sat down writing about His last days before death. But, then, I wondered what happened to Radha and it led to a big space ~ the death of time. I worked really hard on the book.

Q: How do you manage to blend spirituality with vicissitudes of life in your works and use it as a means of finding answers to life's complex questions?

A: A learned person once told me about my literary pursuits: "Sanjib, you are not about to walk down a path covered with roses but thorns." Swami Vivekananda had once said, "Meaning of Sanyas is death. Your present being is replaced by a new spiritual one. Never be afraid of death or you can never be a sadhu." I have learnt my lesson from there. I am always ready to embrace death. In Dakshineswar, Ramakrishna Paramhansa had once told his devotees: "If you feel like you may come to me or go to Rani Rashmani's garden instead. I can make you face sorrow and happiness with equanimity." If an author can face life and death with equanimity, then it widens the scope of literary creativity. "Sahitya" means something that is "with me". So, "it is with me".

Q: Your characters are confined

to well-defined spaces and evolve accordingly and tell their stories...

A: Every individual is constantly engaged in an exercise of creative expression of their daily mundane lives. It may not be essentially put in black and white in a piece of literary work, always. A teeming, nameless multitude is ever busy in a process of creative, literary communication. They are trying to communicate about their own lives. It is akin to what we do in today's digitalised world of social media ~ "share" our feelings, life-stories, with others.

Q: What kind of author do you consider yourself to be?

A: I have observed that time, period and individual-centric literary works are ephemeral. They don't survive for long. Many literary works penned at the time of political turmoil in West Bengal are today passé....Literature cannot be held hostage to time. It is a kind of bondage.

Q: So how do you define an immortal piece of literary work?

A: An immortal piece of literary creation has to be preceded by an exercise to elevate oneself to the zenith of supreme realisation. It is a situation in which a person's individuality pales before the larger objective of literary expression. Now if we go about analysing the top five works of the past we will see that they were issue-based and made a great name for themselves during that period but today are as good as history.

Q: What, in your view, is the role of religion in literature?

A: It is an interesting question. Religion today is all pervasive, whether it is in politics, religion or our lives. Let others discuss it. I am not going to do it. Sir, our struggle for survival is itself a big religion. Live a life and learn how to live it is what religion teaches us. How you are going to shield yourself at the time of your death...Whether in sorrow, joy or fear, religion is everywhere.