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# meet the author

Alokeranjan Dasgupta



আলোকরঞ্জন দাসগুপ্ত



**B**orn 6 October 1933, in Kolkata, Alok Ranjan Dasgupta still nurtures a deep attachment to his ailing mother, who gave him his early exposure to the poems and songs (she was a singer herself and a music teacher) of Rabindranath Tagore, and shared with him her memories and associations of rural/traditional-and-undivided Bengal. One speculates whether the continuing convergences in Alok Ranjan's poetry between enormous universals and minute details from the little cultures of village women, women couped up in middle class domesticities, or the tribals, or the homeless refugees dispersed over the world, who people the landscape of his later and more recent poetry grew out of those 'passages' between times and locales and voices and rites that his mother revealed to him.

In a series of 'passages', Alok Ranjan has since covered trajectories between the tribal village of Rikhia (in Bihar) where he spent long stretches of time, and Santiniketan, where he had his schooling ('When I went to Santiniketan, Tagore was dead,

but his spell hung over us, his absence no less vibrant than his presence. In Santiniketan, we lived under the spell of beauty : beauty seemed to be the sole condition for life.');

between Santiniketan and Kolkata, where he joined Presidency College for his graduation and Masters and wrote the poems that went into his first collection of poems, *Jauban Baul* ('The Bard of the Youth' 1959); between Bengal, and its capital Kolkata, and Germany, where he has been living since 1971. While the sheer thrill of unravelling and reading connections and continuities between these cultural polarities often charge his poems in a civilizational landscape, Alok Ranjan also registers from time to time those poignant pauses when he descends into a profound silence to brood over concerns so deep for words that they demand shifts in the poetic idiom. Names of places and individuals, often other poets and artists and friends, mark his landscape, bringing in their special associations to form an enveloping ambience, often historically potent, as in the richly evocative lines:

Saadi had his Gulistan...

No one dared clip the wings of  
the Sufi poet.

Nazrul was just as lighthearted as  
he was a rebel.

When Tulsidas wrote his  
*Ramcharitamanasa* on the  
ghats of Banaras

The Hindus had not jumped on  
to fundamentalism.

When Hafez learnt that Goethe  
was translating his ghazals,  
He must have burst into divine  
ecstasy

Though he was long dead by  
then.



These are facts that people know  
But daring to draw on divinity to  
write a triolet,  
I discover that war hasn't ceased  
anywhere  
Saadi had his garden stretching  
over acres.  
All I have is friends fighting one  
another  
With shells and abuse – Jammu  
and Kashmir.

The passages between literary traditions and times in this poem converge on the horror of endless war that troubles Alokaranjan persistently. Even as he rearticulates Adorno's momentous question, 'Is there any place for the lyric after Auschwitz?' he reaches out for a more multiarticulate poetic expression, culminating in his most recent work, *Juddher Chhayay* ('In the Shadow of War' 2003) that he describes as a 'collage' on the evercontinuing war, with a multiety of modes, covering factsheets, poems, translations, travelogue, interviews, accounts of chance encounters and 'sharings' with individuals, celebrated and nameless alike, a fragmentary

verseplay, and evocations/ reproductions of artworks, all adding up to a modern epic. The prose of *Juddher Chhayay* in its turn grows out of the course that Alokaranjan's critical writing has taken from his more classical and focused earlier literary criticism towards a more open-ended, brooding, dialectical reading of his times and creativity in poetry and the other arts.

The word 'collage' comes up in Alokaranjan's recent discourse from his close study of and concern with the ethics of artistic and cultural expressions in a larger matrix and the possibilities that they offer to poetry in its inherent compulsion to break beyond its formal and verbal limits in its negotiations with history. Alokaranjan's impatience with settled words and forms surfaces in his brilliant wordplay, his games with sounds and rhythms, his sparkling neologisms, and his dramatic disruptions of and departures from a locus, shocking his reader again and again out of a habit of acquiescent reading. But beyond those exhilarating



With wife Trudberta Dasgupta



With Sankha Ghosh

transitions, there are also those images—in action / movement—that shape and stand beyond time, as the one drawing on his memories of his mother:

My mother held me by the hand  
 one day  
 And helped me cross this turning  
 like a mountain pass,  
 The hungering route, the hard  
 edge at the end,  
 This dark lane shorn of its ringing  
 anklets,  
 The enormous plain gaping with  
 cracks,  
 Stalked by bandits, holding me  
 by the hand.  
 It's my turn today to help my  
 mother cross over,  
 Across the razor-sharp  
 conspiracy of this hungering  
 route,  
 Beyond the traders in lust, rage,  
 desire and the end of desire,  
 I carry my mother along, my  
 mother, who knows nothing,  
 my mother a child.

Besides his prolific creativity Alokranjan has also been a major translator from German into Bengali, translating Goethe, Hölderlin, Heine, Brecht,

Kroetz, Biermann, Grass, Sara Kiersch, Erich Fried, among others; from English to Bengali, with his monumental translation of Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*; from Hindi to Bengali, with his selections from Surdas; and from Bengali to German. With this rich body of translations, and his critical exigeses on these he stands as a major figure in comparative literature and cultural and translation studies.

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RANGAMAYA PANCH-  
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### A Chronology

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1933 Born in Kolkata  
1955 Post-graduation in  
Bengali from the University of  
Calcutta



Speaking at a literary seminar

1957 Taught Comparative  
Literature and Bengali at  
Jadavpur University, Calcutta

1971 Went to Germany on a  
Humboldt Foundation  
Fellowship

1976– Teaching New Indology at  
the South Asia Institute,  
University of Heidelberg

1979 Dasgupta's Bengali  
translation of Sophocles'  
*Antigone* staged in Calcutta  
by Hansgunter Heyme

1984 Awarded Sudha Basu  
Smriti Puraskar

1985 Received Goethe Prize  
from Goethe Institute,  
Munich

Received Ananda Puraskar,  
Kolkata

1987 Received Rabindranath  
Tagore Prize for literature  
from Indo-German  
Association, Stuttgart

1991 Received Shiromoni  
Puraskar, Kolkata

1992 Appointed Cultural  
Adviser to Bildung und  
Wissen Verlag, Nuremberg,  
Germany.

Received Sahitya  
Akademi Award

1994 Adviser to Dialogue  
International, Lemgo