stories of

Human Unsuccess & Beyond

two novellas about Calcutta,
mid-1930s & mid-1940s

Manik Bandyopadhyay

Translated from Bengali by

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Translator's Introduction

Sing of human unsuccess
In a rapture of distress;
In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountain start, ...

—W. H. Auden (1907-1973): "In Memory of W. B. Yeats"; 1939.

Manik Bandyopadhyay was born on May 19, 1908 in Dumka, a tribal area in Jharkhand, where his father was posted as settlement officer. Their extended family continued living in their ancestral home in Bikrampur, Dhaka, where Manik spent large periods of his teenage and early youth, mostly wandering with his flute among the fishing and other rural communities. That immersive experience went into his two famous early novels.[1] During his adult life lived in Calcutta, starting as an undergraduate, he came to know, inside and out, the city's diverse and

1 *Putul Nacher Itikatha* (first serialised in *Bharatvarsha*, 1934-35; first published in book form, 1936) [English translations: *The Puppets Tale* (1968) by Sachindralal Ghosh and *The Puppet's Tale* (2022) by Ratan Kumar Chattopadhyay] and *Padma Nadir Majhi* (first serialised in Purbasha, 1934; first published in book form, 1936); [English translations: *Boatman of the Padma* (1948) by Hitendra Mukherjee; *Padma River Boatman* (1973) by Barbara Painter and Yann Lovelock.].

rapidly changing conditions of life — in its dingy north of interwar years — of the impoverished ranks of city-dwellers and the migrants from depressed villages; as well as in its affluent newly developing south, where his retired father built a family house. He had been walking the city's alleyways and its avenues, taking its trams and buses, and observing the lives of the lower and the upper middle-classes, often among branches of an extended family (such as he shows in the first novella), as well as sections of the city's factory-and-transport workers and rural migrants working mostly as porters and coolies.

In the 28-year literary career of his 48-year life (he died on December 3, 1956), he wrote 39 novels, 226 short stories, a play, essays, volumes of diary, and some poems. What is most striking about his fiction is its radical departure from the powerful influence of Rabindranath Thakur (1868-1941). He regarded Rabindranath as primarily a great poet; hardly ever remarked on his corpus of fiction. His own novels and stories are totally different from Rabindranath's in prose style, themes, and in authorial voice. Considered unique even among the notable post-*Rabindranath* writers of fiction, Manik's fiction in the 1930s through mid-1940s, as in these two novellas, gives starkly neorealist psycho-social portraits of Bengal's lower middle-class lives. The contexts are of disintegrating extended families, a rapidly rising presence of women in higher education and the professions, along with later marriage and changing gender relations at home and outside.

The phrase "human unsuccess" in my title for this juxtaposition of Manik Bandyopadhyay's two early novellas on late-colonial Calcutta, comes from W.H.

The Children of Immortals

(*Amritasya Putrah*, 1938)

1

Crowds are common in our populous world. And the urge to form groups natural in humans. But why they keep packing together in such small spaces — exchanging breath, body odour, infections, harsh words — an answer to that has to come from those who become psychologists by reading books. Ants too crowd, not merely around a bit of molasses, but to ensure survival through collective efforts. Then, once they grow wings, they take off individually for ant-heaven.

The larger the crowds, and the more the occasions when crowds become part of individual life, the bigger a city the place is known to be. Schools and colleges hold daily classes, offices start at ten, and every now then meetings and rallies are held; in an open field, not a day passes without ten, twenty games being played; at cinema halls people line up for tickets; in eateries people gather around tea and cutlets; in Cafe de X and Cafe de Y many, ascending a heaven of unreality after a bottle or two, dance clumsily with flat-chested, hip-padded anglo-Indian Urvashis; the marketplaces sprout knots of people engaging in small talk; and in their homes ten people live in a space adequate for a tenth of one — that's possible because not one of those ten is a full human being; perhaps not even a human being!

Anupam and Shankar were both heading to their college — one in a crowded bus, the other in a family car. At a big crossing, where crowds and speeding vehicles are seen as symbols of progress, where world news worth a few paisas can be bought for a few paisas from a stack under a hawker's arm, the bus and the car came to a stop at the red light, right next to each other.

The double-decker bus,[1] if its seats were removed, could house an entire family. Anupam wasn't deep in its belly; he sat squeezed against a window in the mid-section of its lower deck.

Shankar sat in the car's back seat, relaxed, elbows resting on trousered thighs, one palm on a shaved cheek. Beside him sat his grandfather Bireswar, his age seventy-three and a half.

Spotting Anupam's face at the bus window just a few feet away, Bireswar called out, 'Aren't you Anupam? *Ei*, Anupam!'

Their eyes had met a moment ago. But Anupam, in a mindset of feeling anonymous in a crowd, was slow in face recognition. Having often to be in crowds, he was used to seeing himself as alone in his head, moving incognito in a familiar world. His eyes saw the elderly man whom he had seen once three years ago, but his mind did not connect. Blankly he asked, 'Who're you?'

Bireswar frantically shouted, 'Get off first, then I'll tell you. Get off now, quick!'

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1 Double-decker buses were introduced in Calcutta in 1926 by Walford Company, operated by the Calcutta Trumways Company, to use their large passenger capacity to cope with the fast-rising congestion.