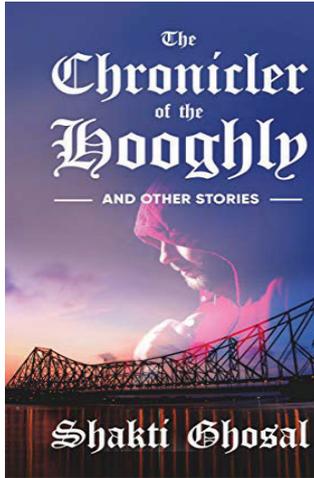


The Chronicler of the Hooghly and Other Stories

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The Chronicler of the Hooghly and Other Stories
Shakti Ghosal

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The Chronicler of the Hooghly and Other Stories by Shakti Ghosal (Half Baked Beans Literature, New Delhi, 2020) is a collection of stories. A versatile personality, Ghosal has worked in the corporate world for decades, and now has come up with his first book of fiction. But his captivating style of narrating tales bears testimony to the fact that he is an accomplished writer of prose. According to the author, these four stories are inspired

by his personal experiences. However, he has woven these stories into a multi-hued fabric of history and societal norms prevailing at that time and linking Bengali culture to modern times. The prominent aspect of the book is that readers get a taste of both the ancient and the modern times, and the switchover is amazing.

The title story, “The Chronicler of the Hooghly,” which appears as the fourth and final story in the book, has its beginning in the year 1756, one year prior to the eventful Battle of Plassey which completely changed the political scenario of not only Bengal but the whole of India too. By winning this battle, the British, through East India Company, successfully laid the foundation for British rule in India, subjecting her people to the yoke of ignominious foreign rule for about two centuries. This story highlights the unfortunate actions of self-interested power-seekers who played treacherous and deceitful games to further their own petty interests. In the process, they even compromised the independence of their kingdoms by their shameful betrayal to the British authorities. Omichand, Nabakrishna Deb, and other characters in the story are representative of such a phenomenon with which the annals of Indian history are replete. Sowing the seeds of discontent among the local chieftains, significant persons in the establishment, the servants, and petty officials had been the winning strategy of the British authorities in India. Ghosal, in this story, has sculpted such characters with finesse and authenticity which successfully

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evoke the reader's interest. He has narrated this story through a stranger who has linked the history of Bengal, the development of modern Kolkata, and the making of British rule in India via Bengal to the saga of the pious Hooghly River. This part of the story is a unique feature. Civilizations usually grow around the banks of rivers and vanish in due course. But the river remains standing as the real chronicler of the events occurring in different regimes at different times. Lastly, the author has laced the narrative with the anecdote of a pearl necklace which touches the chord of spiritualism and moral beliefs of the people.

Going backwards through the book's contents, the third story "Fault Lines" deals with a unique psychological idea. The story's message is that, despite our day-to-day conquests, it is our alter ego that decides the final results. Sometimes, we weave a web around our thinking faculty which makes us believe that we are doing the right thing but this may not always be the case. There is someone, our alter ego, who reminds us of or shows us our fault lines, at least once in our life. Set in Muscat, Oman, this is a story of two close friends who are diametrically opposite in temperament and approach towards life. They are destined to woo the same girl. But this time, the slow-moving tortoise loses the race to the guile of his worldly wise and fastmoving friend. The loser quits the field. However, one day the girl, now married to the winning friend, finds an unopened envelope from the loser friend and ultimately discovers the truth. Her inner self rebels and she leaves her husband's place loaded with a heavy sense of remorse. This way, she inflicts punishment on her husband for his immoral act. The story has been narrated in fluent style, as is noticeable in all of Ghosal's stories, primarily because of the author's familiarity with the places and incidents which adds to the natural flow of the narrative.

"Pandemic" is the second story of this collection. Ghosal has picked the threads of this story from the Spanish flu pandemic of 1919, and the setting is old Calcutta. He has taken the narrative to its logical end by linking it to the current COVID-19 pandemic. Interestingly, nothing has changed in essence. We were as ignorant about the disease then as we are of the disease today. At that time too, there were no specific medical prescriptions or safe vaccination regime. The condition is the same today, even though science and technology have made tremendous strides. But the most interesting aspect is that human nature has not changed. The central character of this story, a woman of insatiable thirst for male company, remains oblivious of the dreaded impact of the novel coronavirus of the present times and constantly seeks the presence of her one-time beau, the hero of this story. However, everything ends quietly. The lives of many are safeguarded, particularly of the hero's family, and the story comes to a happy ending for the hero. The narrator ends by commenting, "Which pandemic was going to leave a more lasting impact, the one inside his head or the one outside, Indranil remained unsure." By doing this, the author has equated

the present corona epidemic with the immoral thoughts taking control of the hero's mind. Not everyone, of course, is or can be exposed to such immoral thoughts and there is no such virus as yet which can mentally pollute an entire society at any time. But "Pandemic" does not meet the readers' expectations that the story would end with something related to the corona pandemic. Maybe, the author was driven by a larger social perspective where morality of conduct means successfully turning the wheels of civilization. Aside from this oversight, the author's detailed description of the life and times of Calcutta of yore and the Gurugram of the present is to be commended.

Finally, we come to the first story of this collection, "Ashtami," which, simply put, is superb. Ghosal has raised a very socially relevant historical issue, a signature of his writing focus. Starting from the infamous partition of Bengal in 1905, masterminded by the staunch imperialist Governor-General, Lord Curzon, Ghosal ends the story in the backdrop of the communal frenzy in the wake of India's freedom in 1947. In both the settings, there were people's protests culminating in deadly communal riots. But in between and in troubled times, the chanting of Durga Saptashati slokas, the widely resonating sounds of dhaks, and the auspicious puja of Maha Ashtami come alive in this story. In all his stories, Ghosal has successfully sprinkled an aroma of the Bengali culture and the Indian ethos with credibility. The end of this story comes to us as a brainstorming session. The message is loud and clear. We still lack a general understanding and overall empathy for special children who are still considered a burden on their families. Despite better awareness levels regarding the problem, we still treat our special children not as a gift from God but as a curse. The sudden downfall of Shanti, the protagonist of the story, becomes insignificant at the time of riots. The author has portrayed the nasty and heartrending picture of ensuing riots in Calcutta and New Delhi with rare sensitivity. Against this backdrop, he had chosen a very socially relevant theme, for which he deserves appreciation. It may be noted that the crux of the story is not the plight of a special child who suddenly finds himself in the vortex of harsh realities of life beyond his imagination. Factually, nobody seemed to think about this aspect. But the author is not to be blamed for this lacuna. Rather, he has portrayed honestly the society's approach and mindset regarding the condition of special children.

Though this is his first book of fiction, and he is not a professional writer, Ghosal's acumen and flair for writing are simply commendable. This is unputdownable book. The narration reminds us of rivers in the hilly terrain that, despite rugged interface with rocks and boulders, keep on flowing in a rhythm and reaching their destination without much ado. The readers must read this book as a trip down memory lane with regards to the forgotten annals of Indian history, particularly of Calcutta and Bengal. The most interesting aspect is that all the stories are centred

around the River Hooghly which sometimes appears to narrate its own story through the powerful quill of the author. Ghosal has done proper research to locate the required material for his stories. At the end of the book, he has added a couple of pages of Acknowledgements and References that reflect his sincerity and keenness for details. This brilliant debut collection marks Ghosal's entry as an author in the Indo-English literary firmament of India.