BOOK REVIEW

Love, Bengal-Style

Bengal Nights

Mircea Eliade

The University of Chicago Press

1994; $ 22.50

It Does Not Die

Maitreyi Devi

The University of Chicago Press

1994; $ 22.50

Review: Sarbani Sarkar

A.S. BYATT, in *Possession,* has written that we live in a time which is theoretically knowing; we know about linguistic sexuality: analysis, dissection, deconstruction, exposure, phallocracy, clitoral tumescence, polymorphous and polysemous perversity, the fluids, the solids, the systems of desire and damage, the iconography of the cervix, and the imagery of the contracting and expanding body. And we mistrust love. Romantic love can be viewed as "a suspect ideological construct" which controls us, so when we have to try and understand lovers who occupied a time and space different from ours, "we have to make a real effort of imagination to know what it felt like to be them." Though we know we are driven by desire we cannot quite bring ourselves to see it as they did; and when "they" happen to be a Rumanian anthropologist and a Bengali *litterateur* whose lives intertwine hopelessly in a colonial, very snobbish and very Victorian Calcutta, one's task becomes that much more difficult.

Mircea Eliade and Maitreyi Dasgupta met and fell in love quite disastrously in the summer of 1930. Mircea came to reside in Maitreyi's home to study the scriptures and philosophy with her father, Surendranath Dasgupta, an erudite Sanskrit scholar and historian of religion. And so began his long journey in religious anthropology which would culminate decades later into several learned volumes on images, symbols, myths, and the history of religion. What followed was *une affaire de passion,* but Dasgupta's patriarchal blood erupted upon discovering the amorous liaison between his *shishya* and his beloved daughter, and the romance ended abruptly and tragically. What remains of this celebrated affair are two testimonials of love - one an impassioned confession, the other a melancholic protestation, a righteous corrective; a remarkable bracing of books, one incomplete without the other.

The young Mircea who arrived at the Bhowanipur house was twenty three years old, patronizing, a trifle arrogant, racist, and filled with a presumptuous sense of having awed and gratified the Dasgupta household with his superior civilized presence and his divinely given "whiteness." At first Maitreyi was distanced as an object, studied with an almost Cartesian gaze. Moments spent with Maitreyi and Chabu (her younger sister) appear to be deliberate ethnographic encounters. An evening of storytelling spent with the sisters became a discovery which Mircea could not lose.

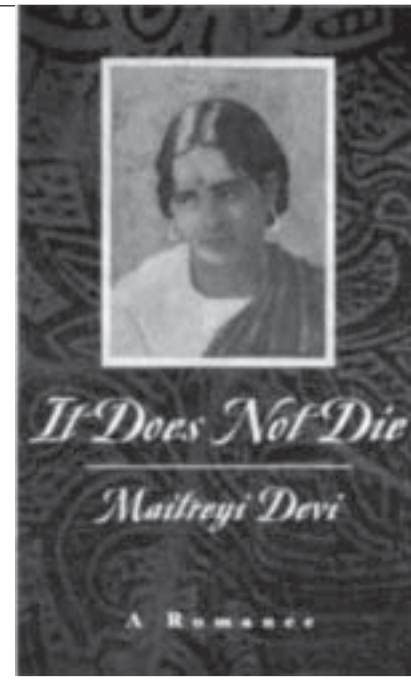
> "But the tree," interrupted Chabu, "What did the tree say?"
> I was at a loss to answer and said to myself: pantheism!
> "She asks if her tree has a soul. I told her all trees have souls."
> "She has a tree?"
> "It's not a tree exactly. It's a shrub in the courtyard....."
> I repeated happily to myself: pantheism, pantheism! What rare documents I had before me!
>
> *Bengal Nights*

Mircea immediately departed to his room to scribble excitedly in his journal: "First discussion with Maitreyi. The primitive nature of her thinking to be noted. A child who has read too much..... A revelation : Chabu is a pantheistic soul. She makes no distinction between her own feelings and those of inanimate objects ..... Very interesting." Maitreyi herself writes that Mircea was "always searching for inner meanings", groping for symbolic significance behind every word and action which were of course documented faithfully in his daily journal. She told him, "At first I loved a tree ..... will not the ground below you, write down the story of

love between a girl and a tree?" Upon such a declaration the young student from Bucharest was disturbed and taken aback and quickly resolved his discomfort by treating it as yet another example of pantheism, but Maitreyi was saddened. "He could not believe that this was no 'ism' but just soaring poetic fancy."

At sixteen, Maitreyi was a budding poet, her first book already published with an introduction by Rabindranath Tagore. To Mircea she was a coquette; vain, precocious, pampered, and clearly did not merit the intellectual admiration she commanded from her father and the lettered of Calcutta. In fact *Bengal Nights* exhibits a veiled, implicit intellectual disrespect not only towards Surendranath Dasgupta but towards the Bengali literati in general that he encountered during his stay in the Dasgupta household - a disrespect more glaring and eloquent in the silences, in the gaps between the syntagmas. "For a long time, I flattered myself by thinking of our relationship as that of civilized man and barbarian," an unfathomable, elusive barbarian. This was compounded by the fact that despite herself, Maitreyi was drawn irresistibly towards his fairness. With "envy and melancholy" her gaze would wander and rest for a few moments on his partly uncovered arm, on his feet "white as alabaster", amusing and enchanting Mircea with her jealousy. More than once, she has sat by him and reflected, "I also would like to be white. Is it possible, do you think?"

Yet he was intrigued and smitten. For him, Maitreyi was an enigma, beautiful, like a startled bird, a "creature of movements as supple as silk ..... whose musical voice continually invented new harmonies, new pitches." As he fell in love with her, the primitive child in the eyes of the Orientalist metamorphosed into the



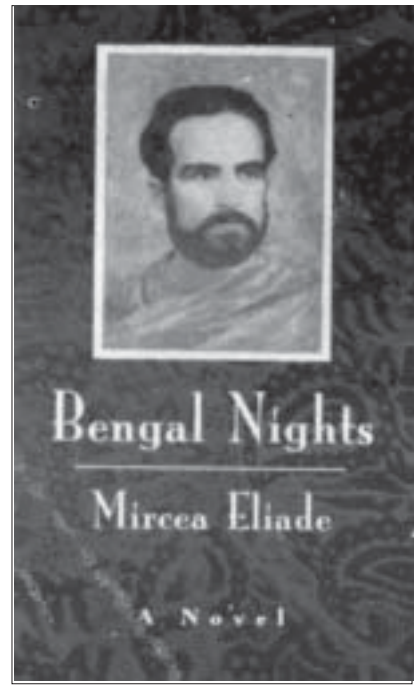
seductress, a sensuous siren, provocating and inviting him to explore the promising delights of her nubile body, which he did apparently, night after night in the dark precincts of the Bhowanipur house.

Maitreyi has objected loudly, denying vehemently, those nights of passion, first in *Na Hanyate* (the original Bengali of *It Does Not Die*, published in 1972, 20 years after the French translation of *Maitreyi)* and then again, in 1987, when she filed a stay order against producer Phillippe Diaz and director Nicholas Klotz to stop the production of the French film, *Les Nuits Bengali,* which she claimed sullied her name and made her life profane. Facticity seemed to bother her less at old age. She wrote in an article in 1988: "Books that achieve literary success cannot only be a bare account of facts, they are mostly a mixture of facts and imagination..." and she firmly held all books were not meant for filming. For "any literature impregnated with some deep idea will not bear an audiovisual expression." Director Nicholas Klotz was forced to change the name of his heroine from Maitreyi to Gayatri and erase the sexually explicit scenes from the film. Being a Hindu, Maitreyi obviously did not share Mircea's Christian compulsion to confess, to admit, to make known, to come to terms with one's self by salving the conscience. Hepworth and Turner, quoting Anthony Trollope, have said that men and women who desist from confessing are viewed with "a disagreeable suspicion." Hepworth and Turner have further said, that in romantic confessional literature, platonic affection indicates "respect for the person rather than mere sexual attraction to the body as a sexual object." But perhaps Maitreyi was merely trying to protect her right to privacy, zealously guarding her most sacred, most intimate domain, the innermost realm of her being which no man could violate.

Maitreyi had also objected to the open association of her name with that of the Tagores, although readers of *It Does Not Die* would be only too familiar with her unabashed expressions of affection for the poet. "Do not leave me, master, come back to my heart. I have nothing else in my life - I never had. Covering my past, present and future, your presence is a constant festival." As she told Mircea many times, despite his outraged jealousy, "my sky blooms stars at night, and forests blossom flowers in the morning, because he is there". Throughout her conversations with Mircea, she seems to have allowed herself a rare candour in *It Does Not Die* about her not so conventional emotions towards the greatest icon of Bengal. This nonconformism which is bounded and restrained in *Maungpute Rabindranath,* a book crisp and tight unlike the sensual languor and repetitiveness of a more sentimental, *Rabindrik, Na Hanyate.*

It Does Not Die is Maitreyi's soul on wings, her liberated self, rippling with poetry and laughter, revealing a world mosaiced with literature, where Mircea and Maitreyi find love and romance between the pages of Hearne and Hamsun, Goethe and Conrad, Swinburne and Whitman, Kalidasa and Tagore. It gives glimpses of a changing world, a patriarchal, traditional, yet educated Anglophile, *bhadralok*, desperately seeking the rational; a world inhabited by Mantu, Lilu, Shanti, Khoka, Tagore, Uday, Shankar, Russian magicians and literary *soirees*. It was a time of shifting sexual moralities. Maitreyi writes, "We hesitated to talk to men ..... it was not that I did not want to talk and I was certain the other party was dying to — then why didn't we ? No one stopped us. Yet we could not." In upper-middle class families, she continues, sex remained completely hidden. "Nobody talked about it ..... we never saw any expression of sex ..... we never saw men and women hold hands. We could guess, a little indirectly, about the existence of an unseen, hidden world." From the veil of this world, Dasgupta attempted to bring his daughter out: like Aradhana and Shanti, whose stories she recounts, Maitreyi was the chrysalis in the metastatis of a civilization.

Could Mircea's anthropological eyes see and comprehend this universe, marked by so many shadowy presences, so many ephemeral changelings in a society's transformative process? Maitreyi claims not. She laments insistently, "Poor fellow, he did not understand our society, our faith and our customs, in spite of his study." Even at 73 years of age, she has written that he was imposing his own impressions which were full of misconceptions upon an unknown country and an unknown civilization. He wore a *dhoti* every afternoon; he wanted to embrace Hinduism. "Is it possible that he thinks father will easily agree if he becomes a Hindu?" Mircea apparently had no doubts in his mind. In the beginning he thought his hosts were conspiring to marry him off to Maitreyi with obvious attempts to bind them in friendship. "It was as though a plot was being hatched against me: I was meant to fall in love with Maitreyi ..... that was why we were always left alone together." His revulsion against such machinations disappeared once he did fall in love with her, but the fear of the matrimonial trap pursued him for a long time. Marrying Maitreyi implied the embracing of a life bereft of freedom and bounded by rules, but his fear melted once his passion, which he thought to be insignificant, and sheer fantasy became "a blossoming of the senses ..... beyond sensuality", suffusing him in an elysian bliss, "carrying (him) far away, to an unknown and unearthly region of (his) soul" which was "a state of pure grace". All that remained was a conversion to Hinduism. But as Maitreyi has written, even if it were so, he would not be eligible - he would have to be of the same caste but of a different clan, for if the clan was the same "it would mean that probably many thousands of years ago they were of the same parents so it would be incest if they married lawfully. He cannot get into the heart of all this complexity, though he constantly enquires about our customs and social injunctions. He does not know how much our family is bound by these irrational rules." Mircea was allowed such intimate proximity as he was ensconced in the bosom of the family like a son - and to Maitreyi, in the eyes of the trusting Dasguptas, like an adopted brother. Maitreyi bound their relationship in secrecy, for as long as "no one suspected their relationship", like that of Aradhana and Soumen, they were safe. It was love, Bengal-style.



In the ultimate analysis, it was the anthropologist who failed, misreading "other" cultures through wrong indexes. Or perhaps it was simply the tragedy of love. On September 18, 1930, Surendranath Dasgupta threw Mircea out of his Bhowanipur house. What followed was an indescribable period of agony and estrangement, sickness and misery. There were intercepted letters and uncommunicated messages, desperate gropings which failed to connect. Both waited for the other, both miscued, fate played unfair, so they lost each other forever on the shores of life.

Matreyi eventually married - a stable, steady, married life with a chemist; a life oppressed by loneliness. Sadly, she writes that she and her husband inhabited different universes. "We sit together in the verandah, I try to open up a conversation, just one or two words trickle out, and then they get lost in the desert land of silence. In which language shall we

speak? We use different languages." Unlike Byatt's Christabel LaMotte, who though unmarried and engaged in an illicit and impossible love, never felt lonely after meeting Randolph Henry Ash, Maitreyi was alone nearly every day of her life, for once betrayed, Mircea was vanquished from her now enclosed mind as an illusion created by the moon's deceptive light.

F. Gonzalez-Crussi has written that nobody is "so pure or so wise as never to have needed the simple, private codes by which lovers communicate the thoughts that they deem exclusively their own," for "love is the supreme lexicographer and the foremost nonverbal communicator". Mircea and Maitreyi's books are encoded secrets of two lovers written only for each other, in the one way they knew - to explain and to "make-up". Maitreyi's book is dedicated to Time, that which is unanchored, formless, infinite; it is entitled *It Does Not Die,* the unborn, eternal, everlasting, primeval Love which does not perish when the body dies. In 1972, 42 years after the fated parting, Maitreyi briefly met Mircea in the University of Chicago's School of Divinity. She said she had come to meet Him whom weapon cannot pierce, fire cannot burn, and he answered, "*Na hanyate hanyamane sharire* (it does not die when the body dies)". He promised her that she would meet his real Self on the shores of the Ganga in a mythological time which returns eternally to regenerate itself. "(Concrete) time does not exist (and) where it becomes perceptible - because of man's sins ..... time can be annulled." And so they would live forever eternally in an "atemporal present". (Eliade, 1989)

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FILM REVIEW

Narmada, a Valley Rises

Director: Ali Kazimi

Running time: 87 minutes

Canada 1995

Review : Sevanti Ninan

NARMADA, a Valley Rises, is a long, highly evocative film that surfaced in Delhi this year at a series of screenings and was instantly acclaimed. It is a film by the converted for the converted, and succeeds effortlessly as such. It is also a film made primarily for a foreign audience by an Indian domiciled in Canada.

We have not seen anything like this before because it is a documentary structured as "an anatomy of political organising", as it has been accurately described in its publicity folder. It takes one specific incident in the course of this dogged ten-year-old anti-dam campaign, hypes it up, and then films it as a case study with a charismatic cast of characters.

The documentary centres on the December l990 march of farmers and tribal people led by Medha Patkar and Baba Amte. The march originated in Madhya Pradesh and was designed to culminate at the dam site in Gujarat. Ali Kazimi, who is the film's director, producer, writer, and cinematographer, bills it as a "latter-day Salt March". At the beginning of the film, Kazimi says that "the marchers know they are following in the footsteps of Gandhi."

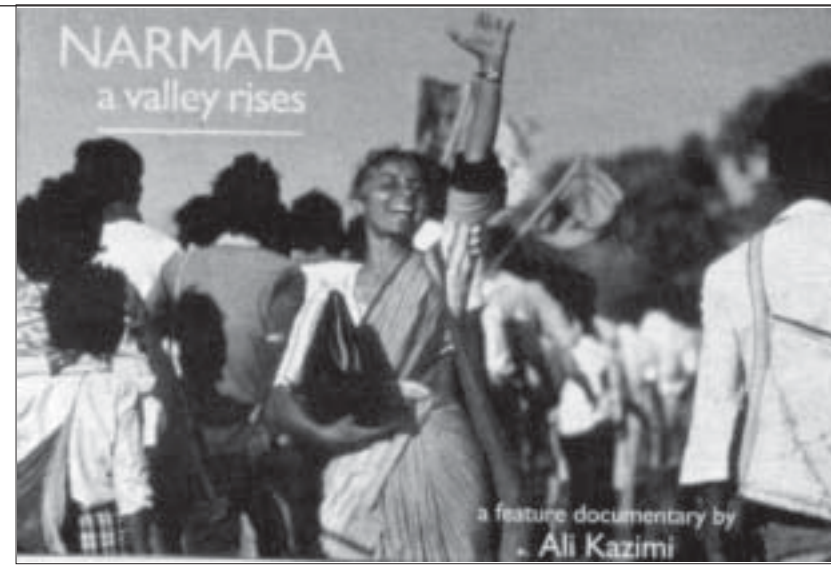
Such elevating comparisons occur off and on throughout the film. The 1990 march is no ordinary protest, he stresses, it is historic. Though shot in l990, the film was not completed until l994, due to lack of funds, and should logically have been quite outdated by then. But by giving it a dramatic structure, Kazimi sets the stage, builds up the struggle to a flash point, and then provides the denouement; it is certain that this film will be viewed as an inspirational case study for some time to come, regardless of what happens to the Narmada Bacchao Andolan.

At 87 minutes, it is a rather long film. It dwells on the people, both ordinary and extraordinary, who have

mounted such a sustained, and therefore heroic, opposition to a government project. The film is peppered with quotes from men and women who are undertaking the march. We are told that there are 3,000 marchers, and after they have been joined by other marchers, we are told that there are 6,000; visually, the camera never conveys anything depicting these numbers.

Narmada, a Valley Rises is a marvellous example of how to bring alive a popular struggle. It captures the ordinary moments--when people are just resting or chatting--as evocatively as the tension-charged ones - when the marchers have reached the Gujarat border and come up against an orchestrated opposition. It is a film made by a man who is unequivocally taking sides, and thus his commentary on the moves of the pro-dam lobby ranged on the border with police acquiescence is sardonic. The camera work has immediacy--it is there right in the middle of the conflict, in the midst of the scuffling with the police, alternating from one camp to another. It captures the machinations of the pro-dam lobby, which is personified by the Gujarat Chamber of Commerce, a lobby which busses in paid villagers to this border site, and keeps them supplied with food. It captures Patkar and her lieutenants planning strategies and counter moves. It is an unhurried case study, but nevertheless one which never becomes boring.

So what does the film accomplish? Indisputably, sympathy for the cause it espouses, a further canonisation of Patkar, something of an over-romanticisation of the life led by the Bhils and the Bhilalas in the Narmada valley, and an unequivocal condemnation of the "greed" of the other side, which wants the waters of the Narmada for Central and Northern Gujarat.



During the last few years, reams of newsprint have been expended on the issue, and several films made on this conflict between those to be displaced by the Sardar Sarovar dam, and the government of Gujarat. This reviewer has seen two other films: *Manibeli*, also a documentary made by people at Cendit, and Nalini Singh's documentary for Doordarshan, *Jis Desh Mein Narmada Beheti Hai*, shown in l993.

The first is a straight activist film. *It is* was about a village that would be submerged when the dam waters rose, and predictably, paints the dam's construction as unmitigated villainy. Singh's film goes about its own agenda more subtly: it scrupulously poses arguments and counter-arguments, throws in a lot of statistics, and allows oustees their say about the kind of rehabilitation they are being fobbed off with. It conveys the extremism of the activists through their own words, just as Ali Kazimi lampoons the pro-dam lobby through its own words.

Singh's film concludes with the economic argument that Rs 2,500 crore has already been spent on the dam (until that point of time), Rs six crore is being wasted every day, and that no country in the world should allow resources to be squandered in this fashion. Would progress come to the country by stopping the dam or building it, Singh asks rhetorically.

I only recall this film to make the point that the Narmada Dam, and the numerous questions about development that it poses, should have by now merited a dispassionate examination on film — perhaps a documentary series of two or three parts; preferably in a series that can see beyond Patkar as its focus, and beyond the arguments of the Gujarat government and the Chamber of Commerce, and answer many questions. Will the waters really take four years to reach the thirsty villages of the North? Will they really end up in the sugarcane fields of Central Gujarat? Do the thirsty villages in the north also think so? Who are these people? What is their plight really like? And conversely, if the dam project really were stopped, would the waste signified by it be as criminal as it is being made out to be?

A *cause celebre* is an emotive subject for a film. But, logically, getting at the truth and at viable alternatives to extreme positions should be as compelling an exercise, if only somebody would undertake it. ❐