

mosquito
and other stories
ghana-da's tall tales

premendra mitra

translated by
amlan das gupta



PENGUIN BOOKS

PENGUIN BOOKS
MOSQUITO AND OTHER STORIES

PREMENDRA MITRA (1904–88), one of the giants of modern Bengali literature, came into prominence in the 1920s and '30s. A poet, novelist and film-maker, he was deeply concerned with social issues and the problems of middle-class urban life. Mitra also wrote detective stories, historical tales and science fiction. He was intimately associated with the early film industry as broadcaster, scriptwriter and director.

AMLAN DAS GUPTA was born in New Delhi in 1957. He teaches English at Jadavpur University, Kolkata. Among his other interests are Hindustani classical music and photography. His publications include *Jishu* (1997); *My Life: Khansaheb Alladiya Khan* (translated with critical introduction, with Urmila Bhardikar, 2000); *Renaissance Texts and Contexts* (2003) and an edition of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* (2004).

PENGUIN BOOKS

USA | Canada | UK | Ireland | Australia
New Zealand | India | South Africa | China

Penguin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com

Published by Penguin Random House India Pvt. Ltd
7th Floor, Infinity Tower C, DLF Cyber City,
Gurgaon 122 002, Haryana, India



Penguin
Random House
India

First published by Penguin Books India 2004

Copyright © Ananda Publishers Private Limited 2004

This translation copyright © Penguin Books India 2004

All rights reserved

ISBN 9780143430353

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Typeset by Eleven Arts, New Delhi

Printed at Repro Knowledgecast Limited, India

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

www.penguin.co.in

contents

introduction	vii
mosquito	1
pebble	11
glass	25
fish	38
hat	52
stick	70
hole	83
watch	95
duck	106
fly	122
umbrella	142
no ice cream for ghana-da	159

introduction

Ghana-da is probably Premendra Mitra's most remarkable creation. The first Ghana-da story appeared in 1945, in *Alpana*, a Puja annual. The story was 'Mosquito' ('*Mosha*'), which initiated the legendary Ghana-da and the *mess-bari*—boarding house—at 72 Banamali Naskar Lane. The familiar setting took some time to develop, though. In the early stories, the address is not mentioned, but we hear of other residents. In a few years, however, the house and its dwellers became firmly established—in the stories themselves as well as in the world of Bengali fiction. Ghana-da's character evolved as Mitra wrote, and the last Ghana-da story was published in 1987.

At the time when the Ghana-da stories started to appear, Premendra Mitra—poet, novelist, essayist, short story writer and film-maker—was already a major figure in the cultural life of Bengal. Born in 1904, he had established himself as a writer of considerable repute when his early novel *Pank* was serialized between 1925 and 1926. The novel, with its searing description of urban poverty, was, however, criticized for its boldness. After that, a series of brilliant short stories were anthologized in collections like *Panchashar* (1929), *Benami Bandar* (1930) and

Mrittika (1932). An important voice in Bengali poetry, Mitra wrote of the sufferings of the poor without cant or hypocrisy, as well as some of the most delicate poems of love and nature, at a time of change and experimentation in Bengali poetry. A pioneer of the early film industry in Calcutta, Mitra worked in various capacities—as script and screenplay writer, adviser and lyricist. While he met the various pressures of Bengali intellectual life in the 1940s and '50s, striving to combine high aesthetic standards with his marked ideological commitment, Mitra continued to produce his Ghana-da stories for an ever-increasing band of readers. As with his other writings and cultural activities, these stories too were driven by the author's belief that true writing comes from a recognition of 'the enormous responsibility of living'. Premendra Mitra continued to write his Ghana-da tales into the 1980s, in the form of short stories as well as novels. Other genres that he enriched were science fiction, historical novels, detective fiction and the ghost story.

Though written for young people, the Ghana-da stories were popular with readers of all ages from the very beginning. The stories combined science, travel, adventure and fantasy, making them unique in Bengali fiction. 'Fantasy' is a dangerous word to use, though: in spite of Ghana-da becoming synonymous with tall tales, there is little in the stories that does not stand up to the test of reason or fact while also drawing sharply upon topical interests. The editor of the Ananda Publishers edition of the Ghana-da stories points out that 'Mosquito', set on Sakhalin Island, appeared when the fate of the island was very much in the news, and its ownership was being arbitrated immediately after the conclusion of the Second World War. Even more dramatic is the setting of 'Hat' ('*Tupi*'), in which Ghana-da is dragged over the peak of Mount Everest by a runaway yeti. The story refers to the failure of the Swiss expedition of 1952, but speaks of the mountain being as yet unconquered. Hillary and Tenzing reached the summit in the

summer of 1953. Evidently the story was written in the few months between the two ventures, at a time when public interest in Everest expeditions was at its height.

Many in my generation learnt about the orang-pendek and *Schistocerca gregaria* from Ghana-da. By then he was already a classic, anthologized and reprinted in various collections. He represented something unique even among the rich fare of 'children's literature' that we had for our delectation: Narayan Ganguly's *Teni-da* stories, the anarchic tales of Shibram Chakrabarti (the model for 'Shibu' in the Ghana-da stories), not to mention the annual offerings from the College Street and Jhamapukur publishing houses. What must have appealed to us about these stories then, I now realize, was the absence of any apparent didactic intent. The exotic settings, the audacious inventiveness, the sheer power of the narratives were what counted. It was important that unlike much other fiction for the young, the characters are adult, thus affording an entry into a grown-up world. As Ghana-da hectored his speechless interlocutors about the witch doctors of Africa or about flying saucers, we felt we were participants in the adventure or experience and not merely a member of the passive audience.

The Ghana-da stories combine different narrative styles and techniques, but if there is one characteristic that they share, it is the variety and exuberance of the geographical settings. Buddhadev Bose, writing in as early as 1948, remarked on this as being a principal aspect of Mitra's literary style, noting that Mitra not only conjures up romance in geographical names but also discovers 'poetry in geography itself'. Ghana-da's bold and risky geographical forays are essential to the success of the stories, especially in the way in which the intimacy and familiarity of the boarding house setting are contrasted with the exotic and unfamiliar landscapes.

Much of the pleasure of reading the stories comes from the question mark that always hangs about Ghana-da. Who *is* he really? Every time he is nearly caught out, but not quite. And yet, his

stories always fall a mite short of conviction. One is never sure about where he stands either. If he is the biggest liar on the planet, there is also the problem of accounting for the amazing accuracy of his narratives. There are other problems too. In the story 'Eye' ('*Chokh*'), when Ghana-da complains of having lost his spectacles, his chums concoct a message made up from various arcane scripts, to fox him. Ghana-da claims that his eyes are so bad that he can't read it. But in the story that follows, Ghana-da tells his young friends about an inscription that he was asked to decipher by the wily Chinese doctor Ching Sun. Ghana-da tells Ching Sun that he isn't as big a fool as the other thinks; he can read the inscription which is a medley of letters from various alphabets: Egyptian, Brahmi, Kharosthi, Phoenician, ancient Ethiopian and so on. Together they form the phrase GHANASHYAM DAS HOAXED. As Ghana-da pauses to puff at his cigarette, the conspirators are aghast: 'When Ghana-da started to give his account of the medley of ancient scripts, we looked at each other in dismay. Some of us turned red, others purple. Who would have known that the elaborate trick that we had devised would rebound on us like this!' However one looks at him, Ghana-da isn't quite what he seems to be.

The setting of the Ghana-da stories is as interesting as Ghana-da himself. All the stories in this collection are set in the mess-bari or boarding house, and the house at Banamali Naskar Lane is undoubtedly the most famous mess-bari in the Bengali language, perhaps because of its importance in the narrative. There is a large amount of Bengali literature set in Calcutta which revolves around the mess-bari—'boarding house' does not in fact quite convey its peculiar character. It was common at the time in Calcutta for groups of individuals to rent houses and share the expenses of living. Many residents had weekday arrangements, with the boarders departing for the weekends. Other houses were more regularly occupied. Most of these boarding houses

were located in north or central Calcutta. Though there is something in Behala (then a south-western suburb) actually called Banamali Naskar Road, one cannot really think of Ghana-da anywhere except in the literary heartland of the city. In 'Duck' ('*Haansh*') we are told of other residents, of whom only one is named and who plays an important role in another story as well. In all the stories included here, Ghana-da never steps out of the house—apart from an occasional evening constitutional perhaps—though we are taken on whirlwind tours of the Arctic and the Antarctic, the South Sea Islands and the Malaysian rainforest in his tales.

The mess-bari also provides other narrative conventions, both by way of exclusion and inclusion. Food, for instance, is a major concern. Apart from the elaborate meals that are prepared by the immortal Rambhuj, there is also a constant procession of delicacies that make life worth living. There are the *hinger kochuris* and *shingaras*, the mutton chops and prawn cutlets—for which small eateries in north Calcutta are still renowned. The boarding house is also a plausible way of ensuring the male character of these tales. As the residence was a male establishment, there is a total absence of women in the world of the stories. But this is a generic feature rather than that of these stories in particular: all in all, there is little evidence of heterosexual friendship in Bengali children's literature of the mid-twentieth century. If at all present, women are usually a part of domestic scenes, and all-girl stories, probably a response to popular English fiction, appear somewhat later.

I have attempted a fairly literal translation on the whole, but have occasionally thought it necessary to try to convey the spirit of the stories rather than the meaning of the words. I have used principally *Ghana-da Samagra* Volumes 1–3, edited by Surajit Dasgupta (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers). All the stories translated in this book are from the first volume, and appeared originally

in the following collections: *Ghana-dar Galpa* ('Mosquito', 'Pebble', 'Glass', 'Fish', 'Hat', 'Stick'); *Adwitiya Ghana-da* ('Watch', 'Duck'); *Ghana-da keVote Din* ('Fly') and *Ghana-da Nitya Natun* ('Water', 'Umbrella', 'No Ice Cream for Ghana-da'). It is important to remember that many of these stories were first published in magazines and annuals. I have consulted other collections of Ghana-da stories for the purpose of comparison. Though the stories were published in a bewildering variety of editions and formats, printing mistakes of the original tended to remain uncorrected.

I am grateful to Ananda Publishers for permission to translate the stories. I would also like to thank all those who read and commented on the translations and suggested improvements, and Diya, who first encouraged me to do this book. It gives me great pleasure that this collection is being published in 2004, Premendra Mitra's birth centenary: it bears testimony to the abiding popularity of the Ghana-da tales.