

A life in and out of the spotlight

CHAPAL RANI, THE LAST QUEEN OF BENGAL: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF A FEMALE IMPERSONATOR

By Sandip Roy.
Seagull, ₹999



“**T**ui meychhele sajte parbi?” (Can you dress like a girl?), a brother-in-law asks a motherless boy soon after his actress-mother dies. He agrees, after some hesitation. It would be the most defining moment of his life, without him realising it at the time. The brother-in-law had a *jatra dal* in mind where it was the norm for men to impersonate women and which typically needed young boys to play ‘*sakhis*’, female extras in the troupe. The 8-year-old boy doesn’t hesitate in accepting because (with acting in his blood) he had already, by then, secretly memorised his mother’s parts in famous plays with a finesse and in a voice that had pleasantly shocked his mother and made her wish he was a girl. The mother’s death would orphan him, as his family disintegrated, leaving him to fend for himself in a cruel world. But it would also, in a crueler irony of fate, make her wish come true. He would quickly rise in the ranks (starting with Rs 100 a month and reaching Rs 6,000) — from playing extra to leading lady (opposite the most sought-after heroes of the time) to the female protagonist — transforming, in the process, from Chapal Bhaduri to Chapal Rani.

That process is shown in great detail in Sandip Roy’s book. Beginning with an elaborate introduction on the history of *jatra*, it is interestingly structured — with biographical chapters in Chapal’s own voice alternating with imaginary voices picking on an important aspect of his life and work related in the chapter before. Thus, we have “The Natta Years” focusing on a glorious phase of Chapal’s career (acting in plays like *Chand Bibi*, *Bilwamangal*, *Bharat Biday* and *Sultana Riziya*) followed by the fictional vignette, “The Other Rani”, where we get to know of the other female impersonators of Chapal’s time whose contributions were either sidelined or forgotten. The same template is repeated for all the 13 chapters of the book.

For many, Kaushik Ganguly’s telefilm, *Ushnatar Jonno* (2003), and *Arekti Premer Golpo* (2010), direct-

ed by Ganguly, were entry points into Chapal’s life. They feature towards the end, with Ganguly confessing (in the fictional chapter) that the former “was a celebration of the life of Chapal Bhaduri” while the latter (with Rituparno Ghosh in the lead) “merely used his life story”. The chapters that deal with the love relationship at the heart of Ganguly’s film — that of Chapal’s for a bisexual man — are both poignant and painful. Starting as romance and then as a secret affair, it evolved into a most unusual avatar when Chapal, fallen on hard times, started living with his family (his parents, wife and children) as the chief of domestic staff, trusted by them all. The eventual misunderstanding and bitter end bear testimony to the abysmal depths a relationship can degrade into.

Loneliness was an integral part of Chapal’s life, which he learnt to live with even when it became corrosive. The roller-coaster of his life as an artist, however, was too unpredictable for him to make any peace with. Thus, it was that the reigning queen of *jatra* found himself suddenly redundant, and after years of obscurity, started performing the Goddess Sitala on the streets, blessing people and collecting alms after every act. This would lead to his discovery by Naveen Kishore whose documentary (where he came out as a gay man) would catapult him into a different order of fame and recognition — beyond the state and nation. Solo performance on stage and, then, acting in films would follow, though the living would always remain precarious, and finally land him in a decrepit old-age home. Till the very last, however, what would remain with him are resilience and humility.

Rituparna Roy