

Behind the scenes stories from Shankar's iconic novel 'Chowringhee'

Mani Shankar Mukherjee, better known as Shankar, the popular Bengali novelist, is a goldmine of stories.

The anecdotes, rich and funny that chronicle lives and suffering in the urban jungle, just roll off his tongue as if he is a walking-talking storybook.

At the launch of the English translation of his iconic debut novel, 'Chowringhee', 46 years after it was published in [Kolkata](#) in 1962, Shankar Wednesday kept a select audience on their edge of seats at the India Habitat Centre with the 'stories inside the story' of 'Chowringhee', which was made into a hit movie in 1968 by Satyajit Ray. And also a play.

The novel, translated into English by Kolkata-based former journalist Arunava Sinha, won the Vodafone Crossword Award 2007 for the best translation.

The book set in the Kolkata of 1950s is a saga of the intimate lives of managers, employees and guests in one of its largest hotels, called Shahjahan in the novel.

Shankar, the newest and the youngest recruit, recounts the stories of several people whose lives come together in the suites, backrooms and restaurants of the hotels.

The book, priced at Rs.295, predates Arthur Hailey's 'Hotel' by three years and has been translated into Malayalam, Marathi, Hindi, Russian and now English. Its larger than life characters - the enigmatic hotel manager Marco Polo, debonair receptionist Sata Bose, the tragic hostess Karabi Guha - attained almost cult status. And the novel became a classic.

'For the first time, I have been told that my book is finding a new segment of readers because it has been translated into English,' he said.

'I am sure this has triggered curiosity about the book and how it was made,' the septuagenarian writer said, travelling down the memory lane.

'I will reveal some inside stories about 'Chowringhee' that I could not tell for fear of a British barrister. I began my career as a clerk after my father passed away when I was barely in my teens. I had to drop out of studies in search of a job. The book was loosely based on him - more as a tribute because he introduced me to the world of good writing. Now that he is no more, I can share the inside stories,' the writer said with his trademark wit.

According to Shankar, the idea for the book took off when he was still in the service of Noel Barwell, the last British barrister in the Kolkata High Court.

'Barwell stayed for a long time at the Spencer's Hotel in Kolkata and I was a frequent visitor to the hotel. It was through common friends at Spencer's that I came to know what was happening at the Great Eastern Hotel, one of the biggest hotels in the metropolis then.

'So, there was this notion that the book was inspired by Great Eastern Hotel. Actually, the muse was the Spencer's Hotel. It was from there that my love affair with hotels began,' Shankar disclosed.

The author, who was unusually expansive, also gave away the real identity of the charismatic receptionist of the Shahjahan hotel in the novel. 'I got the idea to create the debonair Sata Bose, the receptionist, from a railway employee I chanced across. His name was Satya Sdahan Bose and since he had many sahib friends, he refused to be identified by anything but Sata Bose,' he divulged.

A translation of another Shankar book, 'Jana Aranya', will soon be published by Penguin India, the publisher of 'Chowinghee'.

Shankar, whose stormed into Bengali homes with the marketing slogan 'A bagful of Shankar (Ek Bag Shankar)', is a household name in West Bengal. Collections of his books were sold in blue packets that readers were proud to possess.

Shankar wears many hats. A street food expert with two books to his credit, the writer is an also an adept marketing man associated with a leading industrial house.

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