

edited by
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Memory's Gold

Calcutta

Fifth Column¹

Samar Sen

Translated by Rosinka Chaudhuri

SAMAR SEN (1916–87) was a writer from an important intellectual lineage, his father a well-known academic, his grandfather, Dinesh Chandra Sen, a renowned literary historian and writer. Sen was among the foremost poets of his generation, although most of his poetry was written by the time he was twenty-five. Revered for his uncompromising and principled journalism, he was identified for the most part of his later life with the left-wing journal, *Frontier*, of which he was the editor.



I

From the light suddenly I step out.
Astonishing affair!
Stifling darkness, insubstantial shadows on the tarred road,
With yellow muddied eyes the motor advances
Like a frightened wild animal suddenly in human habitation;
An ancient darkness returns to the city
The A.R.P. chief whistles in Chandni Chowk.²
I walk homeward, the blind house-fly's whine sounding in my ear.
O sun, what is this business,
Do pickpocket toughs surround me on all sides?
At the crossroads a little distance away I hear two people converse,
Shaking his beard in the storm wind
The old worker says: *Hamara Hindustan nabi denge.*
Himmat hai, janwar maarne ke liye marne ke liye tayyar,

Translated from 'Pancham Bahini', published in *Samar Sener Kobita*,
Calcutta: Signet Press, 2001.

Bhai Anwar, hatiyaar chahiye, tez hatiyaar.
 Hindustan ki izzat bach nahi sakti is kale burkhe mein
Black-out to bilkul majboori ka baat hai,
 Anwar says to himself; perhaps shakes his head; says further:
 Chhor dijiye, dost, himmat ka baat chhor dijiye.
 Soch kijiye, Angrez to jaanewale. Hazaro sipai saath
 Bangal ki sher anewale Hindustanme,
*Unke saath azaadi anewali Hindustan mein.*³

2

Nobody goes to the river to bring water
 Or to the empty village market to buy vegetables.
 The enemy walks with a swagger
 The vulture's shadow falls on the field.
 The whore's song rises in the wind:
 In this dark night, this display of clouds
 How will you come to the road,
 In distant Berlin my beloved, expectant, waits
 Listening to the radio my heart breaks.

3

We are Bengali; our lineage is Mir Jafari,⁴ we are the fruit
 Of Macaulay's poison tree.
 Many a day have I thought,
 Sometimes in the sun's last tented evening in the open field of the sky
 Sometimes at night when the city sleeps in silence
 I have thought many times;
 Let the seeds not be borne into the future, let this poison tree end,
 In the daily attack of the torturous insect
 Or inch by inch in pain
 Let this fruit be completely finished in our lifetime,
 But let tomorrow come in the homeward worker's song
 In the first pain of the young girl's sacrifice
 In the simple cry of the newly born child;
 After a century of pain

Let the new day come in civilization's ultimate purification of mind.

But winter over, the snake comes out,
Mir Jafari bad blood lies hidden again

In the common clerk's room, in the nooks and corners of many households,

In the merchant's mattress, in the heart of *ahimsa's* den.

In our garden the shrub of the *phanimansha*⁵ grows

Secretly preparations are made for the worship of *Manasa*.⁶

Dejected I turn, the song of the blind house-fly in my ear.
Occasionally in the storm wind I hear another song:

*Nabi denge hamaara Hindustan.*⁷

NOTES

1. The Collins Dictionary defines fifth column as 1. A group of Falangist sympathisers in Madrid during the Spanish Civil War who were prepared to join the four columns of insurgents marching on the city. 2. Any group of hostile or subversive infiltrators; an enemy in one's midst.
2. A.R.P: Air Raid Patrol, people who enforced blackouts etc. during the Blitz in British towns, and, obviously, in the colonies.
3. The lines in the poem are in the original Hindustani. Translated, they would mean: 'The old worker says: We shall not give up our Hindustan. If you have the courage, you must be ready to kill the animal, to be killed by it. Brother Anwar, we need weapons, strong weapons.' Anwar says, 'Forget it, friend, stop talking about courage. Think about it, the English are leaving. Bengal's tiger is advancing into Hindustan with thousands of soldiers; with him, freedom will come to Hindustan.' The reference to 'Bengal's tiger' is to Netaji Subhas Bose, whose Indian National Army was made up of 'thousands of soldiers' waiting to march into India.
4. Mir Jafar: The general who betrayed the last Nawab of Bengal,

Sirajuddaula, to the British at the Battle of Palashi (Plassey) in 1757. His name is a byword for treachery in Bengali. Sen turns the name into an adjective: 'Jafari'.

5. *Phanimansha*: prickly pear, a small wild herb akin to cactus.
6. *Manasa*: Hindu snake-goddess; a kind of plant
7. I will not give up my Hindustan.