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## WHATSUP

### THE SECOND KCC BAITHAKKHANA CELEBRATED THE DEFEATED HERO IN BENGALI LITERATURE, CULTURE AND LIFESTYLE

The second edition of the KCC Baithakkhana: Bangla Sahityer Adda (KCC Baithakkhana: A Bengali Literary Meet), an initiative by Emami CSR and curated by Chandril Bhattacharya, Sanchari Mookherjee and Tausif Rahman, took place at the Kolkata Centre for Creativity on the EM Bypass from April 11 to 13. The theme of the *adda* this year was 'the defeated' (or 'hero' in Bangla), a motif that

runs across our popular literature and also has found ample representation on the Indian silver screen. The defeated hero has touched the hearts of the Bengali *modhyobitto* audience in ways the unconquered hero has, over generations, only dreamt of. There is a certain inexplicable pathos in the way we know Devdas dies, or the fate Karna is doomed to live out all his days, or in the way one cannot help but sympathise with

Meghnad in the final hours of his death. To pay tribute to these *heroes* and extol their many heroic qualities, the KCC Baithakkhana this year organised a series of panel discussions, performances, and debates that were meant to remind audiences that there is not much difference between their own lives and that of the tragic anti-hero. t2 dropped by on Day 3 of the fest and took a few snapshots.



Chandril Bhattacharya, who also partly curated the event, opened the last day of this year's Baithakkhana with his trademark humour, wit, and élan with a half-hour speech on '*koyekta heyro choritro*' (defeated figures in fiction). Recounting the tales of some popular figures in Bengali folklore and mythology, Chandril soon had the house in splits with his humourous, snarky reinterpretations of these stories that we have all grown up reading or listening to. Figures like Savitri and Karna were referenced, with Chandril speaking of how these defeated figures either end up not truly defeated at all, or, in the case of victory, are the reason behind social or emotional defeat in the lives of other characters in their stories. One of his comments that especially drew a lot of laughter was when, in the context of waiting, the satirist said: "*Erakom opekha Bangali first year-e-premika-r jonyo kore, ebong tarpor shara jibon Netaji-r jonyo!*"



The sweetest session of the day was the one that featured Tanmoy Bose, Saswati Guha Thakurta and Anindya Chattopadhyay in conversation with Debanjan Chakrabarti on the 'now-extinct' trio of handwritten letters, cassettes, and '*norom prem*'. This discussion drew lots of *oohs, aahs, and awes* from the audience as each panellist took a trip down memory lane, back to '80s and '90s Calcutta, to recount how letters and cassettes, in an era prior to the Internet, went hand-in-hand with the declaration of youthful love.

sign mine at the end of it," Tanmoy said, mortified, at one point, which brought guffaws from the house.

The subject of customised cassettes, back when our modern-day Spotify playlist was still a non-entity, was also a big hit. "I remember spending hours spooling the tape back into cassettes with a pencil if the tape ever came loose! There are mostly young people in the audience today and I am probably the oldest person in the room. *Ei torun projonner bodh hoye WhatsApp ei mon dewa-neua chole,*" Saswati said mournfully.

Each panellist spoke fondly of their college days and conquests made in the prime of their youth, with the men going as far as to sheepishly admit that sometimes they would blatantly copy their friends' letters to present confessions of love to the object of their desires.

"I once borrowed a letter from Anindya to give to someone and conveniently forgot to erase his name and

Adding to the conversation, Anindya said: "There is a nostalgia to *norom prem*. Most of the *norom prems* in our lives never materialise, and that is what makes them sweeter, *aaro norom*. We grew up listening to cassettes and obviously wanted our music, as Chandrabindoo, to be released on cassettes too. And cassettes were a great way to declare love back when we were young. Funnily enough, we thought they'd stay forever."



This session, called 'Michael O Meghnad: Dui Porajito Nayok (Michael and Meghnad: Two Fallen Heroes)' looked at Michael Madhusudan Dutta's *Meghnadbodh Kalya* in the context of exploring the *Ramayana* from the perspective of one of its greatest defeated antagonists and reflecting on the tragedy of the fallen hero. Moderated by Prithvi Basu (left), who spoke to Indologist-historian Nrisingha Prasad Bhaduri (centre) and Aavek Majumdar, the session touched upon the theme of Michael's own life being akin to that of the *porajito nayok* and later had Bhaduri reading out certain passages for added emphasis.

"Madhusudan renounced his land and language to eventually re-embrace them. He is known to have famously asked: 'Do I contradict myself?' That was his own, personal tragedy, and you must know that to write tragedy, one must be larger than life, because it is impossible for tragedy to spring from anything but an extraordinary imagination. And Madhusudan's life was tragic. That is why in his writing, he upholds and beautifully describes the grandeur that is innate to suffering. Besides, in most of his works, he chooses to extol the defeated figure of the hero more than anything else. He, like *Meghnad*, even named his translation of the *Iliad* '*Hector-bodh*', rather than mention Troy or Ilion anywhere in his title," Majumdar said at the beginning of the session.



Actor Rajatava Dutta, marvellous as ever, did a dramatic reading of Dipendranath Bandyopadhyay's short story *Ashvamedher Ghora*. "I'm delighted to be part of the KCC Baithakkhana, and while I thought that a *Pugla Dashu* tale would be more fitting for a session on the *heyro*, Chandril insisted that I read this story instead! So here we are," said Rajatava.



The session '*Debdash Theke Deewar: Heyror Box Office (From Devdas to Deewar: The Box Office)*' had directors Kamaleshwar Mukherjee and Srijit Mitra and film critic Jagori Bandyopadhyay converse with Priyak Mitra on on-screen adaptations of the fallen hero, and what makes them resonate with audiences sometimes far more profoundly than the hero figure himself.

"We all tend to have a soft spot for Karna, much more than for Arjun. Arjun is the ultimate unconquered, while Karna loses everything by the end of the *Mahabharat*. Very important characters in Greek tragedies, from Oedipus to Agamemnon to Cassandra, are all conquered figures, but plays have been written on them and they have been exceedingly popular," Kamaleshwar started, highlighting how fallen or tragic figures often evoke deeper empathy and offer richer material for storytelling.

Srijit agreed with Kamaleshwar. "In the '90s, especially, there were two kinds of films, one that showed people losing at life, socially, emotionally, and subjectively, despite all odds; and then there was a larger, nobler branch of film where you had central characters sacrifice everything and choose to be conquered, to uplift other people in their life, as a conscious decision. This second form of the *porajito nayok* is more of a commentary on society than of an individual *heyro* story. And these stories always hold the character to a certain parameter," he said, explaining how such narratives are not about personal victory, but about embodying ideals that often come at great personal cost, making the character's fall all the more poignant and powerful.

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Pictures: B Halder