

## Interview

### Pulak Biswas

*Tell us about your childhood ... how you decided to be a painter.*

Actually, you know, my father had some interest. He was fond of painting and sculpture. He was not a professional. He used to do it as a pastime, as a hobby. Maybe that way I got encouragement, I should say.



When I was in class 7, I decided to be a painter and go to the art college. My teachers laughed at me, pointing at the drawing teacher in the school, saying this is the career you would have – the most neglected. Now things are different. People realise that visual expression is very important for the child to grow. They give encouragement from the school days, but in our times it was just the opposite.

I started sketching while in school. After matriculation I went to the art college in Calcutta in 1957.

There was a person who was impressed with my painting – Anoda Munshi. He is known as father of Indian advertising. He was my real guru. He encouraged me. The teachers were quite conventional and my style was unconventional. I had taken painting and we had some financial difficulties and having joined an art college I was feeling a little guilty. I started doing some illustrations for a small publisher in Calcutta. I did book covers, greeting cards and that supported me. So this is how I got into illustrations.

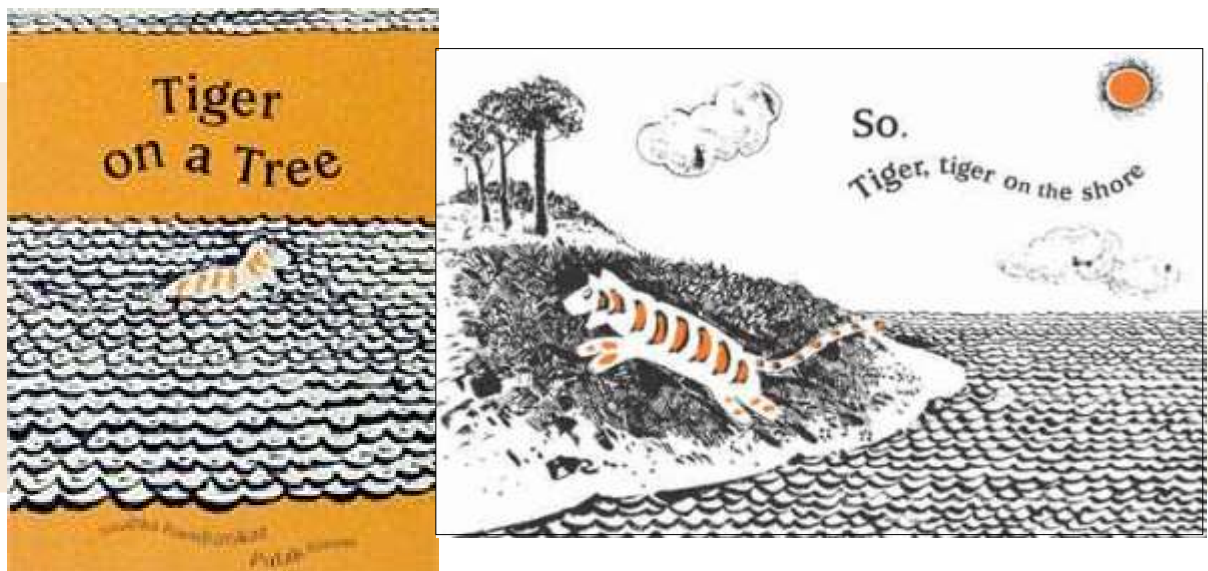
When I completed my college, Anoda Munshi was art director in an ad agency. It was the time of war and there were no recruitments happening, but he asked me to join and so I got a job. I worked there for two years.

Then I came to Delhi to attend a seminar organised by Children's Book Trust (CBT) and UNESCO. There were about 30 artists from all over. Almost 50% of them were from Delhi, others from Bangalore, Chennai etc. It was a three-week-long workshop. We illustrated stories. Hebbbar and KS Kulkarni too attended the workshop. Towards the end of the workshop Shankar asked me how I liked the experience and I said I am enjoying myself since I like to illustrate and draw. Shankar was looking two artists for

CBT. And he asked me to join. Thus I was the first artist to join CBT.

Shankar gave me a free hand and never interfered. He used to ask me, are you satisfied? And I would say – yes, that is why I am showing the illustrations to you. He would then ask me to send the illustrations to the press. I had complete freedom and that is why it gave me confidence and brought out the best in me. Since he trusted me so much, I too felt I had to prove myself. I used to try out different styles – illustration flowing on to the next page, etc.

Then I got a UNESCO scholarship and went to Hansley College for two months. After coming back I decided to join an advertising agency, ASP, where I did a drawing based campaign.



*You have worked with a number of publishers. Does it vary in terms of space that they give you, styles of working...?*

The problem with the publishers is that, they have a very strong view of things. Many of them can't distinguish a good illustration from a bad one. Publishers have very different styles of working. They are concerned about sales. I worked with Tara Publishers in Chennai. I did a book there. I had done a story on deforestation, how it affects everyone, not just human beings. A lady who had worked in Sunderban was very interested and told me about a story of a tiger. So I did the book and wrote the story in a few words. Later Geetha called me and said that the book was very nice and if the text was written in rhyme, children would love it. I said fine. I am not a writer. So Anoushka Ravishankar wrote the text and she did a great job.

Most of the publishers do not want to publish such books. I think that at least for one or two titles they should be willing to experiment. But they don't.

*Can you reflect on the process of illustrating for children? How is it similar to and different from other illustrations, and from design and painting work in terms of conceiving and actually doing the illustration? How do you create balance between your creativity and what the child reader is looking for?*

When you are doing it for the child, you have to understand the child, what the child



enjoys. There, the anatomy of drawing is not important; it is expression that is important. Even if you do it, draw it, like a child – I have not got the opportunity to do so, but I would like to do it that way if I can. However, no publisher would publish it and I cannot do it on my own. The main thing is, children must enjoy. Children don't always read. You have to impress the child with a good drawing, good expression.

When I illustrate for a child, I think it should not be realistic, but rather stylised drawing. In CBT, Shankar wrote humorous stories, so I used stylised, cartoonised illustrations.

But most publishers don't appreciate it. Even in *Mahagiri*, it is stylised drawing. Highly stylised drawing. Also *Maya in Mohanjodaro* – when I finished, Shankar asked me, do you like it? Then he showed it to Mulk Raj Anand. We had an editor – a British lady. She did not like the illustrations. She came to me and said, Maya looks ugly. I said, Maya is Maya. She is Indian. That book got the BIB award. Then the whole approach changed.

*Is there lack of overall understanding in terms of the visual...also lack of understanding of what may appeal to a child?*

Definitely. If you want a child to learn good drawing, you should expose the child to

good illustrations, good drawing. If the child listens to bad music, he will learn bad music.

*We have some new children's publishers coming in now in recent year. But before that, illustrations for children were much more stereotyped.*

Absolutely. People should try different kinds of experimental illustrations. Not interpretation of the text. Illustration is not interpretation, but expression.

*There are a number of children's illustrators-cum-writers in the west. This trend is not seen in India. Why?*

That's true. There are only a few, like Manjula Padmanabhan.

*Is it because the education system is rigid and you have to choose between streams very early?*

That is one of the things. Even when you take commercial art, you cannot think of



drawing and painting. Like Peit Classe, he was a brilliant illustrator and an artist. Most of the western authors, especially for young children, are like that. It makes a big difference. If you paint, your colour sense, your sense of form, of position would definitely improve. Here an illustrator is just an illustrator and a painter a painter.

*So in terms of the child's age – I think at any age we look at illustrations first. But for a young child, illustration is a much more prominent part. You have also done books for NBT that are only illustrations – without text, like pre-literacy books.*

Yes, I did such books for NBT, books without text. They have to work accordingly. But at the same time they must also help children develop a good sense of skill for visual expression.

The child's age is very important. Especially for young children, illustrations play a very important role. We also must expose children to different styles. We have to help them develop the skill.

*When a text is given to you, what is the process? There are some books that you have conceived, but when the text is given to you...?*

When I get a manuscript, I go through it thoroughly and try to get a feel of it. I don't look at each and every word when I do illustrations. Then I prepare a small dummy of the text and of each illustration. I do a miniature, what style I will use. Before I do the final illustration, I do small drawings.

*Out of the books that you have illustrated for children, do you have a*



*favourite?*

My favourite is the *Tiger on The Tree*. I really enjoyed doing it and I did it in a very short time.

*A notion that seems to be taking hold is that children's books must be luxuriously colourful. What are your views on this?*

I don't believe in that. Children's drawings... even before they start talking properly, they express with... black felt pen. They may not necessarily prefer colour.



*What is the process of working with the author?*

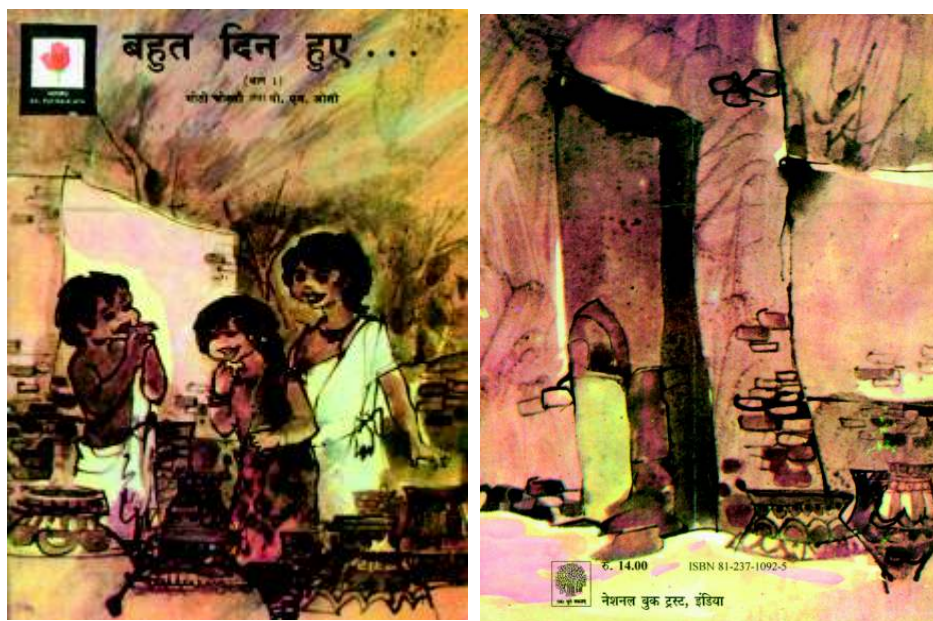
It is very important for the writer and the illustrator to understand each other. Sometimes the authors write without trying to visualise the visual possibilities. Especially for the younger children the visual is important and writer should have that in mind.

Also it is much better to have freelance illustrators than full-time in-house illustrators, so that you can match styles.

*The value of children's drawing for their cognitive development is being recognized. Do you think children's illustrations have a place in publishing?*

I think Tara did that. They did Mahabharat like a child, but it was not childish, and I must say it was a wonderful job. More children will like that than the Mahabharat I have done. It depends. May be there is a lot more experimentation that needs to happen from many directions.

*Do you think illustration is rated a lower thing than painting?*



So far in India painters feel that it is below their dignity to illustrate. But things are changing now. Very slowly.

*How important is it to relate to the text?*

That is where I feel happy as a freelancer. For Begum Akhtar I used unusual colours. The agency said these are bad colours. I said you listen to the ghazal first, get the feel of it and that is how I paint. The problem is, even in music it is the expression that

matters. When you listen to good music, you don't need to understand. The exact word, In classical music, they even distort the word. Painting is also like that. I am good at figures but now I do total abstractions. They say why? I have had enough of figure drawing. I just want to get the feeling that I have when I close my eyes. When I paint, I don't close my eyes, but try to get that feeling.

*The role of the designer in putting the whole thing together. How do you see the role of a creative designer?*

If the designer is a sensible person, if he tries to understand the illustrations, then you can work together. The designer needs to work with the illustrator. He must understand her, must have respect for her. The publisher's role is to print books. In order to decide on good illustrations, he should either have a sense of design himself, or take help from a specialised person.



*In order to advance the field of children's literature, especially illustrations, what needs to be done? What are the ways of attracting and grooming talent for this sector?*

When I used to teach in the art college and used to take drawing classes, a student asked me, what is the use of learning illustration? What is its future? If I get into an ad agency, I will get a good pay.

*What needs to be done to sustain, attract talent?*

Students, they don't pay anything. To a freelancer, for 24-page book, they pay Rs.10,000 or Rs. 8000, depending on the artist. That is ridiculous. There is so much work that goes into doing one book. That is why students feel that if you get into an ad agency, you will earn good money. Today, life is more material.

*About training an illustrator, is there more to be done?*

It is dangerous to train illustrators. You should train them in painting. In illustration, you get something to study, you try to get the feel of it, you try to understand it, and express it. If you are a good artist, your illustration will be good. Illustration is also an art. But most people don't think so.

*I meant, should institutions like NID focus on illustrations?*

They don't perceive it as a career. I don't think they focus on illustration. I don't think they do that at present, but they should. Students should be encouraged. If you see a talented student, she should be encouraged. But the problem is, where do they go after that?

*For young artists, fellowships – or what are the things that would help?*

I think grants. Grants to illustrate and then get it published. For painters there are many, but none for illustrators. That would help.

Fellowships for studying abroad – even for six months – that is enough. Teachers are really good there. These days art colleges here have gone down so much. The attitude is bad. Teachers are more interested in doing tuitions.

Artists also need to survive. You cannot do it as social work, while publishers live a comfortable life.

*You talked about other art forms. Wider exposure to other arts. How important is it for young artists?*

I don't think that is happening. In Bhopal it will happen. Or my daughter went to Slovakia – I think it helped her. That helps, definitely. Artist camps. But there is nothing for illustrators.

Each artist – film maker, writer – they look at things in their own way. Workshop for artists and senior people to guide them.... That way you may be able to organise something. They should also be given some honorarium.

*Interviewed by Amrita Patwardhan on December 5, 2006*