

## *My friend, my friend, a few words to thee*

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I knew Maitreyidi (Maitreyi Chatterjee) before I joined *Nari Nirjatan Pratirodh Mancha* (or *Mancha*), as my mother's elder cousin. She would visit our house in Gariahat without fail, whenever my grandmother (mother's mother) stayed with us and reminisced at length about Hazaribagh. Brought up in Hazaribagh, she went to Mount Carmel School as its first batch of students. Maitreyidi would often tell me to record grandma's narrative because that represented a historical period. I terribly regret not having listened to her. My grandmother was very proud of Maitreyidi, mentioning always that it was unbelievable what she has achieved in life after being born with a hole in her heart and persistently being physically weak.

Maitreyidi overcame her physical weakness with her indomitable spirit, and that was the impression that remained with me throughout my association with her. Maitreyidi, was a bright and colourful person—bright not just in spirit but also in the way she dressed. Her sari, her skirt colours were always in congruence with her junk jewellery and her big sparkling *bindi*. That she enjoyed dressing herself for the occasion was very evident and that generated a positive aroma around her.

Maitreyi, the activist member of *Mancha* was someone who was always alert about making the organization more active. On any issue that demanded public protest or demonstration, Maitreyidi's excitement and involvement were overwhelming. I remember my first engagement with *Mancha* at the 2002 Kolkata Book fair protesting against the ban on the Taslima Nasreen book *Dwikhondito*. Her discussions in *Mancha* about the past activities of the organisation to enlighten the newer members on debatable issues like Section 498A of Indian Penal Code, communal violence, or sex workers had a sense of combining history with the contemporary. Participating in the March 8 and December 10 programs of *Mancha* and *Maitri* with a lot of energy, she was always an informative and passionate speaker on the issue under discussion. She always had constructive suggestions on the contents of leaflets that *Mancha* issued. Maitreyidi remained very committed and enthusiastic about *Sambade Meyera* (women in news)—a documentation that *Mancha* does by collecting newspaper clippings concerning women. She subscribed to a number of newspapers to enable *Mancha* to carry out the documentation activity. These newspaper clippings formed the basis of many of her writings as well as a trigger for numerous protest demonstrations of *Mancha*. These were also used for writing petitions to the government.

Maitreyidi was always encouraging and optimistic to any woman who would come to *Mancha* for legal help or any other support. According to her, every moment of life had to be lived and she always gave a lot of importance to what the person, who had come to the organization for help, herself expected from *Mancha*. This was a very friendly way of trying to provide the woman an agency in her otherwise helpless situation. She was someone with whom one could discuss personal troubles without the fear of being

judged. Maiteyidi's presence in *Mancha* made a huge impression on everyone; her photographic memory helped some of us understand the context of *Mancha*.

Coupled with being an activist, Maitreyidi was also a theatre critic and a keen follower of *Rabindrasangeet*. I always took her advice about which play to watch and which to drop. One of her last full-length writing was on Suchitradi (Suchitra Mitra, *Rabindrasangeet* exponent) which was a very touching piece. I met her last, the day before Kishoreda (Kishore Chatterjee, Maiteyidi's spouse) passed away. She appeared tense and yet had a ray of hope. Nonetheless, she did not forget to enquire the kind of work that I was doing in New Delhi and whether I had joined any women's organization there. She penned down her words of encouragement in *Meyeder Parae Parae*, her last book published by *Search* that I was carrying it with me. I did not know then, that that would be the last meeting and I will not be present when her mortal remains would be confined to flames, but her death proved how much in love and interdependent Maitreyidi and Kishoreda were towards each other.

Today at *Mancha* we celebrated Maitreyidi's 72<sup>nd</sup> birthday remembering Maitreyidi the friend, the inspirer, the comrade. We sang 'Amra Nuton joubander duut' and *Dinga Bhasao Sagore...Sathire....* commemorating her spirit and making her part of all our future activities.

26 January 2012