

## Chowringhee by Sankar.

Atlantic Books 2009.

This wonderful novel, written by Mani Sankar Mukherji, a famous Bengal novelist, was originally published in Bengali in 1962 and not translated into English until 2007. It is a cause for celebration that it is now available to an English audience, for it is a beautifully written, evocative tale that will especially, though not exclusively, delight those fascinated by the Sub-continent.

The book is set inside one of India's great hotels, the Shahjahan in Calcutta, an institution of a place that attracts the great and the good from India and beyond. Inside the Shahjahan affairs are conducted, loves are formed and lost, careers advance and falter and characters abound.

Shankar, the narrator, starts the book as clerk to the last English barrister to the Calcutta High Court and, following a chance meeting with a private detective, finds himself employed by the Shahjahan. At the hotel he has to negotiate many human hurdles erected by, among others, his boss Mr Marco Polo (the name is explained!), Gomez the bandmaster, and the steward Nityahari, not to mention the problems caused by guests and those staying at the hotel. His main friend, Sata Bose, the reception desk manager, takes him under his wing from Shankar's first day and the two become very close with Sata a constant source of wisdom, decency and helpful advice.

In spite of all the twists and turns of his life Shankar maintains his positiveness and good humour, and one ends the book feeling sad at parting from someone who has become a good friend. Chowringhee doesn't really go anywhere as a book, because its main thing is the hotel, its locus, but the tale it tells is rich and varied, and immensely satisfying.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh