

## The Little Magazine Movement in Dhaka: an exchange

SHANTANU CHOWDHURY WRITES:

THE news about little magazines in Dhaka is certainly of the positive kind. After a long time there is a rekindling of hope in all of us who are still on track of the little-magazine movement in this country. People are writing on little magazines, on our movement, which is indeed, significant if only in the sense that it reminds us all that the concept of the little magazine and its movement is yet to die down, that it is alive and well in this country. And, of course, we believe that it needs to be closely studied and explained correctly, in an authentic way. Otherwise, readers will plunge in to find the truth in a world of enigma and dark confusion.

Recently I noticed an article written on the little-magazine movement, specially the poetry movement, in mid-eighties in Dhaka, by a leading young poet Subrata Augustine Gomes (The Renaissance That Failed: the little magazine movement in Bangladesh in the eighties', The Daily Star literature page, April 19, 2003).

Subrata Augustine Gomes, my friend who himself was once a little magazine writer/activist and now is a "defector", painted a grim picture of the movement in his article. It is, in my view, not the complete picture; that it, moreover, seemed to also be wishful thinking in that it failed to reflect historical reality. Surprisingly enough, nowhere in his article Subrata ever mentioned, not even once, our manifesto--

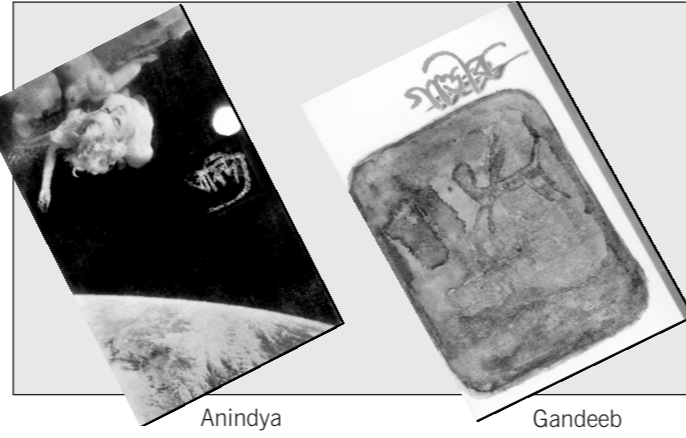
*Samograbadi Ishtehar*--that greatly influenced the shaping of the new poetry movement in Bangladesh. On the contrary, he disowned fully not only the little-magazine movement but mentioned some names who I feel are not in any way deserving of the status accorded to them in the poetry movement. In this context it would be important to note that experimenting with poetry is one thing and poetry movement based on a radical idea and commitment is quite other. One has his or her different poetic aspirations and affections, views on life and society and nature, and above all, one's own set of technique and a self-innovative personal style, but it should not be viewed that he or she is actively involved in a movement. Having mingled those unwanted names with genuine little-magazine writers, one thus feels that Subrata virtually, in one way or other, showed disrespect for them and undermined the little-magazine greats, who in their unceasing struggle with the little-magazine movement bled themselves for near about two decades. And are still bleeding on. So he could have been more authentic and truthful had he not been biased and harboured preconceived notions and not tried to appease some quarters. In our estimation, there are many others who could have been included in his list of little-magazine activists, like Tareq Shahrier, Zahidur Rahim Anjon, Syed Reazur Rashid, Ahmed Nakib, Badrul Haider, Azad Noman, Qamrul Huda Pathik, Rokan Rahman, Sumon Rahman, Pablo Shahi, Shamim

Kabir, Majnu Shah, Mujib Mehdi and many others.

The movement that started in the mid-eighties here in Bangladesh, and especially around us in Dhaka, had a different perspective. Both politically and culturally, literary conditions then were not favourable at that time for young writers like us. In those days, young writers were so confused that they had no tastes or ideals strong enough that would incline them to do anything unusual or something new. They got hooked on imitating the conventional popular poetry of preceding poets. Most of them were captives in the hands of so-called literary editors of some national daily newspapers and a few popular poets who had earned name and fame for their stage-breaking performance.

In such an odd situation, where an ubiquity of imitators and imitations was the predominant feature of poetry and where mere sloganeering was an established part of literary activism, we felt that the literary establishment, chiefly the daily newspapers and their recruited literary editors, were the main obstacles towards progress in the fields of literature and art, as if they had become the arbiters of culture and sole monopolists of the literary world, a world where without their certificate of approval and favour nobody would be able to be a poet, a writer or anything else.

In order to fight against such trends and out of a desire for new poetry, together with some of my poet-friends, we began first to contemplate in the extreme about writing new poetry and thus



floated our manifesto on poetry--*Samograbadi Ishtehar*--which was jointly signed by Sajjad Sharif (currently literary editor, Prothom Alo), Shoyeb Shadab and me, and which was first published in *Anindya*. In it we set ourselves in opposition to the literary *ancien regime* in an effort to overturn the reigning tradition and those poets of the preceding decades, the members of the poetical/literary establishment, who had imposed on poetry artificial conventions and practices, against what we regarded as the whole poetic establishment.

In our eyes, the little-magazine movement and anti-establishment concept both were, and are, integral parts of the same ideological values. It consists in the belief that the life, artistic creation and writer's own personal dignity are important, in fact, are fundamental components which a writer should uphold on the basis of his/her commitment and uncompromising attitude. It would be erroneous,

however, to understand the movement factor in a simplified way. Because we experienced that an establishment with vested interests is the basis of all other forms of evils, and even though it's a faceless structure but its role is more dominant in a rigid and traditional society like ours. To the best of my knowledge we were the first to introduce the concept of the writer- "complete little-mag writer"- in Bangladesh.

Under such circumstances, in order to write experimental poetry according to our manifesto, a need was felt to bring out a little magazine where no space would be allowed to those writers who usually wrote in the literary pages of daily newspapers and thus had compromised with the establishment. Habib Wahid, the young and fiercely independent editor of *Anindya*, came forward boldly to take the responsibility of publishing the manifesto and our new poems in his magazine. Alas, our relationship was short-lived and we separated after a bitter feud.

Then at this stage Tapan Barua, short story writer and the high priest of the little magazine movement, extended the scope of our movement by bringing out a new little magazine named *Gandeeb*, and steering it towards its present course. In the first issue of *Gandeeb* we again published the manifesto with our signatures. Paradoxically, however, our chief comrade-in-arms Sajjad Sharif, who had made an exceptionally important contribution in developing the manifesto, later deserted the movement and became its first defector, to be later followed by many others like Subrata Gomes, who used to come and go like seasonal migratory birds and left no lasting mark on the movement.

In our quest for new poetry, as much as we experienced various setback and opposition, we had also got support and inspiration from our contemporary writers, poets, painters, critics, filmmakers and well-wishers. They expressed their solidarity in our struggle for our cause. Among them short story writer Selim Morshed, Tareq Shahrier and Zahidur Rahim Anjon are noteworthy. I recall with gratitude many discussions on our movement that we had had with them. Particularly, in short stories as in poetry new forms came into being at that time and it was our manifesto that provided some of

the stimulus. We are indebted to young painters Wakil Ahmed and Dhali Al Mamun who designed many magazine covers for us. I have to acknowledge that the movement had moved ahead not only because of our own ability only, but because we were supported by others like poets Mohammad Kamal, Kajol Shah Nawaz, Syed Tarik, Vishnu Biswas, film-maker Tarek Masud, publisher Hossein Haider Chowdhury and many others.

That was indeed a tremendous movement in our part of Bengali literary history. It not only established the literary movement on this soil, but also ushered in a new poetic order. But all such experiments and movements would simply be impossible if there were no underlying philosophical percepts. In those days, when we were waging a historical movement against fuzziness and facile emotionalism that was embedded in the then existing popular poetry, there was also various groups who were trying to substantiate new trends that too could provide the basis for a different poetic outlook. Thus, a technical revolution in poetry was going on side by side with shifts in attitude.

Under these new conditions at least some of the objectives for fresh poetic developments were achieved. The subject matter of our poetry exhibits an extension of range and diction far beyond the previous poets. Most strikingly, the poets of this time resemble the Bengali poets of the thirties who led a similar rebellion against poetic convention. As a result, since then, the newly initiated poetic order based on the little magazine is still sweeping over here with the same rhythm and effectiveness. Whoever studies and assimilates it deeply, seriously and creatively will accept this new outlook through conviction based on reasonable arguments and proofs, and not on blind faith.

And our success is there, that we're able to draw a sharp division between popular poetry (mainly those poets of 50s, 60s, 70s and early 80's who wrote sentimental poems targeting stage-audiences and light-hearted readers) and radical poetry, and which consequently emerged as a new aesthetic of poetry. The new phenomena that arose through total rejection of the old were not created in a vacuum. We were able, by making use of the ground reality, to convert the possibility of a movement into something genuine, perhaps a real poetry movement, which became the beginning of a new order in the development of poetry. The old order dies away, and something new thus constantly arises over the course of time. But the question that arises is whether the new order entails any improvement of poetry or only brings chaos and disorder. It is not easy to answer that seemingly simple question.

Shantanu Chowdhury works at UNB.



Letter from LONDON

KAISER HUQ

SALGADO POETRY

PREFATORY NOTE:

Looking at Salgado's photographs I realized that behind each of them lay a tale of great existential significance. The significance could be sensed, perhaps as an aura, though the tale itself might be irrecoverable beyond the bland details of a news report. However, my experience of the 1971 Bangladesh war of independence fused with the nightmarish tale of the madwoman from Indo-China in Marguerite Duras' novel 'The Vice-Consul' to provide me with a miniature narrative that reflects the extreme situation of so many of Salgado's displaced persons.

Duras' anonymous character utters only one word in the novel, the name of her native village: Battambang. For me this awkward-sounding name symbolizes the home all exiles have left behind, as well as the home they seek to create for themselves wherever they have fetched up: this explains the title of my poem. Needless to say, the identification of Duras' madwoman with a madwoman who haunts the corner of Dhaka where I live is purely fanciful.

BATTAMANG

Out of this tangle of texts and things and beings she springs up like a weed

uprooted, cast to the winds, propelled by hunger through flat spaces, across fetid swamps, rivers porridge-thick after the rains, towards the straight line of sky and earth meeting edge to edge, towards hills and valleys with romantic names, eating young rice shoots, begging for bones, stealing salted fish

(secreted between scraggy breasts), always where she halts someone turns up to shoot her away.

Sometimes, if a man following her about asks her name, where she is from, in a language she scarce understands, all she says is, 'Battambang.'

One, two, three... she'd count the days out of home. Now, all sense of time (or numbers) gone, she only knows a gnawing inside as her belly, infected with life, rises like dough stretching skin till it cracks. (It's only to die quietly that the child is born.)

Hair, pulled in despair, comes off in clumps leaving her looking like a grubby Buddhist nun. Lying in a gravel pit she gazes mesmerised at distant stars, nearby town lights where thousands like her huddle in corridors of wind. In dreams she turns into her dead child walking through mountains and city walls.

Ten years from home, she comes upon ragged millions thronging the Jessore Road towards Calcutta. Air like the inside of a rotten egg: moonson. The tortured city smells of sweat, saffron, stagnant water. Perhaps our paths crossed: hers and a burly, bearded poet's and mine, as I headed for a theatre of war. They say she once pulled a live fish from between her breasts and with delirious shrieks bit off its head, but on party nights devoured foie gras sandwiches from embassy bins.

The war ended. Like women dancing in a trance to shake off the spirits of war-dead spouses I chucked half a life into the bin

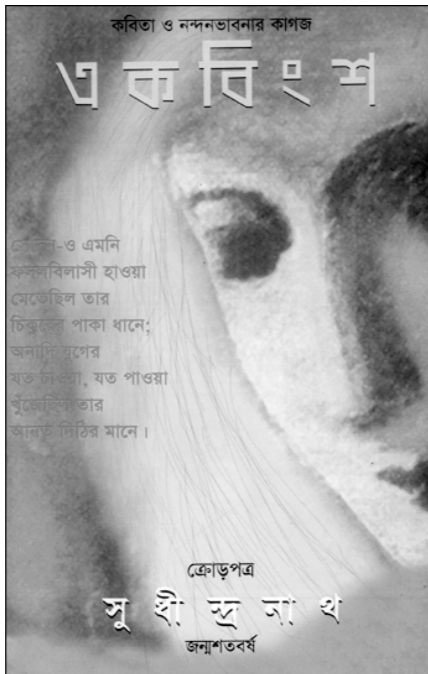
till, one clear autumn morning I see her it can only be her, with her crazy eyes, her tatty sarong by the overflowing skip in front of the British Council in Dhaka, boiling rice in a battered pan. The scent spreads as vapour rises skyward and she bursts into song a joyous song of Battambang.

Sebastio Salgado is the prize-winning photographer of migrants, the dispossessed and refugees worldwide: Kaiser Huq teaches English at Dhaka University.

SUBRATA A. GOMES REPLIES:

THANK you, Shantanu, for your sweet admonishment. True, I failed to mention your *Ishtihar* in my article, and yes, true again, I did not mention a few of the little magazine activists whom you have kindly brought up. The principal reason behind my indeliberate amnesia is my emigration from Bangladesh in the mid-nineties and consequent detachment from Dhaka's little magazine scene. Another reason is that I was attempting to analyze the causes of what I felt was the failure of the movement, not write a Who's Who of little magazine activists in Dhaka. After all, there is the obvious constraint of space. If I had had to mention all the names involved in the movement the essay would have had to be published as a phone directory of some kind.

You are right again saying that I have indeed mentioned some names that you personally, and as a member of the *Gandeeb* group, abhor. But does your abhorrence make the ill-fated ones any lesser writers than they are? Must we exclude names like Khondkar Ashraf Hossain, Moin Chowdhury or Bratya Raisu simply because they? Must we forget their efforts towards the promulgation of the movement? Must we - the ones that were never part of the *Gandeeb* group in the strictest terms - take the movement as a household possession of one little magazine, namely



Ekabingsha

*Gandeeb*? And I do not know why you reprimand my failure to mention writers like Kamrul Huda Pathik or Mujib Mehdi. Were they ever a part of the particular movement I had in mind? Or do you at long last admit that in spite of the differences in aesthetic

goals, all Bengali journals of any class and intentions were part of the same movement? Why then should you segregate *Ekabingsha* or *Pranta*? And in what ways does Habib Wahid's *Anindya* differ from, say, *Pranta*, except that most of its issues were poorer in selection of writing and less innovative than the latter?

Your terming me and Sajjad Sharif as "defectors" amuses me. Who did we let down? What did we betray? Did we compromise our writing style to gain cheap popularity? The answer is, as you too will probably admit, no. All we have done is allowed ourselves to be published in the both the national dailies as well as little magazines. From the very outset, one of our many fruitless debates was whether we should consider the newspapers as part of the literary establishment. And some of us, such as Sajjad or myself, could never understand why some of the little magazine crowd insisted on making a paper tiger out of the puny literary supplements of the daily newspapers. It is, therefore, a matter of personal outlook rather than betrayal of any kind. And in spite of whatever you may call me, I still belong, and always will, to the little magazine and to the larger movement.

*Muchhe jaak glaani, muchhe jaak jaraa, Agnisnaane shuchi hok dharaa.*

Subrata Augustine Gomes is a Bengali poet who lives in Australia.

## TRAVEL WRITING

Travel writing, as we said on this page not too long ago, has exploded out of its seams, with writers ceaselessly exploring not only different parts of the globe, but different notions of the self via journeys. Bangladeshis today travel and settle all over the globe, yet write very little about it in English. In this occasional series we aim to partially fill the gap, to make Bangladeshis more aware not only of this lively, engrossing genre but to also make them see themselves more clearly by lifting them out into different cultures, into a different space and light.

## A Tropical Treat: Indonesia

FAKRUL ALAM

I "Going to Indonesia at this time -- are you crazy? What about the Bali Bomber? And SARS?"

So what? We've been saving for this trip for years! And Malaysian Airlines has a special deal -- Jakarta and three nights in Kuala Lumpur in a four-star hotel free -- all for U. S. \$320! And with my sister in Indonesia wanting us to come and promising to take us to Bali, why miss the trip? And really, if the headlines in our Dhaka newspapers are any indication, is life safer in Dhaka than in the SARS-infested zones of the world? And, finally, Indonesia is SARS free -- according to CNN!

And so we left Dhaka for our fifteen-day summer holiday despite the warnings of the way and the paranoid well-wishers of my Dhaka, eager to take a break from the heat and commotion of our city.

II The Malaysian Airlines flight to Kuala Lumpur en route to Jakarta is smooth enough. But Kuala Lumpur airport's transit area in the early morning looks surreal -- sleepy-eyed people slumped in chairs or shuffling uncertainly and not a few masked faces bent on scaring away the SARS demon. The airport looks futuristic but somehow forbidding. The airport air conditioning, too, is chilly. Thankfully, we will be arriving in Jakarta in a few hours.

III Jakarta Airport is not as modern as Kuala Lumpur's but definitely looks more intimate than that overdone Malaysian showpiece. However, the SARS masks are here too -- giving the same spooky feel to the place.

We feel like VIPs. Salaheen, my friend from my university days, surprises us by greeting us from just outside the immigration booth. He is the World Food Program country director and has come to receive us. And my sister greets us

warmly once we cross customs and claim our baggage; then her driver collects everything and whisks us away to the car.

The flight from the airport to my sister's house startsles us. Jakarta hardly looks like the capital of a country that needs WFP assistance. The highways are impressive, we seem to be on flyovers every now and then, skyscrapers surround us, and we pass trendy malls and hotels regularly. My sister tells me that the money deposited in the three tollgates we cross will go to one of Suharto's daughters. His family, apparently, owns this or that everywhere. But they have things to show and share for all the money they had made at the people's expense!

IV The next three days we travel in and around Jakarta. The first morning we visit a massive museum built by Suharto which displays all the gifts he got from kings, queens, prime ministers, and presidents, as well as his own people and no doubt hordes of sycophants. As a collection, it is uneven, but there are some amazing things here for sure. The museum is a reminder that Suharto is still an absent presence in the country; he might have yielded to public pressure and resigned, but it is clear that he still wields considerable clout. Later, we go to a huge theme park where every province of Indonesia has its own display center. There is even a skyway from which you can see the whole Indonesian archipelago spread below in miniature. It is not only a good way to view Indonesian history and culture but also a shrewd way of fostering a sense of unity in the citizens of a multicultural nation.

The second day we take a three-hour drive to a Safari Park built thoughtfully so that you have the illusion of being amidst wild animals in the wild. Natural barriers confine only the most ferocious animals; the others surround your car or stare at it. Mostly, the animals ignore us, preferring to

groom themselves or devour fruits.

We drive further up the mountains, past tea gardens and a gold mine. We end up in a unique tourist spot-- a place where developers have built summer homes for sale that seem to have come out of assorted movie sets: Venetian apartments, English homes, ranch type homes. It is as if any kind of home you can dream about, they will have it ready for you! The whole place is full of gardens; they have a lot of orchids bloom!

In our evenings in Jakarta we go out on shopping sprees. The city is wonderful for shopping. My sister knows where the best deals are and so we go on a binge. Large department stores are stocked with designer goods but business is dull at this time of the year and so we find bargains everywhere. All the multinational fast food companies have franchises here and as do a few famous department stores and supermarket chains. The signs are in English though nobody speaks the language. That and the currency -- where even a banana costs 500 rupiahs and you can pay lakhs of rupiahs for a shirt -- should have made shopping an impossible proposition for us. After all, we would like to know how much everything costs in dollars so that we can calculate how many takas we were spending for every item. Luckily, my sister does the calculating and we feel pleased that we get some shopping deals we never could dream of getting anywhere whether in Bangladesh, India, or the West.

V The highlight of our Indonesian trip is Bali. It is exactly what the tourist brochures say: an island paradise. SARS and the Bali Bomber have scared away tourists and so prices are down here too. Consequently, we find ourselves in the splendid Nassa Dua Hilton -- a splendid luxury resort hotel on the beach.

From our hotel room balcony we view a picture-post card world: the azure of the sky, an

endlessly blue ocean, and a mountain-capped island emerging languidly on the other side from the water. As we come to the beach we hear the mellifluous splash of waves breaking endlessly on the shore. At night we discover to our delight that we are here during the full moon. And the weather is lovely too: a mild sea breeze blowing all day makes even the hot sand bearable, as long as you are in the shade in the afternoon.

We settle in for three days on the beach. Inevitably, I think of my three trips to Cox's Bazar. What a relief to be in a place where you are completely secure, where you and your loved ones can laze on the beach all day long in the sun or in the shade, play beachsports, surf, splash, and swimfave from ogling eyes, touts, and beach garbage! Lifeguards, towels, swimming pools, refreshments -- everything you can think of -- are available. Time ceases to matter and the mind relaxes. I think of Tennyson: "... a land/in which it seemed always afternoon./All round the coast the languid air did swoon."

We arouse ourselves from our waking dream only in the evenings for shopping expeditions to downtown Bali. My sister helps us haggle and we find bargains galore. Exquisite batik print clothes abound but the woodcarvings are worth buying too. Even more than the Javanese, the Balinese are gifted artisans, possessed of a delicate sense of beauty and imbued with an imagination hued with surely some of the loveliest colors on earth.

One evening we travel to the other side of the island to watch Balinese theatre. The Balinese are predominantly Hindus and the dance is about the love of Ram and Sita, Raban the tempter-abductor, and the intrepid Hanuman brigade. We are enthralled by the grace and vitality of the dance, the delicate movements and the vibrant harmonies. I am reminded how impressed Rabindranath was in 1927 when he visited Java and Bali, was moved by the affinities with Bangla culture he perceived as he watched their dance

dramas and his appreciation of Balinese batik craftsmanship. I recall also "Sagarika" (Seagirl"), the lovely poem he wrote on Bali. He, of course would, because he was one who never failed to respond to the truly beautiful!

VI "Don't miss Borobudur", my historian friend had told me in Dhaka, and I didn't want to. And so we fly from Bali to Jogjakarta, a city conveniently located for excursions to the sites of the Buddhist and Hindu monuments of Central Jakarta.

The highlight of the evening we spend in Jogjakarta is the Javanese play we watch in an open-air stage. A sumptuous dinner precedes the performance. This play, too, is based on the travails of Sita, the machinations of Raban, and the final victory of good over evil, but this production is much more theatrical, and less dancero-orientated than the Balinese one, though both are equally impressive as spectacles. I love watching the dazzling movements of the performers and their marvelous costumes. I enjoy listening to the distinctive rhythms of their songs. Delicious ethnic food, dynamic theater -- what better way to spend a night out on a holiday!

The next morning we leave the hotel at five in the morning for the monuments. Central Java is hot and we must visit them before the afternoon sun saps us of all energy. On our way we pass a still active volcano and see smoke curling out of the mist-filled mountain. Borobudur is a hill where Buddhist artists built walkways, galleries and stupas, embellishing them with bas-relief based on Buddhist themes. There are only a few foreign tourists but we come across Javanese school group who are on a study tour where, among other things, they must polish their English-speaking skills by talking to people like us!

Next we head for the neighboring Hindu monuments of Premanbanag. This is essentially a cluster of temples decorated with motifs from



Hindu myths and legends, I am reminded of the cave paintings of Ajanta and the temples of Elora in Maharashtra and even the relics we can see in Comilla's Mainamati Museum and Rajshahi's Varendra Research Museum. It occurs to me that they are all evidence of the rich syncretic Hindu-Buddhist culture that spanned all of South Asia from India to Indonesia in the early Middle Ages. I am quite sure that what I saw in Ajanta and Elora was even more impressive; however, the Indonesians have done a much better job of preserving these heritage sites and presenting them to tourists.

VII We return to Jakarta, spend two more days in the city with my sister and her family and then head for our three-day Malaysian trip. We have done mostly touristy things in Indonesia and haven't really met the people up close. Salaheen told me that there were slums behind the high-rises of Jakarta that one couldn't see from the highways; I had read about the violence and the looting that accompanied Suharto's downfall; ethnic violence seems to be endemic in some parts of the country and is broadcast on CNN and BBC every now and then. And yet what we had seen in our ten days was a lovely country, very modern in some ways, very traditional too, and had come across friendly and quiet people with a flair for the beautiful. As I left I thought of my own country -- we have our beautiful spots and our people are no doubt as hospitable as any other -- but would a tourist coming to Bangladesh find that out after ten days? Somehow we have to learn to put our best foot forward!

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