

THE BOOK REPORT

'Saogat' magazine and the gift of critical thought

EMRAN MAHFUZ, TRANSLATED BY SHAH TAZRIAN ASHRAFI

In the 18th and 19th centuries, Bengal was rife with the struggle for identity and socio-political upheaval, particularly in the Bengali Muslim communities. The tensions inspired magazines and periodicals devoted to intellectual thinking—in the months between April and June of 1819, the monthly *Digadarshan*, the weekly *Shamachardarpan* and *Bengal Gazette*, and the quarterly *Bangiyo Musalman Shahitya Patrika* were first published, all written in Bangla. It was against this backdrop that *Saogat* came out on December 2, 1819, conceived by the visionary journalist and editor, Mohammad Nasiruddin.

From Chandpur to Kolkata: An Origin Story Nasiruddin began working from a young age—first as a betel nut trader, then as a ticket collector at a rail station, and finally as an insurance officer. Yet his heart remained in the realm of literature. He nursed an urge to act against society's prejudices and ignorance, and knew that publishing a newspaper from within the Muslim society would help create a breathing space for progressive discourse. In 1917, he left Chandpur for Kolkata to turn this vision into reality.

But the Muslim individuals to whom he proposed his idea balked at the prospect. None were keen on bringing out a publication that would contain art and fiction like the magazines printed by Hindus. Nasiruddin persevered, travelling back and forth between Chandpur and Kolkata, until finally he came across barrister Abdul Rasul, who became a stalwart supporter.

The first November-December issue of *Saogat*, an illustrated literary magazine, came out in the Bengali year of 1325 in Kolkata, and as its editor, publisher, and founder, Mohammad Nasiruddin changed the nature of intellectual discourse in Bengal. The first issue contained pieces by Jaldhar Sen, Brajendranath Bandyopadhyay, Satyendranath Datta, and Mankumari Basu. Begum Rokeya wrote her poem "Saogat" under the pseudonym of RS Hossain.

Through *Saogat*, Nasiruddin advocated for the education of Muslim, Hindu, Brahmin, and Christian girls and women, who had long suffered under patriarchal social codes. The magazine would become a pioneer in publishing images of Muslim women on print—an unthinkable act at the time. Soon, writers like Kazi Nazrul Islam, Begum Rokeya, Abul Mansur Ahmad, Shamsunnahar Mahmud,



PHOTOS: BANGLADESH ON RECORD

Sufia Kamal, and many others were engaged in this project of generating liberal discussion and dissent in the Bengali Muslim community. Beyond just a print platform, *Saogat* became a stage for the cultivation of the arts, and a space where new and veteran writers gathered for the quintessential Bengali knack for *adda*.

The Dhaka Chapter

1947. An atmosphere of chaos and strife. Bengal was now divided, and religious fanaticism triumphantly rode the air. Hailing from East Bengal, Nasiruddin found it strenuous to continue working in Kolkata in such an environment. In 1950, he returned to Patuakhali.

Two years later, in the middle of 1952, Dhaka was pulsating with the spirit of the language movement. *Saogat* had become defunct by then. When a group of young writers led by Hasan Hafizur Rahman met up with Nasiruddin, insisting that the magazine could pave the way for critical thinking in Dhaka in the way that it had in Kolkata, the journalist found himself, once again, inspired. *Saogat's* first issue in Dhaka came out in November-December of 1953. Unfortunately, it failed to recreate the impact seen in Kolkata, and paled against the popularity of Nasiruddin's second brainchild, the *Begum* magazine.

A Force against the Current

By virtue of its stance on freedom of thought and speech, *Saogat* consistently attracted criticism from the conservative factions of society. Nasiruddin was branded anti-Islamic

and a Kafir, among other labels. But the editor refused to relent. In *Shougat O Amar Jibonkotha* (Protichinta publishers), he wrote, "My personal life doesn't hold anything remarkable. Whatever I have accomplished, everything is indebted to *Saogat*. I was born in a very ordinary household. I published *Saogat* by the sheer strength of my own perseverance and character."

Between 1793 and 1828, a law relating to non-taxable property was enacted, which spelt losses for both Hindus and Muslims. One of the reasons as to why the Muslims lagged behind was their distaste towards the English language, which replaced Persian not long after in 1835. Muslims abhorred the British rule and as a result, unlike the Hindus, were unable to secure better government jobs.

Many individuals and organisations worked tirelessly to fight this status-quo. Platforms like the *Bongiyo Muslim Shahityo Potrika* (Muslim Bengali Literary Paper), the Muslim Literary Society of 1926, and the Bengali Muslim Renaissance Society of 1942 played significant roles. Organisations like *Saogat* and *Shikha* heralded readers towards progress amidst the tug of war between Bengali Muslim nationalism and Brahminism, which was strangling people's freedom of thought. For sowing the seeds of such pioneering thought and practice, *Saogat* and its like have left us with an enduring debt.

Emran Mahfuz is a poet, writer, and researcher. Shah Tazrian Ashrafi is a contributor

BOOK REVIEW: NON-FICTION

Dissent through the Ages in the Indian Subcontinent

ISHRAT JAHAN AND SELIMA SARA KABIR

Eminent scholar and Emeritus Professor of History at Jawaharlal Nehru University, Romila Thapar, in her latest book, *Voices of Dissent* (Seagull Books, 2020), explores important perspectives on dissent located in the historical and contemporary context of the Indian subcontinent.

Dissent—and thereby the freedom to say what one wants to say—as a basic right has become uncommon with the rise of populist powers and the shrinking of civic spaces. Over this time, in the long and complicated history of the subcontinent, the forms of dissent have evolved accordingly. Professor Thapar's book traces "the larger historical context of the manifestations of dissent in various forms at distinctive times in the Indian past. The latter part of the essay is an attempt not only to relate the past to the present but also to suggest that some forms of dissent are continuities from the past." In the first few chapters, the book sketches out dissent as it has played out in the religious landscape through key periods in ancient and medieval India. In the next sections, Professor Thapar focuses on anti-colonial dissent, and finally into current day India, exploring the sort of criticism of the government that is now labelled "anti-national".

Thapar cites examples of dissent from pre-colonial times to contradict the rising theory that dissent is a borrowed Western concept. By documenting both violent and non-violent examples from the Maurya, Gupta, and Mughal periods, she confronts us with the idea that dissent is an inevitability. And there are always simple, inclusive ways to respond.

Our current systems, however, do not recognise all groups as equal. Those in authority demarcate boundaries between the 'self' and an 'other', and this breeds biases, it shapes how we personally and socially view these boundaries that are constructed more from fear, rather than knowledge, of the "other".

The book points out that history has always served the function of justifying the present. This is usually done by the people in power who push certain values and

ideologies onto our pasts and place the past on a pedestal, all to make history fit their policies. Thapar draws on her own knowledge as a historian as well as well-accepted sociological theory to establish this position. She expertly locates her own biases and circumstances to give us a clear idea of her arguments. "To ignore the contribution of dissenting ideas to [...] reformations [...] is to ignore the impressive presence of dissent in assessing the cultivation of religion in India and in the underpinning of many social forms," she writes.

What makes this book of interest to us living in Bangladesh is the fact that it



COLLAGE: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

traces the history of dissent from before the subcontinent was divided. This history, therefore, is not just Indian; it is our shared history.

One should not expect to find an easy solution to issues of dissent as they are today in this book. Instead, books like *Voices of Dissent* serve the purpose of making systematic problems and challenges more visible. They seek to guide readers towards an understanding of where the roots of our present pains and injustices lie, so that we can go on to find sustainable and effective ways to respond.

Ishrat Jahan and Selima Sara Kabir are early stage researchers who write in their spare time.

INTERVIEW

Romila Thapar on Why Dissent is Inevitable

ISHRAT JAHAN AND SELIMA SARA KABIR



In an interview with Daily Star Books, historian and author Romila Thapar expands on her arguments in *Voices of Dissent*. She discusses how dissent has evolved through time in the Indian subcontinent, how multi-voiced communities can coexist, and reading material that

offers a deeper understanding of dissent in region.

Read the interview online, on The Daily Star website, on fb.com/DailyStarBooks, @thedailystarbooks on Instagram, and @DailyStarBooks on Twitter.

THE SHELF

Reading into Disability: A List

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITY 2020

STAR BOOKS DESK

Notions of "able" bodies and "differently abled" bodies are subjective categories that we, as a society, have drawn across our communities. The books in this list offer stories and insight into how one can better understand the experiences of persons with disabilities, and how the world can create a more inclusive environment.



DISABILITY VISIBILITY: FIRST PERSON STORIES FROM THE 21ST CENTURY (Vintage Books, 2020) Alice Wong Non-Fiction

A series of personal essays by authors, artists, activists, lawyers, and politicians with disability explores the modern day experience of disability through the lens of identity, pop culture, theatre, and social prejudices.

WHAT CAN A BODY DO? HOW WE MEET THE BUILT WORLD (Riverhead Books, 2020) Sara Hendren Non-Fiction

In anecdotes drawn from working with people with disability, Sara Hendren describes how simple things like chairs, kitchens, street signs, and other elements of infrastructure can make sure that the world fits its inhabitants, instead of the other way around. Hendren points out cheap and sustainable models for such an endeavour, and offers critical insight into how the very definitions of normalcy that we depend on are subjective.

What Can a Body Do? How We Meet the Built World Sara Hendren

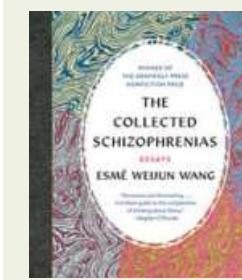


UNBROKEN: 13 STORIES STARRING DISABLED TEENS (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2018) Marieke Nijkamp Fiction

Twelve authors with disability write stories of friendship, love, war, travel, and more in this fiction anthology, all catered towards a young adult audience. The characters in each story reflect the author's respective experiences with physical or neuro-diverse disability.

THE COLLECTED SCHIZOPHRENIAS (Gray Wolf Press, 2019) Esmé Weijun Wang Non-Fiction

Wang's essays—intimate in tone and scope—combine her sharp analysis with a personal experience of being diagnosed with schizophrenia. She discusses the medical community's struggles while labelling an illness, the limitations of institutions and higher education in dealing with PTSD and Lyme's disease, and her own jarring episodes with hallucinations. The book delves deep into the author's own psyche, and in the process offers readers a deeper understanding of the experience of mental conditions.



BODYMAP (Mawenzi House Publishers, 2015) Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha Poetry

The six sections of this poetry collection explore ableism, cultural imperialism, and anti-capitalism filtered through the lens of queer people of colour with disability. The Sri Lankan poet devotes an entire chapter, "Crip World", to how society perceives mental illness and other forms of physical disability, and the injustices that become embedded in the social fabric because of repressed prejudices.