

# The Daily Star WEEKEND MAGAZINE

**T**HE old rain tree was no more, and the playground seemed smaller than I had memory of. Other than that, Banagram High School looked much the same as I remembered leaving it 42 years ago, even in its fresh wash of yellow ochre.

The headmaster's room was at the same end of the building with its huge wooden table in the middle. The flat, round school bell hung at the same spot on the verandah, possibly from the same wooden beam. The verandah ran the length of the barracks-like, single-story building, one side open to the playground, the other lined by classrooms, one following the other. One of those classrooms used to be mine, where we so often played tricks — some of them mean — on our Sanskrit teacher.

Across the road from the headmaster's end of the school were the village post office, the dispensary, a couple of sundry shops, just as before. Around the trunk of another huge rain tree, which survived, bicycles were parked.

There was one big change, though, which pleased. In those days, the school used to be all boys. Now it admitted girls, too, though they sat in separate benches. They wore

## OPEN EYE

# Of Rivers, Memories and Bangladesh

by Vedette

there. The old homesteads no longer existed. At the back used to be a strip of thickly-growing bamboos, which supplied the slats for our walls and through which our short cut to school lay. It had been cleaned out.

A row of ancient mango trees stood behind the kitchen block, across a patch of field where we grew mung beans and potatoes. On stormy nights, through broken sleep, we loved to hear the thuds of falling mangoes coming through the rain. Waking up, our first job was to run there and look for them among the thick, sodden undergrowth.

Those trees, too, were gone.

Down the road from us, the Chowdhurys, of which Nirad C. is the most famous one, had their complex of pucca houses. We had a short cut going to their place through our backyard, and I remember sneaking up there ever so often to

same," he lamented. "But it's so nice to see you here. Why don't you stay the night? Will you come again? It's a pity you people have stopped coming."

It was touching. It made my day. Something hadn't changed, something that transformed the little childhood village of my imagination into a reality that could suddenly be touched.

I looked back down the road, past the ponds where the Chowdhurys used to immerse their Durga images after the annual festival. "There used to be a canal over there," I

vassed, and encouraged, and with the formalities and restrictions of travel reduced, they would love to come for that brief glory of adventure back in time.

For Bangladesh, it could be the beginning of a credible tourism programme.

Does Bangladesh need tourism? Absolutely, even if it's not the sentimental kind. The country isn't quite blessed with raw materials. It can't build its future on heavy industries of its own. It must develop itself as a service economy — even in industry, as Singapore has

beauty. There are the ruins of Mainamoti and Paharpur, where history becomes almost homely in the modesty of its appearance. There are the uplands of Sylhet, where tea grows, life is relaxed, and the landscape is gently beautiful. There are the Sunderbans, the delta swamps with their numerous offshore islands, where tigers roam, crocodiles abound, and some of the richest mangroves in the world await the jungle trekker.

But, above all, there are the rivers, the mighty rivers of Bangladesh, always wild but

muddy monsoon sky, in a strong and moist monsoon breeze, and watched Sadar Ghat, Dhaka, recede with its din and bustle. Around us, a thousand rivercraft moved — steamers going to or coming from Barisal; flats laden with jute, merchandise, or simple sand; boats laying out fishing nets; ferries carrying people across; dinghies with lonely men just sailing up and down.

The river heaved with activity. Jetties passed, cold storages on both banks, factories, red bricks stored in massive piles. In the captain's

fortable, matting his fingers around his knee, and said: "I have been sailing since one could buy four sers of rice for an anna." Must have been a long, long time ago.

Beyond Daudkandi, the river was like a sea, one vast expanse of water whose far ends could not be seen. Here and there, little lines of green streaked the muddy water, as if a painter had swiped his brush across the canvas, and signified villages. Sometimes a cow could be seen standing in knee-deep water, lost. Farmers working in half-submerged rice fields. A washed-out football field, the goal-posts reflected in the still water. The flooded shell of a village mosque.

A line of fishing boats lazed in the sun, wonderfully silhouetted against the horizon. They had two-tiered sails of white, red, brown, and blue, adding to that muddy wilderness of water a dramatic patch of

all over, and still kept coming, billowing out and reaching above my head. On the open river, light ebbed, dimmed, and filled with shadows. Then the rains came, first in a spray of drizzle, then in blinding torrents. Earth, river and sky became one, wiping everything from sight. Only a blur remained, one pervasive haziness, one deep feeling, and the sound of rain falling, falling falling.

Dusk fell on the river as quickly as the dropping of dew. One could almost feel it coming. An abundant breeze below, smothering me in the face and body. Grass grew thick underfoot, accentuating the serenity. Two rows of coconut palms lined a narrow path from the Agricultural University guest house and ran in a straight line as far as one could see. One by one, lights went on in the university quarters. The last strollers went home. A lonely boat sailed by.

It was a lovely strand, left to waste. And yet, a little effort would have made a big difference: Little areas to rest and picnic in; maybe a promenade with benches and lookout points; cottages one could rent for the night; restaurants one could order a simple meal from; fishing trips, if they

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brightly-coloured saris, and when they trooped out during class break, the playground took on the mood of a fiesta. I aimed my camera to take pictures. They posed willingly.

Time had brought to Banagram other changes. They were not as pleasing.

A crowd had gathered and followed us on the short walk from the school to the part of village where we used to live. At Puran Para, I stopped to look for the big football ground where adults held their tournaments and we practised with pomelos stolen from neighbours' trees. It had become a rice field. Beyond the ground was an abandoned Shiva temple, where village youngsters hung out and I had my first stealthy smoke. I couldn't find it anymore. But the big tank was there still, by which the road to our house turned.

Next to the big tank were smaller ones. The third was ours. It looked cleaner than before. A narrow path led from it to the house, line by two rows of pineapples bushes. The pineapples bushes were gone. So was the big jackfruit tree that guarded the entrance to our ancestral frontyard. The yard itself had shrunk from little constructions here and

steal land-lotuses from a tree one of the Chowdhury families had.

The complex had disappeared, without a trace, with its porches and porticos and pavilions. In its place, people now farmed rice. As I stood watching, a new crop was being planted next to a patch where the young rice had grown knee-high.

I suppose that's progress.

Yet, I liked to be there, in the place I had known as a boy, among memories of a past that is still an eternal present.

By now, the crowd tailing us had become larger. There was the usual complement of children, simply hanging around. There were youngsters with keen and curious looks who wouldn't talk. There were men who would smile whenever you caught their eyes. One of them now offered me a pan. I had not noticed the little roadside shop that had sprung up between our pond and Panu's and sold pans, birds, cigarettes, matchboxes, bottled drinks, and other bare necessities of village life.

An old man in a chequered lungi and a brown-coloured turban seemed almost on the verge of tears. He made no effort to hide his emotions. "things are no longer the



Boat carrying jute, the golden fibre on the river Meghna

— Star Photo

done, or Hong Kong, or Taiwan. And in any service economy, tourism is always a major element.

During my recent visit, I saw little evidence that Bangladesh is working towards a future in tourism. One had to look real hard to spot a tourist in Dhaka. The Thai International flight that brought me in from Bangkok brought no more than half-a-dozen people who could have been tourists.

Any yet, there are things a tourist can do in Bangladesh. Of course, there's Cox's Bazar with its wide sandy beach on which, they say, one could drive a Jeep all the way south to the Burmese border. There's Chittagong, where the sea and the hills blend to give the city a raw but picturesque

ever captivating in the sheer majesty of their appearance. And the great lakes, the haors, once the feared preserves of pirates, now a neglected heaven for anglers, hunters, and nature-lovers. One could make them one's golden ponds, and I would have liked to spend an entire vacation there if the proper facilities existed.

Instead, I took the morning steamer to Chandpur for a day's trip up and down the river. The rivers, to be correct, for you actually cross three of them — the Buriganga, the Dhaleshwari, and the Meghna. Meghna, the cloud-river, the dark beauty!

We had the two uppermost cabins on the Australian-built boat, all the ourselves. Outside the cabins, we had the open roof. We stood under a big,

cabin, a middle-aged man with a goatee and close-cropped hair was at the wheel. He sat on a stool and chewed pan, his lungi gathered up around his knees and a keen scowl in his eyes. His assistant sat on a chair next to the cabin door and his stubbled face seemed adequately relaxed.

The man — the assistant — was from Sandwip, the island off the Chittagong coast where hundreds of thousands perished in the May cyclone.

His folks were okay, by God's grace, he told me. "Once in a while I go and visit them," he said after we got into a conversation. "But that's not often. Most of the time, I'm sailing."

He took out a pan, chewed it for a while, put one leg up on the chair to be more comfortable, matting his fingers around his knee, and said: "I have been sailing since one could buy four sers of rice for an anna." Must have been a long, long time ago.

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colour.

At Chandpur, I wanted to sit by the river, under a garden umbrella, to sip a leisurely drink, read a leisurely book, watch a leisurely walk by the river. I half expected that there would at least be an open sandbar somewhere, where one could sit on a rustic bench in the shadow of a straw shed and order a rustic meal of hilsa.

But it was not to be that way. There was no open sandbar anymore at Chandpur, and all the litter and outgrowth of a busy trading town had crowded out whatever was left of the waterfront. So, I came out of the terminal building, crossed a couple of railway lines, took a rickshaw, and headed for downtown Chandpur, which was like downtown anywhere else in Bangladesh. I had my hilsa all right, at a restaurant which had overhead fans, curtained cabins, tables with coverings, and a lot of noise from a radio that nobody bothered to switch off.

On the way back, the monsoon broke. From a corner of the wide sky, dark clouds rose and came menacingly like charging bulls. Soon, they were

could be organised; boating for those who love water sports; rafts one could take midstream and anchor to relax, to sun, or simply to lie back and watch the clouds.

Lovely, too, was the drive up from Dhaka. The well-paved road passed between sal forests and rice fields that looked wonderfully manicured and glowed in various shades of green and yellow.

Occasionally, we passed small roadside markets where farmers, brought their produce: fish, vegetables, spinach, fruits, eggs, jars of molasses. Sellers in bare bodies and lungis sat on the ground. Some dozed. Children played hopscotch. Cows sniffed around. Dogs wandered aimlessly, waiting for something to happen. In the shade of trees, rickshaws stood by, their drivers happily asleep.

I loved that face of Bangladesh. It was the face of life. It was a face from my dreams. I would love to pass that way again. I would go and sit by the river again if I could, even if the grass on its banks grew thick and wild, the coconut palms along its deserted paths offered no shelter, and the evening brought to it early spooky shadows. But not all tourists would.

**T**HE partition of Bengal in 1947 witnessed the emergence of a new middle class society in the then East Pakistan, now known as Bangladesh. And consequent upon that a new literary movement had started in Dhaka which was distinctly different from the Calcutta literature that reflected by and large the socio-economic aspects of the Hindu middle class of Bengal.

With the exception of Quazi Nazrul Islam in the twenties or Farrukh Ahmed and Ahsan Habib in the forties, the scenario was dominated exclusively by the Hindu poets and novelists, and historical reasons account for their inability to project the hopes and aspirations of the majority of the Bengal population.

The partition however provided a new incentive to the Muslim literateurs of East Pakistan to organize themselves in their efforts to portray the society they lived in.

True, the beginning years saw a lot of fumbling in their quest for tradition and identity, but the February movement of 1952 did put an end to the problem once and for all.

With the Bengali language and literature that had flourished over a period of some thousand years as their inseparable inheritance, the young poets and writers of East Pakistan were determined to speak for those who have so long been passed over. No wonder that the decades following the Language Movement coincided with the an unprecedented efflorescence in every area of literature.

# A Contrast Between Pre-Independence and Post-Independence Literature

by Abu Hena Mustafa Kamal

## Introduction by Dr Anisuzzaman

This article is being presented to the readers on the occasion of the second death anniversary, on 23 September 1991, of Professor Abu Hena Mustafa Kamal, a man of unusual versatility.

Born in Pabna in 1936, Abu Hena Mustafa Kamal had a brilliant academic record including first class Honours and Masters degree in Bengali from the University of Dhaka and a PhD from the University of London. After briefly teaching at colleges, he joined the University of Dhaka as a Lecturer in 1963, moved to the Universities of Rajshahi and Chittagong and returned to the University of Dhaka in 1979 as a Professor. He was elected President of the Chittagong University Teachers' Association, appointed Provost of the Mohsin Hall and Director-General of the Shilpakala Academy and was holding the post of Director-General of the Bangla Academy at the time of his death in 1989 in Dhaka.

Professor Kamal is best remembered as a successful teacher, a spellbinding speaker and a sparkling table-taker. His three books including one in English and many articles testify to his remarkable insight as a literary critic. Even before the publication of any of his three volumes of verses, his contribution to modern poetry in Bangladesh was recognized. He was a lyricist of a very high quality and as a presenter of Television programme he was most popular.

His premature death is mourned by so many at home and abroad, his many splendoured personality is fondly remembered and his variegated creativity greatly admired.

A host of poets including Shamsur Rahman, Haasan Hafizur Rahman, Al Mahmud and Shahid Quadri made their presence felt not only for the message they transmitted, but also for the highly stylized forms and diction they evolved.

Our fictional prose was also enriched by the significant contribution of writers like Anis Chowdhury, Abdul Ghafler Chowdhury and Syed Shamsul Huq among many others.

It was during the early sixties that Munir Chowdhury, a playwright of outstanding ability, had initiated almost single-handedly a theatre movement which may be said to have sown the first seeds of modernism in our histrionic activities.

He wrote, directed and produced his plays despite serious social and economic constraints.

At about the same time, under the leadership of the Bengali department of Dhaka University, a group of young scholars undertook a series of research studies leading to the discovery of new horizon of Bengali literature and language hitherto unknown.

With the gradual deterioration of the political situation, cultural freedom was reduced



Then Director-General of Bangla Academy, the author receiving Jyoti Basu, Chief Minister of West Bengal, India, at the academy premises during the latter's visit to Bangladesh in 1987.

surable amount of enthusiasm marks the literary creativity in Bangladesh during the Pakistan period. But the continued manifestation of the colonial attitudes of the ruling class had no doubt retarded the spontaneous growth of our literature to a great extent.

No doubt that this kind of parochial outlook could have

been anything but congenial for the healthy growth of a literature. And the last days of Pakistan were trying enough to disillusion those who had once dreamt of a society, free from persecution and exploitation.

It was only natural for them to identify with the Liberation War in 1971 to unfetter themselves from political as well as cultural domination.

Independence of Bangladesh however released a fresh wave of emotional affluence that clearly distinguishes our post liberation literature from that of the pre-liberation period.

While the new state was yet to recover from the great devastation caused by the liberation war, poets and playwrights, novelists and intellectuals lost no time to overcome the grief and initiate a new era of creative activity.

Potentials hindered so long by relentless opposition, were set free.

Even at a casual glance, this can be discerned from the quantitative as well as qualitative change that occurs in the post independence Bangladesh literature. Hundreds of poets have published

their anthologies, not less than five hundred in number, during the last 14 years.

Novels and short stories are not lagging behind either.

With Dhaka elevated from a provincial township to a new metropolitan city, a new complexity of life confronts the post liberation novelist and story teller and while meeting the challenge the author in his turn also equips himself with an outlook and insight hitherto unknown of. Old values have certainly yielded place to the new.

And a comparative study of the fictions of the two periods underscores the subsequent metamorphosis without any fail.

It is often and rightly said that the liberation of Bangladesh has for the first time liberated our theatre. The group theatre movement has now grown roots in our cultural life. It has stabilized its position in society as an important performing art and in the wake of it, a considerable number of powerful as well as promising playwrights have shown up. Their success in experimentation with modern techniques have not only enlarged the scope of Bangladesh theatre, it may also be said to have enriched our literature as a whole.

That political freedom is an indispensable precondition for the emancipation of creative mind has once again been confirmed by the fruition of our literature in post-independence Bangladesh. We may now be very reasonably proud of those who fought and laid down their lives for the cause of independence.