

## Echoes from the Past

ONE starts a new piece of writing with a mild trepidation and ends it with a sense of relief, said a friend at a writers' workshop we attended years ago. Another countered, no, one starts it with a feeling of excitement, but ends it in a mood of shattering disappointment.

I do not know who is right as I work on a column, under a title that I find rather nice, almost fascinating, but without the slightest idea as to what it should be about. Of course, I would like it to be about people and places, about those fleeting moments of unspoken happiness or about suffering and pain, all linked together in disjointed memories and hazy recollections. I feel a little thrilled with the idea, then somewhat nervous about carrying it out.

I mention the idea of the column to a young colleague, in a matter-of-fact way. It is great, he says, when he probably means that it is not a bad idea. Another colleague shows the same excitement. I give up.

Well, I should have known that in our cultural environment, the excessive politeness shown towards a senior citizen by younger colleagues finds many different manifestations. This explains why my plan about this column evoked a tremendous response from a couple of my younger friends when their unspoken gut reaction was probably one of polite interest.

It would be different in another environment. Here's an example from the past.

While living in Bangkok, a little more than 20 years ago, I started writing a back page column for a local newspaper I worked for, under another fascinating title, "Along My Way." I had convinced myself that it was the most original name ever given to a column which would carry the most original thought, presented in the most original writing style.

It got off to a poor start. There was a hushed silence in the newsroom which I had a cross on my way to mine, on the day the column was first published. It appeared for two more weeks. Then, a young colleague -- a British feature writer -- told me quite casually that the column was not half as good as he had expected. He had just passed the death sentence on "Along My Way." It

never appeared again, a loss to the world of journalism!

For the next 20 years, I did all kinds of writing--good, bad and indifferent--but kept the thought about writing another column all to myself, nursing a secret dream which, surprisingly, refused to go away.

Now, what made me think of writing a new column after all these years? Why now when I have got ten different things to do every day, not counting so many unfinished jobs?

This may well have something to do with my being back to Dhaka and being active my profession, the only one I know something about.

My World

S. M. ALI

For one who had left a city of half a million people and returns to the same city -- the same except for its present population of seven million people--being back to Dhaka has been anything but a simple home-coming. You return to your own world which you barely recognise. You cannot remember the names of friends who greet you with an embrace. Your favourite roads have become narrower; the houses you once lived in have disappeared.

You look around the city only to feel sad. What can you write that won't be hopelessly depressing to yourself and somewhat irrelevant to others?

Yet, once I have recovered from my initial sense of alienation from my surroundings, I may well feel the urge of seeing Dhaka as my world, at least a part of my world, a world that you come back to again and again.

At that stage, "My World" may well be "The City We Return To," the sequel to "The City We Live In." The column I wrote for the Observer here just--you won't believe it--40 years ago. There were probably altogether 50 features I published under that title, not particularly different from "Dhaka Day By Day" which you see in

this paper. But mine was a weekly feature, written in slightly sentimental vein, mostly about people I ran into, about their hopes and joys. Looking back across these four decades, I like to think that the column captured something of the mood of what was then, by present-day standards, a slow-moving town that still retained a little bit of that romantic air that Buddhadev Bose wrote about in some of his memorable pieces about Ramna.

I doubt if there was anything enduring about my column, "The City We Live In." It was probably more like a weekly essay by a university student aspiring to be a reporter than a professional journalistic exercise. What made the experience unforgettable was the moral support extended to me by my peers, the kind of support which, it is said, young newsmen seldom receive from their more experienced colleagues these days.

Starting with the late Abdus Salam, the then Editor of the Observer who gave a quiet nod of approval on seeing my first feature of the series--after which he probably took little notice of the column--there were several other good souls who regarded my weekly offering as "a pretty good thing to fill the space," to remember just one comment from a senior colleague. To me, there was

nothing offensive or uncharitable about the comment. After all, years later, I worked for a newspaper whose owner Lord Thomson had once described all editorial matters as "what goes between the advertisements."

After all these years, it is hard to recall how I felt seeing my byline on the editorial page once a week. The subeditor concerned used a particularly small type for my name. However, to me, it still looked more prominent than all other bylines on the page.

If, at that time, there was anything harder than writing the column every week, it was to retain my sense of humility, instead of feeling smug.

But there was no danger of my developing an inflated ego, not with my teacher in the university,

Prof. Amiya Chakravarty keeping a sharp eye on me. Those days, our teachers like A.G. Stock, S.N. Roy and, of course, two of our 1971 Shaheeds, Munir Chowdhury and Jyotirmoy Guhalakurda, saw individual students, inside the class and outside, a great deal more than... no, I would rather not draw any comparison.

My favourite teacher, Amiya Chakravarty found time to read my published piece every week, marked all the mistakes and inapt phrases and expressions with his blue pencil, put it in an envelope and gave it to me when we met the day after the piece had appeared. Since together with the corrected copy, he would write his detailed comments on a piece of paper, we never felt the need for a discussion. Maybe I felt a little awkward to bother Prof. Chakravarty too much. His daily schedule was always full.

Once I picked up enough courage to ask Chakravarty if I could show him my raw copy before giving it to the Observer. He took a couple of minutes to respond to my request. "You should not," he finally said, "you should revise your copy as many times as you can, instead of relying on me to do your job." And then he laughed.

When I will revise this piece some 40 years after Prof. Chakravarty had gone over and corrected my last published feature of "The City We Live In," just a week before I left Dhaka, I will offer a silent tribute to my teacher.

I owe another debt to Prof. Amiya Chakravarty. It was this thoughtful teacher of mine who told me that I had passed my Master's of Arts examination, and was placed in second class. It was the only reliable information I had on my academic performance. It was still unofficial, and it remained so for 30 more years. A complex story which I related to Dr. Maniruzzaman Miah the other day, and the Vice Chancellor appeared to think that I had made it all up.

Maybe one of these days, I will write this seemingly unbelievable, incredible story about how I waited for 30 years to get my degree in this column.

## TV: What's New in the New Quarter

MAGH: Chaitra (Mid January-Mid April) quarter of B.T.V. has already started. This quarter is expected to be different in its character and content from the previous one. The Parliamentary election is knocking on the door and the 27th February is only a few days away from now. The T.V. authority has an ambitious plan on these national occasions.

Programmes in between the special bulletins and election results are planned to be rewarding enough for the audience. In addition to Bangladeshi and English films, magazines, jocular programmes, cine songs, dance, music and children's programmes, B.T.V. is preparing to telecast seven

dramas from 20th February to ensure diversity to cater to different tastes.

There will be two mini serials for the quarter. First part of "Aamader Galpa" written by Inamul Haq and produced by Mahbubul Alam is expected to be screened on the 4th March. Another mini serial "Kono ek Kulsum"

written by Aziz Misir and produced by Zia Ansari can be seen once only in this quarter. It is learnt that Subarna Mustafa might play the central character Kulsum. But the question is whether she is possible for her when she is going to act as Kashem's second wife in 'Ayomoy' from the next part. B.T.V. regulation forbids and enlisted performer

of a serial to act in another serial or series simultaneously. 'Ayomoy' will continue through this quarter.

The special programme-Abar Shei Falgoun--will be produced by Shahida Arbi, on the 21st February. Firoz Mahmud is going to produce "Sha-dhi-nata Tum" on the 26th March. Another special programme "Barber Fire Aasha" produced by Md. Abu Taher is expected on the occasion.

The other B.T.V. programmes such as Bohurupi, Satarupa, Muktaadhar, Bulbul, Shilpa O Shahitta, Ujjiban, Oitija, Sangit Bichitra, Prabaha will continue for this quarter. The Independence day drama "Ache-na Bandar" is written by Mahbub Jamil and produced by K. M. Haroon. Previously it was planned as the Victory Day drama.

— Mehdi Mahbub

## TV Friday

### MORNING TRANSMISSION

- 8-00 Opening and recitation from the Holy Quran.
- 8-10 News in Bengali.
- 8-15 Cartoon Film: Adventures of the Galaxy Rangers—A high-tech action-adventure show.
- 8-40 Notun Kuri: Children's programme.
- 9-10 Film: Mork and Mindy.
- 9-40 Probaha: Commentary on current affairs.
- 10-00 News.
- 10-05 Educational Film: The Ascent of Man.
- 11-15 Moncer Mukurey: Rerecast of select drama.
- 12-30 Programme summary of evening transmission. Closing.

### EVENING TRANSMISSION

- 3-00 Opening announcement and recitation from the Holy Quran.
- 3-15 Alore Dishari: Children's programme on Islamic teaching.
- 3-40 Movie of the Week: True Grit (American). Based on the 1969 movie Rooster Cogburn, one of the West's legendary heroes battles injustice in his unorthodox way.
- 5-50 Sports Programme.
- 6-45 Janamat: Programme on population.
- 6-55 News in Bengali.
- 7-05 Modhu Chhanda: Modern songs.
- 8-00 News in Bengali.
- 8-30 Film: The Cosby Show. Comedy Serial.
- 9-30 Anirban: Patriotic feature.
- 10-00 News at ten: News in English.
- 10-30 Film: L. A. Law. Critically acclaimed TV series which has won several Emmy awards.



Popular drama serial 'Ayomoy' is to continue through the new quarter that has just begun.

## A BOLD METAFICTION

The Judas Tree by Sanjib Datta. Published by the author, 80/10 Mahatma Gandhi Road, Calcutta-700 009, July 1984.

A Review by Syed Manzoorul Islam

treely flimsy, slippery ground with no bedrock of a plot to give it support. As Ovi admits at the end, "I don't know how it began though, no what sense the end is." So there it is, a novel without be-

(among them the class called metafiction) did that, and more. They parodied the novelistic conventions, and ended up writing novels that offered an alternative mode of writing -- writing which consciously

## BOOKS

gining and an end; novel which not only questions the very act of writing the novel, but mocks it along the way.

This last observation needs some explanation though as Sanjib Datta may be (unjustly) accused of wasting readers' time. The stream of consciousness novel first showed that the traditional novel with its well-constructed plot, theme and style could be rejected in favour of a discourse that was faithful to the moment, to the thought processes of the protagonist, and to the psychological realism of characters. Later fictions

strove not to look like novels. Sanjib Datta's novel has a few elements in common with this class of fiction.

"Judas Tree" turns a neo-religious myth into an exploration of the unknown, an attempt to build a bridge over the chaos of mind. In the process of this exploration only flimsy memories and a patchwork of reminiscences are employed. The selective nature of the work thus foregrounds intellect rather than the imagination, and we have a syllogistic, argumentative discourse shaping itself out of an inchoate mass of events, ac-

## Freedom in Exile for the Land of Snows

Freedom in Exile by The Dalai Lama (John Curtis/Hodder and Stoughton London 1990)

food forbidden to monks.

Then he crashes the 1920s Baby Austin (one of the three cars in the whole of Tibet) while joy-riding in the park of Lhasa's Summer Palace. In several episodes he spies out across Lhasa with his telescope from the roof of the huge Potala Palace, and also admits to tormenting his good-natured tutor with his unwillingness to be educated.

Later on there is the Dalai Lama's experiment with vegetarianism that ends with a severe bout of Hepatitis B. "My skin turned bright yellow. I looked like the Buddha himself."



DALAI LAMA Caught eating eggs

the reincarnation of the previous Dalai Lama. Taken from his parents, he was brought up under monastic discipline until, aged 15, he was invested with full powers as head of the state of a country the size of Western Europe and a population of six million.

For the next eight years he was at the centre of attempts to find a way to accommodate the Chinese without provoking a rebellion among his own countrymen. With Tibet sandwiched between India and China, he became a confidant of both Chairman Mao and Jawaharlal Nehru as he tried to win them over to the cause of Tibetan independence.

Then, in 1959, he was finally forced into exile, fleeing on horseback to India as tens of thousands of Tibetans perished in the face of Chinese bullets and shells as they rose up against the occupation of their land.

All of this has been related elsewhere, not least in the Dalai Lama's first autobiography, My Land and My People. But many of the details are new.

There are amusing episodes such as the young Dalai Lama being caught eating eggs - a

Then there are the political realities: the accounts of injustice meted out to subjects by some high lamas and state officials under the pre-1950 system of traditional government, and the bullying of Tibetan officials by Chinese generals following the occupation of 1950.

The Dalai Lama himself did not at first believe the worst reports of atrocities by Chinese troops following a popular revolt by Tibetans in the eastern provinces of Amdo and Kham in 1957.

"It was not until I read the report published in 1959 by the International Commission of Jurists that I fully accepted what I had heard: crucifixion, vivisection, disembowelling and dismemberment of victims was commonplace. So too were beheading, burning, beating to death and burying alive, not to mention dragging people behind galloping horses until they died...."

"And, in order to prevent them shouting out, 'Long live the Dalai Lama,' on the way to execution they tore their tongues with meat hooks."

Yet even with this knowledge the Dalai Lama reveals no trace of hatred or anger towards the Chinese, something

tions, experiences. Datta's language, charged with the full burden of containing every bit of the novelist's intention, is used with a philosopher's abandon. He stretches a point of thought to the furthest limits of epistemological or ontological meaning. Indeed forces out even the minutest nuances out of it, and his language therefore struggles to faithfully record every light and every shade.

"Judas Tree" is significant for its bold experimentation with a genre. It is, a powerful record of a mind trying to come to grips with time and history. It mocks standard novelistic pretensions as to what constitutes a story or a plot. Ovi, the protagonist is just an abstraction, but within this abstraction being Sanjib Datta has invested the history of a culture. Ovi does not belong to any place or time, his Bengali name and the place called Dhaka are unimportant, as things happen only in his mind, in the interior labyrinth of his uncharted existence. Like Kafka's people, Ovi is our idea of ourselves, not a person with a name.

The reviewer is a Professor of English, Dhaka University.

many have remarked upon after meeting him for the first time. It is this which is probably the strongest evidence that he is indeed the earthly manifestation of Avalokitesvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. It offers good reason too for his being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989.

In the years leading up to his flight from Lhasa, the Dalai Lama constantly reiterates his concern to avert bloodshed, to prevent his people from embarking on a suicidal course of resistance to the army of occupation.

And yet he is not afraid to admit his powerlessness to influence the Chinese nor to admit that at times he considered resigning as head of state.

He recounts how his eldest brother Takster Rinpoche, abbot of the important Kumbum monastery, decided to renounce his monastic vows and seek armed support from the United States despite the Dalai Lama's protests that he keep to Buddhist teaching.

Amid these turbulent events, the Dalai Lama managed to prevail with his rigorous monastic training and pass all the examinations necessary to become a Geshe or Doctor of Buddhist Studies.

This ability to balance and integrate the spiritual and public life permeates the whole of Freedom in Exile.

Even in exile in the North Indian hilltown of Dharamsala he manages to continue his daily practice of five-and-a-half hours of meditation and prayers while working hard to help the 100,000 or so Tibetan refugees in India rebuild their lives.

While condemning Chinese contempt for Tibetan culture - a contempt that left just a handful of 6,000 Buddhist temples and monasteries standing during the devastation of the Fifties and Sixties - the Dalai Lama calls for some kind of synthesis between Marxism and Buddhism.

But for all the gentle-heartedness and breadth of mind of the author, it is the suffering of the Tibetan people under Chinese rule which overshadows this whole account. The truth remains that, since the Chinese invasion, over a million Tibetans have died as a direct result of Peking's policies," he writes.

Even now, horrific reports of torture of pro-nationalist activists still reach the West. Forty years after the People's Liberation Army first crossed Tibet's eastern border, Tibetan protests are still commonplace in Lhasa and the main towns - as are their brutal suppression by the Chinese authorities.

Tibetan initiatives to find some kind of diplomatic solution have run up against Chinese intransigence. The Five-Point Peace Plan outlined to the US Congress by the Dalai Lama in 1987 has brought no response from Peking.

It proposes the demilitarisation of Tibet, crucially - an end to the influx of Han Chinese settlers who now outnumber indigenous Tibetans in Lhasa and Shigatse, the two largest towns.

That is why the Dalai Lama asks the reader "not to forget Tibet at this critical time in our country's history," a time which sees the very future of the Tibetan people under threat. His aim is simple: a free Tibet "to help all those in need, to protect Nature and to promote peace." — GEMINI NEWS