

REVIEWS by S. Bari

'Year of the Girl Child' Celebrations

In a large household, the family eats in sets. First the men, then the children, then the women. When we were young, there were cousins all over the place, so the children were divided up. The boys ate first. In another setting, a setting in which the vast majority of our people live, a girl works both in the house and in the fields.

Yet if the family can afford milk, the girl knows her brother will, and thinks he should, be the one to drink it. When these girls grow up, they become women conditioned into accepting the status of second-class citizens, neglected or even humiliated.

Because self-images and



role expectations are created early in life. It is increasingly apparent that prejudices and sexism are bred and must be tackled at a young age. In acknowledgement of this fact, and to engender an awareness

of the dangers which young girls face, the SAARC nations had declared 1990 the Year of the Girl Child. Last month, a week-long celebration was dedicated to that year, under the slogan, "Do No Keep Me Voiceless." The programmes all gave voice to the girl child.

Plays, musicals, and puppet shows were held at the Shilpakala Academy. Each highlighted, in one way or another, discrimination against and obstacles faced by girls.

Held under the auspices of BRAC, UNICEF, and We Are For Children, the Festival was skilfully managed and entertaining. The amount and quality of talent on display was im-

pressive: some of the best actors, singers, dancers and playwrights in the land were present. The resultant impression on the public is a sure if tiny step towards a safer future for girl children.

Below are reviews of a selection of the shows held during the Festival.

Puppet shows:
O Kaalo Horeen Chokh
O Sada Satya and Co.

Puppet drama, while verbal, relies on movement and non-verbal elements. Thus it grips the attention of children and of the child in all of us. Through movement the audience explores character types

and emotions: confidence, fright, anger, gentleness, jealousy. Each puppet's movements also relate it to the others on stage. A surprisingly large range of dramatic situations can be created through puppetry.

The art is growing in popularity. Given the framework of the Festival, the child-attracting and child-like qualities of puppetry made it perfect for the show. Mustafa Monwar's "Kaalo Horeen Chokh", a fairytale story about the tribulations of dark girls, and "Sada Satya and Co" were major attractions during the festivities. Special hits were the dragon, from the former, and the cow, from the latter, both well-executed puppets.



Mustafa Monwar and his creation.

fully large enough to be seen from the back rows of the auditorium. Mixing puppets with human actors gave a life-like air to the puppets themselves, especially because the two

girls, Mahbuba Nasreen and Meher Nigar, carried the show with aplomb. The music was another plus point for the younger members of the audience. O

DRAMA

O Shat Manusher Konoje
O Kokilara

Ali Zaker's adaptation of Brecht's "The Good Woman of Setchuan" has been around for a while. Like Chitrangada, here is another young protagonist who has both female and a male personal. Phuli is forced to

disguise herself as a man in order to survive in the world without being exploited the way she is used to. An ex-prostitute who reforms herself, she is chosen as a 'good' person by the gods, who promptly abandon her when the going gets tough. In her female incarnation, she takes the initiative: she buys a shop, she takes her lover by the hand and offers him food (note that the woman is the provider), and she decides to dress as Phul Mohammed. Underneath the beard she is Phuli, capable

of containing within herself a Phul Mohammed. Unfortunately, the choice she faces between the wood carpenter and Nabab is a no-win game: meaningless money vs. a selfish lover. Her revenge is taken in the form of Phul Mohammed's humiliation of Nabab. But the end leaves her accused of murder, the murder of Phul, and she stands in the dock facing the real killers, the society Phul lived in. The gods dance off, leaving a scene where the audience must imagine a solution.

The folk-drama style of the play lends it a greater depth than would otherwise have been possible. The audience clapped along enthusiastically to the adaptation of "Shonar Horeen Chokh" as "Bhalo Manush Chokh". The sparse, stylised sets were a fitting backdrop for the placards announcing the scenes, and the musical theme.

Though flat, the characters are very much alive, thanks to an excellent script and superb ensemble acting, notably by Nima Rahman, Lint Jilil, and

Raushanara Hussein as the indomitable landlady, Abul Hayat managed to be both funny and tragically human in his portrayal of the mastaan. The clapping 'probus' were hilarious. Asaduzzaman Noor's applauded moments were his swearing and ranting, but he was his best during the bench scene with Phuli, where their courtship takes concrete shape in a tender and well-paced exchange, all the more touching because he exploits her later. Sara Zaker shines in her role of Phuli as nowhere

else. Her trim, girlish frame and distinctive voice her sweetness as Phuli (notably when the sky grows dark and she is frightened) and her swaggering Phul Mohammed, all add up to an unforgettable performance.

O Brecht's message lay in the exploitation of the good (and, in this context, of a girl), through a carefully thematic story-line. Abdullah Al-Mamun's "Kokilara" takes a different angle. It is a charged, didactic, vehement exposure of the exploiters of the girl. Except that the exploiters are never seen: through three women (all played by veteran actress Ferdousi Majumdar), of various social classes and educational qualifications, we hear what amounts to an indictment of a male-dominated society. There is no attempt at subtly orchestrated messages. "God made the world for men," says the maid Kokila. "Men should have to bear children, then they would understand. God made a manufacturing defect," says the housewife Kokila. The lawyer Kokila brings together the stories of the maid, im-

pregnated and falsely accused by her employers, ending her life under a train, and the housewife, cast aside by a philandering husband with no recourse to anyone. The final trial scene is a fiery condemnation that aims to 'strip naked' the men who create and maintain the status quo.

There is little artistic finesse in the method, but it shakes up a complacent audience. It is heartening to hear shocking truths still being said in a country where everyone is afraid of 'consequences.'

We need more of such non-nonsense theatre that the masses can understand and maybe gripe about but at least be aroused by. That this play had mass appeal was demonstrated by the mob that broke in two-thirds of the way through the performance. Unfortunately, Ferdousi Majumdar's concentration was broken by the disturbance, as she proved during the third act. But she alone could carry a demanding one-woman show on her capable acting shoulders. O

DANCE

'Chitrangada'

CHITRANGADA has for decades symbolised the duality of human nature, the subcontinent's answer to Ying and Yang. This new adaptation, titled "Nohi Debi, Nohi Samanya Naari", is a combination of Tagore's musical and poetic dramas. Lubna Mariam, noted dancer and choreographer, has attempted to highlight the composite quality of womanhood. The drama that unfolds through her adaptation emphasises Chitrangada's questioning of her identity as well as her transformation from girl to woman.

The script called for alternating between song and poem, a technique that ensures audience attentiveness and at the same time, through repetition, drives home the message. The poems become more vivid against a musical background. Actress Sara Zaker's voice had the right tone of boldness to bear out the strength of Kurupa Chitrangada. The tomboy princess is as yet merely the warrior. Till she sets eyes on Arjun, and is rejected by him. When she sways to the god of love, he

transfigures her into pure beauty, sexual attraction personified. At this point, Mita Huq's "Amaar ange ange ke" evokes to the full the erotic yet innocent undertones of her transformation. Ms. Huq's grasp of and conviction in what she sings embellishes her every performance. "Khane

khane mone mone" was an equally flawless rendition. Another remarkable moment was "Keteche akela", where song and dance coalesced marvelously.

The time Chitrangada spends as femme fatale with Arjun soon grows stale. He

hears of another woman, a famous warrior princess, and Chitrangada must now reveal herself. Sadi Mohammad's voice was obviously not in top form, as a result of which his Arjun was lacklustre and faltering. Once Chitrangada realises her identity lies in a blend of her Kurupa and Surupa, she

assumes her true role. In the climax song "Ami Chitrangada, rajendrondini. Nohi Debi, Nohi Samanya Naari," the singer's voice is shadowed by the reciter's, in an echo. The effect is intense, and the poems and songs beautifully executed.

The impact of a dance drama depends on the dancers, who were impeccably tutored. Arjun (Kabirul Islam) was graceful and suitably toned-down to set off the protagonist. Tamanna Rahman was especially brilliant while dancing as Surupa. Her gestures are controlled yet full of verve, particularly her hand movements. The costumes, with the ethnic look of applique designs, were a sight for sore eyes tired of unoriginal and unimaginative dressing. Some of the choreographic touches, such as the flower-throwing during "Amaar eyi rikto dali", had the audience thrilled, and were visually delightful. The disco lights at the end, however, have become cliched. The ensemble singing, by members of Sangeet Bhaban and Chhayanaut, was pleasant: once it started. Every song started two beats late, or different singers began on different beats. The lack of co-ordination was painfully apparent, in an otherwise enjoyable performance. O



Tamanna Rahman as Chitrangada.



Asaduzzaman Noor and Sara Zaker in a scene from 'Shat Manusher Konoje'.

A Human Document of Inhumanity

Samprodaiyikota Birodhee Galpo. Edited by Akhter Hossain and Published by Jatiyo Shahitya Prokashani. Cover design by Shishir Bhattacharya. Pages 181+4. Price Tk.100.

Reviewed by Waheedul Haque

BOOK REVIEW

Communalism has been the bane of the life in the sub-continent for well over a century. Most of the societies in the last days of the British Indian raj was particularly accursed with it and violent eruptions of this may have taken a toll of life countable only in millions — and property in hundreds of billions of rupees and takas. Those who survived to suffer migration, destitution, hunger and a descent into sub-human level could well be counted in crores upon crores of people. Mass psychosis or a kind of all-pervading paranoia took hold of entire societies and politics, instead of plucking this pain out of the society's neck, made a most criminal capital out of it. And ever since politics has not relented in its diabolical game of playing to the vulnerabilities of man — in order that some group or class of people can gratify very mean ambitions of power and property.

That curse continues clouding all positive achievements earned through blood and sweat, through all-in sacrifices — of which the independence of Bangladesh is one of the brightest. It didn't take more than after independence for the communal backlash to strike at the roots of Bangladesh's liberation. It had

to be that way for the Bengalee people's rejection was indeed the rejection first of all of communal divisiveness and alienation — and a complementary embracing of an idea of national identity transcending religious communal barriers.

Samprodaiyikota Birodhee Galpo or 'Stories of Anti-communalism' couldn't have come out at a more apt — better not say opportune — time for the mental atmosphere at the present time, in spite of the first sure intimations of graduation into a democratic way of society, its heavy with communal, anti-national and fissionary sentiments, and a most horrendous and downright wrong 'we-they' non-equation. One cannot easily recall such an anthology of supremely beneficial tales of, yes, humanity. The stories move you, unfailingly, to rise up to humanity and not just anti-inhumanity.

By that same token the anthology could also have been called 'Samprodaiyikota Galpo' — and perhaps this would fit it more.

Leaving aside the binding theme — this is an anthology of some best written short stories of the subcontinent — stories shining with humanity

and an undying commitment to it. And the culling was done with a broadness of mind only to be rarely found. Eight of the stories are by writers from Bangladesh and of the 11 originally Bengali stories three are from West Bengal — although one of these is again set in Dhaka. Three stories are translated from Urdu and two each from Hindi and Punjabi. The writers are all stalwarts of their own literatures and some of the stories have become veritable classics over time. Take for example Manto and Khaja Ahmed Abbas. And who hasn't heard of Krishan Chandar's 'Peshawar Express'? It's there in a good Bengali translation. Vishma Sahant, the Tamas'-famed brother of Balraj is represented by a specially powerful story from the Punjabi. Sallil Choudhury's 'Dressing Table' provides the biggest and the pleasantest surprise of the whole touching fare. That this doyen of modern Indian music and agitprop kind of songs — a matchless composer and lyricist — would write such a moving tale, has to be read to be believed.

All praise for editor Mr. Akhter Hossain. But one can never be too sure if all the Hindi and Urdu and Punjabi stories have been translated by himself — which would be a most remarkable thing especially when the quality of the translation is considered. Some translations are of course credited in the appendix to this or that earlier anthology but that doesn't greatly help tracking down the translators.

The title of the anthology leaves much room for improvement. In fact, this title — a little altered — could have been a good subtitle. There are some horrible type-processing glitches at the beginning, but as the text progresses, a fair and unimpeded read builds up.

It's a book that should broaden the mind and elevate the feelings of all readers.

WRITE TO MITA

Dear Mita,

I read your advise to the mother whose 18 year old daughter became involved with a man that she did not approve of. I faced the same situation several years ago.

I tried everything but ultimately surrendered to the will of my daughter. Even then our relationship became cold and distant because she never understood the reasons for my objection, she married him and till today is struggling to make ends meet. I sympathies with the lady who wrote the letter and disagree with your advise that love and understanding will make her daughter see sense.

Saira, Purana Paltan, Dhaka

Dear Saira,

It seems that you have not yet been able to approve of your daughter's choice and I am not surprised that your relationship has become distant and cold. I am not convinced that your daughter made the wrong choice just because she is struggling to make ends meet. If she is strong and determined, she will overcome all problems and the only loser I can see will be you. Please extend your hand of love and sympathy. Believe me, it's not worth losing a daughter for.

Dear Mita,

My problem might not seem very serious but it is causing me a lot of frustration.

My husband has no sense of timing and not only that, he thinks this is not an issue to be even discussed. You will believe the number of times he has embarrassed me because of his habit of being late. Not only is he late for other people's party, he even turns up late for his parties at home. I am tired of apologizing on his behalf. I am surprised people still bother to invite us. Tell me is there any remedy?

Selina, Gulshan

Dear Selina,

To tell you very frankly, there is really no remedy. A person who has no sense of time has developed this habit over the years, and since he has no awareness of the problem it will be very difficult or rather impossible to change it. Through discussion, and mutual agreement you could come to some kind of compromise. I am not at all surprised that you still get invited to parties. Haven't you seen people walking in much later than you and not even apologizing? Let's put it this way, Punctuality is not our strong point! It is not given too much importance in our culture and that is why your husband's behavior is not so striking. On the other hand, a person with a very keen sense of timing or someone who is strictly punctual can be a misfit in our society.

Dear Mita,

I enjoy reading your column and find your advise sound and sensible. I have a problem; see if you can come up with

some solution. My husband is a nice and kind person but in matters of money he is very stingy. He thinks I overspend and interferes in everything that has to do with household expenditures. When I get angry and accuse him that he does not trust me he promptly denies the accusation and says he is only checking the expenses. As we are quite well off I find all this checking unnecessary. How do I change his behavior, he does not even realize that he is hurting me.

Shabana, Maghbazar

Dear Shabana

If your husband thinks that you overspend then you should keep a very clear account of all house expenditures and show it to him regularly. Often people do things out of habit without realizing its effect on the other person. I suspect such is your husband's case. The amount of money required for running the household must have been discussed and the amount agreed upon by both of you. If you are spending more than the designated amount then discuss it with him. I bring this topic up when both of you are in a good mood. Accusing or getting angry will not help, rather find out what his expectations are regarding expenses at home and also try to find out reasons for his behavior. The reasons could be many such as his upbringing, family patterns or he could be just plain cautious.

WRITE TO MITA

Run by a trained and experienced Family and Marriage counsellor, assisted by a professional team of doctor, psychologist and lawyer, this column will answer questions relating to family, marriage, health, family laws, and social and interpersonal relationships. Please address letters to Mita, The Daily Star, GPO Box 3257 or to 28/1, Toybee Circular Road, Motijheel, Dhaka-1000.

What's in a Name?

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As we are dealing with the heads and tails of names, we must not forget the retired ones (not to be confused with the retarded ones). You've guessed it, I am talking about ex-military personnel. After retirement, they continue to use their ranks with a Retd. in parentheses as a prefix to their names. So, we had Major (Retd) Abdul Mannan becoming MP, while Major-General (Retd) Khalitpur Rahman did not.

But why do they continue to use it? One serving officer told me not so long ago "Because it's a tradition. Just that? No. We feel we have earned the rank", the future Retd. continued, "so we think we have the right to carry on using it." Fair enough.

But how come this tradition hasn't spread to the civil service? We never hear of any Additional Secretary (Retd) Hkmat Ali or anything like that, do we? Perhaps the civilian sector of state service is yet to build up enough sense of tradition about its profession. God help us when they do.

But there is another side to the Retd. business. The rank, so proudly displayed at one time, is also liable to be discarded quite unceremoniously at others. Lieutenant-General (Retd) H. M. Ershad suddenly insisted on becoming plain Hussein Muhammad Ershad. Similarly, the name plaque at the Press Club entrance announces the name of another former president as simply Ziaur Rahman, without the Major-General (Retd). There are three ex-officers in the current cabinet, and judging by the pronouncements on television news, at least one has already decided to get rid of his rank. Is this a new trend? Or is it just a flash of individuality?

But perhaps the most serious plague affecting Bangladesh today is the whole sale tendency to use nicknames. Take the case of former minister of communications (with whom it is not easy to communicate these days since he has an arrest warrant hanging over his head). Son of Tofazzal Hossain and brother of Barrister Mainul, he is called Anwar Hossain Manju. Yes, Manju. A plain Anwar Hossain simply would not do.

A bucketful of new MPs have been elected to the fifth parliament with nicknames dangling at the end: Sadek Hossain Khoka, Mohammad Amanullah Aman, Rashed Khan Menon, Chowdhury Akhtaruzzaman Babu... the list goes on and on. Babu even complained to the Speaker on opening day that the name tag on his chair did not identify him as Babu. Outrageous oversight. How could our parliament function if the name-tags miss out the all-important extras?

The arena of sports has taken the usage of nicknames to even greater heights. It is well nigh impossible to find a footballer or a cricketer who does not use his nickname. Not surprisingly, journalists as well as the public are in danger of losing track of what their correct full names were in the first place. If one mentions Chhunu, one instantly recognises him as the former Abahani footballer. But just try talking about what a wonderful player Ashrafuddin was, and you are likely to draw blank stares, as if you are talking about some players from the (very) distant past that nobody had heard of. The net result of it all is that scoreboards as well as score-cards in newspapers are in the process of giving up using their full names altogether. Why bother to waste space with Nowsheer Khan Prince, when a simple Prince is what everyone is looking out for?

There must be some logic to the process, and it seems to run something like this: they need to have the nickname at the end of the full name so their friends can recognise them; and newspapers should try to make life even easier for friends, relatives and neighbourhood beauties by doing away with the unnecessary bits altogether. The end product should read like this: Bulbul ct. Shantoo bld. Nannoo O.

But this idea of generating familiarity with nicknames carries a grave danger. A suitable for unsuitable, depending which end of the stick you are at) can bring more trouble than one probably deserves, as the joint-secretary of the Awami League found out not so long ago. Discontent with the party leadership after an election defeat is nothing new, it happens all the time. But the unfortunate AL joint-secretary had to put up with this kind of poetry-making:

Chhatra League-re Khaist
Jubo League-re Khaist
Awami League-re Khaist
Ami Amir Hossain Khai
More of the story is this: whether you are a barrister, or major (Retd), a Begum or Janab, be careful when it comes to using your nicknames. That's where the rhyming slangs always bite.