

NOTES ON THE POETRY FESTIVAL; A MALAYSIAN SCHOLAR ON FUNDAMENTALISM; AND AN UPROAR IN BRITAIN

HERE is something heart-warming about old friends and contemporaries taking up new causes, instead of being trapped in their own past. In the process, they recognise the changing realities, with all their hopes, aspirations and even dangers.

Decades ago, many of them were apolitical, while some were, what we called, on the wrong side, who, just now, should remain unidentified. During the sixties and seventies, they changed, quietly but surely, started giving our country their best, often in areas which had once escaped their attention.

Many of them now show signs of age; some are living in such crowded areas as Mohammadpur and Mirpur. When they are obliged to venture out of their homes, their choice lies between over-loaded buses and unsafe rickshaws. If they are attending a function, they may be fetched by a car or a friend might offer a lift.

So, I take my hat off to Poet Shamsur Rahman — and others like him — who remain in the mainstream of our national life, despite their personal inconveniences and the struggle to make a decent living, contributing to causes which matter a great deal to them, and indeed to many of us.

In the latest case, together with Poet Sufia Kamal, Shamsur Rahman played a key role in the two-day poetry festival which, as a theme, dealt with a contemporary challenge, the fight against fundamentalism. There could not have been a more daring subject to take up for poets, nor perhaps a more complex one to discuss in meaningful details. How precisely should one describe "fundamentalism"? In what way, does it differ from a more commonly used term "orthodoxy"? Some might say that while "fundamentalism" has acquired — some would say, imposed — a social, economic and political code, in-

corporated in the constitution of a few Muslim countries, the other phenomenon may only provide for the way of thinking — often reflected in the behavioural pattern — of an individual or a social group. Does it mean that one can be an orthodox person without being a fundamentalist?

Here, I recall that my own grandfather who, a deeply religious person, disapproved of photography and even of gramophone — decades later, one of his granddaughters married a son of the late great singer Abbasuddin — and yet he permitted his youngest son to study under Poet

mains: Where do you take your stand in your fight against fundamentalism? One answer is, secularism. But it is open to many interpretations. The Penguin Dictionary describes it as "tendency to exclude religious standards from public life" and an "ethical system divorced from religious traditions." My own personal position is based on "liberal humanism."

HOW we wish we could organise a media round table here on Islamic fundamentalism and on its impact on predominantly Muslim countries in Asia, with

An excellent writer in both English and Bahasa Malaysia, a keen social reformer, a human rights activist and, by Malaysian standards, a dissident politician who served a short prison term under the country's infamous security act in 1996, all rolled into one, Dr Chandra — as we all call him — has done some incisive writing on Islamic fundamentalism, first for a lecture tour in the United States and then for a series of articles in the Kuala Lumpur daily, the *New Straits Times*. On this subject, few of us have read anything more substantive than the pieces by Chandra Muzaffar.

Muslims, whether they live in Kuala Lumpur or study in New York, with empathy and understanding. This is where Chandra Muzaffar's work differs from V S Naipaul's highly critical "An Islamic Journey" which contains a somewhat superficial chapter on Malaysia. My eight-year stay in Kuala Lumpur had many surprises — mostly pleasant ones — one of them being a small seminar organised by the Press Foundation of Asia with funds provided by an Arab newspaper group to explain Islam to a group of non-Muslim senior journalists. Like many of my friends, I first regarded the

revealing their own difficulties in understanding some in the basic tenets of their religion. A retired Attorney General even went to the extent of suggesting that there were too many flaws in the Muslim inheritance laws as well as in the operation of Zakat.

During tea breaks, participants and resource persons continued their discussion, as they would have done at a scholarly gathering in Oxford or Harvard.

This was Southeast Asia, with its tolerance and inquisitiveness, at its best, something one misses so much in Dhaka.

It seems that the concern over the rise of Islamic fundamentalism is no longer confined to predominantly Muslim countries. One can now hear its echoes — loud and clear — in Britain.

Early last month, one Dr Kalam Siddiqui organised what was called the "Muslim parliament" in London and advised his co-religionists in Britain to break any law which they felt to be hostile to their interests, to quote from *The Times*.

The British press is understandably angry over the whole episode. However, the quality press, we are glad to note, has not lost its cool nor its perspective. Its commitment to liberalism remains as strong as its concern for the welfare of its ethnic minorities, including Muslims from South Asia. One comment in a recent issue of *The Times*, which is worth quoting:

"The most difficult task any liberal democracy can face is defending itself against illiberalism, particularly the well-organised manipulative kind... Failure to take such provocation (by Siddiqui) seriously compounds racist sentiments and insults the Muslim population with its dismissiveness."

When it comes to politics in Britain, *The Times* is, more often than not, right. This is just one more case in point.



Sufia Kamal Rabindranath Tagore in the highly cosmopolitan atmosphere of Viswabarati. Where did his orthodoxy begin and end?

Again, where do we find the counterparts of "Islamic fundamentalism" in other religions, say, in Hinduism, Christianity and Judaism? The rise of fundamentalism in the Jewish state of Israel is strong and pronounced. But, then, where does one place the concept of "Ramrajya"? A mythological utopia or an aggregation of some loosely-defined ideals that a section of Hindus may think worth fighting for?

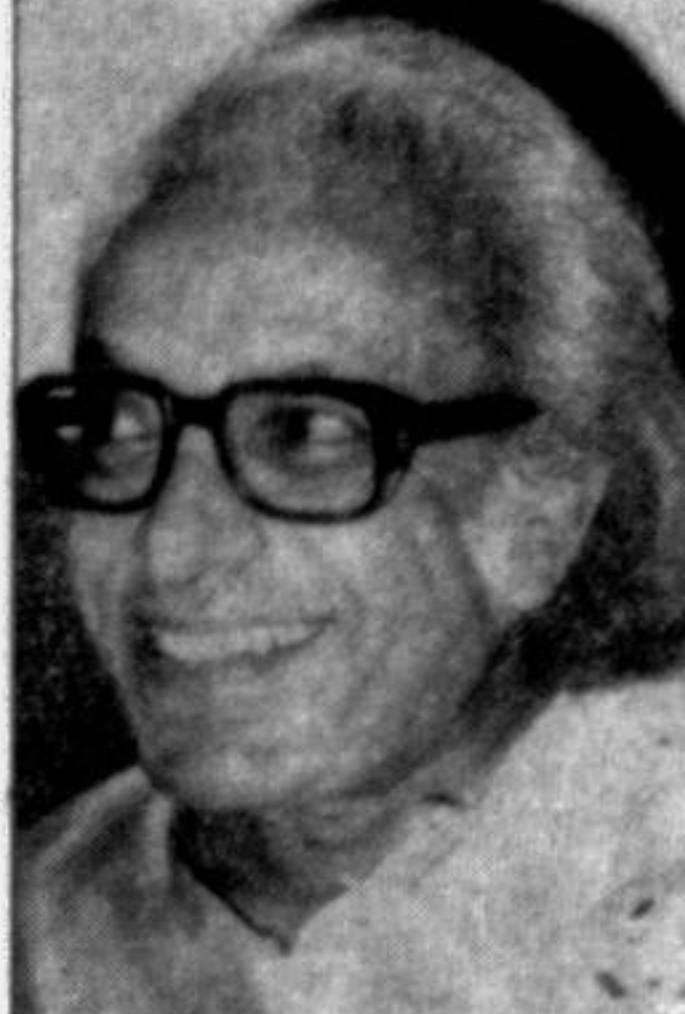
Yet another question re-

MY WORLD

S. M. ALI

scholars and participants drawn from within the region! One Asian intellectual who would head my list of resource persons is Chandra Muzaffar of Malaysia, whose somewhat unusual name matches his uncommon academic and professional background. With his ethnic origin traced to Kerala and his religion to a mixture of Hinduism and Islam, Muzaffar has distinguished academic credentials which include a doctorate from Harvard. Now in his early fifties — or perhaps even younger — he is a long suffering victim of polio which seriously affects his movements.

If I remember correctly, Dr Muzaffar's study which largely dealt with the Malaysian situation made an interesting — and often overlooked — distinction between the fundamentalist party Parti Islam (PAS) which has gained a foothold in parts of his country and young western-educated Malays who have embraced fundamentalism as part of their genuine rejection of and alienation from present-day materialistic society. While this Malaysian scholar strongly opposes the fundamentalist PAS and sees it as a threat to his multi-religious and multi-cultural country, he treats the young Malay "born-again"



Shamsur Rahman

venture with serious misgiving, but later it proved largely unfounded. All the resource persons were well-educated Muslim scholars, mostly with liberal background, who seemed conversant with both Islam and western, philosophies. Credit goes to non-Muslim journalists, brought from different Southeast Asian countries, for asking frank, often almost blunt, questions on subjects ranging from polygamy in modern society to the place of non-Muslims in the Islamic society. On their part, resource persons dealt with these questions fairly and often convincingly, at times

It is rare in our country that the people in politics, either top notches or their followers, take up their pen to write about what they saw, thought and did, and also what they could not do. Some of them, those who ventured to do it, are so obsessed with their own self that what transpires from their pen is nothing but self-eulogy. Commentary on contemporary political events and personalities by people not connected with politics are also rare, but still rare are commentaries by people having involvement in politics. Considering this Iqbal Ansari Khan's maiden venture is most welcome and can claim to be an exception from many considerations. Self exposition has been kept to the minimum and his very incisive 'third eye' has laid bare for the readers the real picture of some of the stalwarts in the political arena of this country. The narratives, in the style of history, memoirs and personal reflections, appear to be honest and have been put down, as claimed by the author, 'to get rid of the concept of El-Dorado — make a country rich only by fictions'. Without trying to create fiction and myth, the author has chosen to be straight forward and outspoken making it clear in his declaration of intent: 'I have written nothing in malice and omitted nothing out of cowardice.'

Mr. Iqbal Ansari Khan's *The Third Eye* can be taken to be his personal reflections on the politics of his choice and in making his comments and observations he has not attempted any hide and seek, and has come out with expositions, which at times, appear to be highly courageous, may be outrageous to many.

The narration of events in the book has a feeling of intimacy. Mr. Khan's father Ali Amjad Khan and mother Begum Anwar Khatun were well-known figures in the political arena of Dhaka and many of their contemporary politicians used to come to their residence and many a political developments took their shape in meetings and parleys there. So Mr. Khan, from his boyhood, had the privilege of knowing these politicians very intimately. Later on the author himself indulged in politics and hence his intimate relationship with them continued. So whatever he has to say in this book is the outcome of his intimate viewing of the political personalities from his situation very near them.

The book of 250 pages contains twenty-seven chapters, which do not really follow any chronological scheme. Starting in the first two chapters with Retrospection and Transformation of the emergence of Bangladesh, the author devotes two chapters to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, three chapters to Suhrawardy (the author spells the name as Suhrwardy for reasons best known to him), four chapters

'Nothing in Malice, Nothing out of Cowardice'

to Moulana Bhasani and three to Ziaur Rahman. In his narration about these key figures of our politics he has referred to events, which were little known, and took every opportunity of judging their actions and policies and spared no pains in pronouncing his own judgement and comment on their personalities, convictions, follies and failures and very rarely on their success and achievements. In the course of discussion on the above figures other personalities, such as Aatur Rahman Khan, Shah Aziz, Mashur Rahman, Professor (?) Muzaffar Ahmad and many others naturally came in. Chapter XIII, Jinnah — Revisited, dwells on

justice and flexibility, the leadership must pursue a firm pre-set policy, any deviation from which would be a rare exception rather than a routine rule or 'Each soul claiming to lead a people has a role as a leader' or 'The charismatic populist stance is in direct head-long clash with the job entrusted to the leader or taken by the leader' or 'Their characters and personalities are like an unmapped terrain: wild, undependable and unpredictable. They refuse to read the writing on the wall and grasp their meanings. They live in the make-believe world of pomposity, grandeur and ignorance' or 'The first lesson our leadership must

conversant. He was, in the language of the author, 'a wizard of human psychology'. With Sheikh Mujib the author claims to have developed a 'very easy, strong and brotherly relationship' and from this intimate acquaintance he has narrated many an episode and happenings which are interesting as well as revealing. 'Sheikh Mujib, despite his unprecedented popularity, went to unknown vacuity of history in an attempt to transform himself into a dictator. Had he not attempted that, he could have been in power through votes and popular support for twenty years at the least.' One may not agree with all the remarks and assessment of the

always considered his self-interest above the interest of the people has been very clearly laid bare. Needs determined his actions in politics and he was a great bouncer.

Another stalwart of Bangladesh politics, Moulana Bhasani, has been portrayed in four chapters. Starting with Bhasani — Sir Saadullah (of Assam) affair down to Bhasani's support for Zia regime, many episodes have been narrated to drive at a single point that the Moulana was prone to change his stance keeping pace with the changing circumstances. How did Moulana Bhasani elude Aatur Rahman Khan in 1973 in the formation of an anti-Mujib Front and how did Aatur Rahman Khan and Mainul Hussain could win Moulana's support for Zia — all these make very interesting reading. One may ponder about the author's conclusion: 'Like most politicians, Bhasani was highly flexible, a kind of chameleon, resembling all the weather-cocks and changing birds in the world; and his "quality of lubricated flexibility" was "unburdened by any brand

of bigotry or idealism'.

In the same framework the author has dealt with Zia regime in three chapters. 'What was political science to Aristotle, was a political art to Zia' — showering such remarks on Zia the author deals with Zia's astute ability in the breaking-up of the political parties and his handling of the youth of Bangladesh which, according to his judgement, 'curved a definite pattern of total disregard to scruple and responsibility'.

The author has his own style of narration, never sparing curt remarks about the politics of his choice. Some of the remarks may appear daring and may be unpalatable to different shades of opinion. But the intention of the author is clearly laid down in the following sentences: 'Neither we ourselves are creating any example for them (the future generation) to follow nor are we leaving behind a written history for our future generation to tend to. It is high time we thought to create a causative history, wrapped with a covenant of character,

so that our children have no cause to brand us as renegades and regard themselves born out of vacuum... we owe an obligation to history — let us begin one.'

The author has looked at the politics with a searching eye and appear to have seen something which the normal pair of eyes fail to observe. The third eye has the power of insight and hence more powerful. When that vision has the advantage of the light born out of knowledge and wisdom it can see far deeper. The author's attempt is obviously at seeing in depth. In Indian mythology and tradition Lord Shiva had the power to emit fire of wrath through his third eye, by which he could burn Madanadeva. Whether the author has the intention of burning the images of his chosen personalities, the readers have to judge. But the tone is not of malice, but of frustration, of unfulfilled expectations and whatever 'fire' that has been vented out in the pages of the book must have been the outcome of these injured feelings.

The book is well produced, but one would wish the printer's devil to have been less at work.

There is a tradition in Borneo that if a man dreams that his wife is an adulteress, her father must take her back.

There are many examples where dream is given a status of reality.

Extension of the waking state: A German chemist Friedrich Kekule could not understand the molecular structure of the chemical compound 'Benzene' for a pretty long time. Then one night he dreamt that the atoms were dancing themselves to form a snake with its tail in its mouth — the structure he sought was, of course, in the form of a closed ring.

Novelist R. L. Stevenson said that much of his writing was developed by 'Little People' in his dream, and specifically, the story of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde was one of them.

Dreamers of this category have reported that they thought about the same topic over a considerably longer period.

Unique dreams: Just before the Battle of Waterloo, Napoleon Bonaparte is said to have dreamt a black cat running from one army to other.

Abraham Lincoln, dreamt a day before his assassination that he heard people crying and so went to the hall of Presidential Palace where he saw one coffin and finally asked a man about who lied — 'The answer' was — 'The President'.

Dream interpretation: It is a part of psychotherapeutic measures which help to explain the repressed or unconscious motives in the patient. When unconscious motives, that get activated in sleep, cannot be suppressed, they get manifested into dreams.



BOOKS

THE THIRD EYE: Glimpses of the Politics
By Iqbal Ansari Khan
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the personality of Jinnah, his non-communal stance and integrity of character. A few chapters have been devoted to the Hindu-Muslim relations in this subcontinent starting from the forties to the present. The language movement, in which the author was an active participant, features in two chapters and many parts of his narration have the tinge of authenticity and are often revealing.

In the last three chapters the author dilates on the question of leadership, and in this context he has more than once come back to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, as also to Ziaur Rahman and others. His lament that 'Bangles had more politicians than they had use of them... they remained perennially deprived of a leader who would be willing to take charge, command, and not indulging in doing cheap things to perpetuate political power' clearly expose his frustrations, unfulfilled desire and unrealised hopes. With this mental make-up the author, in the last three chapters, sound like making sermons like 'the leader must succeed to distance himself away from the sycophants... should be extra alert from the clutches of these sycophants who are really the head wheels of the leader; the leader only being a man, falls flat to such debased deception' or 'Given the allowance of ad-

learn and admit it that they were not born rulers.' These lessons speak of the author's mind and realisations, and his wish that 'Let state-craft be an institution — then no one has to die like him (Mujib) and Zia — nor anyone will feel to kill' genuinely sums up the author's intent and epitomises the tone of the book under review.

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman features very prominently in the book. Considering Sheikh Mujib only 'umbilically connected with the whole episode of liberation process' the author dilates upon his style of politics in which 'dynamism, flexibility and adaptability' he 'never lacked manifesting' and 'Politics came to him dancing, like phosphorescence, as clearly and as dazzlingly.' Starting the 1970 elections with the slogan of 'Joi Bangla' with the aim of becoming the Chief Minister of East Pakistan when Mujib found, after the election results, that he was confronted with a situation and opportunity of becoming the Prime Minister of the whole of Pakistan, he thought it prudent to redefine his patriotic 'Joi Bangla' slogan and came up at the Suhrawardy Uddyan post-election public meeting with slogans of 'Allah Akbar' and 'Joi Pakistan' along with 'Joi Bangla'. This the author cites as an example of the 'art of crisscross, zigzag, flippery ways of life and politics' which Sheikh Mujib was well

author, but they deserve to be pondered upon.

In the context of the formation of the BAKSHAL, the character of another leader, Aatur Rahman Khan, has been brought under scrutiny. Almost throughout his political career Aatur Rahman Khan was engaged in anti-Sheikh politics, but when the question of joining Mujib's BAKSHAL came up, he literally dodged his fellow partymen, including the author, and joined BAKSHAL. The author exclaims, 'he threw us into political dustbin like rotten eggs and odorous garbage' and this act of his leader appeared to him to be devoid of any logic and rationale. Aatur Rahman Khan's ambivalence in politics was again demonstrated in his joining hands with Ershad. After being shot out by Ershad Aatur Rahman Khan wrote his 'Nine Months of Prime Ministership' and the author's explanation that he 'Wrote the book not to give his fellow countrymen some wisdom from the vast store of his life, but it was directed against President Ershad personally — with venom, and that, he wouldn't have written the book, had he not been shot out from the post of Prime Ministership' is very pertinent.

Three chapters have been devoted to Hussain Shahid Suhrawardy, whom the author had the opportunity of seeing very closely. That Suhrawardy

WRITE TO MITA

Dear Mita,
Please read the Quran before you advise some of your readers concerning marriage, divorce, re-marrying etc. You will be surprised to find that your advice is biased and most stupid. As a woman yourself you seem to dislike men to a great extent, or maybe you simply wish to exploit women for your own good. After all life is full of miseries and ups and downs. Nevertheless, you can try to be more careful in future. While there is still the time — make good use of it. For, life — though it may seem to be too short, as we like to believe, gives us plenty of time to mend our offences and misdeeds or mistakes.

Best of luck to your married life and your family members.

Muqbul Haque

Dear Mr Haque,
Your letter could not be printed in full as it was too long. Please give an example of when my answer was sinful and against the Holy Quran. I really don't recollect having ever answered in a way that would hurt anyone's religious sentiments. If you make a strong allegation such as the one you have made, then you should come up with solid evidence.

Dear Mita,
Being a working mother is hectic enough, but on top of that my husband expects the house to be run perfectly. He refuses to be patient when the children are being naughty or when servants misbehave. He says this is because of my treiflency. What can I do to stop him?

Rosy, Mirpur, Dhaka.

Dear Rosy,
Yes, there are some very demanding husbands and wives who have to adjust with themselves to keep the harmony in the family. But your husband can be told very gently that you are no "super-woman" and you have to learn to live and cope with the small irritants of life. Ask him his advice on how to run the household better. He might give you some new tips.

Dear Mita,
I have been observing your answers for quite a long time and I am proud to say that they are prudent and accurate. Based on this observation, I have decided to put forward my problem in anticipation of your wise answer.

We are newly married (for last one year only). Whenever we write or get letters we always fight. Although I do not pass any comments on her letters, she always insist that I change the text of letters that I write. This task is quite tough for me. I ordered her not to see my letters or even if she wishes to see them, she must not pass comments. But she never listens and a fight starts. How to avoid this, please suggest.

Apis, DU

Dear Apis,
From what I could understand from your letter, the problem is that your wife interferes and makes comments whenever you receive or write a letter. Maybe it is not the content of the letter that she is objecting to but rather from whom you receive or write the letter to. Actually the first few years of marriage is often stormy but couples adjust to these little things gradually. I wouldn't worry too much about it.

Dear Mita,
I know you have replied to this kind of letter many times before but somehow I never got a satisfactory answer. Both my children have grown up and have left. My husband is very busy with his work and I am very bored. What can women like me do? My life was spent looking after the children and I have not acquired any skills for a job. Do you have any suggestions?

Mohsina, Kamalapur, Dhaka.

Dear Mohsina,
I am sorry my previous answers to similar problems have not satisfied you as I really do not have any new solutions. I have to repeat that it is never too late to start anew. If you have not been able to complete your education due to marriage and children then do it now. If you need to get some training to enter the job market then don't hesitate. There are hundreds of examples of very successful women who started late, you can be one of them.