

Glimpses of Kabul: Another Age, Another Time

ONE wonders what kind of Afghanistan will emerge when the structure built by successive Soviet-backed regimes is finally dismantled. Will the process be slow and painful? Or will it be quick and surgical? Here, one guess is as good as another.

With the fall of the government of General Najibullah, the third Afghan leader to be put in power by Moscow since the 1978 pro-Soviet coup, the battlelines are once again drawn between the liberals and the conservatives, as it happened so often in the past, with both sides pledging their faith in Islam. Unfortunately, this time, the differences between the two sides have further widened. Whom we once regarded as conservatives are described as hardliners: the liberals think of themselves as progressive, the remnants of the communist movement. There are sophisticated arms on both sides. Hence, one cannot rule out the danger of bloodshed. One only hopes that it won't be like the massacre we had seen in Indonesia after the abortive communist coup in 1965, in which dead bodies of communists and their supporters, in thousands, clogged the rivers in the Red stronghold in Bali.

For reasons of geography, history and culture, Bangladeshis have strong sympathies for the people of Afghanistan. Then, during the liberation struggle in 1971, so many Bangladeshi families, stranded in Pakistan, used the Kabul route to return to Dhaka. True, many were harassed, ill-treated and even robbed on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. But the fact that the authorities in Kabul let them pass some without valid travel documents is something that our fleeing civil servants would not perhaps forget. Pity I am yet to locate a book that details the experiences of any such family. May be it was not always a pleasant experience. Unlike journalists, government employees do not like to talk about unpleasant things, except for the correspondence columns in newspapers under the cover the anonymity.

So, an interesting chapter in Afghanistan-Bangladesh relations remains unwritten.

My own visit to Afghanistan took place much earlier, in 1965 — by sheer coincidence, I always manage to get to interesting places ahead of others — during a two-month trip through China, Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Soviet Union and Western Europe. It was part of a deal with the Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) whose Public Relations Director was then none other than the great sports commentator Omar Qureshi, which flew me to all its foreign destinations, with my newspapers paying for my hotel expenses. While I remained free to write for newspapers, all that I was asked to do by that superb friend, Qureshi was to write six travel pieces which would just mention something to that effect, "You can get to this interesting place by PIA." Qureshi was

mightily pleased with my performance. Of course, he did not read any of the features I wrote. But he received a few clippings, which prompted him to attribute the increase in the PIA traffic to places like Canton, Kathmandu and Kabul to my modest venture into travel writing.

Flying into Kabul from Kathmandu, via Dhaka and Karachi, my first thought was, who made better carpets, the Tibetan refugees settled in the Nepalese capital or the Afghans? They all have incredible nimble fingers, spectacular colour sense but a somewhat unsympathetic attitude to bargaining over the prices. As I had then no place of my own to put a carpet in, my bargaining over the prices was purely academic, just to get a couple of paragraphs for my features, which the Tibetan refugees sensed just as quickly as the Afghans in Kabul.

burqas and discard their modern attire, as bandit Bachcha Sakko did when he drove out King Amanullah in the late twenties, or as some hardliners among the Mujahedeen may do when they take power in Kabul.

For my meals, I would walk out of my grey sombre hotel, without giving a second look at the gloomy dining hall, and step into a brightly lit self-service cafeteria just across the road — a good item for my travel piece — which, I was told, was built with German aid or collaboration. It was spotlessly clean and well-organised, serving reasonably-priced wholesome Afghan and western food. Here, too, young Afghan girls, dressed in cafeteria uniforms, were at work, mainly in clearing the tables.

In mid-sixties, one could not find such a cafeteria in Karachi, Lahore or Dhaka. Then, putting on my hat as a newspaper correspondent, I would visit the Ministry of Planning for detailed briefings on all aspects of

former Soviet Union and to East European countries.

True, the economy was in shambles during the decade of the eighties. According to the World Almanac, even the rate of literacy had remained only 12 per cent in 1987, a field of national development which gets a lot of attention by a socialist regime.

However, even western commentators agree that a progressive process of socio-economic reforms had been set in motion, thus strengthening the modern base that, given a chance, could take the country forward. Why the process failed is something that can be discussed by more recent visitors to Kabul.

Here is a family anecdote that tells us something heart-warming about how the educated elite in Afghanistan, especially under the late King Amanullah, looked at Bengal.

My youngest uncle, the late Syed Mujtaba Ali landed in Kabul some time in the late twenties with a teaching job at the country's prestigious institution, *Maktab-e-Habibia*. A former student of Viswabarati, his diploma was signed by none other than Poet Rabindranath Tagore. But it was a degree that had not yet been recognised in British India. Uncle Mujtaba Ali had no chance of getting a job even in a mufassil college with that piece of paper from Shantiniketon.

Some pro-British elements in Kabul raised an outcry against the confirmation of Mujtaba Sahib's appointment. The matter went up to the Minister of Education of the Government of Afghanistan.

The Minister listened to the critics of my uncle's appointment with patience. Then, with a smile, he said, "You see, my friends, this diploma of Agha Syed Mujtaba Ali carries the signature of a great poet who has brought honour and fame to the whole of Asia, including Afghanistan. How can it carry any less value than one signed by a colonial governor in Calcutta or even the Governor-General in New Delhi? The diploma of Mujtaba Ali is priceless."

Uncle Mujtaba Ali mentioned this episode in a short piece he wrote for "Kabi pranam", an anthology of writings brought out soon after the death of Tagore by writers and intellectuals of what is now known as Greater Sylhet, perhaps the only district in Bengal and Assam to pay its tribute to the great poet in this manner. It was also an appropriate recognition of the fact that Sylhet might have been the only district on which Tagore had written a poem, regretting the fact that it had been "banished" from Bengal to become a part of Assam.

I have no idea if any copy of this superb anthology, *Kabipranam* is around. It should be a collector's item, just as priceless as a diploma signed by Rabindranath Tagore.

MY WORLD

S. M. Ali

My main impression of Kabul in the mid-sixties was the same as what our fleeing Bangladeshi families probably felt about the place some six years later, that it was poor, impoverished and filled with a sense of helplessness. It was also a capital that lived on rumours, about coups, take-overs and mutinies, which were all part of the history, both ancient and modern, of this land-locked state of 2,51,773 sq. miles, nearly five times the size of Bangladesh. As an Afghan friend once said to me many years later, "Mutual distrust is our most dominant social trait."

Of course, one could push such gloomy thoughts out of one's mind and take a long walk through the bazaar which always reminded me of the long narrow lanes of the market place in Peshawar, the famous *Kissa Khan Bazar* (The bazaar of the story-tellers). Here in Kabul, as in Peshawar, you felt the noise, the smell and the flavour of another time, another age. A political analyst might call it stagnation; a travel writer had another term for it, timelessness.

Whatever one called it, there was an undercurrent of modernism that was silently asserting itself. Even in the mid-sixties, one saw a fairly large number of young ladies, not just school girls, on the streets in skirts and dresses, wearing black stockings and scarves over their heads, walking side by side with elderly women in veils. One only hoped that no one would force these young ladies to put on

Afghan economy. The picture was always gloomy, but the presentation was always superb. Educated in Germany, France or Britain, the experts spoke different languages, using plain simple terms that a journalist could understand and left the visitor with the impression that if only the country could mobilise its meagre resources and establish a viable political system, these planners would get a real chance of taking the country forward along the road of economic progress. (Am I talking of Bangladesh or Afghanistan?)

This educated elite in Kabul was the product of a process in which King Amanullah had played the most significant role in the late twenties. Opening the country to the modern world, like Kamal Atatürk of Turkey or King Chulalongkorn of Thailand, he had sent young Afghan men and women to the West for education, not just to Britain but to Germany and France. They came back to a strife-torn country and could do no more than to introduce a few cosmetic changes in the economy of Afghanistan. (No, I am not talking of Bangladesh.)

The hope of the three successive Soviet-backed presidents — Hafizullah Amin, Babrak Karmal and Najibullah — was to build on the process started by King Amanullah, except that instead of sending young Afghans to Germany or France for higher education, the three ill-fated rulers of Kabul despatched them to the

supporter of Bob Hawke, backing him last year in the first of the two challenges to Hawke's Labor Party leadership by then Treasurer Paul Keating.

Keating failed in the first challenge last June, but narrowly won a second ballot just before Christmas, thus taking over as Prime Minister.

On the eve of the second ballot Hawke rang Evans, who was in Cambodia at the time, to tell him not to bother flying home for it. By then Hawke knew enough votes had gone to Keating in the government caucus to make Evans' vote irrelevant. The Foreign Minister had important work to do where he was.

Keating kept Evans on in the job, acknowledging his achievements. The odds are against Keating winning the 1993 national election. If he is defeated and follows Hawke into retirement, the Party will be looking for a new leader.

And, just maybe, the Nobel Peace Prize will have been on his mantelpiece long enough for his compatriots to have come to understand its importance. — GEMINI NEWS

Gareth Evans — the Real Father of Cambodian Peace

David O'Reilly writes from Canberra

Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen has said that the real father of the peace plan for his country is Gareth Evans, Foreign Minister of Australia. Evans was a Bob Hawke man. Now Hawke is no longer Prime Minister Evans remains in his job. He has done much for Australian foreign policy and, reports Gemini News Service, he could one day be in line for the top job.

FOR a politician once written off domestically as inept and accident-prone, Gareth Evans has carved an enviable niche for himself these last four years as Foreign Minister of Australia. The metamorphosis was born of hard work, stamina and application. So dramatic has it been that the father of the Cambodian peace agreement is now talked of in Australia as a potential future leader of the Labor Party, and thus, a prime minister later in the Nineties.

Evans earned the nickname Biggles in 1984 soon after being catapulted into the important post of Federal Attorney-General when Bob Hawke defeated conservative Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser and formed a Labor government.

Among early Evans decisions was a secret authorisation for "spy flights" by airforce planes to gather data over southern Australia, where conservationists were locked in a fierce battle with government agencies wanting to flood virgin wilderness for a hydro-electricity dam. The misjudgement started a national outcry.

The young attorney soon found himself demoted to a junior portfolio. He developed a reputation for being impatient and highly temperamental in dealing with people. His critics claimed he was arrogant, like a spoilt child when he did not get his way.

His admirers said he was simply highly intellectual, a tactical thinker whose vision was often beyond the purview of others, and a man who both refused to suffer fools and made the same high demands of those around him as he did of himself.

He may be truly an intellectual, but 47-year old Evans never loses sight of his working class roots.

His father was a tram driver in Hawthorn, Melbourne, and he got to university on a scholarship. An honours law degree at Melbourne University was followed by a Masters at Oxford. Childhood memories of hard toil still haunt him.

He said recently: "I hope I never lose the understanding of what it's like to budget from a jam jar. It was down to basics in those days. No cheque books, no credit cards."

Those who know him say those tough formative years bred in Evans a fierce desire to succeed. When Hawke made him Foreign Minister in 1988 he grabbed the opportunity with both hands. For a middle-ranking nation, Australia can boast significant international diplomatic and political achievements in the Hawke period, 1983-1991.

It tried to stiffen Commonwealth resolve over the



GARETH EVANS Nominated for Nobel Peace Prize

apartheid issue, locking horns, for example, with Britain's Margaret Thatcher. It had a prominent role in forging agreements on mining and drilling for oil in the Antarctic; emerged as something of a small player/honest broker through the so-called "Cairns group" in the Uruguay Round of Trade talks; and helped found the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation group.

Evans captured world attention by his work in Indo-China. In 1989 in New York he met congressman Stephen Solarz, chairman of the US Committee on South East Asia. Solarz talked about a plan to get the warring parties in Cambodia together, but complained he could not excite interest in the American administration.

Evans saw a huge opportunity for Australia, as a nation within the region.

Months of quiet shuttle diplomacy ensued, with either Evans or his departmental heads journeying back and forth, inching talks ahead with the Cambodian principals. Eventually something like an agreement loomed. It had the makings of an historic breakthrough in one of history's ugliest struggles.

Despite the bloodshed at the hands of the Pol Pot regime, the invasion by Vietnam and the Chinese support for the Khmer Rouge, Evans fought relentlessly for the idea of a UN-sponsored peace in which democratic elections could be conducted. To the surprise of many, he ac-

tually pulled it off.

Under the plan, the UN Transition Authority would send up to 10,000 troops, including 5,000 from Australia, to stabilise the country while elections were held.

Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen paid a stark tribute when he said of the plan: "Of course success has a lot of fathers, but failure would have been an orphan. Right now we have a lot of fathers, but the real father is Gareth Evans."

Solarz had said in New York that the task was so monumental the politician who achieved it would deserve a Nobel Peace Prize nomination. True to his word, the American has nominated Evans for that honour later this year.

Last year, Evans surprised diplomatic circles in Australia by publishing a book on Australia's foreign relations. It is not normal practice for foreign ministers to publish tomes on their nation's international relationships while still in office.

But Evans saw a crying need for a coherent explanation to be laid down for Australians of precisely why their national government chooses to take the foreign policy decisions it does. Nothing like it had been attempted for years, he complained. And, of course, the globe-shaking changes of 1989-90 meant there was much to reassess.

Evans wants to help make Australia more outward-looking. He sees disturbing evidence of his nation's "cultural cringe" in the surprise generated at home about the Noble Prize nomination.

"Nothing really matters (in Australia) unless someone somewhere else — preferably in Britain or the US — says it's important. Then we say: Gee, that's important."

"Also, it's a bit of the dark side of the Australian tradition of hostility to bullshit and scepticism about pomposity. That's one of the things that makes us the country we are. But it also means there is suspicion toward any kind of achievement. We have to develop a bit more confidence in ourselves."

Evans' management of foreign policy excites criticism and praise at home. He wasted no time in publicly distancing himself from a furore caused by the comments of a leading Australian basketballer about refusing to play against the US Aids-positive athlete Magic Johnson, if he was part of the American Olympic team at Barcelona.

Evans said: "It certainly has done Australia's image no good at all to have a half-baked and wrong-headed comment of this kind being made."

Yet he has routinely run the gauntlet of criticism that, under his guidance, Australia has taken too lenient a view of the civil rights records of nations in the region like Indonesia and Malaysia.

Evans is aware that the few odd moments of tension — like his angered criticisms of South African military officials during a recent visit — have accentuated the picture of him as a politician on something of a nerve edge.

"The stereotype of me built up from a couple of classic moments when I have been passionate or — like everyone else can be — cranky and over-stretched at the end of a 16-hour day, is terribly superficial. I'm not complaining, though. Every person in public life in Australia gets the same treatment. It really means people here have to have huge amounts of stamina and a large number of layers of epidermis to ever do anything, as there are so many disincentives."

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supporter of Bob Hawke, backing him last year in the first of the two challenges to Hawke's Labor Party leadership by then Treasurer Paul Keating.

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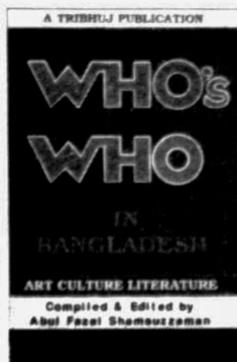
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BOOKS

Luminaries of a Century

Who's Who in Bangladesh: Art Culture Literature, compiled and edited by Abul Fazal Shamsuzzaman, Tribhuj Prakashani, Dhaka, January 1992, Price Tk 300/=

Reviewed by Prof Kabir Chowdhury



enlisted here such great names as those of Ustad Alauddin Khan, Dakshinarajan Mitra, Dinesh Sen, Kamini Roy, Mankumari Basu, Deviprasad Roy Chowdhury, Buddhadev Basu, Humayan Kabir, Jibanananda Das and P C Sircar.

The information provided in the Who's Who on the personalities enlisted seems to be fairly comprehensive, correct and up-to-date. This has been possible because in most cases the compiler and editor collected the relevant materials directly from the personalities concerned or from their close relatives. The compiler has also done well by including in the book our young but promising personalities in the cultural, literary and art arena of Bangladesh.

Abul Fazal Shamsuzzaman, who had earlier brought out the Bangladesh Trade and Industry Directory, has now given us an excellent "Who's Who in Bangladesh" in the fields of art, culture and literature. The Who's Who enlists 573 personalities, including 198 who are deceased. The period covered is nearly a hundred years, from 1901 to 1991. An interesting feature of the present compilation is that personalities who once lived, worked and made contributions in art, culture and literature in the geographical area that at present constitutes Bangladesh but had later moved out and settled elsewhere are enlisted here. They have not been left out prompted by any narrow sectarian or chauvinistic approach. That is why we find

An index giving the names of the personalities enlisted in alphabetic order, indicating their classification, that is if the concerned person is a poet or a playwright or a singer or a film maker or a painter etc. along with his phone number wherever available has increased the book's usefulness. The photographs of the personalities have added to the volume's attractiveness.

I have no doubt that many individuals and organisations, particularly those connected with the pursuit of art, culture and literature would like to have this Who's Who on their desk as a quick and valuable reference book. My warm congratulations to Mr Shamsuzzaman.

Building Again

(A poem of inspiration by Jeannie Miller after she became severely disabled.)

There is nothing to stop you from building again — when all of your castles have crumbled. There is nothing to stop you from dreaming again — when the things long worked for have smashed.

There is no law to stop you from wearing a smile, though perhaps you are crying inside. There is never a reason for losing a grip — Or your nerve — your faith or your pride.

There is nothing to gain by repeating your woes into every listening ear — For pity, and sympathy won't get you far — Though it may be so kind and sincere.

Get on with the job of rebuilding your life — It's so useless to sigh, or complain. The best thing to do — is to start out anew — Pluck up courage, and then try again.

WRITE TO MITA

Dear Mita, I am having big arguments with my husband regarding the absence of security in the streets of Dhaka city. He does not let me go out anywhere without the car. Tell me is it possible for a working mother of 2 young children to wait for the car just to go shopping few blocks away. I realize the danger but he is exaggerating which really annoys me. The car or the driver is not available for me all the time so what can I do. Please advise. Sarwat Jahan, Lalmeta, Dhaka

Dear Sarwat, Your husband means well and is only showing concern for your safety. I realize how annoying and restrictive it is not to be able to go out at will. One of the solutions is to learn driving, then you can use the car more often. Otherwise, just take the normal precautions such as avoiding deserted roads, never go out alone after dark etc. The sad thing is all this proves woman's vulnerability and the hijacker's capability to do whatever he wants to. Unless society as a whole fights back, this problem will continue, whether you and I stay indoors or not.

Dear Mita, Now-a-days, more and more young girls are delaying getting married due to dearth of suitable men. This is creating a lot of worries and concern for mothers of these young women such as myself. Though I realise that finding suitable partners for independent working girls is difficult, it is not impossible as some of these girls insist. They have expectations which are too high for any man to live up to. They have unrealistic views on life and are bound to be disappointed. What do you say, am I right or wrong? Concerned Mother, Dhaka

Dear Concerned Mother, You are not totally right or wrong, this problem is too complex to be categorized as being just right or wrong. We are being confronted by a group of very special young girls who have tasted independence and refused to be tied down in any situation that will restrict it. As for high expectations, there is nothing wrong with it as long as it stays within some realistic range. Actually the problem is that men have not kept pace with women on such issues as equality of sexes and independence. This is not to say that all young women

should take a view not to get married till they find the perfect partners. Women will have to strike a balance between what is realistically possible and what is available. Please don't be too harsh on your daughter, she will settle down eventually.

Dear Mita, I got married 3 years ago. It was an arranged marriage but with my consent. My husband had agreed that I would be able to work after marriage. After a year we had our child and now he is 2 years old. As agreed I want to start working but my husband does not want me to, he says the child and home will be neglected. I resent his attitude and besides, we need the extra income. What should I do, please advise. Bewildered, Naraynganj

Dear Bewildered, I suggest you resolve this problem with your husband before taking any action. You have been married for only 3 years and are still adjusting and adopting to each life styles. The baby, with all the joy it brings, also demands a few kind of adjustments. Under the circumstances, you both should join forces and do what is best for the family. I am not trying to undermine your need to have a career. Sometimes it is wiser to retreat a little to make bigger gains later on.

Dear Mita, My son of 2 1/2 years has a habit of becoming very angry and then holding his breath. Last week while doing this he became red and blue then fainted. It seemed he wanted to scream but no sound came out. I was terrified and rushed to the doctor who said not to worry about it. I was, of course, very worried. Can you tell me more about it. Shaila, Maghbar, Dhaka

Dear Shaila, The doctor in our team says, breath holding is a distressing but not necessarily serious form of behavior in children under 3. The child may begin to cry as if about to yell but no sound come out, then he turns red, blue, purple and loses consciousness. But once unconscious he will start breathing again. The danger is that if he holds his breath for too long the brain is deprived of oxygen which might cause convulsion. This symptom usually decreases after age 3. The cause might be uncontrolled frustration or anger.