

How the Foreign Media Looks at Bangladesh

DR Mahathir bin Mohamad of Malaysia once described visiting foreign newsmen as "parachute journalists", meaning they just land from nowhere, write a couple of reports and disappear. That was the time when Kuala Lumpur was getting a bad press abroad, mostly about alleged suppression of political dissent and the racial situation.

Something else was happening then in the neighbouring city republic of Singapore. Until recently, taxi drivers in the island state had been a somewhat talkative lot, on subjects ranging from mistaken government policies to high living by visiting suitors from Malaysia, enough to give a roving journalist a few good quotes. Great. Then, a message was sent out through the transport union that cab drivers should refrain from indulging in conversations with their passengers.

I saw how the message worked during my last visit to Singapore.

During the drive from the Changi airport to a downtown hotel, I asked the cab driver a simple basic question. "How are things around here?"

"Very well, Sir," he replied promptly and firmly.

It was a signal that he would not entertain any more questions. However, this did not mean that he did not have any queries for me.

Where did I come from? What was I doing in Singapore? Then, on learning that I was a journalist, he was curious what I planned to write on Singapore.

Well, maybe the new message from the transport union advised the cab drivers to ask questions rather than to answer them. After all, the drive from Changi to the heart of the city is a fairly long one. A total silence between the cab driver and the passenger can be a little boring.

In sharp contrast to what often looks like a negative relationship between the foreign media on the one side and Malaysia and Singapore on the other, Dhaka's ties with the press abroad have passed through different stages — good, bad and indifferent — but never turning out to be totally negative or soothingly warm.

During the liberation war, Bangladesh owed a lot to foreign correspondents who, by and large, lent their support to our struggle and, in the process, provided a channel of communication between the people fighting for their independence and the world outside.

Then came the ups and downs, depending on the magnitude of problems the country faced (which evoked more sympathy than criticisms), the prevailing corruption and bureaucratic bunglings (no sympathy and plenty of harsh words) and so on and so forth.

As a foreign correspondent once put it, "A certain monotony had set in over the Bangladesh story and few editors really bothered about what was happening in Dhaka."

Kevin Rafferty, a familiar figure in Dhaka's journalist circles in the seventies had made a case with his London office for giving more attention to economic problems facing Bangladesh. "After all," he had argued, "the country is bursting with discontent."

"Will it be a revolution there tomorrow?" the editor had asked a direct question. Rafferty was wondering about his answer when he heard the editor closed the matter by saying, "Well, if not, why bother?"

Indeed, why bother? It seems that unless a

developing country produces a major disaster or breaks up into pieces, like Yugoslavia, it does not get the attention of the foreign media it deserves.

WHERE Bangladesh is concerned, there now appears a significant variation in the established pattern.

After all, when you have a woman heading a democratically elected government, after long nine years of authoritarian rule by a general, with another woman leading the opposition, a visiting correspondent has all the materials he wants for a good, not necessarily a positive, series of articles. Then, when you add to them the Rohingya issue, the Golam Azam case, the bickering among the political parties and the threat of a drought, you won't be running out of ideas.

So, we had a good, largely positive and factual, cover story on Bangladesh — rather on Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia — in the regional journal, *The Far Eastern Economic Review*. Then, a few weeks later, there was this major report, fairly balanced but bold, in *The Economist* of London, laced with observations and quotes which made a story highly readable — and even spicy.

Readable and spicy? Take the following for an example.

MY WORLD

S.M. AH

After paying some well-deserved compliments to Finance Minister Saifur Rahman for "saying and doing many of the right things", the correspondent says, "Rahman says Bangladesh is absolutely on track with every macro-economic demand by the International Monetary Fund. But in the same breath he admits that his cabinet colleagues do not understand free markets: 'The Prime Minister is my only supporter.'"

We dare not speculate on the reaction of Mr Rahman's cabinet colleagues to what many would regard as an outrageous comment. However, one cannot help wondering what it is like for a member of the cabinet, who certainly happens to be good in his work, to be in the "minority of one" in a government!

Was the Finance Minister being misquoted by *The Economist*? Or did he make a slip of tongue? My own guess is, the latter.

One major problem, out of many, with most of our politicians — the Prime Minister is an exception — is that they are extremely talkative and that they easily get carried away when they discuss their own performance, especially with foreign visitors and journalists.

In trying to be candid, explaining an issue in details, they are quite capable of making unguarded remarks, more often than not in criticism of another person, and provide the visitor, if he is a journalist, with marvellous quotes.

One theory is, politicians acquire this talking style from addressing too many public rallies, where, coming under the spell of applause from the crowd, they talk on and on, in a marathon lecture which is as remote from communication as chalk is from cheese.

We can be sure that at the end of the interview, the *Economist* reporter said to Mr Rahman something to this effect, "Mr Finance Minister, you have been most articulate, informative and candid. We will have another talk like this during my next visit to Dhaka."

If the Finance Minister is planning to give another interview to the *Economist* next time its correspondent drops in, my advice to Mr Rahman is simply this: "Watch out!"

To Judge a Book by its Cover

by S. Bari

WE learn never to judge the book by the cover, but the Age of the Consumer has taught us that the cover goes a long way towards selling the book. Just as the presentation of an artistic programme enhances the performance itself, or, alternatively, drags it down. Sujata Mishra's Odissi dance recital last week was a case in point.

Organized by the Indian High Commission and the Indian Council for Cultural Exchange, the programme took place at the National Museum. It was a choice of venue they would come to regret. As the crowd filled the auditorium, the heat climbed to unbearable heights and the air conditioner remained obstinately off. The resulting black hole did little for the audience's disposition. To top it off, the lighting was erratic and the stage decor unimaginative.

However, Mishra's easy grace was pleasing. A native of Orissa, Mishra is in her late twenties. She was a disciple of the late Dr. Debiprasad Das, with whom she began training in 1976. Mishra came to national attention at the Angahar Odissi Dance Festival in 1985, where she was heralded as "a Sanjukta Panigrahi in the making," a reference to one of the current stalwarts of Odissi dance.

Mishra has the refreshing quality of being graceful without being over-feminine. Odissi is often interpreted as an effeminate, saccharine-sweet dance, perhaps because of its *devdas* origins. Mishra has managed to avoid that familiar pitfall. Her movements are bold and expressive, and if she still needs to mature somewhat as a stage presence, she already possesses innate sensitivity and taste. Her choice of dances could ideally have been a more varied, in order to highlight the many faces of Odissi for what was essentially a lay audience. The programme tended to drag at times, not due to any fault in the dancing, but simply because of the similarity in mood between the

pieces. The audience was left with a somewhat one-sided view of the Odissi style.

The accompanying instrumentalists did their best, but vocalist KC Roy's mellifluous voice was too weak and "filmi" for such a recital. His singing left the listener wishing the audio track could be switched off, and did much to detract



Sujata Mishra: Graceful without being over-feminine.

from the overall quality of the evening.

Which again goes to prove the importance of the packaging in making the product attractive. Mishra is a fine dancer, but not yet of the calibre to carry it off on her shoulders alone. Given a few years, she will reach that stature. Hopefully for her and for us, organizers will also get their act together.

A Tribute to Satyajit Ray He was his Own Standard

by Waheedul Haque

IT was a super-10 head that he sported on a still of a body. That came from his forebears. Upen-dra-kishore Ray and his brothers and his sons and daughters and the offspring of his brothers had all been very talented people, some of them near geniuses — and at least one was a true genius, Sukumar Ray whose son is who we are talking about. All the world is at the moment talking about him. The world as well as we have long been talking about him and it is only natural that, now that he has died, we should all be for a spell of time talk and write and exhibit mostly about him. After Tagore, Satyajit Ray is the most celebrated Bengalee. And if the two cannot really be compared by any measure, Ray, one feels, has had a greater audience than the great man, understandably because of the medium he chose to work in.

And there was culture in the family. The Brahmos had not gone into a decline at the time Ray was born and the community represented the highest point in modern Indian culture, reaching deep down the roots of the subcontinental civilisation and imbuing all that was wholesome in the cultures and legacies of the west. Satyajit got it all from the milieu. Like he got his felicity in music. But the Brahmos would also be, very rightly car-

aptured as Victorian pruders and in spite of the remarkable all-round achievements of the sect as a whole very few of them could break free of an invisible straitjacket that was there. Until Tagore's voluptuous nudca shocked the Bengali intellectual establishment into a rethinking, he also was supposed to keep himself clearly off the boundaries set by Debendranath, Keshab Sen and Shrinath Sastri. Tagore himself took rather unkindly towards movies although for reasons very advanced for his times and far from considerations of prudery.

Film was not the ideal thing for a budding Brahmo intellectual to go madly after although Nitin, the son of the protean pathbreaker II Bose, had in the early thirties carved out his name as one of the pioneers of film technique and art in the subcontinent. When Satyajit broke free from the communal taboos, there was not much of challenge left in it. This is all to stress that he didn't get his film-mania from the family culture. It was something his very own. In a remote way, the death of the father, Sukumar, the Bengali version of Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear rolled into one — and far more than that — might have helped him find his first love — the Hollywood films.

During the opening of the fifties, this son of an illustrious Kishoreganj family, combining with another from a Chittagong-origin family, Chidananda Dasgupta, were working through mainly the forum of the Calcutta Film Society, a radical change in the film perception of the generation. And Jean Renoir, already a father-figure to world cinema and son of the celebrated impressionist painter, burst on to the Calcutta scene. That Ray was baptized into the art of film-making, a completely different avocation from writing about films, by none other than one of the all-time film immortals, was portentous of many good things to come. However, it was beyond the wildest dream of even those that were near and around that the first of these good things would be Pather Panchali. Bibhutibhusan's first novel was his greatest novel. According to many, Satyajit's first film, based on the same novel, was his greatest film.

All of the many splendored achievements of Ray may be traced back to family culture and genius barring one — his cinematic creations. His changing the world of book design and production into something after which books were never to be the same again is a gem of an achievement. But remember the drawings and caricatures of Sukumar and gra-



ndfather Upen-dra-kishore or art movement as a whole in Bengal at the time of his birth whose product was Mymensingh-patriot Hemen Majumdar, the self-taught master of the female figure — and you will know the roots of Satyajit's gift. His Shonku and Feluda mesmerizers are all so very natural offshoots of a clan sizzling with creative energy and unceasing playfulness — of both the intellectual and the artistic kind — as was true also of the Jorasanko house of the Tagores. How well the generation now going out remembered Kuladranjan, the writer-translator of classics for children, and Subinoy Roy, the science-minded ever curious one — both uncles of Satyajit! The writer he almost worshipped, Bibhutibhusan, the serious man had long before set a model for adventure thrillers for children that bristled with geography and history and anthropology — and could you believe — a dash of oceanography in the two classics of all time like RLS's Treasure Island. It was all set for Satyajit to follow in the footsteps of Chander Pahar and Mariner Donka.

After one has been able to circumnavigate this multifaceted genius, one would tend to push aside all his other works and come back to his films — specially the ones delving deep into the deprived and degraded world of a people that once was so rich and continues to be as rich in humanity as it was ever. And realise

that, well, here is the most Satyajit Ray in his element. Having no peers and predecessors. An avid Hollywood gazetteer that churned out a combination of Italian neo-realism with Soviet social realism and yet having much more that was completely new and fresh.

Like Tagore he used to set his own standard and strove to surpass it and move on to newer vistas of the human situation for a new kind of film. Although he stuck to a particularly slow tempo all his life, he never repeated himself in his films.

Our tributes to this best known Bengalee of his generation — and best preserved also — should come straight from hearts laden heavy with gratitude. It is not true that he has placed Bengali cinema on the map of world cinema — why should anyone in the world care for such trash? He caught for all the world and the posterity the humanity of the Bengalee people's society, crowded and poor and hungry for generations and yet evocative of the highest in man's capacity in the realm of culture and society. And thus gave us, irrelevant non-entities as we have been for so long in the world society, some value and see for ourselves in the mirror provided by him of our own soulful images and know that we haven't really been a bunch of evanescent phantoms but real people creating a real liveable world out of the utmost poverty in everything.



A scene from 'Pather Panchali'

Continued from page 9 for fuel. Kazakh ministerial intervention saved the day for us and we flew off not towards Moscow but to a Russian airport called Chilibirinsk, in the Ural region lost totally under snow. We refueled there and flew off to Moscow.

The target of our delegation was more than fulfilled. We had signed protocol on establishment of diplomatic relations with the seven newly independent republics that we visited. We signed agreements on trade and economic cooperation with every one of them and our members of delegation, specially from the private sector, established fruitful contacts with their counterparts. We had explored a whole new world and the result was very encouraging indeed.

A word about our students, many of whom have married locally and settled there. With their knowledge of Russian, acquaintance with local conditions and contacts, they were of enormous help to our delegation. With command economy collapsing in Moscow and elsewhere and being rapidly replaced by free market economy, our students have turned into full fledged businessmen and some, we were told, were doing very well. We heard that when former President Mr Gorbachev opened the market for import of computers back in 1987, our students rushed to Singapore and we were told of dollar millionaires among them!

During our three-week long visit in the eight republics, what struck me was that nowhere did I find any desire to snap ties with Moscow. The republics had become independent and they were slowly charting out their own course according to their capacities. Yet the bond forged through seventy years of living together, through the Russian language, through the now defunct discredited Communist Party and the Soviet military machine, the Russian TV and newspapers remained strong. In the collapse of the Soviet Union the republics played virtually no part and not certainly the Asian republics, who if anything, watched in helpless dismay the slide of this giant state. The Foreign

Gains of Seven Decades

Minister of Kazakhstan Mr Suleymanov spoke with warmth about his former boss HE Mr Alekseev, currently Russian Ambassador in Dhaka to whom Mr Suleymanov conveyed his very warm regards. Each newly independent republic has a representative in Moscow and that really is the effective coordinating body. Russia's influence with the new republics is still strong is evident from the simple fact that leaders of the newly independent republics have been paying visits to India, with whom the former Soviet Union

maintained excellent relations for nearly half a century. It is still too early to predict the future of the Commonwealth of Independent States. The leadership everywhere appeared to recognize that they had much to gain by keeping some links. It will never be the same Soviet Union again but perhaps a new entity based on community interest and shared experience.

Our Aeroflot flight back to Dhaka was due to take off on a late night of Sunday and I decided to look around Moscow. Yes, behind the Lenin hill

stood the magnificent Moscow University, Lenin's statue was in place and the first conqueror of space Yuri Gagarin, still standing tall. Marxism had made its home in Moscow for more than seventy years and Lenin took it to giddy heights. The ambition was no less than creation of a new man — the Soviet Man. In that grand quest the achievements of the Soviet Union are remarkable in the journey of man to a better future. Those achievements are there for all to see. Yet the soul has evaporated.

In fading sunlight of the

evening I took a walk around the Kremlin, where I had stayed as a member of the first Bangladesh delegation twenty years ago. Curious visitors were still looking at the mummified body of Lenin and wondering if it would be there tomorrow. The Red flags had been replaced by the Russian blue and red; the star on the Kremlin looked forlorn. I was overpowered by a sombre mood. The whole setting looked like a circus party, which had finished its final programme and was busy folding up the tents for its destination in the unknown.

(The author is former Ambassador and Assistant Secretary-General, OIC)

WRITE TO MITA

Dear Mita,
I am a regular reader of your newspaper, *The Daily Star*. I am facing a personal problem. Would you please help me out by giving me some advice and printing my letter in your esteemed daily.
I have been seeing a senior boy of our school for over one and half years. He will be appearing for his 'A' level examinations this year. I have developed a weakness for him as he is very cute and looks like the hero of Humayun Ahmed's story "Daroochhitr Dwip".
He will be leaving our school after this year, but I have to tell him that I love him. Thinking of him has already made me lose my sleep and my appetite. What can I do without any embarrassment to either of us? Please help me out.

Anonymous.

Dear Anonymous,
Young people of your age fall in and out of love very often. This is nothing to be ashamed or embarrassed about. Instead of telling the boy directly you can give him some hints and express your feelings indirectly. If the boy is interested, he will respond and even after leaving the school will maintain contact with you. Just remember that you both are very young and have a long way to go before settling down with a single partner. What seems like love today might not seem that way tomorrow. So take it easy, don't lose sleep or appetite over it, there is plenty of time for that. Right now just enjoy yourself, be happy and study hard.

Dear Mita,
A distant relative married off her daughter to a man who had lived 20 years in the US and was here for a two-month holiday. The girl joined her husband after six months and found he already had a wife and did not want her anymore. This young girl is alone, without anybody to support her and doesn't know what to do. What can be done about this situation? Please advise.

Salma Khan, Chittagong.

Dear Salma,
It is another sad example of the vulnerability of our women. They seem to be such a burden that some parents marry them off to the first apparent eligible bachelor. This kind of situation is not new nor uncommon. Many men after spending years abroad come back to marry. What they want is not a wife and partner but a servant who will be at their beck and call. There are a number of actions this girl can take. If she has her marriage certificates, she can sue her husband legally as polygamy is illegal in the West. She should leave him and come back home and start a new life. There is no doubt that to be happily married is very important but it is not more important than life itself.

Anonymous, Dhaka.

Dear Anonymous,
You have hit upon a very valid and important point. This is very common in our culture. A woman suffers for years and finally, when their life is almost over, is rewarded by their husband's respect which is also motivated as he needs someone to look after him. It is not relevant whether I think it was worth it or not. The point is as long as we orient our women to feel that making their husbands happy is the sole purpose of their lives, such things will continue. As for your first point, though independence for women is a long way off, they can protest in many subtle ways and not be so subservient.