

# Bardolatry: In England, in Bangladesh

When the western admirers joined the stream and lent their voice to the chorus, the cult gained in prestige without becoming a world phenomenon. Bardolatry is always limited to the boundaries of a language.

THE word bardolatry has a strictly English usage: Shakespeare worship, excessive admiration for Shakespeare. Change the context, shift the scene, it means excessive admiration for Tagore. One suspects that the word, bardolatry, carries with it a hint, maybe just a hint, of disapproval. I would like to find out the first use of the word in English. But though the dictionary is with me, the magnifying glass without which it is impossible to read this particular edition of the Oxford English Dictionary, is missing. My suspicion is that the word originated with the cult, and that would be, historically speaking, the first quarter of the nineteenth century, the time of the Romantics. Before that, it is not easy to imagine the most ardent admirer of the poet to be carried off his feet in his adulation of Shakespeare. Enthusiasm is not the thing we associate with the hard-headed neo-classicists. Which means that we have to wait till the era of enthusiasm, of romanticism, for a sentiment like bardolatry to gain popularity.

Bengali-speaking world have found in him their poet par excellence, their poet of poets. The year 1913 is the watershed, separating the long years of lukewarm recognition from the longer years of warm acceptance culminating in the bardolatry which has all the promise of remaining an inalienable part of Bengali psyche.

The English bardolatry knows no second to Shakespeare. As far as I know, in the Russia speaking world, Pushkin's sway is the same. I am not sure if the same could be claimed in favour of Ghalib vis-a-vis the Urdu world. In Bengal, there is no doubt that bardolatry has only one meaning: Rabindranath.

And like all such things, it is a cult. It is more a heart's tribute to the dazzling achievements of a genius than a mind's cool and balanced appraisal of a mortal's work. As in idolatry, so in bardolatry, a dissembling voice is not taken kindly. Even a cautious note, a cool comparison with another towering figure, Tagore with Dante, Tagore with Goethe, is sometimes taken as a mark of disrespect and the critic finds himself in the position of a heretic. Rabindranath, in his lifetime, had to endure much

criticism which hurt him without disturbing him deeply. The criticism came mostly from old school critics, and they had their limitations. The poet must have known this and must have forgiven them, unless there was more malice than a critical deficiency in them. In the last twenty years or so of his life, when honour and adulation were heaped upon him, he did not allow his

his bell. Far from it. Santiniketan, the woodland retreat, this abode of peace, was first conceived by his father, the Maharshi. Its later development as a residential school owed mostly to the poet. When he moved himself to this place with his family, he needed a school for his own son, and instead of sending him to one of the schools already in existence, he decided to start a

What was apothosis in the charmed circle of Santiniketan become bardolatry for the wider public. When the western admirers joined the stream and lent their voice to the chorus, the cult gained in prestige without becoming a world phenomenon. Bardolatry is always limited to the boundaries of a language. True, there was something like a Tagore wave in the West, particularly in continental Europe, and like all other waves, it was a passing thing. But back at home, in the poet's native Bengal, the cult persisted.

There is a curious history of how the both popular and educated sentiment in our part of the Bengal-speaking world has been viewed by successive governments. Authorities in Karachi and Pindi never understood the sentiment. Not only that, they were deeply suspicious of it and took it as a potential, if not an actual, threat to national integrity. In a sense they were right. To the extent Rabindranath strengthened our sense of cultural identity, his influence could be seen as secretly and mysteriously disruptive. But that would be so from a peculiarly myopic and distorted point of view which, perhaps inevitably vitiated Pakistani politics. The emergence of

Bangladesh brought about a big difference in official attitude to the poet. The Shaikh himself was an ardent admirer of Rabindranath as much as he was of Nazrul Islam. But bardolatry as such remained in private sector, the official media, during the post-Shaikh era, being content to do the bare minimum.

The last year of President Ershad signified another change. Anniversary of both Rabindranath and Nazrul's birth was observed officially, the one at Silaidah, and the other at Darirampur, Mymensingh. The President was present in both the celebrations. The move provoked a mixed reaction. The President, who had himself emerged as a poet, was keen to share the platform with Tagore and Nazrul, and in this aspiration he got unqualified support from his Prime Minister, also the first among the flatterers, thus reducing the whole show to something like a comic absurdity. The officials had seen to it that the poet-President's portrait embellishing the welcome arch at Silaidah was of equal height with Tagore's. The news soon became the talk of the town. It perhaps carried a moral and a lesson for Ershad's successors, and more particularly for the Ministry of Culture. Bardolatry at the official level may lose its purity and its charm.

## Democracy for Thailand

In politics, especially in Thailand, no victory for democratic forces is ever a complete one. This seems to be the case with the latest development, with Prime Minister Suchinda Kraprayon bowing to the opposition demand for his resignation on the ground that he is not an elected member of the Thai parliament. General Suchinda who stepped down as the Supreme Military Commander of the country last month to take over as the head of the government has also accepted the demand that the Thai constitution would be amended by the parliament so that Prime Minister must be chosen from elected members of the parliament.

On the face of it, this is a step forward in the process of increased democratisation of the political system of Thailand. The credit for this goes to the huge demonstration of nearly 200,000 people who had staged the protest rallies in Bangkok. This largely spontaneous affair drew much of its inspiration from Chamlong Srimuang, a former governor of Bangkok, generally referred to as "Mr. Clean", whose six-day hunger strike spurred the largest ever mass protest faced by the military junta in Thailand in two decades.

The pro-democracy forces have won a decisive round, but not the whole battle. This explains why part of the opposition has expressed its rejection of the so-called compromise solution. In the first place, this rejection underscores the popular distrust of Gen. Suchinda who had staged the coup against the civilian government in February last year, thus setting the process in motion that eventually led to mass rallies. Again, even if the discredited general wins a measure of credibility, the people of Thailand, especially the educated elite and the media, will not rest until the military withdraws from the political scene. Thai analysts cannot also dismiss the possibility that, after resigning as Prime Minister, Suchinda can still manipulate his way back to power, either as an elected member of the parliament or through another coup in not too distant future. Again, unless the powers of the Senate whose members are largely nominated by the military establishment are drastically curbed, the elected lower house cannot operate with a popular mandate. Seen from this perspective, this incredibly affluent Southeast Asian country still has a long way to go before its economic progress is matched by political reforms.

In bringing about these overdue reforms, protest rallies in Bangkok certainly help a great deal. So does the leadership of a man like Chamlong. However, in the long run, there is a role to be played by political parties which remain personality-oriented and generally based in Bangkok. Unless they develop a grassroots base and offer the people a progressive socio-economic agenda, they will fail their people in the all-important task of stimulating the process of democracy in this ancient country. These political parties know better than outsiders that people in the outlying provinces of the country are yet to share the benefits of the country's economic growth. The social problems faced by millions of people, from the northeast to the south, are many, problems which get little attention from the authorities. In fighting for a democratic Thailand, political parties will indeed be looking for solutions of these problems, with a popular mandate, instead of letting the military tackle them with another coup.

## Mines, Bad Roads Peril UN Food Aid for Cambodians

BETWEEN now and Christmas the United Nations hopes to feed 9,000 returning refugees from Thai border camps into Cambodia's north-western provinces. But as the first food convoys rolled through Poipet in early April, there were serious doubts as to how far many of them would get, and what they would find if they got there.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports that Routes 5 and 6 are currently incapable of handling the expected volume of traffic. Mine clearing operations have not been completed on the main roads and feeder links or in the likely resettlement areas. Rehabilitation of Cambodia's main north-western road network was to have started months ago, but in the absence of funding, only a token effort has been made, courtesy of the Royal Thai Army. The Thai army completed work on roughly one-third the 30-kilometre stretch of Route 5 between Sisophon and the border before it ran out of operating funds. A UNHCR survey of secondary roads leading to possible resettlement sites found that 3,100 kms of secondary roads and the 2,800 kms of tertiary roads in the northwest are in a state of "advanced deterioration" and are all but unusable even in the current dry season. The survey team advised that when the wet season arrives in August the roads will become impassable

and repair work will have to be suspended. UNHCR also found that some of the access roads which will be needed to bring food and other supplies for resettlement areas could not be safely restored at the present time because of land mines and security problems around the proposed sites. In addition to the broken roads, some 4,100 bridges and culverts are reported to be in need of repair or reconstruction. Effective transportation of the 370,000 Cambodians scheduled to return this year

hinges on an emergency operation mounted this month by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) with initial funding from Sweden. UNDP has contracted with the Thai Battalion for the UN Transitional Authority for Cambodia (UNTAC) to tackle the 70-kilometre stretch of Route 5 between Sisophon and Battambang, and the longer haul to Pursat is currently being surveyed. Whether or not these operations can be successfully completed before the wet sea-

son, is an open question. The heavy equipment currently available for the work is old, in poor repair, and in many instances unusable. UNDP's main office in Phnom Penh reports that it will be difficult to find spare parts to recondition some of the machines. A contingency fund has been established to purchase reconditioned bulldozers and rolling equipment in Thailand together with

bridge building equipment, spare parts, fuel and lubricants. The total cost of this race against time is estimated at US \$15 million which UNDP hopes to obtain from donor countries. —*Deplines Asia*

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## To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

### Security in the Secretariat

Sir, Facts are indeed stranger than fiction. In broad day light a person with bonafide intention cannot enter the precincts of Bangladesh Secretariat without going through an uphill task to gain admittance. None below the rank of a Joint Secretary of a Ministry can issue a gate pass to a visitor intending to see some high-up in that magnificent edifice. So tight is the security. But with the sun down, it is understood that the whole scenario changes. One cannot only enter the precinct but also the buildings unchallenged and break open the lock of the room of any one from the Hon'ble Minister down to the officers and become the master of the place. At least that's the idea one forms after having read the report published in most of the local dailies on 4th May with regard to ransacking the chamber of the Minister for Social Welfare and Women's Affairs on the preceding night. How could an unidentified person enter into the restricted area, do the damage and leave the place unnoticed — is a prime question to be probed into. Then follows the rest of the questions. Newspapers say that some time back the room of the Secretary was also ransacked. "A case has been registered with the Ramna Police Station" should not be enough in this case. It needs a thorough investigation deep into the mat-

ter and the culprit should be brought to book. The crime should forthwith be stopped once for all, otherwise the whole security system, if there be any, of the Government will be in jeopardy. We invite the kind attention of the Home Minister. Abu M Faiz Dhaka-1205

### Utility bills and banks

Sir, I had an ordeal of paying some utility service bills. On 9.5.92 I went to Agrani Bank, Mahakhali Branch near TB Gate Water Tank to pay WASA Bill. Reaching there at about 10.30 AM I found about 80 persons standing on the long queue I had to wait my turn to pay the bill which I paid after 11.40 AM. It was a very sad experience and I approached the Manager of the Branch drawing his attention that there was only one queue for receiving all the Tele, Gas, Electric and WASA Bills which naturally caused hardship to bill payers and requested him to arrange for opening another counter from his available staff so that bill collection could be quicker. The Manager talked to my queries quite attentively saying that he appreciated the difficulties of the public and had written to the controlling office to depute more staff to meet the necessity. He, however, said that there were other works to be done in the bank and he couldn't arrange to open another counter for receiving bills. It seemed to

## OPINION

### Railway Track on Jamuna Bridge

From a recent Tender Notice it is understood that the Jamuna Bridge Authority intends to lay a metre gauge railway track over the proposed multipurpose bridge.

The metre gauge railway track will never serve the purpose fully both at present and future. It will be uneconomical and time-consuming, too. It is known to all that the existence of two railway systems — broad gauge on the west and metre gauge on the east of the Jamuna has been the cause of a lot of inconveniences. It is understood that an idea to convert the broad gauge into metre gauge on the west of the Jamuna i.e. Rajshahi-Khulna Divisions was given up due to the fact that the Harding Bridge over the Ganges was constructed by the British rulers making it suitable for double broad gauge railway track and not for a metre gauge track thus linking only the western region of the country with rest of the sub-continent and Iran and onwards with Europe. Besides for heavier transport, its economical movement and the introduction of a standard gauge railway track, the broad gauge railway track is always preferred the world over. But the colonial rulers installed only 400 miles broad gauge railway track — Rajshahi-Khulna Divisions.

Out of total 1700 miles railway track in our country, 1300 miles are metre gauge. Yet in 1969 United Kingdom's "Freeman Fox and Partners" and in 1973 Japan's "Japan International Co-operation Agency" in their survey reports recommended for broad gauge railway track on the proposed bridge. The purpose of this recommendation was to connect Dhaka directly with 85% of the western region and the country's single natural port Mongla without any interruption and change-over. In the western region, jute mills, sugar mills, newspaper mills, all other large scale industries and the unexplored deposit sites are connected by broad gauge railway track. For marketing, the whole western region is dependent on Dhaka and vice versa.

Deposits in the north of mineral resource like coal, hard stone, lime stone, cement etc., when explored will need heavier railway bogies. Traffic in Bangladesh specially across the Jamuna is likely to increase and cargo traffic is expected to change its pattern to heavier nature. Throughout the year there is no road for movement of heavier transports in the country. Not only in our country but also in the USA known as a country of automobiles, the railway transport is still liked and trusted and is cheaper. In our country 60 wagons of a goods train cost only one gallon of oil for one mile. For the same weight for goods 240 trucks are needed which cost 21 gallons of oil as fuel for one mile. So the use of broad gauge rail track would not only minimise the heavy pressure of traffic, by capacity, on the bridge but also save

time and make the transportation of goods cheaper, too. For more agricultural development, particularly in the western region, fertilizer factory is installed at Sarisabari nearer to the proposed Jamuna Bridge. Installation of broad gauge railway track over the bridge will facilitate distribution of fertilizer at a cheaper rate directly to the major parts of the western region which produces 70% of total paddy and jute and nearly 90-95% of total sugarcane, tobacco, hides and skins. In the western region the site of the bridge will be located at Panchasona village in Strajganj district which is connected with broad gauge railway tracks covering 37 districts including Faridpur of Dhaka Division — 14 district headquarters including Rajshahi and Khulna metropolitan cities and a good number of upazila headquarters. In the eastern region the site of the bridge will be located at Daria village in Kalihati upazila of Tangail district where there is no railway track. The construction of a metre gauge rail link from Dhaka to the site at Panchasona village in Strajganj will not remove the difficulties as the inconvenience of transshipment of passengers and mostly perishable goods from metre gauge to broad gauge train will be unavoidable. The laying of a broad gauge railway track over the proposed bridge will not be costlier than the metre gauge track if it is taken up at this initial stage. A new broad gauge railway line from Dhaka/Tejgaon to Strajganj will give direct rail connection to the capital city with the rest of all important places on the west of the Jamuna. It will facilitate easy, quick and cheaper movement of passengers and goods from Khulna, Rajshahi, Amnura, Nawabganj, Santahar, Parbatipur, Nilphamari to Dhaka and vice versa. Presuming that the proposed multipurpose Jamuna Bridge will have a railway track, two up and down motor lanes and one lane for gas and electricity the total width of the bridge may be about 40/45 feet and it will not therefore be costlier to lay a broad gauge railway track instead of a metre gauge. In this connection I like to mention about the 8.5-mile long San Francisco Bay Bridge of California, USA with up and down double decks having in each deck five wide tracks for all kinds of heavy motor vehicular transports, each paying a toll of three dollars each trip. Our single decker Jamuna Bridge will be much shorter in length than the Bay Bridge and will have a lesser width. If the construction of the proposed bridge is materialised, its cost may be recovered within eight to 10 years from a nominal toll of Tk. 10 to 20 levied on each vehicle for each trip. It may be noted that for the bridge the World Bank has approved a breadth of 18.5 metre instead of 20.3 metre.

With the installation of new broad gauge railway track from Daria in Tangail to Dhaka and Narayanganj (not present in Plan) and new metre gauge railway track from Daria to nearby Jagannathganj Railway Station (present in Plan) in the eastern region and in the western region, new metre gauge railway track between Panchasona in Strajganj district and Bogra (present in Plan), the mixed gauge railway tracks on the Jamuna Bridge will cover the entire country connecting Dhaka directly without the necessity of converting the broad gauge track into metre gauge and vice versa. It will serve both Mongla and Chittagong ports properly. Railway incurs a loss of Taka 160 crore annually. In view of the spontaneous, easy and direct movement of goods and passengers without any interruption and change-over, this loss will be minimised a great deal. Within 1994-95 it is a must to connect the western region with additional electricity and for the first time with gas. But without giving much weight to the pattern of traffic, particularly for near future, installation of metre gauge railway track will not be scientific. Once the breadth of the bridge is fixed and constructed, in near future it will be costly and difficult to instal the mixed gauge railway track. So at first only the installation of broad gauge railway tracks will solve the problem. The provision for turning it into the mixed gauge railway track will remain 'built-in' there.

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## Sino-Bangla Cultural Cooperation

The visiting Chinese acrobatic troupe has offered training for children in Bangladesh. A high quality entertainment as well as sport, acrobatic is not really a new concept for people here. But the level at which the Chinese have elevated it — almost to flawless perfection — is wondrous indeed. Like Russian ballet, acrobatic has attained at its captivating best at the hands of the Chinese. So when the visiting team volunteers to train children of the country, it cannot but be a most welcome offer from a country with which we have cultural exchanges dating back to thousands of years.

While this new offer is going to open up a new frontier in the Sino-Bangla relations, its implications for Bangladesh are expected to be most positive for a number of reasons. The fact that our backwardness in sports mostly lies in the attitude of the people to this area of life has now been recognised but not as much as the situation demanded to bring about a noticeable change in the arena. The Chinese are as much oriental — culturally speaking — as we are but much less conservative and sure enough we have a lesson or two to learn from them. This is not just in terms of the sport itself but in relation to our attitude to games and sports.

Cultural considerations apart, the economic side is equally a strong determinant for the girls in particular to undergo the various regimes of acrobatic and learn those intricate skills. Thus the girls will stand a chance of coming out of the shell and of even breaking some social taboo. This is because of the sophistication attached to this discipline — part sport and part entertainment. This is quite important because if the thing is divorced from sophistication, there is hardly any chance of its attaining the respectability it enjoys among its audience.

Let the co-operation on this be fruitful in the light of our past exchanges. That religio-cultural exchanges for both countries were once highly beneficial was epitomised by the spread of Buddhist religion across the length and breadth of China as also by the visits of Atisha Dipankar, Fa-Hien and Huen-Sung. That tradition in the modern world will be maintained but only through some changes suitable to the need of the time. Acrobatic may be just one of the many steps to be made in that direction.