

# Tagore at Oxford, a Reprint with a Difference; and Tributes to Some Colourful Figures from Another Time

## Tamizuddin's Stand for Democracy

By Razia Khan

It is a superb piece of writing, a gem that I have just read for the third time. "Tagore at Oxford" by S H Suhrawardy. Why for the third time? Well, it had appeared twice in the Dhaka daily, The New Nation, last year on two of the anniversaries of the great poet. Then, on Friday, August 7, on the death anniversary of Tagore, the article made its third appearance, one I have before me, in The Morning Sun.

The reprint of the article in The Morning Sun has one distinguishing addition, which was lacking in the piece that appeared twice in The New Nation last year. The addition comes at the bottom of the long piece, and it says, "The article was first published in the Calcutta Municipal Gazette on September 13, 1941." The acknowledgement might well have added, "This article has also appeared in another local newspaper which, probably due to an oversight, failed to mention its original source."

The article raises a few questions. What kind of publication was the Calcutta Municipal Gazette that printed such a superb literary piece? What else did the Gazette offer its readers? Where can we get such back issues?

The other question is about the identity of the writer. H S Suhrawardy is definitely not the politician, the one time Prime Minister of Pakistan, Hussain Shahid Suhrawardy. It is Hassan Shahed Suhrawardy, the politician's elder brother (or uncle?), which I found out last year from my friend, Rehman Sobhan who is related to the Suhrawardy family through his wife.

Except for a long piece I once read on Shahed Suhrawardy in the Statesman, the Calcutta daily, I know little about this unique Bengali who made his name as a writer, art critic and perhaps as an educationist, with a degree from Oxford. Did he end up in Moscow just before the 1917 revolution and become a teacher in English to Alexander Kerensky, the head of the provisional government — one short-lived exercise in social democracy — which was toppled by Lenin on Nov 7, 1917? A Bengali teaching English to a Russian leader of Kerensky's stature? Or was it later when Kerensky lived in the United States in exile? There was definitely some kind of an association between the two. The article about Suhrawardy in the Statesman made a mention of it.

Whether Suhrawardy — I mean, Shahed not Shahid — taught English to Kerensky, he could teach anyone how to write superb prose

in English. "Tagore at Oxford" provides some excellent examples.

On his encounter with Tagore in a flat at Chelsea: "The poet was sitting on a divan and along the walls, there were many chairs occupied by men and women, Indian, British and continental who sat in rapt silence, as in a prayer hall. In one corner, an English woman was modelling the poet's head in clay, while in another, a fierce young man, a Pole perhaps, was sketching... At that time, I thought that the poet's immobility and his closed eyes were due to his posing for the artists in the room,

the Oxford Majlis. There, we would skin him alive, proving to him that he was a worthless worm, who, in spite of his nationalist pretensions, had done nothing else all his life but lick the boots of British imperialism... Yet, they (these visiting Indian politicians) always came, almost afraid of annoying us by refusing our invitation, which would always be entrusted to me as I had developed a gift for treacherous bandishment. I used to arouse their interest in us by mock humility, pretending that we were thirsting to be taught, while all along I knew what fate awaited them once they walked into

either. For reasons I cannot make out, unlike Bombay, Calcutta book publishing trade never turned to English. So, Shahed Suhrawardy — Bengal's Mulk Raj Anand in art criticism — has remained virtually an unknown quantity to our young generation of artists, poets and writers.

Quite a few other Bengalis — Hindus and Muslims — have suffered the same fate. One of them was S Wajid Ali whose prose pieces were recommended readings for us in our schools.

There were also some very colourful personalities. A paperback on Germany I had once picked up, perhaps in mid-fifties, from an old bookshop in London contained some fascinating details about plots which were hatched to murder Hitler. A Bengali was said to be involved in one such plot, perhaps a minor one, and he was Soumendra Nath Tagore, a leftist radical living in exile in Europe, who was either a nephew or a grand nephew of the great poet. Tagore was let off by the German police for lack of evidence against him and allowed to leave the country. He spent some years in Moscow, before returning to British India where he was promptly arrested and put in jail.

Then an intermediate student in Calcutta, just before our independence, I met Soumendra Nath Tagore when he was released in his modest but tastefully furnished house on Elgin Road, through the good offices of Uncle Mujtaba Ali. During an hour-long conversation, Tagore was just as curious to find out how I felt about the future of socialism in India as I was to know about the plot to murder Hitler in which he was reportedly involved. We did not get very far on either subject.

Now, find me a good biography of Soumendra Nath Tagore. We will pay a good price to use extracts from it in the Weekend Magazine of The Daily Star.

Last but not the least, whatever happened to another Bengali, Lohani whose first name escapes my memory? A political exile from British India, he settled in Moscow which provided sanctuary to many radical activists from South Asia, and was never heard of, not even by his relatives like the late Fatch Lohani or Kamal of the Press Institute of Bangladesh.

After all these decades, their memories — or whatever little I know of them — cast their shadow over My World. To quote from the introductory poem by Kanti Chandra Ghosh in his Bengali translation of Omar Khayyam, "Wherever you may be today, my tributes will not go in vain."

# MY WORLD

S. M. Ali

but since I have understood better, he possessed the rare quality of being able to withdraw within himself at will... That capacity for complete aloofness in the midst of contacts, that sudden communion with the inner life in the intervals of spoken words, that faculty of abstracting oneself from one's surroundings, he shared with prophets and visionaries

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On other Indians who visited Oxford: "Naturally Indian public men in England used to dislike us... In fact, it was a game of ours to get hold of an Indian politician, cajole and flatter him and invite him to the meeting of

our parlour. I could give a long list of distinguished Indians who were thus brought to Oxford by me. Only one person tamed us, that was Sarojini Naidu; another was consistently obdurate, and that was Jinnah. Even in those days, he was a difficult person..."

On Bengali and Tagore poetry: "I am ashamed to say that due to the defective upbringing, I was then, as I am now, ignorant of Bengali, except of the most debased kind. So I had heard with a certain amount of scepticism of the great popularity of the Tagore's verses which were being sung. I was told, in every village home in Bengal. Therefore, to me, as to those who came to know of him through translations, the first renderings of his verses in English... came as a great revelation."

The specific timing of Tagore's visit to Oxford is not clear from the piece by Suhrawardy. It was probably soon after the poet received the Nobel Prize in 1913. There were two other Bengalis we know who were contemporaries of Suhrawardy at Oxford, Kiran Shankar Roy and Apurba Chandra. If the piece I have quoted from is any guide, it was certainly great to be in Oxford at that time.

It is a pity, there isn't a good biography of English of Shahed Suhrawardy — as far as I know — and perhaps there isn't an anthology of his writings on art and literature

# Problems of Bangladesh Politics X-rayed

**G**ANOTANTRE Shankat: Bangladesh (the Problems of Establishing Democracy: the Case of Bangladesh) is a book on an array of inherent problems of the institutions of Bangladesh. Bangladesh was conquered many times — and the conquerors met little material resistance, but were absorbed by the new land. The British colonial rulers, who were superior in all fields, as riders of an advancing civilization, destroyed the old feudal political

way, but because there are necessary relationships between resources, technology, population, social organisation and ideology. The poor generally bear their poverty in silence and isolation. Loyalty and lack of initiative are by far the most common phenomenon. The ruling class here, comprador mercantile bourgeoisie — scholar — official class, has a way of life that is largely incompatible with the change. It is hard for industrial development, or any kind of develop-

ment, to occur except under official patronage. The burden of an ancient culture weigh heavily on Bangladesh and few have detached themselves radically from the past. People are not receptive to change. Kazi Malek points out that during a very critical period of history when colonialism was tailored to fit the changing circumstances of the twentieth century, the utilitarian interpretation of Marxism, made by Lenin, by contemplating the possibility of overleaping the middle class revolution by seizing power proved to be of significant impact for third world. According to the Marxist theory the growth of a capitalist economy must first cause a middle class revolution to destroy feudalism and to set up the liberal political institutions appropriate to a bourgeois society. Only then there be any hope of going on to socialism. For dialectical materialism seemed to prove that the revolutionary spirit of the proletariat and its political education could evolve only as results of industrialism and political liberalism. But for Lenin this solution was irrelevant for he could not hope to capture power by waiting to see its maturity. The Russian revolution of 1905 made this problem acute. For it held out the hope that revolution in Russia was possible, yet it evidently was far from being a situation which Lenin could exploit to capture power. There was not much in Marx that could help him to seize power in an underdeveloped state. For the main outline of Marx's philosophy depended on the presumption that the French Revolution had already marked a clear line between feudalism

and capitalism. In 1848 and even a good deal later Marx had believed that a socialist revolution was imminent only in France or perhaps in England. The closest analogue to the Russian situation was Germany, which he expected to follow the road already traveled by France. Responsible Marxists could only support liberal reforms that would strengthen the working class. In "What is to be Done," published in 1902, and elsewhere, subsequently, Lenin made a startling emendation of accepted Marxist theory. He said, "A trade union movement is incapable of developing a revolutionary ideology for it-

self. So the choice for a revolutionary party is the only option for indoctrinating it with the ideology of socialist intellectuals." This explanation neatly solved the problem of the revolutionary intellectual of the Eastern World, accustomed to think of the revolution or change of system as something that must be brought to the masses from without. For him the maker of the proletarian ideology was not a social class but a small group of middle class intellectuals, professional revolutionaries, later turned professional politicians.

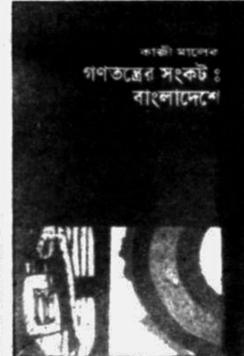
Kazi Malek, with rare insight, presents us with an expose of what ails leftist politics in the Third World specially Bangladesh, when he says that

trausted consciousness and spontaneity, and they have an exaggerated confidence in the first and ingrained distrust of the second. It is perhaps natural that the frustrated intellectuals, including the politicians, keenly aware of their isolated superiority, with deep aspirations, engage themselves in taming human destiny and reducing politics to be executed under bureaucratic direction and control.

The 270-page big work comprising around 90,000 words couched well-researched information and enlightened observation is somewhat overbearing. The rather sloppy production makes it more so. But that should not deter one from going for the Karnel which speaks of a deep knowledge of our political reality and what vitiates it.

## BOOK REVIEW

**Ganotantre Shankat: Bangladesh**  
(Problems of Establishing Democracy: the Case of Bangladesh)  
by Kazi Malek



institutions, shattered traditional economic patterns. New forms were sought to replace them but only to suit the interest of the colonialists' mother country, the historical social inertia rooted here was left untouched.

The objective of the colonialist was to annex the peasant economy to the British metropolitan economy, to appropriate minerals and agricultural products from the metropolitan centre, to destroy the local artisan, thereby, and also by other factors including lack of initiative on the native's own part, preventing him from playing his historic role as the central point in the transition from manufactory to factory, to link the colonial market with the factories of Manchester and Liverpool, and to create an indigenous elite through the colonial education system to help them in their task. As staging posts on the periphery to centre routes, small modern enclaves mushroomed in the ports, mining centres, plantations and administrative nuclei of the colonies to form part of the colonial system.

The first volume of 'Ganotantre Shankat: Bangladesh' by Kazi Malek examines the extremes of privilege and deprivation which had been characteristic of the agrarian society of Bangladesh. Achievement of independence meant no change for these people comprising 80 per cent of the population. Political movement, change of government or geographical reconstruction etc. had no repercussion whatsoever. Society is structured the way it is, not because people chose to construct them in a particular

ment, to occur except under official patronage. The burden of an ancient culture weigh heavily on Bangladesh and few have detached themselves radically from the past. People are not receptive to change.

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## Of Ethnic Angles, Symbols and Swirls

by Fayza Haq

her mother, bearing collected items for her family from the woods. Trees and hills had been brought up. The "Pinon" and the "Khadi" had been accentuated with care, precision and dexterity, in red and white zigzag patterns. The figure was out-lined in grey, with soft sweeps. The effect was almost that of a sketch. One of the figure's leg was outlined in black, and the other had gentle grey outline. The Chittagong atmosphere had been captured well.

The artist's favourite piece recalled her youth in her home, "At that time I believed 'Rangamati to be idyllic.' Every moment there was enjoyable, and benefit of the present vicissitudes I now confront in Dhaka," Kanakchapa explained that it was a collage of different coloured textures, which had bits of straw, and had been obtained from "MCCC," Mohamadpur. "I no longer find Rangamati what it was in my early days. I find it colourless and insipid. A tribal young woman and her home has been sketched. The importance has been given to the colour composition." There were trees in the backdrop as well as hills,

them with vegetables, rice, seasonal fruits etc. They get it from the gardens on the hills and dales.

As regards the piece "Moment", once again it was impressionistic and this was presented in a delectable manner with a lot of dots on the blouse, and a swirl comprising the rest of the apparel. Brilliant vermilion hues, with scratches in the work, lent further aesthetic beauty to the

Replying to the question as to why she chose her style in the impressionistic manner, with a combination of bright and soft hues, the artist elaborated, "I could have gone on to pure abstraction. I feel that if I had indulged in abstraction alone, I might have lost my goal and identity. My work might have appeared like someone else's creation and my individuality thus would be lost."

In "Curiosity" there was an impressionistic background which had touches of yellow. The figure was wearing a "sari" and the backdrop had been delineated with soft hues. Another woman seated, in front, could be clearly understood. The fact that the main face had no details lent beauty to the composition. There were scratches and dashes on the main figure. The colours in the composition were blue and pink, with touches of green, yellow ochre and blue. "Whatever colours I have used in my work have been inspired by the tribal clothes. In 'Chakma' clothes, bright colours are used. Like green, red and yellow," Kanakchapa elaborated, "Tribal women always carry baskets behind

which clearly denoted the origin of the subject, as well as the theme. The composition had been completed with burnt-senna, black and white.

There was yet another piece that had a sketched effect. There were designs of curls and swirls in green, yellow and vermilion. The backdrop was light grey. It was completed in blue, black, with

In "Luck", Mithu, the other painter at the exhibit, had presented the theme of fortunes and bad luck. This has been delineated with the representations — a dice-board and three dices of different sizes placed in an arresting manner. There were squares in the backdrop in which the artist had used green, red and blue. In the "Power" piece the "ring" symbolised power. It was a "white king" that was focused by the artist. Mithu explained, "I wish to tell the world that the fair races are still dominated by the dark ones." The composition in that piece included green, yellow-ochre, dominated and subtly blended together with black and white. This was geometrical in presentation.

In "Hope", there were cycle wheels depicted by blue circles, which ran in a diagonal way from the top to the bottom of the composition. Blue, red and white hues had been carefully employed in this piece. The white, in the composition, represented success. Three loops were wheels — part of a rickshaw — which had been carefully juxtaposed in the painting. The struggle of the downtrodden in this complex world had been well emphasised.

"Survive" was a view from a window. A grey and red light could be seen inside the room. The artist explained about that work, "We are trying to escape from hardship to peace and

harmony". In "Childhood", one found an eye sketched in the left lower end, while there was a kite in the right top end. This obviously represented the carefree days of one's youth. The designs and formations were neat. The dominating colours used were pulsating green and red, with a lot of white thrown in for good measure.

"Life Line" depicted life in Bangladesh. Scratches had been used while a cross in the backdrop had been highlighted with a red circle. The background was kept a subdued one. The rings that represented life in the pattern. The rings, representing a rickshaw wheel, stood for the struggle of the average man in the country. The final effect was semi abstract and cubistic. Blue, green and grey colours had been used.

"From the Tree" was another fascinating piece created from impression of what the artist had found in the roots of a tree. He had composed the "eye-catching" piece. This abstraction was grey and included dots, with a heavy grey bar in between the details, added to its beauty. Kanakchapa and Mithu had proved themselves a promising set of painters. This was apart from the refreshing camaraderie they have had to offer to any viewer who cared to visit their display. They even took pains to explain their work with patience and suavity. Their awards and displays, here and overseas, proved their success as promising contemporary artists with guts and go.



Mr D N Pritt, the eminent English lawyer known for his democratic priorities, is seen seated in the picture taken during the Tamizuddin Khan case, with Mr Khan while Mr Mirza Ghulam Hafiz and Mr Hamidul Huq Chowdhury are seen standing behind.

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her mother, bearing collected items for her family from the woods. Trees and hills had been brought up. The "Pinon" and the "Khadi" had been accentuated with care, precision and dexterity, in red and white zigzag patterns. The figure was out-lined in grey, with soft sweeps. The effect was almost that of a sketch. One of the figure's leg was outlined in black, and the other had gentle grey outline. The Chittagong atmosphere had been captured well.

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The column WRITE TO MITA has been held over for next week due to unavoidable circumstances.