

# Treatise on War and Liberation

## BOOK REVIEW

**OF BLOOD AND FIRE**, by Jahanara Imam, translated from Bangla by Mustafizur Rahman. Published by Academic Publishers, 35 Syed Awlad Hossain Lane, Dhaka 1100. Pp 246. Price Tk 225.

Reviewed by **NANCY WONG**



our very existence is at stake". She could not agree more. The Chinese word for "patriotism" is "love of country" and it has no other synonym. The author has obviously imbibed it into her family. Despite her numerous heart-felt trepidations, she not only condoned her son's actions but joined wholeheartedly in the fray by sending parcels of food, clothing and money whenever possible through other Freedom Fighters. Her husband did no less as he helped in the guerrilla activities by supplying maps of bridges in the country as targets to be blown apart. Their house became a centre of co-ordination, information and refuge for weary young men. As the turmoil escalated and the Pakistani army increased their reign of terror and picked up civilians thought to be connected with the Freedom Fighters, more and more friends and relatives showed up — at one time their house had 45 people under its roof. Yet despite all worries, the author manages to retain her sense of humour: "The days and nights are now crowded with events. There is an unending stream of visitors and we are getting used to frequent sounds and explosions. We don't sleep well unless we hear one or two loud bangs." Meanwhile, the Freedom Fighters had gotten more daring (and successful) in their raids against the military regime and the author and friends laughingly observes that the sale of valium had gone down with the escalation of bomb blasts!

continual detention by the army) belies the intense suffering undergone. For Bengalis who were at the time making their living abroad and friends of Bangladesh, they must have wondered what life was like at home. The book gives detailed accounts of mundane, everyday activities of an upper middle class Bengali family (with no apparent particular political affiliations) going about their daily chores at the beginning of the Liberation struggle until it ends, where the country is finally free. What shines through is the author's patriotism and courage when the occasion came for her to make the tough decision of letting her eldest son (a mere lad in the bloom of youth) join the Freedom Fighters to wage guerrilla warfare. This was a hard one as at that juncture Indian assistance had not yet been anticipated and it was a matter of frail David doing battle against mighty Goliath. All the freedom fighters had mere outdated arms and home-made bombs while the opposition had the latest artillery at its disposal as well as trained and battle-hardened soldiers and generals. However, Rumf's idealism won her over: "All that we value, all that we cherish,

the Indian border, recruited volunteers and directed guerrilla activities all over the country. The highlight of many Bengalis' lives was to hear news of their successful operations by word of mouth or eye-witnesses' accounts. Many highly risky missions were executed by mere youths who up to then had led rather sheltered and pampered lives as siblings of well-to-do families. This angered the Pakistani army no end and ruthless reprisals inevitably followed — more often than not relatives were indiscriminately picked up and relentlessly tortured. Alas, wars are not made with rose water!

Meanwhile, life went on for the majority of the populace. They had to put up with numerous power failures (although many didn't mind if it meant victory for the freedom fighters); sudden impositions of curfew at odd hours, and door-to-door searches for the brave and hunted. Large numbers stayed glued to their radios hoping to receive some accurate news from a clandestinely operated radio station along the north-western border instead of the utterly discredited official media — both print and wireless. Those who had sons, brothers, cousins or nephews in the Freedom Movement waited and hoped desperately for news sent via messengers from the training camps. Such was life for most people.

"Blood and fire" is highly reminiscent of "Anne Frank's Diary". The format is similar — and both themes are timeless being the eternal struggle for freedom. Above all, it deals with how mortals react to adversity: Some (like the author and her friends and relatives) become heroes and martyrs in defending their motherland while others become quislings and collaborators who shamelessly and callously betray their countrymen just so that they can save their own skin and continue their lives of ease and luxury. The sad irony is that while the former is often times forgotten, the latter (through cunning and devious corruptive methods) are rehabilitated in society, thus getting off scot free! Let us hope that precious personal documents such as Imam's book prevent society and the powers that be from making the wrong choice.

# The Indomitable Shabana Azmi

by **Girija Rajendran**

**G**IVE Shabana Azmi a cause and she will go till the end of the world to fight it. This time it is an anti-slum-dweller wall (put up in the Geeta Nagar segment of Bombay's Navy Nagar) that disturbs her. She has taken up the case of the have-nots affected by this anti-poor wall in right earnest. No matter if the media dismisses her effort as a publicity stunt, Shabana, in fact, could hear her detractors saying: "She has no films in hand, no other outlet to project herself, hence this latest action to attract attention."

Those who know Shabana the woman feel upset when they hear such things said about her. But one person who does not care is Shabana herself. All that matters to her is the issue — whether it is worth fighting for. And, being a woman of deep conviction, Shabana, once she takes a thing up never does it by halves.

People will say that Geeta Nagar is yet another attempt by Shabana to break into politics. But Shabana herself knows that there could be no greater misfit in politics than Ms Azmi! Shabana is somewhat like Maneka Gandhi here — equally fiery of temperament, she wears her heart on her sleeve. Shabana says what she means. And means what she says.

"I'm an outspoken person," she once told me. "I tell a person to his face what I feel. But I'm not a malicious being. I never hold on to negative feelings about a person while acting civil with him in public. So I'm termed blunt. But it's much better to be blunt than to be hypocritical."

Shabana is deadly sincere in taking up this issue. This is because she is never anything less than sincere in any matter she takes up, when she took up the cause of women's lib, Shabana Azmi, typical of her, went the whole hog. Hers was a frontal approach by which she even refused lucrative offers for 'conventional' roles that went against her ribber ideology.

The lady has always had the courage to go it alone. Remember her last on the issue of the pathway to Sanjay Gandhi Nagar at Nariman Point in South Bombay? People termed Shabana's act a filmi



gimmick.

This was a very superficial view of the person and her action. Shabana did not say die until she had her way. Even now the same fire burns in her, whether the location be Sanjay Gandhi Nagar or Geeta Nagar.

Deep down inside us, we women have always had an abiding regard for Shabana as a thinking, feeling person who unfailingly summons the kind of guts we ourselves would like to do, but never can. Her four-day fast in rooting for the Sanjay Gandhi Nagar slum dwellers, as far back as may 1986, is proof of the fact that Shabana continues to feel as strongly, in 1992, for the Geeta Nagar downtrodden too. Shabana's action then invited nothing but ridicule from a section of the people never disposed to take film stars seriously. But Shabana went ahead with her fast because it was, very simply, her conviction.

To the doubting Thomases, she had then, as she has now, only one answer: "I did it because I'm my father's daughter."

That says it all. For who

the character sharply. It is quite another matter genuinely to feel for the plight of those living deplorably below the poverty line — feel for it not just for the moment, but from day to day.

Here it is well to remember that, right from the outset, Shabana Azmi has been different from the starry artistes who have shown their sympathies towards the stricken from a distance — by staging a farcical cricket-match or by promenading the city, urging the public to give till it hurts. In a nutshell, these stars have never personally identified with the down-and-out characters they so often depict on the screen.

But Shabana, she has been different daringly different. Where other stars have talked, she has acted. Right from the time (1973) she made such a telling down-to-earth impact with Ankur, Shabana has empathised with the less privileged in keeping with the social image of the Azmi family.

Never therefore make the mistake of dismissing Shabana Azmi as a stunner. For her part, she couldn't care less even if you do. She believes in doing her own thing. Other stars too believe in doing their own thing — their own selfish thing. But Shabana has a deep humanistic streak in her which surfaces from time to time. She is a rebel who does not wait for the cause to come her way. She seeks out the cause and plunges headlong into upholding it.

This is precisely what has happened in the case of Geeta Nagar. Win or lose, what matters to Shabana is the fight. I remember, five years back, the Sanjay Gandhi Nagar residents came to look upon her as a demigod. It is therefore rewarding to know that Shabana feels as intensely about such people in 1992 as she did in 1986.

With the years, even born fighters lose their edge and go soft. Not so our Shabana. After nearly twenty years in films, she realises that she has to broaden her mental horizon. And she is doing it most meaningfully by speaking up for those who have no voice of their own.

PTI Feature

Ms. Rajendran is a veteran film writer based in Bombay.

## Spiritual Harmony

A music festival in London introduces Westerners to spiritual music from the Third World — songs and hymns to soothe anyone's soul. **Lucy Johnson of IPS writes from London.**

barren mountains of Northern China. The abbot's monastery is the only remaining place on earth where the music is performed.

"The problem is that these guys are old now," says Robson. "In some cases, very old."

Despite their age, the monks have been on a sprightly site-seeing tour of the English countryside.

But they were dismissive of a 400-year-old bridge that was pointed out to them in Stratford-upon-Avon, the birthplace of Britain's literary giant, William Shakespeare. Sniffed one of the monks: "The monastery where I live is 1,500 years old."

conservatoire scheduled four hours earlier. "But it didn't matter," says Considine. "I just thought, why rush? What's the hurry?"

By bringing together performers of devotional music, Robson says he is trying to illuminate the spiritual roots of music that have been obscured by mass marketing in the West. "These players live their music," he says. "They live the life they are singing about."

But communicating this within the framework of Western theatre, where the audience sits in a polite, silent semi-circle 50 yards from the performers, is difficult. The task is not made any easier by the fact that much of the audience does not understand a single word.

The job of looking after the performers — some of whom have never been abroad before and have certainly never seen hotels and televisions — falls to a group of young volunteers. Paula Considine is in charge of the Bhakti Bhajan Marga, a group from Southern India who play for rice in Tamil villages.

"They have such a laid-back concept of time," Considine notes. "It makes me feel very self-conscious being so English and so punctual."

The group arrived at five pm for a tour of Birmingham's

Still, Robson says: "Even though they may not understand nine-tenths of it, the audience concentrates on the music because it is interesting and unusual."

He argues that this is the festival's strength. It opens up the audience to the bewildering variety of music from across the globe that give vent to man's sense of spirituality.

Cuba's Los Munculos de Matanzas, with its rumba roots derived from the powerful West African poly-rhythm drumbeats, is worlds apart from the contemplative vocal chant of Georgia's Rustavi chhoff. But Robson points out that both are expressing the same "universal" message.

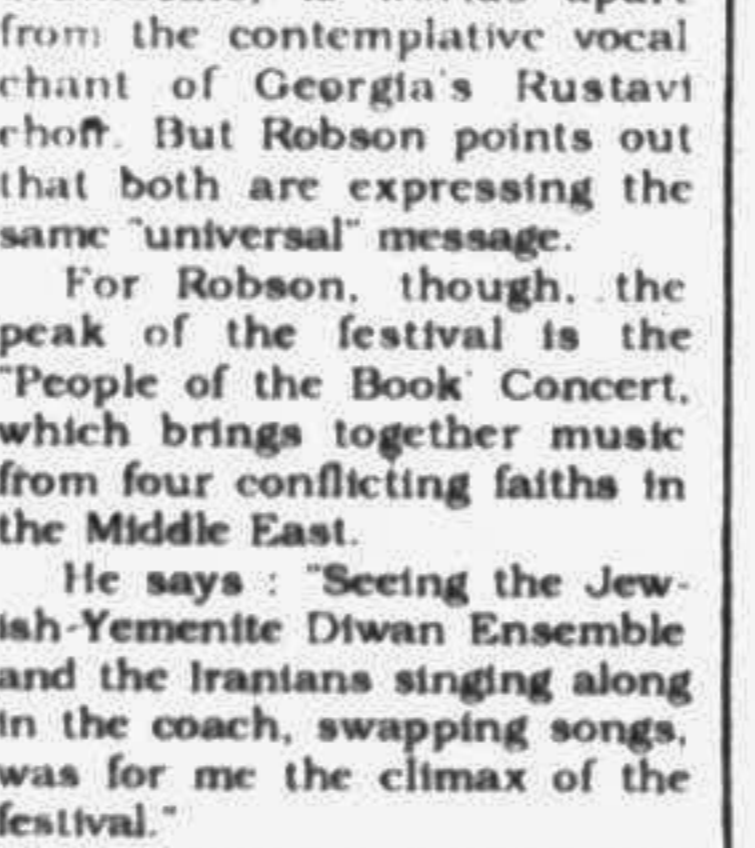
For Robson, though, the peak of the festival is the "People of the Book" Concert, which brings together music from four conflicting faiths in the Middle East.

He says: "Seeing the Jewish-Yemenite Dwan Ensemble and the Iranians singing along in the coach, swapping songs, was for me the climax of the festival."

## Colourful Raj Ceremonials

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Secretary who leads the procession, proceeds to the seat occupied by the President. The Army officers of the President's Office, officers of the Ministry of External Affairs and a few members of the Embassy form the procession.



As the procession approaches the Chair, the President receives them. The Secretary of the Ministry of External Affairs formally presents the Ambassador.

The group photograph over, the guests along with the President and the Ambassador are conducted to the drawing room adjacent to the Ashoka Hall for an informal meeting where refreshments are served. The meeting lasting about 15 minutes enables the President and the Ambassador to have a free exchange of views. An opportunity is also taken to spell out India's policies and programmes while the Ambassador renews his schedule of work.

The President, quite often, apprises the Ambassador of the economic progress made by India and the possible areas of

cooperation with a view to strengthening bilateral relations. It helps build personal rapport.

This is an exact replica of the credential ceremonies at the Buckingham Palace in London.

It is generally believed here that it was Lord Mountbatten, the last British Viceroy, who persuaded Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to retain the traditions and ceremonials, including the colourful Vice-regal Guards with their horses. The credentials ceremony is part of this pattern.

But nothing comes cheap. Apparently, it costs some 50 million rupees (US\$1.8 million) annually to maintain the massive Rashtrapati Bhawan mansion with its presidential guards, contingent of armed police, horses, a stable of cars and its extensive gardens.

Some 300 gardeners are on the staff to maintain the Mughal Gardens which is known for its rose, oriental and English flowers. Now the President takes his guests on a personal tour of the enchanting garden. — *Depthwise Asia*

## "Songs Cannot be Stifled by Talk"

INTERVIEW WITH **NEELIMA SEN**

by **S Bari**

*Singer Neelima Sen recently spent six weeks in Dhaka giving lessons in Rabindrasangeet. One of the disciples of Tagore himself, Sen came to the city at the invitation of Chhayanaut, which coordinated a number of recitals she gave as well. The singer has spent nearly all her life in Shantiniketan itself, and her first recording was in 1944.*

*While fans and students dropped by to say their goodbyes, Sen spared a few moments for The Daily Star to talk about herself and her visit here.*



Neelima Sen speaking at the inaugural of her workshop of Rabindra Sangeet while Begum Sufia Kamal and Sanjida Khatun look on.

**T**HE single strongest impression Sen carried with her was one of hospitality. "I don't think West Bengal has the tradition for this kind of hospitality," the 66-year-old singer begins, in the slow dignified tone that one quickly comes to identify with her. "It's not a question of lavish food or gifts: it's the way people have made me their own. taken me in. Their hearts were in it. I was completely overwhelmed."

When she came here, Sen was not prepared for the lavish emotional welcome she received. "Every minute of my time was filled with warmth," Sen's point is validated by a calendar that squats on a table near us. Breakfasts, lunches, shopping trips, dinners, excursions to Savar fill all the available white space.

Though Sen tends to attribute this rapturous welcome to the traditions of the region, a lot of the credit visibly goes to her. If she was touched by east Bengali hospitality, her hosts were smitten by her humility and approachability. "I was so intimidated by the idea of meeting the great Neelima Sen," gushes one student, "but she's not proud at all."

That much is clear from her reactions to Dhaka and its music scene. "The music institutes and the extent of training here is of a much higher quality than I knew of. People here feel that there aren't enough facilities, but they shouldn't feel any lack," she suggests. "I guess me coming from Shantiniketan meant a lot, it's like coming from the source. There's a tremendous enthusi-

asm for learning. Although there are different schools and musical organizations, and there is a natural amount of rivalry, everyone came together for my classes. I am so pleased about this, that my lessons could bring so many people together."

When Sen sings, though her voice shows its age, her grasp of tune is delightful. But since Rabindrasangeet is also poetry, Sen insists, "Every song has a point. The poet is saying something. The task of the singer is to convey that point to the audience."

If only the melody comes across, the essence of Rabindrasangeet disappears. Does this mean that only a literary mind can grasp the depths of Tagore's poetry? "I think there are ways to improve the quality of your understanding. Read a great deal. Attend poetry recitals, think about the words you are singing."

Sen believes that Rabindrasangeet demands a certain maturity of thought: "Just experience itself is a lesson. There are songs that mean so much more to me now than they did twenty years ago."

Over the years, Tagore's music has been Sen's solace in many moments of loss and pain. She comes from a household where traditional Hindu rituals were not all-important. Music was an act of worship. Tagore himself wrote, "God respects me when I work, but he loves me when I sing." Neelima Sen has followed this dictum with her life. "My puja was his music, it was at once my worship and my thakur," she says.

## Migrants Making it

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agency. She returns at 6.30 pm to prepare her family meals.

Maria Augustino runs a fruit and vegetable shop in at Mentone. She has three grown up sons and an enthusiastic daughter to help her. Sometimes her mustachioed husband too makes an appearance, but he is usually in charge of the deliveries, and very much in the background. Maria, like two other Italian fruit and vegetable shop owners in the area, is successful and extremely hardworking.

Do the migrants miss home? Obviously they enjoy better wages and a superior standard of living than they could every have dreamt of in their "old country". Some of the Asians, like the Tamils and the Vietnamese, would have their lives in jeopardy if they returned to their place of origin. The Lebanese and Armenians too have the same story. The Turks and Chinese certainly flourish in the Melbourne air. Even Buddhist temples and opulent mosques are there to drive away homesickness and usher in the spiritual comfort. The Greek Orthodox Church in Fawkner is a well-known place for ethnic socialising. The Asian food — from Sri Lankan and Indian spices to "halal" meat — are abundant even if they are not in obvious display as seen in the London Pakistani shops and the Sylheti cafes of UK.