attention."

halves.

greater misfit in politics than

Ms Azmil Shabana is somewhat

like Maneka Gandhi here -

equally flery of temperament

she wears her heart on her

sleeve. Shabana says what she

means. And means what she

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 feel-

ings about a person while act-

ing civil with him in public. So

I'm termed blunt. But it's

much better to be blunt than

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 of-

fers for 'conventional' roles

that went against her ribber

courage to go it alone.

Remember her fast on the is-

sue of the pathway to Sanjay

Gandhi Nagar at Nariman Point

in South Bombay? People

termed Shabana's act a filmi

The lady has always had the

to be hypocritical."

ideology.

"I'm an outspoken person,"

Treatise on War and Liberation | The Indomitable Shabana Azmi

WO decades have passed since Bangladesh fought its war of independence against an exploitative military regime which tried its very best to crush the people's hunger for self-determination. A fair number of books in English was published on the genocide during the war and shortly after. This together with reports of foreign correspondents helped to a large extent to focus international attention to the crisis facing the eastern wing

of Pakistan. Jahanara Imam's record of events during that turbulent period, "Blood And Fire" is of a different genre altogether, say, from that by Anthony Masccaranhas' "Rape of Bangladesh": in that it is a consistently kept diary of life for the ordinary Bengalis in extraordinary times, of how people responded to the call of patriotism in different ways. Her book appeared originally in Bengali in February 1986 and such was the demand, four editions were reprinted in rapid succession. Fortunately, for the non-Bengali readers, Mustafizur Rahman, the current Ambassador of Bangladesh to Russia, has translated it into English - thus enabling a wider audience to share the rich experiences involved in the birth of a nation.

Translation is both a science as well as an art, and M Rahman's work certainly does justice to the original Bengali version (although a non-Bengali reviewer has no right to say so- but the story rings true). He has captured the tense atmosphere and ever present pall of uncertainty of those months and nothing seems to have been lost of diluted in the process.

The title "Blood and Fire" is misleading - for it conjures up images of Dante's inferno where hell is portrayed in all its fiery ferocity. The tale, in fact, is told in simple, unadorned language with no histrionics or embroidery of events. It is a tragic one - for the Liberation War cost the author the lives of her two beloved ones - her first born and her husband. Yet, the author's stoic resolve and acceptance of her personal loss is truly awesome. The matter-offact way in which she relates her husband's death (a massive heart attack undoubtedly triggered off by brutal Pakistani army torture together with the mental agony over their son's

HE abbot of Xuanzhong

amidst the backstage bustle of

the South Bank Centre in

to the West, the 70-year-old

Buddhist monk is unperturbed.

"England is very clean, very

nice," he says, nodding gently

"And the people are very po-

septuagenarian folk-musician

monks are performing at the

Spirit of the Earth', Britain's

music. The summer

largest-ever festival of devo-

event has attracted the abbot

and his group - along with

over 100 players, singers and

dancers from around the globe.

the remote villages of South-

ern India, Latin America and

China was an organiser's night-

mare, says William Robson, the

festival's artistic director and

deputy-head of Britain's Radio

3. "It was like trying to fit

together a tricky jigsaw

ing strains from Third World

countries reaching Western

ears for the first time, the or-

ganisers say it is all worth the

pants have never been heard

outside their home countries.

Says Robson: "We didn't even

know that the monks' temple

music existed for many years."

hack 1,000 years to China's

Tang Dynasty. But consistent

persecution from the commu-

nist authorities over the last

50 years had pushed it into the

Temple music stretches

Many of the festival partici-

But with most of the sooth-

puzzie."

efforts.

Gathering performers from

The abbot and his group of

Though this is his first visit

London, smiling peacefully.

Monastery, which is on

the sacred mountain of

Shan in China, sits

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



ing 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 guerilla 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, Rumi's idealism won her over: "All that we value, all that we cherish,

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 heartfelt trepidations, she not only condoned her son's actions but joined whole-heartedly 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 continual detention by the for weary young men. As the army) belies the intense suffer- 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!

What stands out most in those tension filled days of not knowing anything for sure (the media being used as a propaganda tool and it had no credibility whatsoever) were actions undertaken by individual civilians of their own accord. Some like Khaled Musharrof and Captain Haider simply established training camps along

conservatoire scheduled four

hours earlier. "But it didn't

matter," says Considine. "I just

thought, why rush? What's the

By bringing together per

formers of devotional music,

Robson says he is trying to if

luminate the spiritual roots of

music that have been obscured

by mass marketing in the West

These players live their mu-

sic," he says, 'They live the life

within the framework of West-

ern theatre, where the audi

ence 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 audi-

ence does not understand a

though they may not under-

stand nine-tenths of it, the au-

dience concentrates on the

music because it is interesting

Still, Robson says: "Even

single word

But communicating this

they are singing about."

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 eyewitnesses' 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

"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 rehabilated in society, thus getting off scott free! Let us hope that precious personal documents such as Imam's book prevent society and the powers that be from making the wrong

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 Munequitos 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 choff. 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 Jew ish-Yemenite Diwan Ensemble and the Iranians singing along in the coach, swapping songs, was for me the climax of the



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 per-

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 Strat ford-upon-Avon, the birthplace of Britain's literary giant. William Shakespeare. Sniffed one of the monks: "The monas tery where I live is 1,500 years

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

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

Colourful Raj Ceremonials

Continued from page 10 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

proaches the Chair, the President receives them. The Sec rétary of the Ministry of Ex ternal 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 poli cies and programmes while the Ambassador renews his

The President, quite often, apprises the Ambassador of the economic progress made by strengthening bilateral relations. It helps build personal

This is an exact replica of the credential ceremonies at the Buckingham Places in

It is generally believed here that it was Lord Mounthatten, the last British Viceroy, who persuaded Prime Ministe Jawaharlal Nehru to retain the traditions and ceremonials, including the colourful Viceregal 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 milmassive Rashtrapati Bhawan mansion with its presidential guards, contingent of armed police, horses, a stable of cars and its extensive gardens.

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 enchant ing garden. — Depthnews Asia



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

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 convic-

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

That says it all. For who

shall deny that her socialist fasented, in his outlook as in his poetry, the common man? From her father and mother, Kaifi and Shuakat, Shabana draws her inner strength. And with that inner strength has come a sense of commitment that can belong only to a household passionately wed-

ded to an ideology.

In the case of Sanjay Gandhi Nagar, it was Anand Patwardhan's moving documentary on the plight of construction workers, Hamara Shehar, that acted as the spur. Shabana felt she must do something positive and visible to demonstrate where her true sympathies lay. With her star image and socially involved stance, Shabana then accomplished what no one else in the film industry could Likewise, I have no doubt that Shabana will realise her Geeta Nagar goal too. This is because she still has the courage to sail

It is one thing to essay the role of a Dharavi dweller on the silver screen, even live for a few days in the subhuman conditions obtaining in a slum so as to be able to delineate

against the wind.

the character sharply. It is guite 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 stunster. For her part, she couldn't care less even if you do. She believes in doing her own thing. Other ther, Kaifi Azmi, has repre- 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

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

PTI Feature

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

"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

> Nilima Sen speaking at the inaugural of her workshop of Rabindra Sangeet while Begum Sufia Kamal and Sanjida Khatun

HE single strongest im pression Sen carried with her was one of hospitality. "I don't think West Bengal has the tradition for this kind of hospitality," the 68-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 the 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 delightfuls. 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

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.

She remembers Tagore as an old man of whom she was a trifle scared, but "I was too young to be in awe of him. One day he called her over and read a part from one of his plays to her. He wanted her to play the part of Amol, a little boy. "I didn't really understand," she recalls. "To the children in Shantiniketan, he was somewhere near God. something more than a man. What exact kind of feeling it was I can't explain, it was peculiar to that age. When he died I remember thinking. That's impossible, how can he

As the afternoon work on, talk turned to the artiste's role in society. The old chicken and-egg question: is it the artiste who develops the audience's taste, or is it the audience who dictates the artiste's

die? Almost as if he were im-

"I think an artiste has a certain responsibility towards the audience. I'll tell you why I believe this. When I was younger Abu Sayeed Ayub was a very dear friend, he was very fond of me. I once wrote to him, 'All I regret is that I am not a popular artiste.' For a long time this bothered me." Sen shows that beneath the scholarly graying temples there is a little girl. "He wrote back to me, To be popular requires that you lower yourself somewhat. I'm not saying I improved audience taste, but people did come to listen to me sing, despite the fact that I was never

a big name." It comes as a surprise that Neeltma Sen was ever actually insecure over her popularity.

"Oh I was, in my youth," she smiles. "My husband helped me a lot in this. He always reminded me that albums and star-studded concerts were not my reason for singing, that by not compromising on quality I had not lost any admir-

Sen is unequivocal in her advice to students here. "The one thing I suggest is to make sure that any serious Rabindrasangeet student has classical training. This should be compulsory. You see," Sen points out, "all our songs are just moving around these basic seven notes. We must know them well."

And remember that how many cassettes you bring out is not a measure of how well you sing. This is one field in which insincerity can be spotted a mile away," Sen advises young singers often eager to make it big as fast as they can.

Tagore's music has often suffered official neglect, on the part of television and radio in Bangladesh. As an instructing fundamentalism grows, the fact that Tagore was a Hindu is more important to the powers that be than the fact that he was a poet who changed the face of Bangali literafure. When asked if she thought this would lead to a decline in the quality and practice Rabindrasangeet, Sen was vehemently upbeat

"Songs cannot be stifled by talk, If any nation feels there is such a threat, you must just go on singing his songs, more and more, to spread them. Besides, Bengalts love Rabindrasangeet too much to let it die, no matter how hard any one may 'ry '

Migrants Making it

Continued from page 9 agency. She returns at 6.30 pm to prepare her family meals.

Maria Augostino 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 cases of UK.

a few members of the Embassy form the procession.

As the procession ap-

schedule of work

India and the possible areas of

cooperation with a view to

lion) annually to maintain the Some 300 gardeners are on