

THE traditional Chinese calendar is largely a lunar one. It was based on the twelve revolutions by the moon around the earth which took 354 days. However, China was mainly an agrarian society at the dawn of time and the farmers, through experience, realised that they could not plant or harvest their crops by relying solely on the cycle of the moon. The sun obviously played a great role in determining the change and time of various seasons. By observing the relative positions of groups of stars and correlating its natural phenomena with the waxing and waning of the moon together with the rising and setting of the sun, early man created the first lunar and solar calendar. Hence, the Chinese calendar is loosely defined as lunar but it is not identical to that of the Muslim lunar one as it incorporates a 'yearly cycle of 24 alternating solar and mid-solar terms, each one 15 days long. Each of the four seasons then is sub-divided into three solar and three mid-solar terms' according to researcher on the subject, Marie-Luise Latsch. These adjustments had to be made in order to accommodate the fact that the earth takes about 365 1/4 days to make one turn around the sun.

There have been some modifications on the traditional Chinese calendar, but basically it has remained true to the one which dates from the Xia dynasty (about 21st-16th century B.C.). This declared New Year's Day to be the 'day of the first new moon after the sun enters the 11th sign of the solar zodiac, known in China as the Dog and in the West as Aquarius. Thus, the start of the year could not begin earlier than Jan 21 nor later than Feb 20.

A unique feature of the calendar is the division into cycles of twelve years, each one marked by the zodiac symbol of an animal. Almost every Chinese knows which animal his birth year belonged, whether Rat, Ox, Tiger, Hare, Dragon, Snake, Horse, Sheep, Monkey, Fowl, Dog or Pig. Historical records indicate that this practice dated from the latter part of the Eastern Han dynasty which ended in 220 A.D.

As China has the most ancient continuous civilization, it is not surprising that the new year has been celebrated there and in other Asian countries for more than 4,000 years. It is the biggest festival of the year and is observed with zest and joy wherever the Chinese have settled. No expense is spared and in countries like Taiwan, Hongkong and Singapore where the majority of the population is Chinese, practically everything comes to a halt for a week. In western countries such as the United States, Australia and England where there are large 'China towns', the festival is celebrated in a big way, with specially constructed arches gaily decorated and the colourful dragon dancers weaving their way through the streets.

The prelude to the New Year, that is, New Year's Eve is just as important as the day itself with elaborate preparations taking place. It marks the culmination of days of cooking special delicacies for the family, friends, relatives or any visitor who may drop by. Every nook and corner of the house has to be swept and scrubbed and all household tasks must be finished by New Year's eve as no work should be done in the first few days of the New Year.

The family dinner on this evening is a combination of Christmas and Thanksgiving when all family members get together for a grand reunion feast. During this period overseas Chinese who are scattered across the globe try their very best to get 'home' — usually to the parents' house (as long as they are alive and thereafter to the eldest male child of the family who is then regarded as 'head' of the clan) for this occasion.

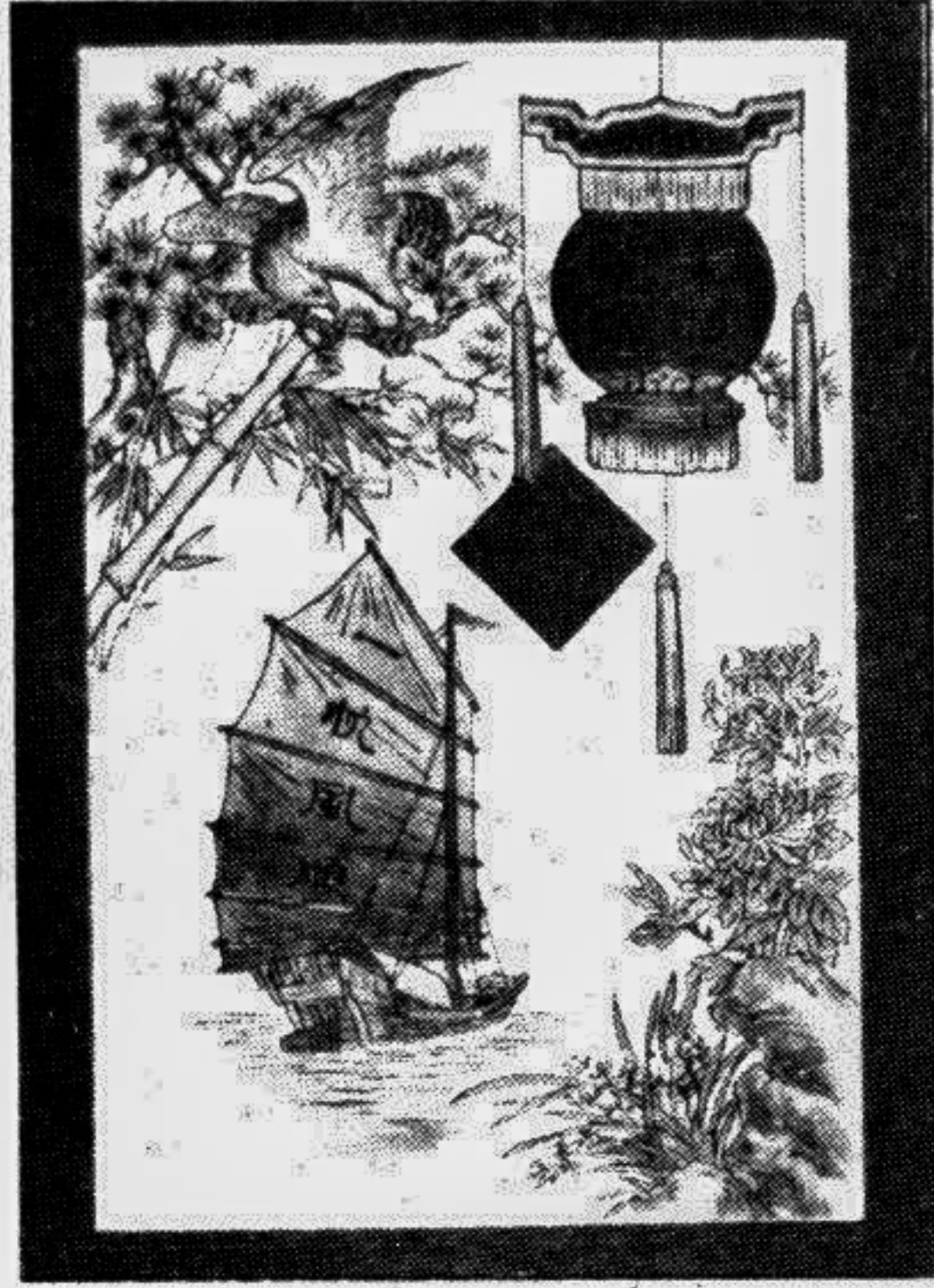
New Year's eve dinner is usually a banquet with sumptuous dishes fit for an emperor and appropriate names such as 'Four Jewels', 'Fatt Choy Prawns' (prosperity prawns), 'Wong Kam Kai' (golden chicken), 'Fragrant Duck', 'Jewel in the Crab' — all part of a 'dragon's feast'. Some dishes have special significance for the occasion, such as fish served whole symbolises family unity and lettuce, which in the Cantonese dialect sounds like 'everliving' and hence signifies 'long life'.

In the evening the whole compound would be ablaze with fairy lights and comic midnight all and sundry would contribute to the sound and fury of firecrackers set alight. As the Chinese invented gunpowder this was put to full use in the most important day of the calendar — or rather night. Youngsters especially eagerly look forward to the march of time, waiting with baited breath for the magic hour of mid-

The Chinese all over the world, including in Bangladesh, will be celebrating their New Year tomorrow. Here, in this article, a Singaporean national of Chinese origin traces the history of this ancient festival and relates how it is observed by adults and children.

# The Chinese New Year: Glimpses from an Ancient Festival

by Nancy Wong



## 萬事如意

Wishing You A Happy & Prosperous New Year

Two traditional Chinese New Year cards (left and right). Millions of such greeting cards are produced and printed every year in a massive business.



night when they can squander their store of 'firearms'. Then comes a right royal din as each house tries to outdo the other in 'firecracker wars' — partly to chase away any lurking demons of the old year and partly to herald in the new one with hope and gusto. The 'victor' of this thunderous 'war' is the one who outlasts everyone else. Businessmen pay special heed to this as they regard it as a symbol of holding power and economic clout in the forthcoming year. Thus, the God of Wealth ascends the heavens amidst the joyful sound and fragrance of fire crackers.

While the very young watch their 'elders' do battle with fire crackers, they indulge their thirst for light with relatively harmless toys like sparklers which emit bright and fragrant lights when lit. As for the older generation, this is one night of the year when they forsake their worldly cares and indulge in the age-old past-time of gambling, the top favourite being Chinese card games and dice. In predominantly Chinese cities of Southeast Asia, Hongkong and Taiwan, the 'clakety clak' of mahjong tablets resound throughout the night.

With the end of imperial rule and the promulgation of the Chinese Republic by Sun Yat-Sen, China did away with the old calendar, officially observing the western Gregorian one, and named its New Year, the spring festival. However, the style and celebration remained much the same and some of the old rituals continue on to this day. Like their overseas kinfolk, the mainland Chinese look on this festival as one charged with meaning and symbolism. All the paraphernalia of new clothes, spotless houses, feasting and exchange of gifts (usually food items) and red packets containing mint condition notes are

observed, together with some ancient customs which have died out in other Chinese-dominated countries. Among them is the quaint practice of placing one's shoes with the soles turned upward on retiring to bed in the belief that any ill luck brought by evil spirits would fall on the soles. The following morning one only need to walk a few steps in one's shoes and the evil schemes would be thwarted! Another is that of sweeping inwards while doing the house-cleaning so as not to sweep out any good luck before the new year.

Such tales of yore have been handed down to generations of overseas Chinese. One important custom was that of settling all debts before New Year's Day. This dates from the ancient custom of buying everything on credit in old China, including household provisions and food. The New Year festival is one of three main ones during which accounts are settled. All try their level best to do this, but if some are unable to do so because of hard times, they just have to go into hiding from their creditors until New Year's Day. Then, they are safe, as no business is transacted on this auspicious day.

Then comes the red-letter day itself! Homes are decked out with traditional symbols such as gaily tasseled palace lanterns, long red streamers overhanging the sides of the main door and streamers with gold coloured calligraphy wishing all 'health and wealth'.

In Hongkong, the event is celebrated on a truly grand scale, the most popular item of decoration being the exquisite peach blossom sapling (the fruit symbolising long life) with its dark brown stems and pinkish white blossoms specially imported from China. To behold it truly reminds one of nature's

lawless beauty and what the New Year really means — rejuvenation! Commercial enterprises, notably banks, vie with each other to have the biggest and fullest blossom tree from whose branches dangle red packets with gold calligraphy.

Among the most ardent celebrants of the New Year are the chief beneficiaries — children. They are thoroughly spoilt for at least the first three days during which they receive not only many sets of new clothes, but also a small fortune in the form of red packets containing crisp bank notes as well as impunity from punishment and scolding! However naughty the kid may be, he cannot be spanked! Among adults it is considered bad luck to quarrel. Visits are paid on the first day to relatives and subsequent days to friends and neighbours, all the time exchanging gifts — usually in the form of food such as black mushrooms, bird's nests, live poultry and the all important tangerine, which because of its rich colour and homonym giving it the meaning of 'gold' in Chinese, symbolises wealth. A new year visit without bringing a cluster of tangerines would be incomplete and considered bad form.

Thus Chinese all over the world celebrate the momentous occasion of spiritual renewal and continuing good fortune with the auspicious greeting, 'Guang Xi Fa Choy' — Happiness and prosperity to you!

There are fifteen days of feasting and merrymaking in the observance of the New Year. In present day times, such prolonged festivities are no longer practical owing to the hustle and bustle of everyday life. Nevertheless, the grand finale, that is, the 15th night calls for another family banquet. Those who failed to show up for the New Year's Eve dinner make it a



The Chinese New Year offers a great time for children. After all, no child can be scolded, certainly not spanked, during the festival, as the writer says.

point to attend this family reunion. In Malaysia, Singapore and Hongkong, a mandatory dish is that of raw fish mixed with all kinds of delectable sauces, thinly sliced raw ginger, sesame seeds and Chinese rose wine; as this signifies a long and fulfilled life. Those Chinese who were driven abroad by hard times, famines, civil war and the unbridled excesses of effete emperors who ruined the country, ultimately find various havens and feasting during New Year signifies freedom of want of any kind.

WHEN it comes to the question of culture, particularly literature and education, the Muslim community among the Bengalees have, for well over a century, betrayed a streak of feeling inferior to the neighbouring community. This has contributed to the coinage of such abominable phrases as 'the pioneer of Muslim education'; or 'the pathbreaker of emancipation of Muslim women' or the rather all too familiar 'first Muslim graduate' or 'first Muslim magistrate', so on and so forth. I have desisted falling into this mean trap and would never call Mir Mosharraf Hossain a great Muslim prose writer in Bengal. He is, by all measure, one of the greatest of all writers of the Bengali language. If he or the other mighty writer Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain has not come to be recognised as such by the mainstream of Bengali literature, that demeaning practice of reducing the true importance of a writer by consigning he or she to a communal pen must have had a big hand in that.

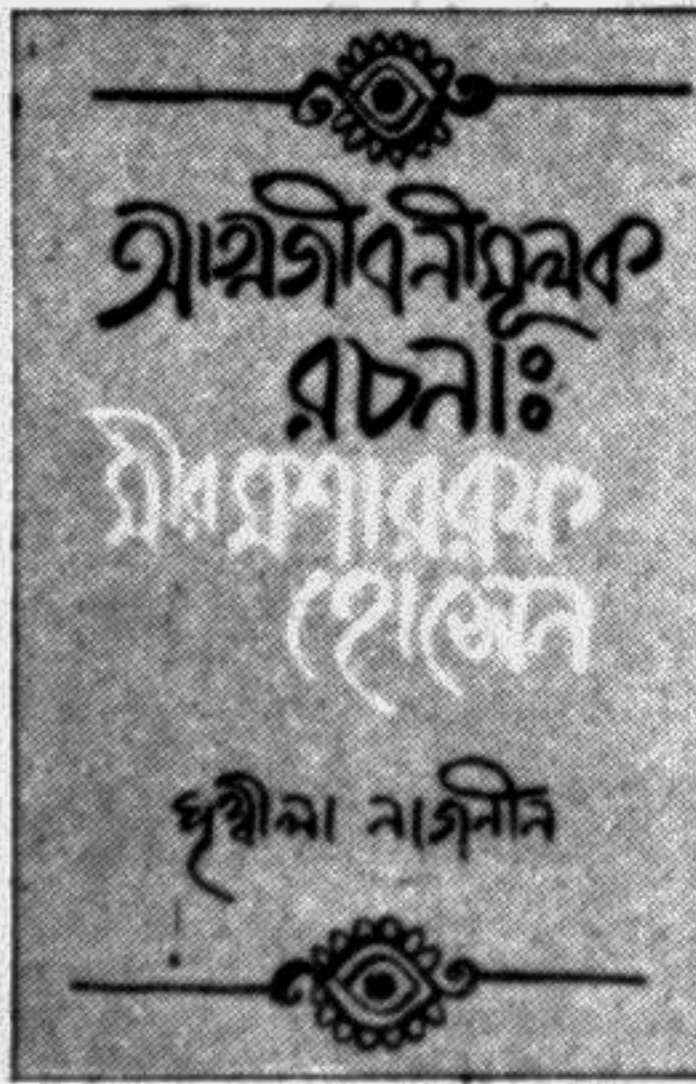
Mir Mosharraf could have been a great writer even if he would not write anything beside his tome — Bishad-Shindhu. The same applies to Bibhutibhusan who would surely have found a firm seat on the Bengali literary pantheon by writing only his maiden opus 'Pother Panchali'. But he went ahead to write such immortal, and ever-fresh, novels as Aranyak and Onubarton and his precious trove of short stories. Literature as a whole would have been the poorer had Bib-hutibhusan or

# Mosharraf, the Inimitable Mir

## BOOK REVIEW

Atmajibonimulak Rachona : Mir Mosharraf Hossain by Prithvila Nazneen, Published by Bangla Academy, Pages 134, Tk 60.

by Waheedul Haque



side serving a very useful academic purpose, have contributed in no mean manner to make a museum-piece of him. The total academic work done on him does not amount to anything in terms of the 'literature of literary criticism' when one compares this to the works done on Bankim or

Saratchandra, not to say anything of whole literatures growing into Tagoreana and Shakespeariana. And we can only mourn the fact that creative writers have hardly ever fancied Mir Mosharraf as a point of their writing. One only wishes they did. After all one article by Selina Hossain in a daily newspaper where she only uses the language of Mir Mosharraf's Bishad-Shindhu to make a point of hers and by no means holds forth on the Mir as such, endears and enlivens the great writer more effectively to the readers than can volumes of so-called research publications.

One was in such a state of impatience with the so-called scholarly work on the Mir that it was both easy and natural for me to take yet another dissertation by whoever as one more addition to the chain of inconsequential stuff that has all ready piled to no one's benefit. It was for that reason quite a pleasant surprise that Prithvila Nazneen's book, based on her dissertation for Masters, should prove quite a departure from the usual dead stuff and yet not quite cutting free, very advisedly for a student on the stake, of the academic rut.

The publication of her maiden attempt in literary criticism: 'Atmajibonimulak

Rachona: Mir Mosharraf Hossain' by the Bangla Academy should alone have meant indubitable recognition. But the Academy has an unenviable record of publishing so much poor stuff on so many subjects that one was required to go through her book in order to discover merit. At a time when Bishad-Shindhu, not to speak of the other works of the Mir, is better remembered as a celebrated book then read and when no one cares to observe his birth or death anniversaries or to honour his place of birth or death and not even an apology of a memorial is planned, Prithvila Nazneen does a good turn to the nation by drawing attention of the readers to the life and time of Mir Mosharraf as told by himself.

Bengali literature is far from replete with autobiographical writings. Yet there are some very celebrated memoirs that have become literary classics. But no writer, not even the prolific Rabindranath, has written so extensively in this genre and in so many distinctly varied manners and styles as the Mir has done. Out of a total of 35 books by him, four are autobiographical — with one of them sprawling and much too fictionalised. It is both a pleasure and revelation to get to know his times through the Mir's own eyes — and Prithvila's book allows us, through extensive but very well-chosen quotes from those four, to do exactly that. And moreover, Prithvila adds from her vantage point of being distanced by a century such insights into those ramblings by Mir prone as they were to be much too confused in detail but wonderfully illuminating as an overview of the times.

I am personally grateful to the authoress for establishing throughout her book the point of Mir Mosharraf's absolutely non-communal attitude to man and society, institutions and culture as so aptly brought out by that wonderful observation: If Hindus and Muslims would live such a life of mutual love (as they did at Krishnagar in his youth) life would be as happy as there is nowhere else.

We do not get much material on the Bengali Muslim aristocracy fallen on evil times through the Cornwallis fell stroke — by any truly patriotic insider's pen. Boring at times on penury the Mir had to work hard to keep his family in one piece and afford the luxury of also keeping a writer's independence. The

predominance of the Hindu zemindars in Bengal did not make his survival very easy for he had to find his patrons from among Muslim zemindars only who were neither too numerous nor too generous. If there was any man ideally fit to be a bitter and dihard communal partisan, it could first of all be Mir Mosharraf. It certainly contributes to his greatness that he was throughout his life just the opposite of that. And supplementing this fact was the rare quality in him of not feeling in any way inferior to anyone because of being born a Muslim. In fact, on the other hand, he didn't either wax eloquent on his having blue blood, of belonging to Sharif Khandan with whatever goes with that like having Urdu as the family's mother tongue. Prithvila Nazneen brings all this out very clearly as she is also unsparing in pointing to his shortcomings received as a legacy of belonging to a parasitical and pampered class.

Mir Mosharraf's literary contributions, together with Rokeya Sakhawat's and Nazrul's, do amount in the last analysis to a 1st opportunity of building a literature that would be true to the social composition of the ethnic-cultural entity known as the Bengalees. This cannot be said of anyone, however great, across the communal divide — including the great of greats Tagore. Look at Mir's prose — at once you will feel in your blood the presence not only of Bankim but also of Aalo!

Two things elude us even after Prithvila Nazneen's searching exposure of the Mir's life. First is his complete conversion to a Bengalee which he was to his bones. His coming to read and write both Bengali and the Semitic tongues is there but not the whole of his wholesale change which must have had come in degrees and doses along the many meanderings of a life-long rambler's life. His must have been a case of choice — difficult to be sure — at every twist and turn of his life's events. He unfailingly opted for the Bengalee in him and not for the other self which was far bigger as a bequest from the family.

Two, why didn't he allow himself to be drawn by the pull of Calcutta, the literary and artistic epicentre of the Indian subcontinent? Calcutta was not unknown to him and it cannot be true that he didn't go there for want of a fitting position. He, of course, could do that only if he wanted to. Prithvila's book offers us certain clues but no clear answer.

If only hers were not an academic treatise, how would

# LOOKING INTO 1990: Europe

Continued from page 9 December rejected the EEA, but observers are confident that the Nordic countries and Austria will join in Europe's integrated market by the spring of 1993.

Although the EFTA's combined population is only one-tenth that of the EC, it remains the Community's largest trading partner. The EC takes 58 per cent of EFTA's exports while EFTA represents 26 per cent of EC exports against 17 per cent sold to the US.

Implementation of the single European market and the EEA means that European companies now have access to a huge home market greater in size than its US and Japanese competitors.

In a December poll more than 45 per cent of European companies forecast that under the single market customs procedures and controls at borders will not disappear in 1993, but most forecast that the movement of goods within the next year will be easier.

Europe may have taken the poll position in forming an insular and powerful trading bloc, but North America is not far behind. If legislative approval is achieved within the three countries then January 1994 will open a market place of more than 360 million consumers with an economic product of \$ 6 trillion.

Under NAFTA provisions about half of some 9,000 tariffs would be abolished immediately and the rest phased out over a 15-year period.

The NAFTA pact is designed to prevent Asian and European countries getting around US tariffs by shipping goods through Mexico. Although it is presented as the embodiment of free trade, it is

potentially a discriminatory trade bloc with the economic muscle to become a formidable rival to Europe. Many Latin American countries have already indicated their desire to join NAFTA.

Compared to Europe, where economic growth has fallen from four per cent in 1988 to 0.8 per cent in 1991, Asia is a virtual hothouse of regional growth. During the 1990s growth is expected to average 5-6 per cent a year, according to the OECD. This is twice as fast as the OECD's forecast for North America and some 50 per cent faster than growth in a more unified Europe.

By 2010 Asia is expected to account for one-third of world production compared to the present level of 25 per cent. More and more inter-Asian trade is also forecast. A stupendous outflow of direct investment from Japan is the main cause of the growing economic integration in the region. From 1985 to 1990 Japan invested \$25.5 billion into Asian countries.

Asian officials are now talking about strengthening the three-year-old Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum. With increasing regional economic integration elsewhere, Asia is determined to increase its strength to maintain the balance in negotiations with North America and Europe. The scenario then appears that by the turn of the century there could well be three powerful trading blocs surrounded by protectionist barriers which would leave efforts by GATT to liberalise world trade severely hampered.

For the poorer countries of the world such a scenario would mean that the door to economic growth has been slammed shut.

We want Prithvila to give her loving attention to the Mir's love for his wife Kulsum. He is possibly the only man who brings out his wife into the literary glare with so much devotion and delicate care as to elevate her into a kind of divinity but yet only the paragon of womanhood, of humanity — something Bankim Chandra was loath to do and Rabindranath thought was too personal for his passion of speaking in universal terms. Was Mir way ahead of his nineteenth century peers in this — a modern among classic greats?

Whatever his roots, Mir sent very deep roots into the soil of Bengal. What deep love could have driven him to that? Prithvila Nazneen would one day answer that, I fondly hope.

# Songs of Freedom

Continued from page 10.

a narration will be inserted. They also hope to use some editing facilities in Dhaka. 'Maybe we'll be able to save some money that way,' Tareq said.

If everything goes as planned, the film is expected to be ready in March 1993. 'I hope, I hope,' Tareq said, his voice full of expectations, his eyes brimming with confidence.

The author edits an English language monthly news-magazine the 'Voice of Bangladesh', published from New York. Earlier he was wrongly identified as editing a Bengalee weekly. We regret the confusion.



A raptani boat under sail on the Lakhya river: Narayanganj. Photo: Trygve Bolstad