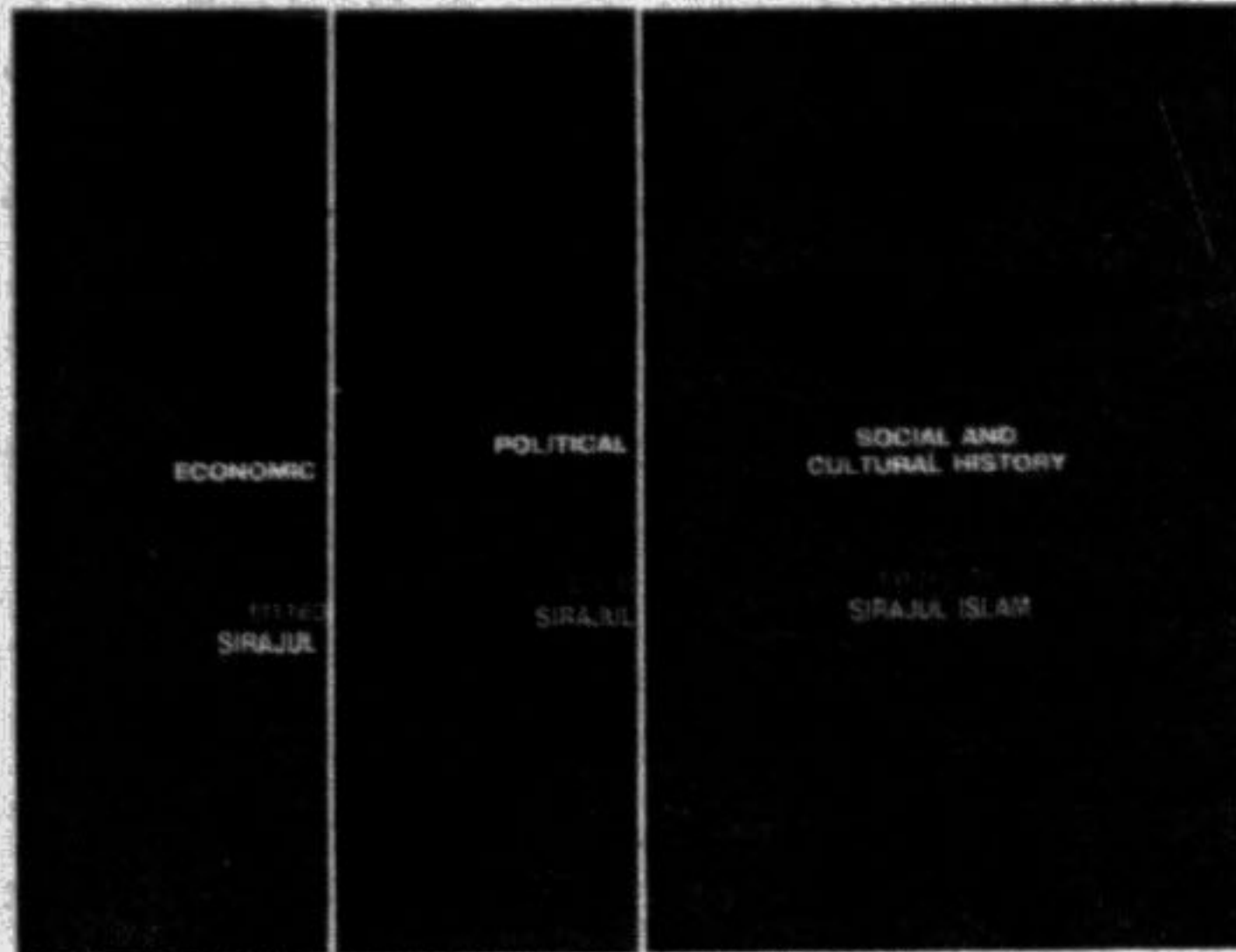


# Filling a Historiographic Vacuum

**T**HIS is a major academic exercise on the part of scholars versed in Bangladesh history in the last half a century. The other comparable attempt was made by RC Majumdar and Sir Jadunath Sarkar at Dhaka University. In two volumes they published the history of Bengal upto the end of the Mughal regime. The present study begins from 1704, when the capital of suba Bangla was shifted from Dhaka to Murshidabad and terminates in 1971 when the Bangladesh Revolution began. At last a vacuum in the Bangladesh historiography has been filled in. By presenting this massive work in three large volumes all at a time the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh has set up an example of great academic exercise and organization which are so much in need at this juncture of moral and intellectual crisis of our nation. The emergence of Bangladesh as an independent nation has a historical root which has been looked at in these volumes in depth. Scholars of all disciplines have collaborated to produce this magnum opus which has been prepared by specialists not only from Bangladesh but also from India, Europe and America and, such a collaboration has made this book particularly attractive. Surely, the publication of the book with such high quality of production from Bangladesh, is a matter of great pride and prestige for us all.

Unlike the Dhaka University's *History of Bengal* (2 vols.) the Asiatic Society's *History of Bangladesh* (3 vols.) has been thematically arranged into political, economic, social and cultural sections. The first volume is devoted to political history, the second to economic history and the third volume is concentrated on social and cultural history. The second and third volumes have added new colours to our historiography in the sense that such treatment has never been given by our scholars previously. Even the *Cambridge History of India* is written in all-in-one form.

The styles of governance under the nawabs and the colonial rulers have been discussed in the first volume. Despotism was at work both under the nawabs and the British, but with a difference. Under the nawabs the country was governed according to the Quran, Sunna and Sastras, and hence the cultural heritage of the people was well preserved and promoted. But under the colonial regime there was a sharp break in the continuity of our heritage. From the British we have inherited a professional bureaucracy and a professional army and a western type of justice and judicial administration. But all these had not improved the human rights and relations and the people continued to remain



## BOOK REVIEW

**History of Bangladesh 1701-1971, (3 vols), Edited by Sirajul Islam and published by the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, (September 1992), Price Tk 3000, (Tk 1000 per volume), 2500 pages.**

*Reviewed by Dr Ahmed A Jamal*  
Department of History, Dhaka University

poor, caste bound, rural based and traditional. Only one positive aspect of the British rule was the annihilation of aristocracy and introduction of democratic institutions though with limited success.

In the second volume we find general economic conditions of the people under the nawabi, British and Pakistani rule. In this volume we see how the people were getting economically and socially segmented and differentiated into rich and poor, urban and rural, professional and non-professional, landed and landless, employers and employees and so on. The degrees of deprivations and differentiations, poverty and prosperity, famines and scarcities, landlord-tenant relations, etc have been dealt with by every scholar so authoritatively and objectively that any alert reader can find great value in every section of this volume.

The third volumes is all the more interesting because of its thematic novelty and mastery of presentation. What seems to be very interesting is that Bengali Society and Bengali culture had received their lifeblood from so many sources and under so many regimes of varying politics, and cultures. Until the end of the nineteenth century the society was segmented in habits, rites and rituals, customs and manners, peccages and pedigrees. Both the rural and urban societies were all anchored in the tradi-

tional value systems and alongside this traditional society was the English educated baboos who appeared as a kind of separate breed half European and half oriental. Out of this chaotic state had emerged the 20th century Bengal society with their distinctive identity. Aristocratic obedience gave way to mobocracy, and mobocracy to communal strife. These distorted developments have been very lucidly and authoritatively discussed in various sections of this volume.

To-day's generation must be surprised to hear that until Partition Arabic, Persian and Urdu were practiced in Bangladesh much more extensively than in any part of the subcontinent other than Oudh. Numerous Bengali Muslim writers wrote Bengali in Arabic script in the 18th and 19th centuries. Bangladesh had produced great many Urdu poets and literatures whose works became popular in the Urdu speaking north India. Abdul Gafur Nassakh (1839-1894) (Nassakh was his poetic name) of Faridpur was known as a great poet all over north-eastern India. Urdu poet and writer Hakim Habibur Rahman of Dhaka is a well known name even today. In pre-partition days every major school and college had courses on Urdu and Urdu was the language of the so-called aristocratic families of Bengal. The Holy Quran and Sunnahs were interpreted in Urdu. The city notables of

each other. This broke down when the group leader inadvertently or otherwise admitted some local 'bad hats' who subsequently absconded. Likewise, when insufficient vetting was done to determine whether they passed the means test. Senior managers of Grameen Bank were called to the rescue and with their assistance, such teething problems were ironed out. As Gibbons reflected: "Our experience showed that whenever we strayed from the Grameen Bank approach we failed. Now we follow the model closely."

So encouraged is he by the successful implementation of this programme that his research unit has set up regional organisations, which are "replicators of Grameen Bank" - CASHIPOR (Credit-Savings for the Hardec Poor), based in Kuala Lumpur. It works closely with Grameen Trust in Dhaka to promote and scale up new Grameen type projects throughout the region. So far, Amanah Akhtiar has given staff training to other countries in Southeast Asia, South Asia and Africa which have expressed interest in following the same approach.

Gibbons and his wife, Helen, have been commissioned by Grameen Bank to undertake research concerning the long-term impact on the lives of the loanees. They were enthusiastic about the field survey as it would clearly help potential "converts" to avoid the kind of pitfalls Amanah Akhtiar had initially fallen into. Moreover, any kind of experience in this pioneering area would be of great help, as he freely admitted: "None of us has the kind of experience as Dr Yunus has gathered, and it is invaluable in dealing with practical problems."

Of more than academic interest is the burning question of how Grameen Bank members fared in life as compared to non-members. Gibbons and Helen spent four months in 1992 and another four months recently in the village of Ghatail during which they conducted a survey which included Shahjanpur (both in Tangail) to determine the long

term impact of Grameen Bank style credit on the people's lives. The results were revealing and certainly heartening. The differences between two groups were most striking. The study concentrated on long term borrowers of nine years standing and it showed that a most half of the Grameen Bank loanees were no longer poor as compared with a mere four per cent of the non-members who managed to pull themselves out of poverty. Gibbons and Helen worked with two research assistants and an investigator from Grameen Bank who had collected data for one year. Both have plans to write a book on their experiences.

Commenting on life in the village, Gibbons said: "There is a lot of economic activity taking place in the villages. When we return to Dhaka we don't see any improvement from year to year. The same problems seem to exist and the same political strife. We find the villages moving ahead and in fact the country is being held back by squabbling politicians. We see a lot of hope in the villages compared to the despair in Dhaka. Incomes have increased 25 times since our last visit, villagers have bigger landholdings, houses are better built and children staying longer in schools. These improvements are sustainable and they will not fall back into poverty because they have invested in agricultural land. This is their lifelong security."

Although Malaysia and Bangladesh are long somewhat different stages of development, Gibbons observed that "poor people in many countries seem to have similar problems; such as lack of access to credit and shortage of land. The Grameen approach is effective because it capitalises on these people's survival skills. They are quite adept at making the most out of their environment; for instance they can plant paddy, raise livestock and involve themselves in petty trading. Given some start up funds, they can earn more cash and gradually build up more capital until they are

# Opinions of a "Return of the Native"

by Fayza Haq

**M**ONIRUL Islam, who now lives and works in Spain often gets his name mixed up in the country where he resides—some call him "Maricel" and some "Islam", and now he uses the name "Monir" to simplify matters.

"Spain is a beautiful country with the Mediterranean sunshine, and the company of the contemporary artists. It is the country of Picasso, Dalí and other masters like Goya, who lived earlier." I find that the culture of the Bengalis is closest to the people in Spain rather than any other country in Europe. They have the same warmth of heart and are similarly gregarious. I have made a number of friends there, especially in my own field, like Antonio Saura, Carlos Saura, a film-maker, Andreas Nagel, Jose Hernandez, Tapis and Ginovort. Monir explained as to why he had stayed back in Spain, and made it his home.

Asked how he combined the memories of his own country with the environment around him, and next proceeded to do his etching and paintings, he said, "All the work that I did during my stay in Bangladesh, during my student life for three years, '66 to '69, brought in many local country scenes. Now too, living in Spain, I bring in Padma, Meghna and Buriganga rivers in my works, as well as the rice fields. Although my work is now abstract, I do not want to confine myself to any 'ism'. My past memories subconsciously come back in my work, as Bangladesh is where my roots lie.

When questioned as to which media he was best at home with, Monir replied, without any hesitation, "I was more relaxed with etching, but etching, a graphic medium, I felt could not express my thoughts or feelings completely. Thus I reverted to paintings and am working in mixed media."

Dwelling on how he rated himself as an etcher, Monir elaborated that he had been working for twenty years, getting opportunities to join art fairs, the galleries fixings the prices for him. His works were sold at Germany, Japan, USA and France. Prices were labelled according to the economy of the city or country.

Asked as to why he had confined himself to etchings earlier, Monir elaborated that going back to Bangladesh in '72, he had seen considerable progress in graphic works, an easier medium to communicate an artist's message to various parts of the earth. Woodcuts, lithographs, etchings were there but he chose etching. For texture and composition he felt that etching was the best method of conveying his message, at that juncture in life.

Replying to the question as to why he had said in his speech at "Shilpangan" recently, Monir said "It is time, I only believe in prizes for Olympic games. In the art world, the commercialized works get rapid success, as in the case of Japan, and the prizes prove little, in my opinion." When requested to give his ratings of his peers in USA, Europe and in Bangladesh, Monir confidently replied that he had seen works in which the standard was the same, whereas, the style varied, which was natural and ex-



"Blue Fountain" Etching and Aquatint

pected. The techniques, he said, varied, as some artists were sculptors, others were painters and some confined themselves to graphics. The different media, Monir said, were simply different languages. "Coming to Bangladesh," the artist commented, one is referred to as an artist of international repute. "However, I feel we are mediocre artists. Joque Capa and Denis Long (from USA) are my equals and friends in Spain, to name only a few," the artist, who was well aware of the art works at the various seats of learning and working, had replied without faltering or taking a respite.

When questioned if he faced any problem in earning a living as an artist, Monir replied, "It is my luck that I can earn a living by expressing myself. This



"Open Your Heart"



"Top Secret" water colour drawing

during the Middle Ages. Toledo (Spain) remains the centre of culture, which can be traced back to many generations. The architectural works and the artifacts at Alhambra are inspiring for one and all. I find the Spanish artists experimental, bold and with individual visions. These are the basis of good analytic art."

"Granada, Cordova, Seville, in the south of Spain, continue to inspire me and always will," Monir concluded about his life and work in Spain.

Coming back to Bangladesh, after three years, Monir felt greatly impressed by the works of the contemporary Bangladeshi artists, specially those of the young ones. Their techniques and imagination are laudable, he said.

Monir had been conducting a workshop at the Shilpakala Academy and this had comprised three weeks of labour of

love. The materials that had been used at the workshop were obtained at Bangladesh, such as paints, plastic, hard-board paper, without having to resort to materials flown in specially from overseas. He had approximately twenty-two students from Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna, and Rajshahi. The participants at the workshop had been teachers and students, and on February 14, they had organised an exhibition of their works.

"Blue Fountain" seen at "Shilpangan" recently was a symbolic piece. The blue that had been used from one end of the composition to another, represented a form, which could be human being or an object. A bold use of red placed somewhat centrally and the black lines that had been used all over the painting, with care and suavity, were to hold and project the composition. The red, which had been included, was to represent the soul and heart of human beings. It was an abstract creation.

"Joy," an etching, symbolized happiness and contentment, as yellow ochre and other pale but buoyant colours had been used. Less of black was utilized in this composition as the piece was a creation to express the sense of satisfaction.

"My works remain small in dimension," while I experiment with space, forms, colours and textures. Thus, for example 'Joy' and 'Blue Fountain' were 40 cm. by 28cm., as I do not believe that the size of a piece of art can be evaluated in pounds or dollars, or even Takas, in the correct way at all times. What was cast away at one time is priceless today, as you know very well yourself," the artist commented about his works.

In "Only Two of Us," an etching with aquatint, one found a diagonal and bold dark line carried over from the right end to left of the picture. There were impressions of images of a jug and a cup at the left corner, at the top of the composition. Colours like blue, orange, turquoise, navy blue, soft shades of green and burnt-sienna, furthermore, were held together by dark impressions and curling, swerving lines. The artist explained that the jug and the cup—clear and obvious in the picture—were mere symbols.

The impact of the lines and colours in all of Monir's works were soothing and harmonious. The juxtaposition of the colours, images, and the choice of texture spoke of unquestionable skill and admirable imagination.

"Open Your Heart," "Hope and Despair," and "Top Secret" were similarly confident and daring compositions in blue, black, grey, bottle-green, vermilion, burnt-sienna, with faint touches of dark overlapping colours.

Monir, with his 19 solo shows in Europe, USA, Middle East and Bangladesh, has won ten international awards from USA and Europe. The artist's collections can be found in places stretching from Japan, Taiwan to Jordan, Israel, Egypt to Norway and Yugoslavia.

It was a unique opportunity for art lovers to recently view Monir's works at "Shilpangan" gallery and the Shilpakala Academy. No wonder that they flocked there like bees around an open honey pot!

## Helen Todd

Continued from page 9 and even affection: "No taka, no love" Ruhena, a mother of four, laughingly joked.

Previous experiences showed that various government-managed rural banks have often failed. One main reason could well be the political nature of such loans. The loanee's attitude turns out to be: "It is enough that I vote for the government, so I don't really need to repay the loan." That is how vote banks are built.

The most striking difference between women of rural Bangladesh and Malaysia,

Helen observes, is that while the latter have no hesitation whatsoever in going to the village market to do some petty trading, the former rarely engage in this activity, though they may do it near their bars. "The reason is probably because the 'hats' here are so crowded that women don't like to jostle with the men. Consequently, it is really hard on widows who do not have grown up sons to do their marketing for them. However, they are enterprising and like so many areas in life, they get around it in some way or other," she concluded.

## David Gibbons

Continued from page 9 prising, considering the fact that for the first time, this marginalised group had the opportunity to receive loans and uplift themselves from the quicksand of poverty. Realising this, they were anxious to make the most of it, repaid faithfully, became regular borrowers, expanded their small ventures and eventually, Projek Ikhtiar evolved into a "women's programme". It is now a private-registered trust governed by a Board of ten trustees (Dr Yunus being one of the members) consisting of prominent people who have been involved with the project from the very beginning.

With the Steering Committee pronouncing Projek Ikhtiar a "qualified success", the programme has been expanded to cover all poor states, which is eight out of eleven. This includes 20,000 loanes which comprises 20% of the extreme poor. According to Gibbons, Malaysia has about 100,000 which are considered to be living below the poverty line. The programme is expanding rapidly, taking in 1000 new members every month, with the target aimed at reaching 50,000 or half of the very poor by the end of '95. Funding comes largely from the Federal and State governments. The

government views the work done by Amanah Ikhtiar as complementary to its own role of poverty alleviation. On the thorny question of whether the government follows a "hands off" approach in the programme, Gibbons replied: "Of course we are not completely autonomous because we depend heavily on government for funding, but so far there has been no government interference with day-to-day operations and it is necessary to remain non-political in order to work effectively—just like Grameen Bank."

Although Amanah Ikhtiar was conceived along the lines of Grameen Bank, it started life with some differences as the economic-socio structure of Malaysia and Bangladesh are somewhat different; so thought Gibbons. However, the beginning was plagued with problems such as irregular attendance followed by sporadic repayment and stoppages altogether. Lack of speedy and firm action on the part of the team led loanees to believe that they could get away with defaulting. This had a snowballing effect as word spread around the kampungs quite fast. The cornerstone of the Grameen Bank model was group formation in which members of similar backgrounds and status vouched for

## Future of Cultures

Continued from page 10

While it is true that technology has helped in widening the cognitive horizons and enlarging the range of choices, its global "hegemonic blanket" is incapable of shrouding all cultural specificities. To what uses a given technology is put is still very much dependent on the people. The resurgence and revival of tradition alongside of development puts question marks on the "conspiracy" theory that alleges the West for all ills of development.

There are several unintended consequences of the development process. Reinforcement of cultural identity is one of them. Modern media have done a great deal to revive and diffuse tradition. People have become mobile—both physically and psychologically. Not only do they cross cultural boundaries, they are enabled to travel into the corridors of their cultural past.

There is nothing strange in culture change. What a culture retains and what it gives up, or what it receives from the outside after a thorough cultural screening and redefinition is a complicated process. Living cultures do not oblige spectators who would like to put the culture "on stage", or make it a show piece, an anthropological

zoo. It is common knowledge that tourists arriving in traditional societies to observe "exotic" cultures have been primarily responsible for disturbing their status quo. But such disturbance may not be regarded as "dysfunctional" by those who live that culture.

Surely, their culture will not remain the same, but changes in it need not be symptomatic of an impending demise. And views may differ on what is good or bad: what the "outsiders" may like to retain may be the one that the "insiders" would like to discard, and vice versa.

It can be said that all cultures in future will look different from what they are today with changes in the profiles of their demography and literacy, and with the continuing onslaught of technology and its attendant ramifications. But they will remain, and remain different with their own identities. Similarities in material culture—the externalia—will not obliterate differences in values and ways of life. Neither will there be a single future for the globe, nor will there be a single global culture. Multiple cultures will have multiple futures. Heterogeneity will prevail.

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In a position to purchase a plot of agricultural land from which they can expand further. These characteristics are common to poor people in any country."

## REFLECTIONS

Continued from page 10

teacher. The innate respect for the teachers that I witnessed in the school's annual sports is still overwhelming to me. A participant threw his javelin in the air. Our eyes followed till it struck the ground. One of our teachers (apathetic to games) was going to the school from the hostel in a foolish shortcut way (trespassing the line for sports events) and the javelin nearly fell on his shoulder. The nearby students alerted him and he was thus saved. I began blaming the teacher for his callousness and expected the participant would resent for it. On the contrary, I saw the participant came running to the teacher and began asking for apology and forgiveness saying he didn't see the teacher going in that direction.

Maulvibazar was the place which exerted a formative influence in my belief of communal harmony. The joy and enthusiasm observed and shared by both Hindu and Muslim communities during the Puja occasion was immense. The sound of drums, blowing of conch-shell, cymbals, trumpet, tuba, songs from the mike, intermittent bangs of crackers—all would come together even a few days before the beginning of the festival.

The day of immersion was another sight to see. A Marwari merchant named Champalal was the talk of the town for his generosity and lavish expenditure especially during the

Durga Puja when he put real gold ornaments on the deity which was immersed with all those ornaments in the river Monu.

Besides my sharing of joys of Hindu festivals, there was another thing to share—our intimate neighbourly term with a Hindu family. While reading S M Ali's nostalgic writing where he described his long-lost friend who used to help run his father's printing press, whose passion was music and later who became mad out of his frustration, instantly reminded me of a person from our next door Hindu family with whom we shared almost everything; frequent exchange of curry from both kitchens was a common phenomenon. Though I used to move every nook and corner of their house there was always a fearful feeling for me about that person who had once a singing voice and was mad at that time. He was never found frightening except muttering away to himself but I remained sacred. His name was Monohir Das. He was an elderly son of his parents' many children. I wonder whether Monohir is that very long-lost friend of S M Ali.

In 1971, like many other Hindu and Muslim families they met the same fate. Their house was burned down. Later they moved to Karimganj in India. Still we receive letters from them at least once a year. It was the love between two families that instilled a sense of communal harmony at my tender age. . . . If we could live with them in harmony in Pakistan period, then why we can't live in more harmony in Bangladesh?