

The Bangla Samvat 1400: A Museological Welcome

WHILE we say good-bye to the Bengali year which has just ended, we also welcome the advent of a new Bengali year. It is significant that with the beginning of the year 1400 BS we, in fact, begin preparation to welcome the Bengali 15th century next year. And while we talk about our Bengali century, we may as well talk about our unabashed hypocrisy in matters of computing days, months and years. We are a nation known for conveniently choosing dates for celebrations from at least three different forms of calendars. We celebrate our Navabarsha (New Year), Tagore's birth and death anniversaries, Nazrul's birth and death anniversaries, etc. following the Bengali calendar; Language Martyr's Day (Ekushe February), Independence Day, Victory Day, etc. follows the Christian Era and the Gregorian calendar (generally called the English calendar); and the two Eids, Ramadan, Shab-e-Barat, etc. follow the lunar Islamic (Hijri) calendar. The elite and educated Bangladeshis are totally dependent on the English calendar and government transactions also follow this era. Rural life and agrarian systems are entirely based on the Bengali era. For a Bengali Muslim living in West Bengal, in addition to these three eras, you have to keep track of the official Sakabda era!

At the moment we are witnesses to the passing away of a century in the Bengali era. This passage can be noted in so many ways. Poetically, it can be put in a sandalwood coffin and buried ceremonially while an assembly of muses render their best compositions. Historically, the long time span can be analysed and its salient features recorded as a summary of human failures and achievements. Politically, we may note the emergence and demise of new and old sovereign states, local and

global wars, the fall of empires, and racial and communal atrocities. Culturally, we may express our horror or satisfaction at the production of nuclear bombs, the discovery of vaccines and life-saving drugs, an explosion in intercontinental travels and migrations, and also, interplanetary travel. One can prepare a much longer list to recapitulate the existence of the century which is setting.

Perhaps such an overview of the past century is likely to be best dealt with in a museum situation. A museum is a place where objects (and, therefore, information) of historical, artistic or scientific interest are collected, preserved, exhibited and studied. For practical reasons of administration, museums all over the world are developed as specialised institutions, each concerning some specific subjects and related to particular geographic areas or covering defined periods of time. The museums of Bangladesh are no exception to this norm.

All of the museums of Bangladesh were established during the outgoing century. The history of the two principal museums of Bangladesh devoted to the preservation of

and research into the cultural heritage of Bangladesh, the Bangladesh National Museum (BNM) in Dhaka and the Varendra Research Museum in Rajshahi, reflects the spirit of modernism ushered into Bengal in the last century through the Bengal Renaissance. The Bangladesh National Museum is the successor of the Dacca Museum which was opened to the public in 1913. The initiative to establish the museum was first taken in 1809 when a proposal was made for the transfer of the Shillong coin cabinet to Dacca, the then capital of the newly created province of Eastern Bengal and Assam. The Bangladesh National Museum inherited all that belonged to the Dacca Museum and opened in a brand new spacious building in 1983. The Varendra Research Museum was commissioned in 1919 in a newly created building, although it came into existence in 1910 like its parent body, the Varendra Research Society. The VRM is specifically devoted to the art and archaeological of Varendra, i.e. Northern Bengal.

We may note that both the Dacca Museum and the

Varendra Museum were set up almost a hundred years after the establishment of the Indian Museum at Calcutta in 1914. Both these museums of Bangladesh were products of private patronisation and suffered undignified neglect at the governmental level until the emergence of independent Bangladesh. The spirit of the Renaissance was strong and the government apathy to museums was bypassed by some highly cultured persons, mostly Rajas, Maharajas,

brought an inglorious end to these cultural centres. Balaha Museum was merged with Dacca Museum in 1963 (and is now within the Bangladesh National Museum) and the Garden is barely surviving under the Forest Department.

In the last few decades of the Bengali 14th century, several other museums have been established in Bangladesh. Prominent among those are the National Museum of Science and Technology, the site museums at Mahasthan,

Mainamati, Paharpur, and Lalbagh Fort, the National Folk Art Museum at Sonarganj, the Osmant Museum in Sylhet, the National Military Museum, the Ahsan Manzil Museum, etc. It is to be noted that subsequent governments of independent Bangladesh have extended rather generous support for the establishment of most of these museums. It is also to be noted that this expansion of the institutional preservation of our heritage would not have been possible without the active and conscious cooperation of culturally aware sections of society.

Various constraints and limitations imposed by the size, characteristics and charter of duties of the museums of Bangladesh have meant that these institutions concentrate mostly on the history and society of Bangladesh. In particular, the museums listed above, large and small, reflect the impact of liberal humanists, intellectuals of different grains, and social workers on the development of society in Bangladesh during the last century. Indeed the story of the last century has been a long one, its setting wide and varied. Many varieties of human elements are to be found in it: rich, poor, educated, illiterate, rural, urban, liberal, fanatic, and such other kinds. In evaluating whether or not the museums have adequately performed their responsibilities in capturing the major events and developments in Bengal society we can choose any number of indicators. The reader/visitor may investigate for himself/herself as to the involvement of our museums in collecting, preserving, analysing, and projecting objects/information connected with such topics. A random se-

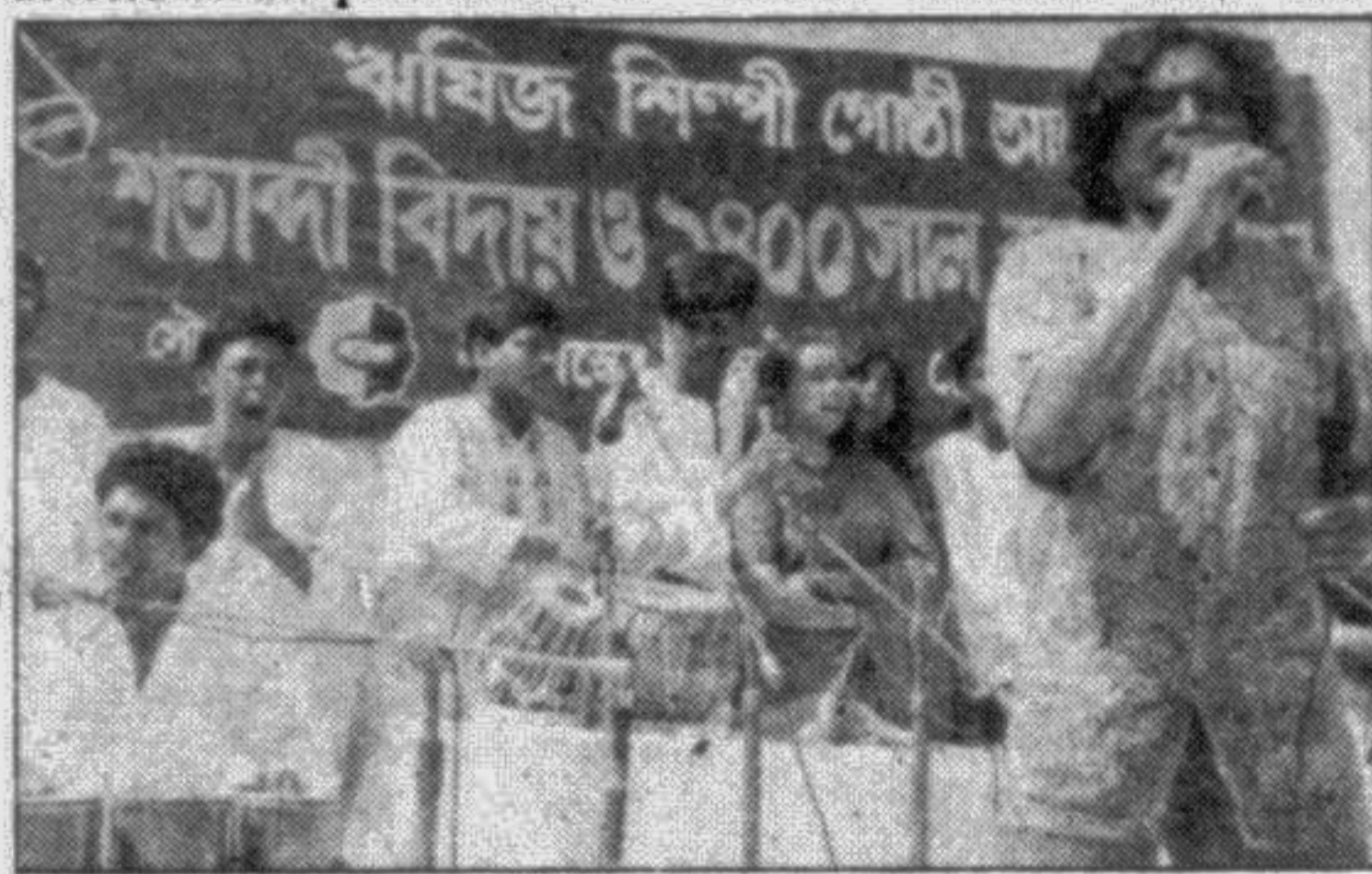
lection of such topics of indicators could be the following ten subjects: (i) the Bengal partition of 1905; (ii) the famine in Bengal in 1942-43; (iii) the partition of the Indian Sub-Continent of 1947; (iv) the State Language Movement of 1948-52; (v) the War of Liberation of 1971 under the leadership of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman; (vi) the life and works of Rabindranath Tagore; (vii) the life and works of Kazi Nazrul Islam; (viii) Dhaka University; (ix) Bangladesh National Museum and (x) Bangla Academy. This is an indicative rather than an exhaustive list of subject areas for evaluating the coverage of the past century by the museums.

Ordinarily, only one generation in every four is capable of witnessing the departure of emergence of a century. Except as in mythical times, we human mortals are almost universally incapable of witnessing consciously in our lifetime all the moments that constitute a century. Neither God nor nature has bestowed any power on our luminaries to ordinarily become a centenarian. Alexander the Great, Shakespeare, Akbar the Great,

Rabindranath Tagore or George Bernard Shaw, lived for only 33, 52, 63, 81 and 94 years respectively. I cannot remember at this moment any person, except one, who became famous for some achievements and then lived to be a centenarian. It is therefore fitting that we felicitate on the occasion of the birth of a new century, our very revered Janab Md Nasiruddin, the renowned Snagat Editor, who is now 105 years old and who keeps his sense of humour and all faculties intact. It is an experience to be near him; you talk to him and he is a living history book. The wealth of detail of any episode or event narrated by Janab Nasiruddin which may have taken place some seven or eight decades ago, is simply astonishing. For many chapters of our contemporary social history, he has been rendering the service of a well-established museum indeed. We wish him well in the new year.

In conclusion amidst various kinds of celebrations, we extend a museological welcome to the Bengali 14th century reflected in all its dimensions in the rich museum heritage of Bangladesh. This would mean that our museums will evaluate their own performance of the past years. They would revitalise their old programmes and adopt new ones. There is ample scope for an overall improvement in methodology in all the museums of the country. The challenge of the new century would be to provide more service, and more useful service, to more people. A proper museological welcome to the new Bengali year, and then onto the new century, would, in fact, place all the museums of Bangladesh under scrutiny of such demands, every day of every year of the century.

The author is a poet, lyricist, cultural activist and retired Director-General of Bangladesh National Museum.



1st of Baishakh, 1400: Series of Celebrations mark the day.



— Star photos

The Magazine that Gives Shelter to the Homeless

Rebecca Dodd writes from London

Homelessness is a growing problem in Britain. Hundreds of people sleep on the streets of London. A magazine launched in 1991 and now having a run of 160,000, has come to their aid. It is sold exclusively by homeless who keep 60 per cent of the cover price from each issue they sell. In March the magazine crossed one million pounds of earnings for the homeless. Gemini News Service reports on an experiment that has given hope to the homeless of Britain.

the streets, getting accommodation, getting a job. We see success as somebody who has never had anything in their life

getting on their feet every day, selling the paper, talking to the public, getting themselves sorted out slowly. It's anybody

who's self esteem has increased, who is happy, doing what they're doing, and isn't resorting to other means of making money.

Sellers of the magazine are split into teams that cover different areas of London. They are monitored by the "outreach" team, a group of six, each of whom previously sold the magazine.

Each seller has two training sessions and must sign a code of conduct before being given a badge allowing them to buy copies of the magazine at 20 pence each.

The code declares that the seller is homeless, that he or she is not claiming social security benefits, will not be sexist or racist in their dealings with the public, take drugs or drink alcohol while selling.

In central London, one of the most lucrative areas, the number of sellers has been restricted after members of the public complained of being inundated by pitches from the magazine sellers.

Start-up funds of £30,000 were donated by Gordon Roddick, Chairman of the retail chain The Body Shop, after he saw a similar scheme in the United States.

Launched as a monthly magazine in September 1991 with a run of 30,000, it went fortnightly in August, 1992 and now has a run of 160,000. It is also sold in Manchester and Brighton.

Bird says the magazine is now breaking even, although losses for the year are £128,000. He is ever con-

scious of the need for the magazine to be seen as a quality read. "We have to make the paper look good and feel good so it sells in its own right, so it's not a pity purchase or a hand-out by another name."

But he admits, "We're not there yet."

He describes magazine as a "typical good read" and says readers are mainly 18 to 40 year-olds who are interested in social issues but "don't necessarily have a social conscience."

The Big Issue is an unusual combination of entertainment listings, for alternative cinema, theatre, music venues and restaurants, feature articles and news items — usually about issues affecting homeless people. Two pages are devoted to the writings of homeless people, including poetry, letters and opinion pieces.

Bird says the magazines is neither politically left-wing nor right-wing. He calls the government's attitude to homeless people patronising and says their schemes to alleviate homelessness are "cosmetic."

Terry, 46, is one of the many in London selling The Big Issue. He's been at it for 18 months. He became homeless four years ago after splitting up

with his wife. At first, Terry begged on the streets, but a friend tipped him off about the magazine. "He said to me, 'Get badged up and you won't be short of money,' and it's true actually. I've done well out of The Big Issue."

Terry sells between 60 and 80 copies each day. He's saved £150 and hopes to book into a cheap residential hostel. "It doesn't all go on booze, I like a drink, but you can't drink when you're selling the issue or people won't buy off you."

In contrast, Tony, 43, says selling "just gives me a couple of cans of beer." He doesn't have an identification badge but he works with another man who does. He says that between them they make £150 a week, and always donate £25 to charity.

The Big Issue has been criticised by other homeless organisations who say they only help the younger and least disturbed of the homeless population, ignoring those most in need.

"We can only do two things," says John Bird, "one is to help the people that can be helped and two is to continually ram home the obscenity of aged people on the streets. Perhaps if we can actually do something about young homeless people... then we can get at the real problem."

"The Big Issue is about allowing people to get their act together, giving them the opportunity. We don't do it for them, they do it for themselves."

REBECCA DODD works for the British charity Actionaid.

At the Advent of the Year 1400

by Shamsur Rahman

The whole night I spent with Jibananda's poetry I became more and more grief-stricken when I tried to forget my pain. How much I wished to bathe in the 1400's pervading radiance

But by and by I got plunged into the darkness. I could not catch a wink of sleep in the past few days. Horrors in masks of all kinds Started dancing in the wild darkness. Very close to me slept the death As if it was a frozen missile.

Alas! Who are dying in Somalia? Humans; Alas! Who are dying in Bosnia? Humans; Alas! Who are being raped in Bosnia? Mothers and sisters; Who were murdered in Bombay and Delhi? Humans; Who got burnt and died in Dhoha? Humans; Who were raped in Manikganj under cover? Mothers and sisters; Who are robbed there? Humans; Who are robbed here? Humans.

Humans die and yet man lives; Alas! Humanity is often moving toward the slaughter ground; Death itself, in the bird-chanted morning Is shocked to look at its face everyday in the newspaper. Yet the death dresses itself up in glistening letters of the computer And gets advertised all over this conflict-prone world.

Shall we carry out the errands of the death by leaving humanity Everyday in the creation ground and graveyard And plunder the life of man? At the advent of year 1400. Let us, the citizens of the world in our soul searching song, Take away the blood stain from the cloud-laden dusk; Wipe away the hideous designs from the black note-book of conspirators.

Let all birds in their melodious voice sing in all the ten directions: "Let all humans, trees, herbs, climbers, birds and animals live in peace."

Translated by A S Islame

THE BIG ISSUE One of the fastest growing magazines in Britain

Asian Wives by Half a Dozen

Women's groups and social agencies press the government to put a stop to the 'serial sponsorship' of Asian wives by Australian men. Kalinga Seneviratne of IPS reports from Sydney.

part off a broader social problem — namely the sexual exploitation of women by men from rich countries like Australia, Germany and Japan.

Meeting with officials of the Department of Immigration, Local Government and Ethnic Affairs (DILGEA) recently, members of a Filipino women's group based in this country asked that Asian women be provided with more information about their Australian finances.

"We asked for the introduction of rigid screening of men applying for fiancée migration and for the women to be given more details about the men

who are sponsoring them, so that an informed decision can be made," said Edith Planes of the Filipino Women's Working Party (FWWP).

"In previous years, this has been so hushed up," she added. Planes said DILGEA officials accepted their recommendations but indicated to them that "administrative procedures have to happen" first.

According to the CMS report, the Philippines is the main source of 'wives' for Australian men, many of them meeting each other through introduction agencies or pen-pal set-ups. Based on official

immigration data, between 15,000 to 20,000 Australian men now have Filipino wives.

But Thailand has become the second major source of spouses for Australian men in recent years, with Indonesia — mostly young village women from West Timor — following closely behind. Fiji, Sri Lanka, Vietnam and Tonga are other countries named by the report as source countries on the increase.

Although many of these marriages have been successful, social workers have noted that some have had serious problems with domestic violence — a few even ending in deaths.

So far, there have been 11 recorded cases of Filipino women murdered by their Australian husbands, while two women have been reported missing.

Nilwan Jiraratwatana of the

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WRITE TO MTA

Counselling Parents

This is a very touchy subject, specially in our culture, where parents have the ultimate right over their children and always know what is "best for them."

We rely totally on instinct and experience to bring up our children. Any suggestion of seeking professional help is disdainfully brushed aside. In fact seeking professional help for any family problem is not popular in a culture where so much family support is available to resolve most domestic crises.

However, over time the concept of family, children, parents and their responsibilities and duties towards each other is changing. Children are no longer willing to abide by the age-old dictum of "parents are always right". Parents, on the other hand, make less demand of their children than they previously used to.

Given the changing situation, it is becoming more and more important for parents to receive some kind of formal or informal training in raising children. In today's competitive world, there is really no scope, or time for trial and error. Realizing that, there is no perfect formula to child rearing; one can at least keep an open mind about it and be responsive to suggestions. We often hear people ridiculing child psychologists and family therapists as theoreticians who know nothing about the real world and are only good for writing books.

One has to strike a healthy balance between the two schools of thought. Relying on books totally to bring up children is silly and not even possible. But relying only on instinct and common sense is an extreme position and one which is most common in our culture. As I mentioned above, it would help if one just kept an open mind on the subject. Many par-

ents think it sacrilegious to discuss parenting with a stranger no matter how qualified the stranger might be. This attitude springs from our cultural perception that parents know what is best for their children. In most cases the above is true but in some cases it is not, and since the stakes are so high, mistakes become too expensive.

We are still a long way from recognizing family counselling as a profession, rather a helpful profession. We usually rely on help from friends and relatives to solve family problems. When children do not turn out the way parents want them to, then everybody is blamed — the society, the school, college, their friends etc. Often parents blame themselves and go into guilt trips. But unfortunately they seldom learn from mistakes and react in the same way in later similar situations.

Admitting that others know more about how to bring up "my children" is very difficult. It takes courage and self confidence. The important thing to remember is, parenting is a complex task with many different dimensions to it. One can be very good with a five-year-old but not such an expert when the same child is 15. There is no shame in seeking professional counselling especially when we know that timely intervention could avert a near disaster. Sometimes all it takes is the perspective of an outsider or an objective person to put things on the right track. What family counsellors usually do is try to open a channel of communication which did not exist among family members. Though this sounds easy, it is one of the most complicated aspect of counselling, and is at the root of all family problems.

— Shaheen Anam