

Songs Leading to Liberation

by Waheedul Huq

IF 1971 was our greatest year as a nation, the sixties that inexorably led to it was our golden decade. It was the time for a politics of national liberation to be born out of the womb of an unprecedented cultural awakening, no doubt culminating in the legacies of the Language Movement. The question of the identity of The Bengalee Mussalman willfully clouded and compounded by the biggest cultural bluff called the Pakistan Philosophy was set on the right rails by the Language Movement. During the sixties it went headlong for a resolution. And in the process a resurgent Bengalee nation successfully took on one of the bloodiest genocides of history.

What was there in the sixties that made the qualitative jump of a colonised province becoming a nation state possible? Many factors contributed to the making of the wonder that was the sixties. However, the good work done by Chhayanaut in the capital city, Dhaka and by Shondipon

in the industrial city of Khulna had no peer. The great contribution of Chhayanaut is now reduced to a nostalgic piece of hazy memory. There was no reason why Shondipon's important work would not meet the same fate. Thanks to the one-man effort of Nazim Mahmud, one of a team that constituted Shondipon from its first day. The tragedy has been averted. A main difference between the work of Chhayanaut and Shondipon lay in the former's attempt to take the society to Tagore and Nazrul for a national rejuvenation and the latter celebrating the glory of peace and just revenge, man's rights and incomparable Ekushey, in unforgettable songs created by Sadhan Sarkar out of the lyrics of Nazim Mahmud and Abu Bakar Siddique, after the fashion of the IPTA songs, to be sure. Chhayanaut's endeavour to get the people nearer to their true national identity through the immortal songs of

Tagore proved more relevant at the time. And Shondipon's songs will have to wait for a subsequent stage of social development to come into better focus. Nazim Mahmud has done a great job by preserving for posterity those Shondipon songs, specially at a time when these seemed doomed to oblivion after the death of Sadhan Sarkar.

Mahmud has produced a cassette containing 12 of his songs set to tune by Sadhan Sarkar — the dozen that in the Sixties became the hallmark of Shondipon. The cassette is remarkable in more ways than one and has become a collector's must. On top of the songs there are two introductory pieces by Hasan Azizul Huq the doyen of our short story writers — and a Shondipon activist from the day Nazim Mahmud was one. Then again, there is Nazim Mahmud himself reciting from his poems.

The rendition of the songs couldn't be better by any other group in Bangladesh or West Bengal. This has been done in the best tradition of IPTA songs — and yet the songs have some surpassing points. As the

melody progresses climbing on the pegs supplied by chords, the pure tones of the best trained Tagore exponents of the land, such as Laisa Ahmed Lisa, Anondamoyee Mojumdar and Imtiaz Ahmed, add new dimensions to the rendition. Lisa sings a hauntingly beautiful solo confirming again her claim to being one of the best melodious voices that has both culture and feeling unlike the other bests. There are nine chorus numbers, some of them turned out excellently indeed. Thanks to Imtiaz Ahmed's direction. The verve of the compositions and their true ring of total commitment to society comes out forcefully in them.

Some may feel that the songs are somewhat limited in their variety. Well, there are songs by one composer alone and only one very limited genre of songs. On closer examination, the songs do display admirable attempt at variation and innovation.

Will the songs strike one as being somewhat dated? This may, well indeed. When the context of the sixties is gone and when the 'class' interpretation of social development has also taken a good beating



Exacting but Unrewarding Work on a 5-century-old Mosque

BOOK REVIEW

Ayesha Begum, *Amader Aitijhya Shahazadpur Masjid (Dhaka: Shilpakala Academy, 1990, pp. 62+34, Tk 80.00).*

Reviewed by Syed Amirul Islam

A very interesting study has been done by Ayesha Begum in her book entitled "Amader Aitijhya Shahazadpur Masjid" (Our Heritage Shahazadpur Mosque). Written in Bengali, the book sets as its goal to ascertain the date of construction of the mosque. The endeavour although praiseworthy is however, a very difficult one as there is no helpful definite or particular historical document such as inscription or reliable literary evidence.

The supposed builder of the mosque, but she has rightly pointed out that it was not a proper name, merely a title used by many other Muslim saints (P. 21). It has also not been possible for the author to discover the original name of Shah Makhdm as she has found no document about it. Actually the author has traversed a long way to finding new materials to reconstruct the history of the mosque but unfortunately she has hardly been rewarded with any. Absence of historical evidence led her to engage in detailed description of the mosque and identifying its architectural peculiarities hitherto done by no other scholar. She has for this purpose not only visited the mosque site for several times but also took many photographs from different directions. She has very rightly indicated the work of architectural designs and structural features of the mosque with diagrams and other necessary particulars. She has also rightly pointed out some shortcomings of the writings of preceding scholars on the subject.

The history of the construction of Shahazadpur Mosque is shrouded in mystery. Even the authorship of the mosque is unknown. Whether Shah Makhdm was the builder of this mosque is not certain. Even Ayesha Begum could not definitely establish her view that it was constructed by the Shah himself. Nor could she give a specific date of the construction of the mosque. She has only presumed that it was constructed during the first half of the 15th century on the basis of structural designs of the mosque comparing with other mosque-architecture of the time. This is indeed a correct procedure of identifying and dating architectural monuments, yet it remains very much an assumption.

The author's contention that Shahazadpur Mosque stands at the cross-road of a definite style of mosque-architecture of Bengal (P.39), is very interesting. Her arguments in chapter 8 on this point are fascinating. To make her ideas clearer and more convincing she should have attempted an elaborate discussion on this point.

Due to meagre information, Ayesha Begum could not give any clear information about Makhdm Shah Doula Shahid,

The principal two points of the author — dating and special features of the mosque, are dealt with in a very scholarly manner. But, however, the idea of A K M Zakaria that the mosque was built not by Shah Makhdm but by somebody else, probably by a ruler (P. 29) or a rich man(?) of Bengal cannot be ruled out, for a saint cannot be so wealthy as to construct a big building like Shahazadpur mosque. Moreover, the question of acquisition of land was there which could be had only from the ruler of the land. An enormous mosque could be made only after the conquest of a land. But it is said that Shah Makhdm was killed in a skirmish with a non-Muslim ruler. When was then the



mosque built and by whom is not clear, even after Ayesha Begum's exertions.

The dating of the mosque by the author has been put during the first half of the 15th century i.e. between 1414 and 1442 (PP. 37-38). It was a period of turmoil. Dynastic revolution of Ganesh took place during this period. Jalaluddin, his successors and the so-called later Ilyas Shahi dynasty began to rule at this time. Now, whether Shah Makhdm came to Shahazadpur during this period is yet to be found out. It is also to be searched out whether any mosque was built here by any ruler or rich man of this time.

It seems very probable that the man under the name of Shah Makhdm was a veteran soldier of his time like Ismail Ghazi or Khan Jahan Ali who, though war-leaders, became religious leaders as well, otherwise it seems very much improbable for a saint to construct a mosque like the Shahazadpur one which needed enough money, land, men and time. Pending further discovery of new evidence to reconstruct the history of the mosque, anything more can hardly be said other than what Ayesha Begum has laboriously written about it in her monograph.

Tiger in a Flap

Our charming picture shows a Siberian Tiger cub climbing through a domestic cat flap, tentatively taking its first steps into the outside world.

The four month old cub, one of a pair, is being hand-reared at Howletts Wild Animal Park in Kent, southern England.

The Siberian Tiger is the largest member of the cat family and is an endangered species. The aim at Howletts is to breed endangered species, eventually to return them to safe wild habitats.

The Park has bred over 300 Siberian and Indian tigers since the tiger programme was initiated, and visitors can regularly see new cubs born there.



Rise and Fall of Communism

BOOK REVIEW

ROMANIA: Evolution of History by Mohammad Amjad Hossain Published by Academic Publishers Page-75, Price Tk 45/-

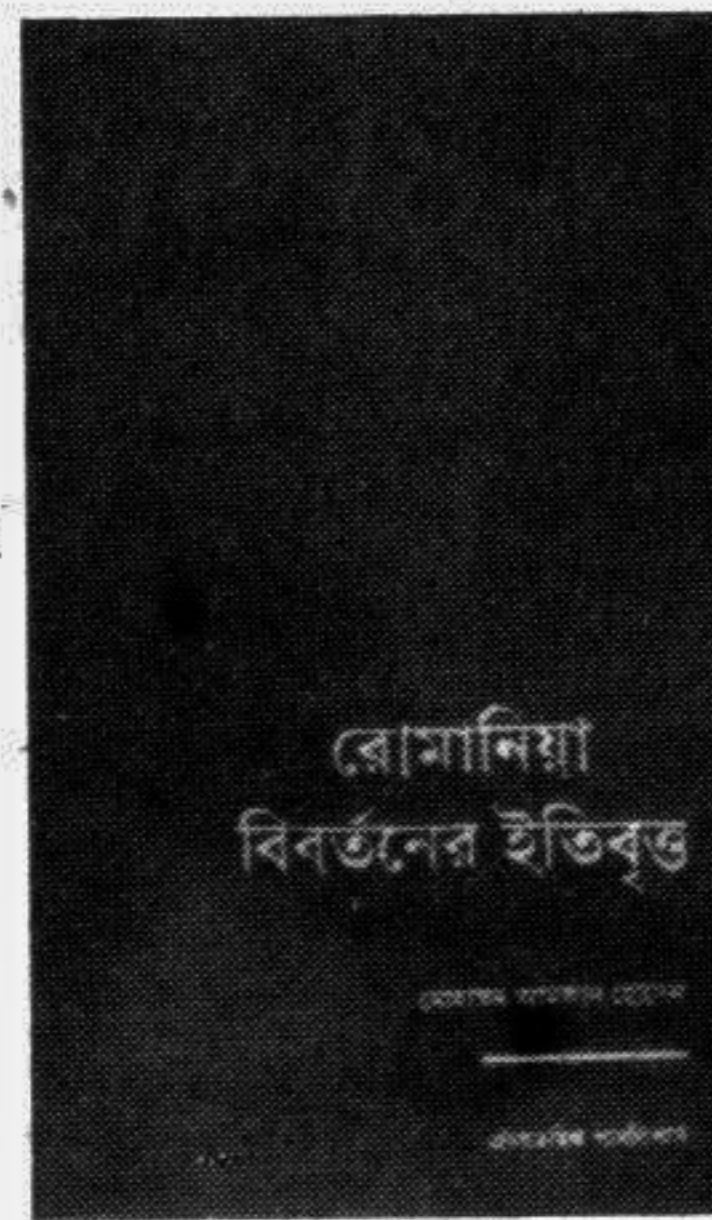
Reviewed by Md Zafar

AFTER a long 75-year of journey, the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe in 1989-90 evoked enthusiasm and curiosity in the minds of those who advocated introduction of Communism and the keen followers of the political philosophy in this part of the world. The book 'Romania: Evolution of History' written by Mohammad Amjad Hossain offers an insight into the role played by Communist leaders, particularly the executed dictator, Nicolae Ceausescu, of Romania in establishing Communism there.

As we see from the overleaf of the book, the writer had

spent four years particularly at the hub of the action. He, therefore, is supposedly well qualified to interpret the events in Romania. The book deals with the historical background of Communism, rise of the Communist leaders, activities of the Communist Party, its foreign and economic relations within the Communist bloc and the reasons for the fall of Communism.

The epilogue at the end of the book epitomizes the reason for the fall of Communism. The book is written in a lucid language. It is not biased either as it presents failures and successes of the Communist Party



in an objective manner. A few typographical errors are, however, noticeable. The price appears to be on the high side as compared to the number of pages but printing carries a sign of quality.

I wish the book is received by a large number of readers.

Singapore Government Tries to Breed Smarter Babies

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cover to go elsewhere to discover that the SDU caters to majority Chinese, who account for 76 per cent of the country's nearly 3 million people. The minority Malays, at 15 per cent of the population, and Indians, six per cent, rarely attend SDU events. Perhaps they don't need such artificial stimulus for romance.

Statistics for 1987 show that the Indian population of Singapore grows annually by 2.4 per cent. This is comfortably above the two per cent rate needed to replace those that die. Malays multiply at 1.86 per cent, while the best educated section of the population, the Chinese, increase by only 1.4 per cent, a year.

Most countries that reach a certain level of wealth experience a declining birthrate. It is regarded as an inevitable result of development and usually not viewed to be negative. It seemed that for a couple of decades this was also the philosophy in Singapore, a small island with an already dense population.

Since 1959 there has been a vigorous birth control programme and a liberal abortion policy. In 1988, Singapore had 52,000 births and 23,000 abortions. But government planners have been worried for some years that not enough babies are being born to educated Chinese couples.

The trend was noticed in 1983 and former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew made it public. He said women with little or no education were having more than twice the number of children as graduate women. Lee said Singapore faced a grim future "unless this balance is corrected." He went on to say that "levels of competence will decline. Our economy will falter, the administration will suffer and society will decline."

None of the world's wealthier countries, whether in Western Europe, North America or Japan, have been able to reverse declining birthrates — nor have they wanted to.

Singapore is different. It wants births among some of its social groups to go down, others to go up and is confident it can achieve both objectives.

Its strategy is to get eligible graduates together and dis-

courage the uneducated from having more children. In 1984, women of little or no formal education were offered financial inducements to be sterilised. If they were over 30 and had more than two children they could get 10,000 Singapore dollars reduced from the price of a low-cost government housing unit. At that time this was about one-third of the cost of a new unit.

The authorities explain their worries over the island's demographic trends by saying they believe a poor family with lots of children spends most of its money on food, clothes and basic necessities, with little left for education. As a result, the children drop out of school early and the pattern is repeated when they have children of their own.

Curiously, Lee's plans for improving Singapore's talent pool do not include upgrading educational opportunities for the disadvantaged. Rather, more privileges are given to the privileged.

Graduate women with more than three children can get priority placement for them in Singapore's better kindergartens and primary schools. Although Lee is no longer prime minister, he remains the unseen power behind most government strategy.

Another problem the SDU hopes to tackle through its teas, dances, photography courses, and island cruises is the tendency for Singaporean men not to mind — or to even prefer — spouses less educated than themselves. When the SDU was set up in 1984, 37 per cent of male graduates married women with equal qualifications.

Singaporean women were just as determined not to "marry down" as the men were not to "marry up". As a result, just under a quarter of graduate women between 30 and 40, it was noticed with alarm, were still single.

In its first year, the SDU operated under a veil of secrecy. The government-controlled local press was warned off covering its activities, despite sarcastic criticism of the unit by some Members of Parliament, which was reported. "Single. Desperate and Ugly" was the unkind label applied by some to those who signed up.

Now the government's

lonely hearts club appears to have lost its stigma. A glossy 12 page brochure lists events for the month for singles to get together. Photographs of members appear on the front cover of Link.

The unit now has 14,000 single graduates on its books and it organises 400 social events for them annually. Its aim is to get 65 per cent of Singapore's 28,000 unmarried graduates to join in the next four years.

In its nine years, the SDU claims to have had a hand in 1,796 marriages, although the statistics warrant some scrutiny. The numbers include couples who did not necessarily meet at SDU events and those who were not both members.

Chan says more than half of Singapore's graduate men now marry women of equal educational status. She adds that the imbalance of the early days of the SDU has been corrected.

In the mid-1980s, the SDU signed up equal numbers of men and women, but many more females showed up for social events. Some activities were oversubscribed three or four times by women. Now Chan says women make up 55 per cent of SDU membership against 45 per cent of men.

Perhaps the most surprising thing about this government attempt to breed smarter Chinese babies is the need for it at all. Link reports that a recent survey in many different countries found that romantic love was significant factor in the coming together of most couples. Surprising news? Evidently in Singapore, yes.

Chan says: "You have to remember that in Chinese culture many people hardly get to know anyone of the opposite sex. Women teachers, for instance, are in a profession which is almost exclusively female."

"Some Singaporean boys who go to all-male schools, do their military service and go on to technical college, never mix socially with girls. The only women they know are their teachers, mothers and sisters. All we're trying to do is provide them with some better opportunities."

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Child brides line up for marriage in Rajasthan

When the Husband is 9 and the wife 18 Months

During the annual harvest festival of 'Akha Teej', tens of thousands of child marriages take place in single day in Rajasthan, India. The practice is illegal, but it persists in several states. In the villages many people working for women's emancipation are trying to make parents increasingly aware of the evil of these ancient ways. Gemini News Service reports on the struggle to eliminate child marriage.

A J Singh writes from Jaipur, India

MARRIAGE is an important event in a person's life, but for Gopa Bishnoi of Rajasthan, the wedding day came and went without any say from him. At 10 years old, Bishnoi might not have much to say on the subject.

He was married last year when he was nine and barely old enough to know what life was all about. For his wife Ganga, it was even worse. She became a bride at six months. Now 18 months old, she has already celebrated her first anniversary.

Strange as it may seem in this day and age, the pernicious custom of child marriage continues to thrive in more than half a dozen states in India.

Rajasthan tops the list, with 90 per cent of all the child marriages in the country performed here each year, followed by the states of Bihar,

Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka.

Sociologists say that child marriages are child exploitation, plain and simple. They are nothing but adult games on innocent minds," says Sudhir Saxena, a sociologist and social worker in Jaipur, the capital of Rajasthan. "The children are pawns in the business transactions of families to safeguard their properties."

Though prohibited by law, child weddings continue unabated. "Violators are rarely reported, rarely prosecuted," says another Jaipur social worker, Gopal Krishna.

Each May, during the harvest festival of Akha Teej, tens of thousands of child weddings take place in one day all over Rajasthan. So great is the enthusiasm for attending these that work stops in fields and factories on this day. In the countryside, the jingling of bullock cart bells and the put-

put of tractors carrying gaily dressed marriage parties is heard everywhere.

It matters little that some brides and grooms may still be sleeping in the laps of their parents. Mass child marriages take place on Akha Teej day for two reasons: it is considered a good omen, bringing happiness to newlyweds; and people avoid getting fleeced and exploited by priests who fix marriage dates after consulting religious texts.

At the wedding ceremony, as the priests chant the marriage mantras — gibberish to children — the couple is made to walk around the holy fire seven times, clothes bound together in nuptial knots. In the case of an infant girl, she is carried in her mother's lap around the fire.

Once the marriage ceremony is over, except for being bound for life, nothing changes

for the couple. Each continues to live with their parents until they are old enough to consummate the marriage — when the girl is 14 or 15 years old. When she gets pregnant, she returns to her parental home to give birth to her first child.

The parents of child brides and grooms know child marriages are illegal, punishable by fines and even jail. Yet no one seems to care. The only effect of the law is that the weddings are kept short, simple and secret.

Complaints are rarely reported because to prosecute violators, someone must file a report in a court of law, along with a supporting affidavit identifying the complainants. Once done, the magistrate issues a search warrant to prosecute the case. The report must be filed within one year of the marriage or the case is not prosecuted.

Jaipur lawyer Shyam Lal Bishnoi says: "No one reports because it invariably invites the ire of the complainants. It can lead to physical violence, even murder, of the person who reports."

Also, the person who reports is ostracised by the community if he or she is a local person. An outsider can be put to great mental and physical hardships, even torture. Says Malika, a schoolteacher: "If I suggest some social reform, I will not get milk or water in the village. I can be chased out by the elders."

Sometime back, a group of people sexually assaulted a village worker who campaigned vigorously against child marriage. To date, no one has been punished, though the victim had given the authorities the names of the accused.

Child marriage persists because of the desire to protect young girls against the risk of sexual abuse, for their own sake as well as for the family honour. Another reason is to keep dowries low and ensure groom is found. The older the age at marriage, the higher the dowry.

Social workers and women's organisations oppose child marriage for several reasons. Dr N. K. Singh says: "Early marriage results in early sexual activity. Occurring before the young girl is physically mature, this has implications for the development of her reproductive organs, exposing them to infections and diseases."

With her reproductive span increased, the child bride is also liable to have more preg-

nancies and births in her lifetime than a girl who marries after 21. Worst is the lot of child widows. Whether the husband dies before or after consummating the marriage, no one comes forward to marry the girl.

Social workers try to convince families that child marriages are uneconomical to the parents, even if the girl leaves home to live with her husband's family. One woman village worker said: "She returns to her parents for her first childbirth and even after that the parents must bear the heavy costs of rituals and religious ceremonies throughout life."

Those who favour child marriage far outnumber those who do not. In Rajasthan, where for every 1,000 males there are only 919 females, rural poor think that if a girl does not get married before she is 15, she may not get married at all, or may find only a widower. And because of the shortage of girls, parents can demand a price, often silver jewellery, for their daughter.

There are other advantage of child marriage. For instance, if a child bride is raped, she will still be accepted by her in-laws. An unmarried girl in the same situation would never be accepted as a prospective bride.

Women's organisations in Rajasthan have stopped some child marriages with the help of police. Also, women's groups encourage families to put the amount they would spend on the marriage in a fixed deposit to be used four or five years later. Equally important, these groups give emotional and economic support to young widows whose status is extremely low in the society.

Many villagers working for women's emancipation in rural areas have increased awareness of the harms of child marriage and have successfully countered the ceremonies — without upsetting local sentiments or people's self-esteem.

Teacher Madho Singh says: "All this is good and encouraging, but the key to eradicating the old evil lies in the elimination of poverty, women's education and above all, a political will at the top to do away with child marriage."

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