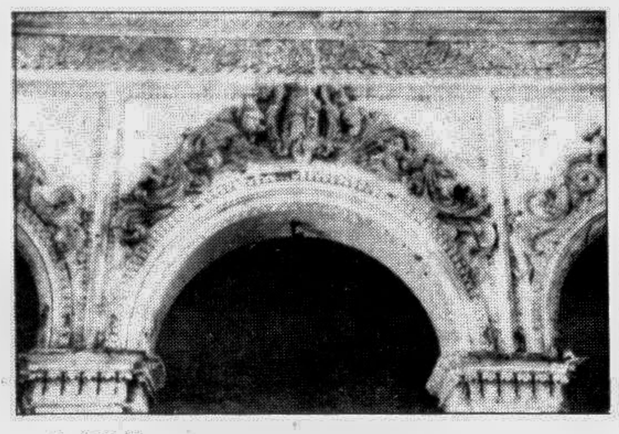
The Daily Star
WEEKEND MAGAZINE



People and Places

Painam Nagar: Price of Heritage

by Zainab Faruqui Ali

SONARGAON. A name that reminds us of our rich cultural and historical past. A name architects, planners and historians proudly pronounce in seminars, workshops and papers. But do we know or care much about the present fate of this history-laden town?

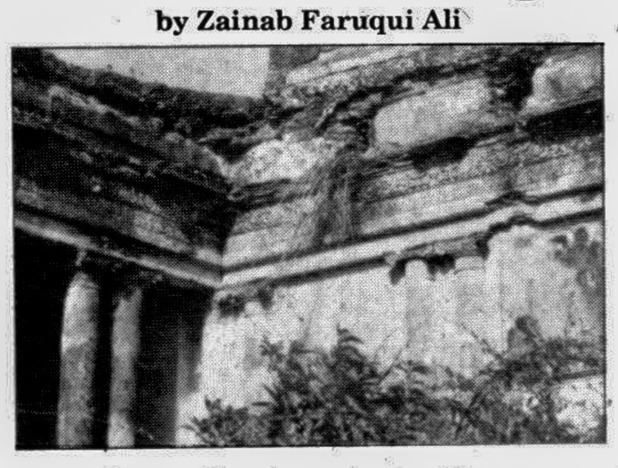
Situated in the heart of Sonargaon, Painam Nagar is probably the only surviving example of the early urban settlements of our country.

In the 12th century, long before Dhaka was born, Sonargaon, then called Suvarnagrama, was built as a centre of commerce. With the Muslim rule in the 13th century, Sonargaon became the capital of East Bengal. Even after Dhaka was made the capital in 1608, Sonargaon remained a centre of commerce and trade for a long time. Painam Nagar became prominent during the British period, when a cloth trading centre grew up under the influential zamindars. The cloth merchants came from various places such as Calcutta, Patna and Bombay and these wealthy merchants built their exquisite residences in the charming setting in Painam Nagar.

Here, a brick paved main road, slightly less than a mile, stretches east-west and is lined on both sides with fifty grand houses. The village is protected by two moats on the north and south which also serve as the service accesses. The buildings were built in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in an urban pattern, each adjoining the other with or without a narrow passage between them. The architectural pattern is the English Renaissance or the British Raj style, used throughout the cities of India in the 19th century. Each house is different; than the other in its facade composition yet together they create a unique ensemble along the street. It is a coherent neighbourhood of richly detailed buildings which tell us about the life and culture of our past. There were gardens, orchards and open spaces along with ponds set with ghat-houses. In Painam Nagar close-knit families lived side by side and often enjoyed many celebrations filled with feasts and musical festivals. People from nearby villages were invited to come and witness the special celebrations and rituals, such as Nagar-dola in the grand halls of some of the buildings. These merchants lived a vibrant life until 1947 when majority of them left for India. With the departure of the rest in 1960, the village became nearly abandoned. Most of these houses are still in good condition, some in poor and some have become ruins. But since there has not been any renovation/preservation work done so far, all of them are fast succumbing to ruins.

Painam Nagar was surveyed in detail and recommendations were made for its revitalization by local participants with the help of foreign experts in an architectural conservation workshop in 1989. We prepared proposals on the restoration, preservation and revitalization of the area along with suggestions regarding the funding of the project. The workshop suggested Painam Nagar to be rehabilitated into an educational/recreational centre geared towards national tourism. Once we heard that the government of Bangladesh was considering plans for conservation of this village, but serious doubts arise as to the state of this so called plan. If something has not been done soon, the government will come to preserve only ruins.

We cannot survive without referring back to history, to culture, to architecture. Why is the Taj then such a pride and joy of India? Why do not Romans let the Colosseum, or Greeks the Parthenon, fall apart into pieces? As Bengalis, aren't we sensitive about our great culture and literature? Aren't we proud of Titumir, Sirajuddowla and the gallant heroes of our War of Independence? Why should we then let our architectural heritage sold for a mere six Taka a bag?

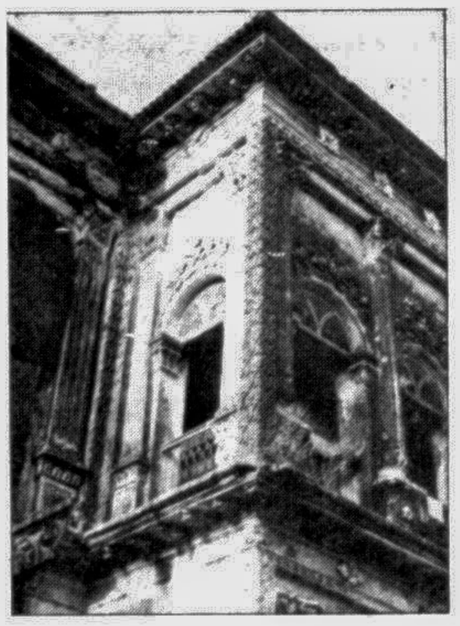


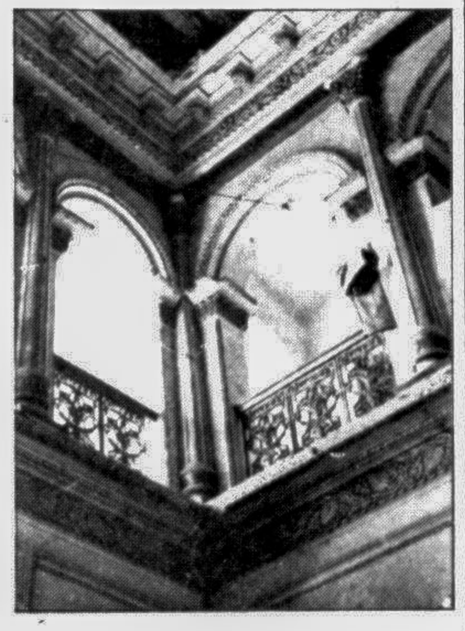
As a part of the architecture department study tour, we take our students to Painam Nagar every year. Last visit was a shock to me and my colleagues as we found the beautiful herring bone pattern of the hundred-year old road vanished as the brick pavers were crushed into gravel and black tar poured over it. What a painful sight! A few days later, a senior student of the department came to me and expressed his concern over the matter. I would very much like to know if the person-in-charge ever thought of what he was going to destroy before ordering this historical road to be made 'pucca'? If we are not conscious of our roots and heritage, can we sincerely put our mind to progress? I have seen many such brick pavings or old cobbled roads preserved only for pedestrian use in the middle of busy centre-cities of the West.

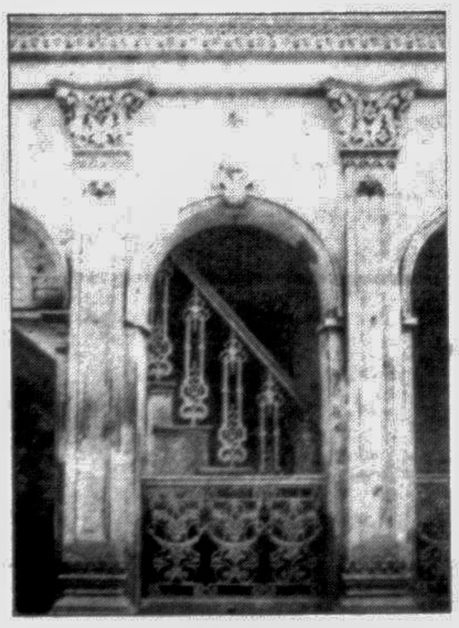
Each year we see one more wall torn down and the broken pieces of terra-cotta cornices, intricate detailing of ceilings and column capitals lying about. One more year passes and this glorious presence of the past gets more neglect as usual. As moss and vines cover the dilapidated walls, the structures get weakened. The two storied halls with their columned balconies that reminded the old goldsmith of the Jhulons they used to hold during Pujas and Dols, are loosing their grace while ornamental railings and rich plaster decorations are becoming prized possessions of the thieves.

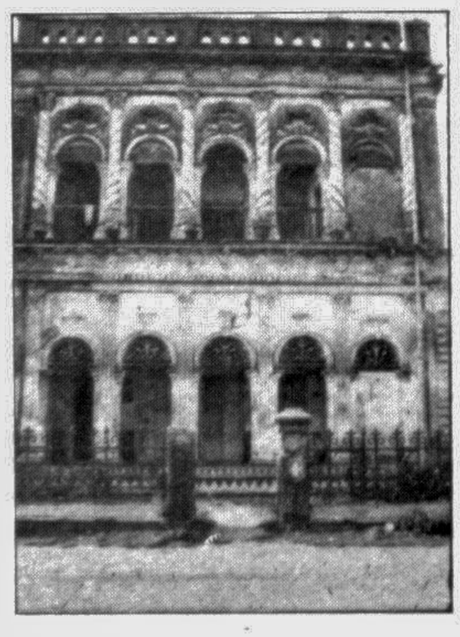
While the first year architecture students were busy sketching marvelous details and views, we took a stroll through the main street. It was a wonderful feeling as if we were travelling in the past and soon the horse carriages will roll down the street and ladies in their gorgeous saries and gold bangles will peek through the second floor balconies. But instead the real world caught up with us and unfolded the saddest event of the day. Sitting by the corner of a house, two old women were pounding those soft mellow bricks and making them into 'khoas'. When asked where the bricks came from, they replied that they gather the bricks from the very buildings and after crushing them into small pieces or 'khoas', sell them to the local contractors for six Taka per bag. I somehow held back my tears and walked away. Being an active participant in the conservation workshop, I always felt a close association with Painam Nagar and also felt certain responsibilities towards saving these old structures. While staying abroad I have experienced how people take pride in preserving valuable old buildings, and how all the citizens of the United States contributed to the renovation work of the Statue of Liberty. Similarly, rows of abandoned printing press

Continued on page 11







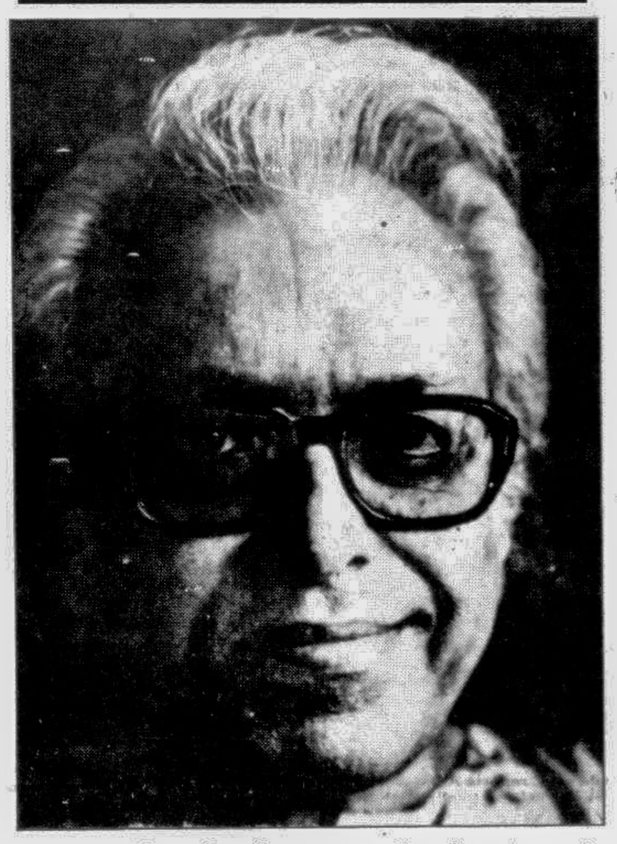


Shamsur Rahman : The Need for Rereading

by Azfar Hussain

Shamsur Rahman has evolved a poetic language out of the forces of national and global history, particularly exhibiting what has come to be known in the post-colonial discourse of Edward Said as 'creative globalism'. The writer provides a clue or two to Rahmanian modernism in the light of changing critical principles.

The Daily Star takes this opportunity to offer this piece in connection with the observance of the 65th birth anniversary of the poet.



OUR cultural response to Shamsur Rahman, *unquestionably* our foremost poet, has so far been sterile and spontaneous — both. The adverb 'unquestionably', just used here, tends to impose a circle of signification not only on the poet himself, but also on the possibilities of what may be called a *free reading* — the kind of reading the postmodernists would advocate even in the case of a modernist like Shamsur Rahman. It is true that Shamsur Rahman has hitherto been talked about with enthusiasm and *eclat*, at times with rigour and mostly with rhetoric, and he has been celebrated, symbolized, metaphorized, mythicized, at times even at the mass level. True, his lines have irresistibly occupied public memory and have also dominated political imagination in this part of the world. Given such phenomena, it is not difficult to see the power and potentials of Rahman's poetry, and also experience the untrammelled readability of his *oeuvre* produced over a period of almost half a century. No other living poet in the Third World has been so meaningfully and readably prolific as Shamsur Rahman.

Now, these three things — readability, prolificity and popularity — certainly attest to Rahman's genius, but they also determine and dictate stock responses to Shamsur Rahman's work, yielding now and then traditional criticisms replete with imagery-hunting, theme-building and diction-analysing exercises carried out with a somewhat feudal satisfaction and certitude. Before I move on to Shamsur Rahman's work, I intend to look at a few dominating trends in Rahman criticisms hitherto attempted.

Most of the conventional criticisms (I do not include all) appear to be *hegemonic* and *centric* in the sense that they tend to put Shamsur Rahman into self-limiting boxes of interpretations, and that they enclose the poet within the confines of narrow types and labels without creatively exploring Rahman's flair for *free play*, his penchant for box-breaking. There is yet another dimension to the drift of such criticisms : they tend to encourage a kind of limited critical ownership of Rahman's work, giving the impression that it is not easy to understand or appreciate or evaluate Rahman. There is a certain amount of mysticism and feudalism in such criticisms in that they want to establish their own critical hegemony over Shamsur Rahman through making him inaccessible to other criticisms and other readings, and thus also generate a mysterious fear that would not allow everyone to read, and write on, Shamsur Rahman. Today, I feel, one of the apt ways of paying a tribute to Shamsur Rahman would be to explode this self-complacent, hegemonic, mystic circle of criticism imposed on his *oeuvre*. Yes, Shamsur Rahman does not belong to a limited circle of *punditts*; he is everyone's, and his poetry, by virtue of its quality, is hospitable to a variety of readings. The fact that Rahman's poetry is in a position to spark off a spectrum of readings underlines one of the modernist characteristics of the poet.

Shamsur Rahman got his first poem published in 1949, though one had to wait until 1960 to see his first volume of poems published — *Pratham Gan Ditiyo Mrittyur Agay* (The First Song Precedes the Second Death). As a poet, he has been active since then, and has so far produced as many as 40 volumes of poems including selected and collected works. Given the range and quantity of Rahman's *oeuvre* and the enormous formal and stylistic varieties he has been able to exhibit and evolve, it is not possible to come up with a fairly inclusive evaluation of the poet within the space-limit allowed to me here, and such an evaluation does not constitute my purpose either. However, what I intend to do is to raise a question or two in the face of a few fixed and frozen characterizations somewhat glibly attributed to Shamsur Rahman.

One of the pet notions of traditional Rahman critics, dramatically exemplified in Humayun Azad, is that Shamsur Rahman has inherited his modernism from the poets of the thirties; though, to a certain extent, he has been able to evince a breakaway with it. This notion smacks of a linearistic simplification based on a water-tight cause-and-effect relationship. If one even looks into Rahman's early works, one cannot miss Rahman's rich, dense *intertextuality* that plays fast and loose with the modernists of the thirties on the one hand, and with the whole of the lyrical tradition traceable from *Charyapada* through the medieval romantic poetry and Biharilal and Lalon down to Tagore on the other. A hard-core reading of Rahman's tone, tune and text, and particularly of *Rahmanian* lyricism, would reveal that the poet has certainly moved both *beyond* and *after* the thirties, exemplifying a dialectic of attachment to, and detachment from, the whole of the Bengali lyrical tradition. And with time, this dialectic in Rahman's poetry has become acutely slippery to the extent of negating any fixed centre of origin as such. Of course, the poets of the thirties are there, but not as the dictators of Rahmanian modernism which is more expansively intertextual than traditional Rahman critics have so far anticipated. It is through an expansive and at times notoriously slippery intertextuality based on a playful dialectic just indicated earlier that Shamsur Rahman has been able to shape a language for contemporary Bengali poetry — in other words, a language full of possibilities.

For Shamsur Rahman's intertextuality which evolved over a period of 45 years, one only needs to explore the free-playing mix of bewilderingly varied linguistic and stylistic resources that the poet has brought to his work. In his poetry, the Lalonian half-rhythm and *epanophora* jazzed up by the Tagoresque lyrical *elan*, the semi-existentialist lyrical 'I' in the whirl of collective historical unconscious particularly noticeable in the eary and middle works the poet, the familiar modernist associations of Baudelairean ennui and Laforguean irony and the Dantesque-Hopkinsian-Eliotesque mode of interwoven temporalizing, the Jibanananadian lyrical melancholy coupled with the intense psychologization of nature, the ineradicable sense of all-pervading exile and sophisticated cosmopolitanism of Amiya Chakrabarty, a sporadic Mallarmean fascination for asemantic sounds, among others, have gone into the making of a language sensitively receptive and elastically readable. One should not, however, be misguided by thinking that Shamsur Rahman has simply assimilated and absorbed various tones and tunes, lines and rhymes, forms and metres, moods and modes, from various sources; but one needs to notice that Shamsur Rahman has evolved a poetic language out of the forces of national and global history, particularly exhibiting what Edward W Said has called *creative globalism*. This creative globalism accommodates space for linkages between a poem and a poem, a language and a language, a culture and a culture, and of course, between a man and a man. Yes, it was Tagore who could successfully accommodate such space; Jibanananda Das also did it, and so has Shamsur Rahman done in our times. Yes, Rahman is national and global — both.

It is customary to say that Shamsur Rahman progresses from the lyrical and empirical "I" to the collective historical and political "we". One usually refers to the poem "The manuscript of an Autobiography" including in his first volume of poems and also to his later poem "Freedom, you are" to indicate the movement of the poet from the presence of the 'I' to its absence. I feel this is a misleading characterization of Rahman's intensely paradoxical and dialectical stylistic dynamics. In fact, Rahman plays with the "I" — it is not the kind of the "I" that the Romanticists celebrate in the Wordsworthean fashion, but it is the kind of the "I" which activates the play of absence and presence in the shadow of Zeno's paradox. For example, the "I" in the early Rahman simultaneously shows up and puts itself *under erasure* in the sense that the "I" is a slippery signifier referring to the poet himself and at the same time crossing him out so as to enable the signifier to refer to anyone — uncertain, unknown, unidentified. When the poet says : "Someone once said to me, "Give me something after your heart." / "Scouring all around I brought back Sorrow/ and set them face to face," the "I" indicated here becomes anyone, stripping itself of any fixed, frozen identity.

One can certainly say that Shamsur Rahman has, almost all throughout, been exploring the symbolic and metaphorical potentials — the playfulness — of the "I" in his poetry. Rahman has never been an explicit classicist like Eliot at the expense of the "I", nor he has been romantically celebratory of the egolistical sublime like Wordsworth, nor his "I" has become confessionally exposed in bare or cubic details, nor his "I" is immensely dwarfed into a tiny speck of meaningless dust in the existentialist fashion. In fact, Rahman's "I" resists fixity, closedness. It is perhaps a playful signifier that has only gained energy and force over a period of 45 years. No Bengali modernist has been so successful as Shamsur Rahman in evolving various, playfully metaphorizing texts of the "I".

The "I" is there in both the topical and timeless themes which Shamsur Rahman handles almost equally well in his poetry : it is rooted in the historical present and in the changing social dynamics when Rahman tries to draw the fever-chart of his age; it is also there in the magic livelihood of his love and in the vision of a desirable order of experience; it also explores the contours of our own extended beings in the familiar and *defamiliarized* Bangladeshi milieu; it is there with squeaks, clicks, belches and groans; it has also got a sideline role, sometimes even lost in 'the dense, rowdy friezes of people', and so on.

There is yet another aspect of Shamsur Rahman's poetry which is often lost sight of in traditional criticisms. This is an aspect with which the postmodernists exhibit their particular concerns, though Rahman is not a postmodernist in that special sense of the term. This aspect brings to the fore Rahman's flair for countless binary oppositions such as inside/outside, before/after, death/life, fiction/reality, silence/sound, and so on.

Of course, it is possible to find binary oppositions almost everywhere in the world, say in *Chandimangal*; but Rahman's binary oppositions have a special quality in that they heighten and sharpen the political, historical and mythic imagination of the poet. In other words, Rahman directly or indirectly — sometimes

Continued on page 11

So Many Days

by Shamsur Rahman

One, two, three, the days go by,
I am gashed by their cold razor-edge.
One, two, three, the days go by,
Yet there's no sign of you,

You don't come and stand leaning against the doorframe
Or brushing back a wanton lock from the forehead
Ask, "And how are you? Won't you ever
Come again? See, Loneliness sportively proffers her beaker
And I drain it to the lees. My warm hands
Touch the bed, chair, wall, the sapling
In the courtyard, and everywhere meet
The absence of your dazzling body.

I stand facing the kris of despair,
Like a youth offering his breast to the oppressor's bayonet.
Without your visits this room is a tomb
Overgrown with wild grass
Where a desolate wind sings a ceaseless lament;
An ancient skeleton shouts bizarre slogans,
Busy termites swarm among its ribs.

Whenever you step into this room, the old door-frame
Laughs merrily, on the instant the window-curtain
Turns into a nautch-girl; I grow happy as a birthday —
Flickering candle-light and the Moonlight Sonata
Unobtrusively transform all into a garden.
And when you leave, my heart is like
A crematory on a wintry evening.

— Translated by Kaiser Haq