

Bangladesh Analysed with Love and Understanding

HERE is a background story behind James J. Novak's choosing to write on Bangladesh. He was then eight years old, his brother Richard was 10. He happened to see a mural painting depicting a scene of East Bengal, now Bangladesh, on the cafeteria wall of Notre Dame University. It was part of a village set among the woods, where two Christian priests were walking barefooted and preaching the message of the Holy Father.

That was in 1930. Both Richard and James were acquainted with the name 'Bengal' for the first time. The name kindled their curiosity about the land. When grown up Richard came to East Bengal in pursuance of the noble calling of a priest. He came to East Pakistan in 1955. And in 1964, during one of his preachings he was stabbed to death by an assailant.

The younger brother was then working in Germany as an officer of the US army. His father communicated to him the painful news over telephone. James recalled that when he was a child his father had dreamt that some one had stabbed Richard and he was dying. Through the death of Richard, Novak came closer to the word Bengal. From then on, Novak regarded this country with hatred and contempt. But he was looking for an opportunity to visit the country and see the soil on which Richard's blood was shed.

In 1970 Novak came to Hong Kong on official business. It was then that he paid his first visit to Dhaka. He paid several subsequent visits after the liberation of Bangladesh. As his hatred and contempt subsided, he grew an interest to see and know the country more closely. The interest graduated into love. From this deep realisation of love wrote he the book 'Bangladesh: Reflections on the Water'. Though strains of sorrow and hatred are far from rare after going through the book, I got the feeling that Novak came to Bangladesh with a mind full of animus and vengeance and went back with great tenderness and love for this country, and perhaps also a sadness at the country's misery and distress. Novak's love and tenderness towards Bangladesh are expressed with the exactitude and dispassionate analysis of a historian. Plain sentimentality finds no place here. In some fields he betrays a limitation of his knowledge and experience. An instance of this limitation was the way he compared Tajuddin Ahmed, the Prime Minister of Bangladesh during the liberation war, and eminent politician, with Ziaur Rahman, then a Sector Commander and later President of Bangladesh. The book on the history and culture of Bangladesh contains a few more flaws and inconsistencies. These may be discussed later.

It should be mentioned at the outset that when Novak wrote the book he was living in Dhaka and was an officer in the Asia Foundation.

The subject matter has been divided under different heads, namely: Nature, Succession of the seasons, Poverty and pride, Different aspects of the Bangladeshi psyche, Natural calamities, 'I am cyclone, I am destruction', Assassinations and political annals, Bangladesh and the US, can Bangladesh survive, Foreign investment in Bangladesh, Tourism.

Novak has seen and analysed Bangladesh from various perspectives. He started with giving a tip on Bangladesh and

BOOK REVIEW

Bangladesh: Reflections on the Water
by James J. Novak

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Page: 236.

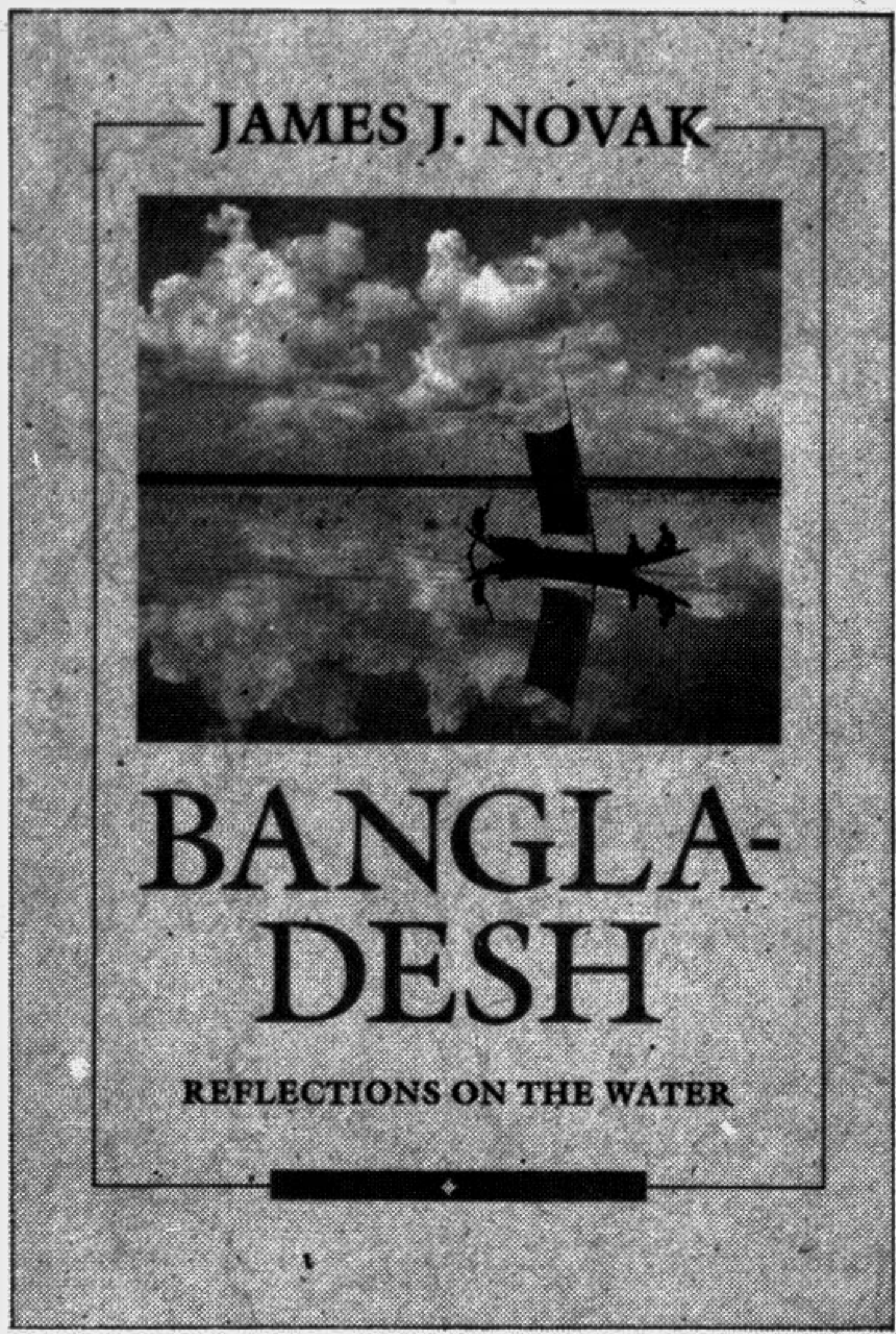
Reviewed by
Rahat Khan

sounding a warning. The tip is: 'Bangladesh is a poor country, though not as poor as on Ziaul Abedin's paintings.' The warning is: 'When you visit Bangladesh, by all means view the people as they are, but for your sake and theirs, remember that you are dealing with people who know what development is.' (page 85). It is clear that both the tip and the warning are intended for foreigners.

During his stay in Dhaka, Novak met the leading politicians, government ministers, high ranking bureaucrats, professors, journalists and writers and exchanged views with them on different topics concerning Bangladesh. In this way he has enriched his ideas and experience. Searching for early history of Bangladesh he has taken the help of religious scriptures and legends. The pages of his book are a testament to his single-mindedness and diligence as a researcher seeking the truth. In this way he has brought into relief the history of Bengal, the history of Bengali Muslims, the bitter conflict of politics with religion and communalism with secularism triumphing finally.

It appears that W W Hunter's book 'The Indian Mussalmans' has influenced Novak in various ways. Hunter was a British civil servant working in India towards 1930. He noted with surprise that the lion's share of the money needed to finance the war that the British army was fighting along the Afghan border for years together was coming from a poorer and neglected part of Bengal called East Bengal. Hunter's writings and counsels prompted the British civilians of the then India to give up their condescending attitude towards the Muslims, particularly Bengali Muslims and to adapt, on the whole, a more sympathetic attitude towards the Muslims, especially Bengali Muslims. Novak has analysed in historical light the poverty of Bengali Muslims, their religious and cultural distinctness, the political and religious upheavals repeatedly assailing their simple lives and their recourse to falsehood under compulsion of poverty. Analysing various historical events and social settings, Novak has come to the conclusion that Bengali Muslims are religious while they are also secular. In Novak's own words: "Unfortunately outsiders today often view Islam with fear as a holed of militancy, reactionary politics and terrorism — an image fortified by many events in recent years. But in truth only a minuscule number of the world's nearly one billion Muslims are involved in these dramatic events. Most Muslims do not even live in Middle East or North Africa. They are in Asia, somewhat isolated from the events of recent years. Bangladesh is a case in point."

In analysing the Bangladeshi



psychic, James Novak has also weighs the impact of poets, writers and artists besides that of politicians and social reformers. He has skillfully analysed the contributions of Lalou Shah, Rabindranath, M N Roy and Kazi Nazrul Islam in the lives of Bengalis (inhabitants of Bangladesh).

He has also dwelt on the point that the mainstream of Bengali life has repeatedly been stirred by liberal humanism of the West. But Novak's observation on the influence of Poet Iqbal on Bengali life is not correct. Iqbal is regarded by Bengalis as a major poet, even a great poet, like Matthew Arnold and T S Eliot. But Iqbal's poetry and philosophy have no direct influence on Bengali life.

Novak has described the social current of Bangladesh as somewhat enfeebled and sluggish. Society is replete with superstitions and religious bigotry. Comparing, Novak said, Bangladesh society is conservative but not like in Middle East or Pakistan. Seeing the role of mother in Bangladesh society Novak is filled with surprise and admiration. There is a touching centrality to the role of the mother in Bangladesh that has no western comparison in terms of respect and love tendered to her, especially by her sons. He also said that there is no other country except Bangladesh where female education is receiving such cardinal importance. In the politics of Bangladesh the Prime Minister herself is an estimable lady and according to Novak, "There is no reason to doubt that the other, Sheikh Hasina, daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the nation's father, has a very good chance of being Begum Zia's successor."

An analysis of the historical forces will reveal that Plato and Aristotle received a new life due to the work of Muslim researchers and theoreticians. In the early phase of European Renaissance, great influence was exerted by Muslim theoreticians, historians, political scientists, physicians, philosophers and Doctors of Philosophy, mathematicians and astronomers. Muslims have taught Europe the use of the

compass rudder and gunpowder. The European society also learnt from Muslim society how to show honour to women and what the pride of aristocracy is. Novak says that the high place and honour accorded to women in the politics and society of Bangladesh is integral to Bangladesh tradition and is not something extraneous or borrowed.

In his book 'Bangladesh: Reflections on the Water' Novak has taken the help of such contradictory media as history, social organisation, poetry, painting, etc. in order to understand the Bangladeshi ethos. Perhaps the most striking feature outside he has said clearly, "When you come to Bangladesh you must visit 32, Dhamondi and offer respect to the memory of the founder of Bangladesh and the father of the Bengali nation."

Such an approach on the part of Novak proves that he has at least tried to see and understand Sheikh Mujib in the light of history and reality. His bitter comments about Sheikh Mujib are not lacking either. But despite some odd, half-true and baseless conceptions of politics, on the whole Novak's conclusions mostly lie within the bounds of acceptability. The 236-page book covered with blue jacket came out in 1993. After 1990 he has written about Ershad regime, probably while he was stationed in Dhaka. So it is better not to discuss Novak's comments and analyses about Ershad and his regime. When all is said, 'Bangladesh: Reflections on the Water' is a delightful reading. Novak's heart and intellect were simultaneously at work in constructing each sentence of the book. The flavour of Bangladesh that the author had obtained back in 1930 at the age of eight from a mural in the university is multiplied and accentuated in this book. The blood of a preacher which mixed with the dust of Bangladesh has not gone in vain. Twenty-nine years later his younger brother, through deep understanding and love of this country, has produced a marvellous book. Heartily congratulations to the James J. Novak for his noble work.

the buffalo, sting to the wasp, treachery to the Bengali'. Novak could not refute this statement. But Macaulay's observation stemmed from hatred and scorn while Novak's largely emanates from sympathy and love. Therefore, while admitting that the other face of Bengalis is that of deceit, jealousy, suspiciousness and random mendacity, he says, "But this fear (of hunger) does not make the Bangladeshi more greedy or dishonest. Poverty and uncertainty of life are the source of this fear. Out of this fear has grown the Bengali's propensity to resort to mudslinging, backbiting and throwing pointed innuendoes about other's corruption without remaining honest himself."

Some of Novak's analysis and comments are not above controversy. Reading his views one gets the feeling that he is an ardent Republican who tends to value American foreign policy much beyond its real worth. It also seems that during his stay in Dhaka for understanding political trend and characteristics he strayed into wrong assemblies of the living rooms. In any country analysis of a contemporary or recent political event is difficult and full of hazards. Though an outsider, Novak has ventured to do this and given proof of his sincerity, commitment to truth and skill. But although his commitment to truth and skill are fully reflected, some of his analyses of the political trends of Bangladesh reveal in congruities and half-truths. The comparison of Tajuddin Ahmed with President Ziaur Rahman is one such instance. About Sheikh Mujib he comments: "He rose to the extent that it is possible for a common man to rise. For this reason Sheikh Mujib should be lauded and congratulated. Alongside he has praised the Sheikh's dedication to politics, struggle and leadership. Novak did not hesitate to mention that though Sheikh Mujib was the victim of a tragedy, he was a hero in history and politics, and not anti-hero or villain. To those coming to visit Bangladesh form outside he has said clearly, "When you come to Bangladesh you must visit 32, Dhamondi and offer respect to the memory of the founder of Bangladesh and the father of the Bengali nation."

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In Love with Bangladeshi Skies

by Fayza Haq

GALINA Shevchenko, who had nine of her art pieces included in the Sixth Asian Art Biennale, recently had a solo exhibition of 41 art pieces at the Russian Culture Centre. Her works include portraits, but she loves delineating nature, specially the Bangladeshi skies with their changing colours, which she finds completely different from those found in Russia. Galina hopes to visit historical places in Bangladesh like Sonargaon, Mohastangarh, the king's palace at Natore, and scenic areas like Jafflon and Cox's Bazaar to paint these scenes.

Encouraged and inspired to paint as a child by her father and grandfather, who painted themselves, and having attended the Russian Institute of Fine Arts for a while, the artist has taken lessons in painting while in Bangladesh. She likes using bright colours and her favourite is blue.

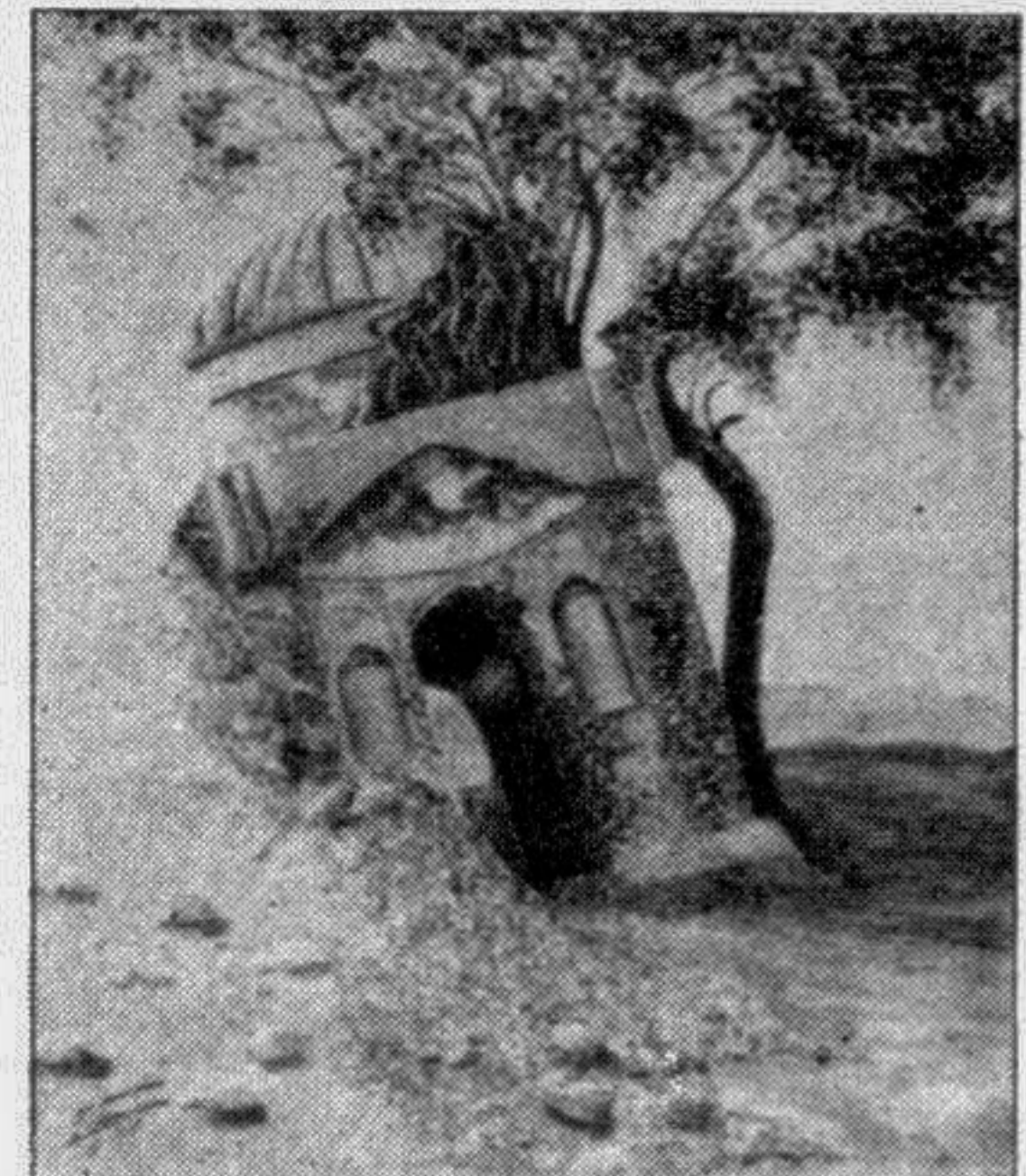
Her "Hair-do" in oil pastel has a delicate depiction of a woman colling her hair, wearing only a flowing blue skirt. The composition with the yellow flowers and the red covered dressing table is both picturesque and suggestive.

Similarly, "A girl in front of a mirror" (oil-pastel) depicts a

also consists of varied boyant colours. Galina, who has El Greco and da Vinci as her favourite painters, has a penchant for the French Impressionists too, has also tried her hand at abstracts and semi abstracts as in "The beginning of life", with its conglomeration of vivid coloured spheres, and "Succession," in which the artist has symbolised different generations by silhouettes created by varied coloured chords against a grey and orange background in oil. She has also depicted pain and uncertainty in "Anguish — woman" and "Anguish — man" using cubism and pointillism.

Galina, who has a Ph.D. in mathematics, teaches the subjects at the Russian International School. Her husband is the Ambassador of the Russian Federation in Bangladesh, and she has two charming children, Gleb and Anna. This statuesque blonde, despite being gifted with numerous assets, remains gentle, self-effacing, soft-spoken and eager to please. She has nothing but praises for the people of Bangladesh, whom she considers hard working and incredibly hospitable. Apart from painting, she has gardening and knitting as her hobbies.

"Year of a rooster" is an oil which has a farmer's hut and animals surrounded by fog and mist and with a black forest topped by a pink and golden sky. Against this sombre background is a cock with an enormous fabulous tail comprising brilliant blue and yellow colours. The path at the side



Old Dhaka: Temple on the bank of the river



Corn flowers

Dresden-doll like dainty blonde as she sits perched on a cane chair, examining her face and her body in the mirror before her. A white cushion placed nearby matches well with the blossoms and the trailing cloth placed seductively on her thighs.

"Youth" is another delightful pastel portrait of a young woman in a pale mauve hat with purple flowers, with only a lavender skirt for her apparel, seen standing blithely in a beautiful garden with many coloured blossoms.

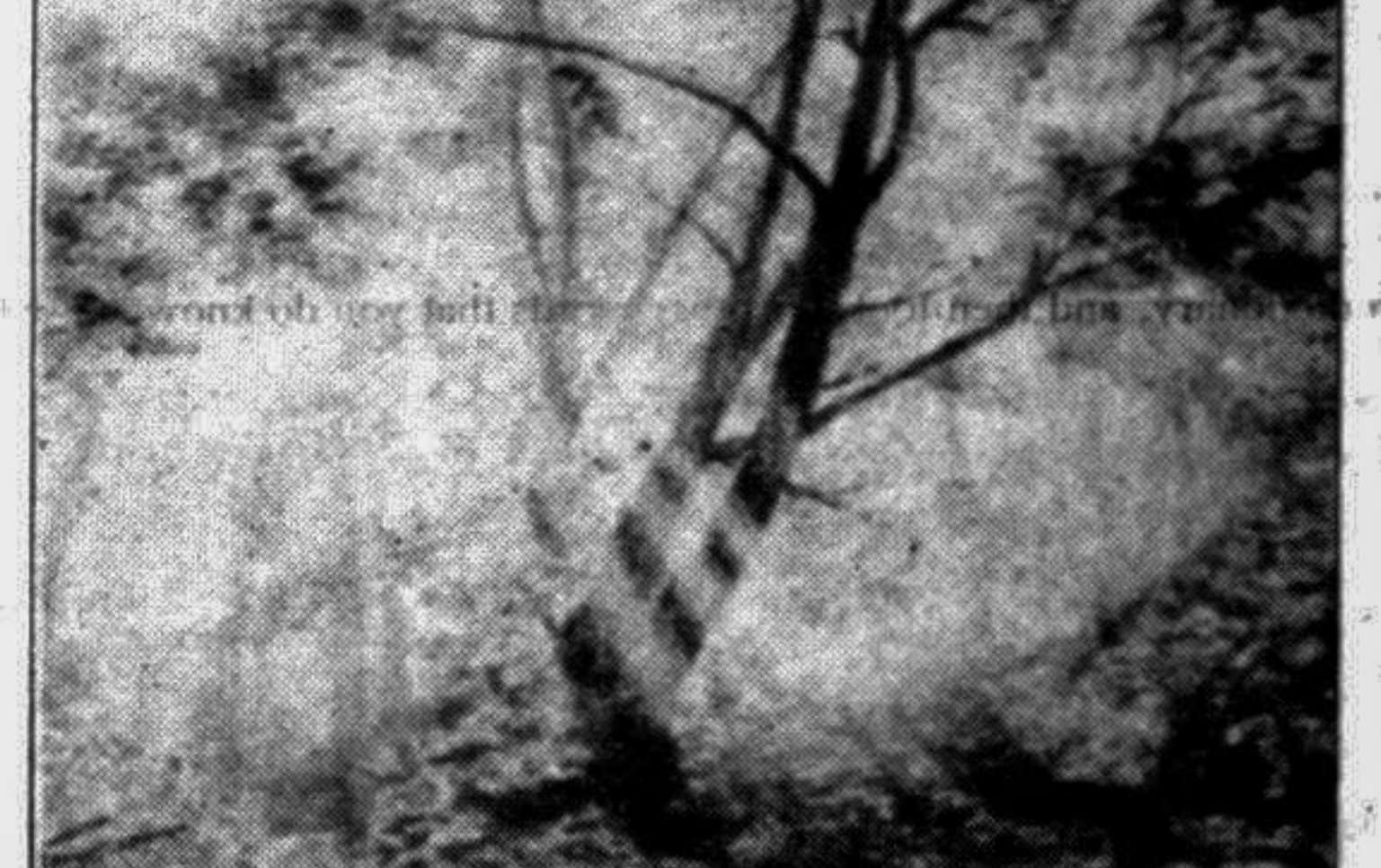
The "Portrait of an unknown man" shows an old unshaven man with a red muffler which relieve the grey and white of the rest of the creation. The artist has done two realistic portraits of her husband and her teacher as well as that of a young girl in charcoal. The lines are subtle and effective.

"Symphony of light" is an idyllic depiction of streams of light filtering through leaves, branches and tree trunks in a forest. The yellow and green leaves contrast well with the black branches and the pale blue of the shadows. Galina's "Lake Ujin," "Lilac bay" and "Crying birches" are similarly painstaking and picturesque creations based on the landscape of Russia.

"Clouds in the Himalayas" is a fresh, pleasing, realistic piece with a pleasant combination of blue, green and brown. The Nepalese atmosphere has been brought in with deft and power-



Symphony of light



Waiting for Her Call

Waiting for Her Call

by Fakhru Aziz

- The pounding surf on Kuakata are calling me
- The Bengal Tigers of Sunderban are calling me
- Padma, Meghna and Jamuna are calling me
- Rain, Flood and Thunderstorm are calling me
- Sunshine, friendly sky and ivory cloud are calling me
- Owl, woodpecker and kingfisher are calling me
- Grasshopper, butterfly and firefly are calling me
- Dahlia, petunia and zinnia are calling me

But lonely heart of mine is waiting for her call only.

Reflex

by Akhtar Ahmad

Once in a mild noon at Kumarshah I saw
An absolute black butterfly
Fly gently across the hillocks green.
I dared not
To look at it,
For its aristocracy
That withheld me.



Academic of Beaux Arts of Paris has recently made the famous mime artiste Marcel Mercon their academician member — It's a rare honour — receiving which, Marcel Mercon held a function at the Academic and to assist her, those expatriate Bangladeshi mime artiste Parthapratim Majumder, — a great honour to him too.

Rainbow Film Society Holds International Film Festival

critically acceptable social, political and cultural atmosphere so that a strong demand for making good films can be created among the common moviegoers, and is unflinchingly trying to reach this target by regularly holding film shows, seminars, discussion meetings and rallies.

— Dr Mohammad Moniruzzaman
Chairman, Festival Committee
2nd Dhaka International Film Festival '93

THE 2nd Dhaka International Film Festival '93 has been arranged to commemorate the 16th Founding Anniversary of the Rainbow Film Society. The Rainbow Film Society is well-known for its positive as well as steady role in the film society movement. It is firmly devoted to the Democratic and secular values that have emerged from the language movement through the liberation war and to the mass uprising and on which the very existence of independent, sovereign Bangladesh is based. As a result the Rainbow has set its goal towards creating a demo-

In view of the profound interest shown by the elite of the society we arrived at the decision that holding of film festival every year was most desirable in order to make the Film Society movement more forceful. Keeping this in view the second Dhaka International Film Festival is being held from 23 December. We are determined that henceforward Dhaka Film Festival will be held from 23 to 31 December every year. It may be mentioned here that this is the first full-length feature film festival organised unofficially.

In this festival twelve countries including Bangladesh are participating and about sixty films will be screened. The programme includes retrospective, Panorama of Bangladesh, international film session and a film session for children. Besides, open discussion and international seminar will be the chief attraction of the festival.

We face here problems of projection, auditorium, official permission, and above all, financial. However, we are pleased to say that the arrival of distinguished guests from far and near has intensely inspired us. This festival has been dedi-

ated to the memory of a pioneer of film society movement late film-maker Alamgir Kabir. Panorama of Bangladesh has been dedicated to the memory of another pioneer of film making in Bangladesh, late Nazir Ahmed.

A special feature of this

year's festival is two retrospectives. We are fortunate that along with the retrospective of six films of Adur Gopal Krishnan we will hear his valuable observations on film. Another retrospective will be on five films of late Zahir Raihan, one of the pioneers of good film making in Bangladesh.

The theme of this 2nd Dhaka Film Festival is "Better Film, Better Audience, Better Society".
Ahmed Muztaba Zamal
Director, 2nd Dhaka International Film Festival '93

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There is certainly no room for complacency, yet it must be admitted that the film society movement in Bangladesh has created, over the years, an enlightened film audience who can appreciate good cinema, although their number is still small and they are limited, for the most part, to the urban educated middle class. The Rainbow Film Society has played an important role in this. It sincerely believes that without the growth of a healthy democratic secular culture a country can hardly move forward in any field, be it social or economic. And films can play a very important role in the flowering of

TO organise a festival and that too an international festival of films by a film society is indeed a very challenging task.

So far as I remember even at the public level we didn't have a truly international festival since quite some time. It is indeed heartening to see that the Rainbow Film Society has attempted to fill the void.

Let us hope for a fruitful congregation of thinking people and a rewarding viewing of significant films by eminent directors of many countries of the world.

— Sayeed Ahmad

A Most Worthy Venture

CONGRATULATIONS, Rainbow Film Society! You have done it again!

But for the persistent, innovative any bold activities of the various film societies and the short film forum of Bangladesh our film scenario is a bleak one. In this dismal situation film festivals can relieve, to some little extent, the feeling of boredom, not to say disgust, produced by most of the commercially turned out films of Bangladesh. The programmes chalked out by the Rainbow Film Society for its 1993 film festival gives us a chance once again to see some good films and listen to some interesting discussions on various aspects of the cinema. Hopefully it will contribute to the growth of a

healthy film culture in the country, even if marginally.

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such a culture. And film festivals can indeed play a role, necessary a small one, but nonetheless a positive one, in this matter.

I wish the international film festival 1993 every success. Some dedicated youngsters worked tirelessly day and night to bring it about. Problems seemed endless. There were problems of planning, establishing contacts, obtaining clearances and confirmations, arranging logistic support and above all of finance. It is no mean achievement for an entirely private organisation to be able finally to overcome all difficulties and bring its dream to fruition.

— Kabir Choudhury



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