



Our Cultural Struggle and Muhammad Shahidullah

by Azfar Hussain

This piece is presented here to mark the 109th birth-anniversary (July 10, 1885) and the 25th death-anniversary (July 13, 1969) of Dr Muhammad Shahidullah — linguist, critic, researcher, educationist, grammarian, translator, essayist and editor.

THE customary characterization of Dr Muhammad Shahidullah has been given in to an irresistibly recurring epithet — "linguist". True, he had multi-lingual scholarships well exemplified in his oeuvre; his work on Bengali and Sanskrit linguistics is particularly commendable. But, then, if one looks into the whole range and scale of his enterprises, one cannot but feel that he was very much involved in a kind of progressive language-movement indicating, what Frederic Jameson once called, "the political work of culture". For, Shahidullah was struggling hard to consolidate and expand the possibilities of Bengali language and literature at a moment when the Bengali language itself came under the direct attack of Pakistani colonialism. In fact, his was a task that bore the Gramscian trace of counter-cultural hegemony, which was then very much part of people's anti-colonial struggle.

It deserves remembering here that when Dr Ziauddin Ahmed, the then Vice-chancellor of Aligarh University, recommended the very establishment of Urdu as the only state-language, Shahidullah's response and reaction, rather resistance, were more than prompt and unequivocal. It was Shahidullah who wrote that Bengali alone deserved the prerogative and prestige of being the state language, for it was the language of the majority. Noticeable as it is, Shahidullah's position was transparently democratic, and his resistance was directed against the colonial hegemony whose fierce, violent expression he could readily identify in the cultural, rather linguistic, hegemony. Shahidullah himself indicated in one of his essays that the most violent form of attack on someone can assume the shape of an attack on nothing but one's tongue, one's language. Shahidullah also struggled to resist, the typical colonial attack on the

Bengali alphabet itself; it was then proposed that the Bengali alphabet should be written in the Arabic or Roman alphabet. For Shahidullah, this very proposition was nothing but preposterous as well as reactionary in that it could only destroy a living language full of promises and possibilities. In 1948, in his presidential address he gave at a literary convention, he assertively maintained that "we" are first of all Bengalees; then "we" are either Hindus or Muslims, and thus, he exhibited his uncompromising attachment to his identity, to his essential Bengalihood, which no doubt provided an impetus to the kind of language-struggle (here, a form of anti-colonial struggle) he was involved in, of course with an unusual degree of conviction and commitment, energy and enthusiasm. What he was actually doing was that he was unearthing and demystifying the genesis and genesis of his own language, that he was also reshaping and

reforming the Bengali language including its morphology and phonology and grammar as well as spellings, and that he was writing a history of Bengali language and literature, thus carrying forward a cultural struggle whose politics one can readily identify in terms of the will-to-stay-in-place exhibited by the language itself. It needs mentioning here that the writing of a history, particularly in a land colonized and not independent, is essentially a political act, a means to claiming and consolidating power.

Before we move on to see how Muhammad Shahidullah was carrying forward his linguistic, cultural, anti-colonial enterprises, we can now briefly look into his life, career and education.

2

Born on July 10 in 1885 in the village of Peyara under the district of Chhabish Pargana — now known as Uttar Chhabish Pargana, Shahidullah had to spend his early life in an atmosphere and a milieu inescapably marked by feudal norms and values. But, then, his fight against such values began since his early life. Learning languages constituted one of the most abiding passions for him. At a quite early age, he learnt at home such languages as Urdu, Arabic and Persian. Then, at school, he showed an amazing merit in picking up Sanskrit which remained a strong passion for him until his last day. While at school, he also learnt Oriya, Hindi, Tamil and Greek. It was at this time that Shahidullah engaged himself in translating from Persian and Sanskrit poetry.

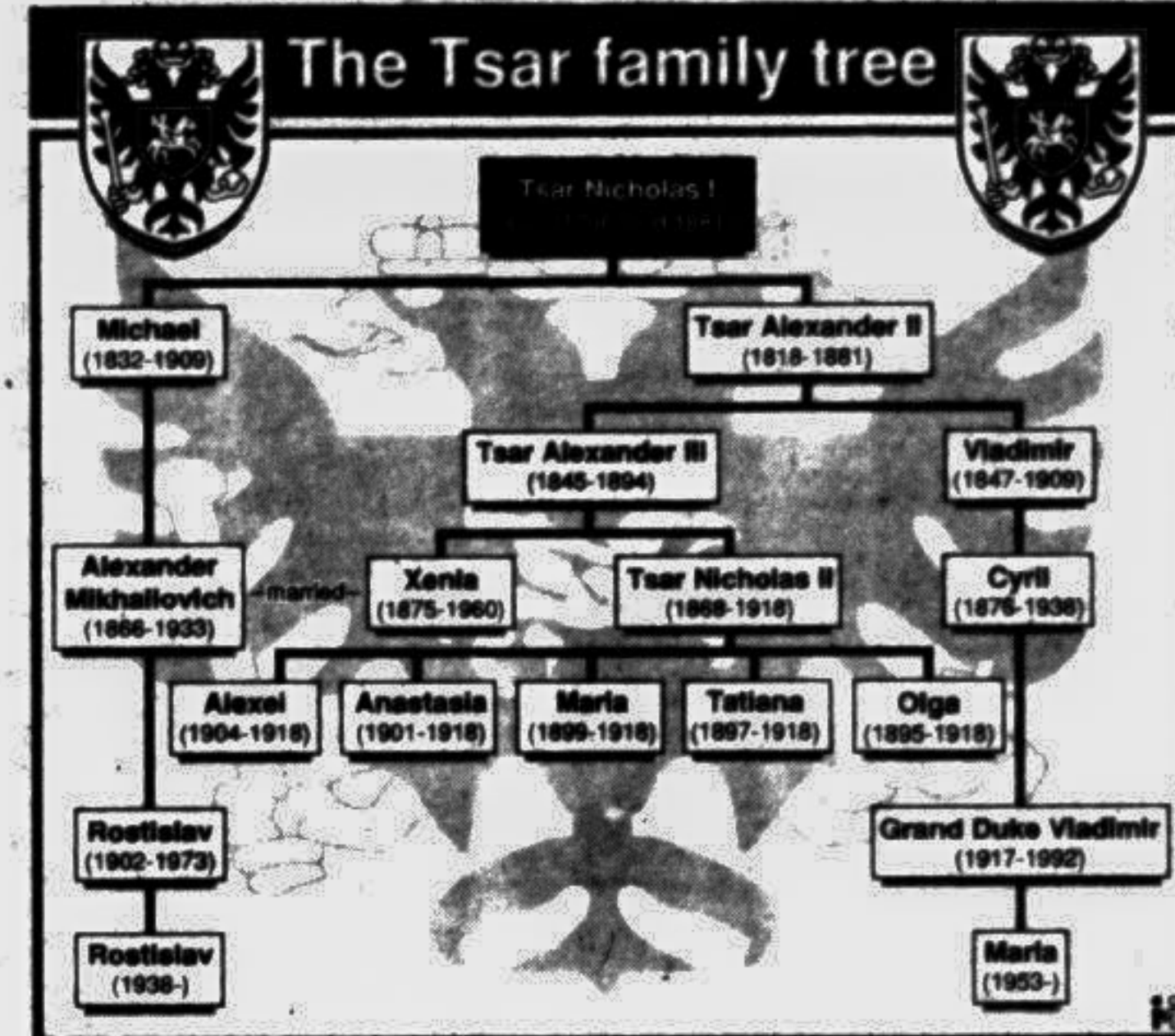
Muhammad Shahidullah passed his entrance from Howra Zila School with a first in 1904. In 1906, he did his F A from Presidency College, subsequently getting into the BA class at Hoogly College. Owing to illness, however, Shahidullah could not sit for the BA examination in time, though later in 1910, he did his BA with a second-class honours in Sanskrit. It was in this year that Shahidullah got married to Morguba Khatun.

Continued on page 11

Tsaromania Takes Russia by Storm

Nina Bachkatov writes from Moscow

Since the end of socialism many Russians have sought their Tsarist past. They want to reclaim their history, but one laced with rosy myths and dreams. Pavement stalls sprout Romanov family trees, pictures of the last Tsar and Tsarina surrounded by their children, and medals and pieces of imperial uniform. Gemini News Service reports on the rising cult of Russia's imperial past.



made an "informal" appearance in Russia, just in time to die and be buried with pomp in the Tsars' old city, St. Petersburg.

The next event causing history to blink was a reunion of emigres, summoned to Moscow by the scions of old Russian families. The gathering found itself taking place on the steps of the Russian parliament building in the midst of the August 1991 putsch.

Instinctively the royalists came in favour of Boris Yeltsin, Russia's first President, in opposition to the "Soviet" Gorbachev — forgetting it was Yeltsin who in 1977, as First Secretary in Sverdlovsk,

ordered the dynamiting of the Ignatiev house, where the imperial family had spent its last days, to prevent its becoming a place of pilgrimage.

In truth, Tsaromania springs from solid ignorance. Because of the discredit heaped on the Tsar by the now-despised communists, the imperial family has become a symbol of virtue. Nicholas II is seen by Russians not as a confused and irresolute ruler, but as an energetic monarch supported by a wife devoted to her people, and surrounded by ministers and a court aware of the country's problems.

It is an image Russians cherish, as they work to re-

store rococo palaces and gilded monasteries that 70 years of communism turned into museums (or factories). They want to have back their history, but one laced with rosy myths and dreams.

The new snobbery leads to heights of false gentility. Tea is stirred with a few spoons we managed to save from the (communist) disaster. The photo on the wall is of "great-great-aunt Anastasia" — a countess who, alas, married a peasant, which explains why her little great-great nephew has a snub nose.

Russia's first sight of today's representatives of the imperial family was a bit of a shock, too. The Grand Duke was wearing a dublonka, the winter uniform of communist apparatchiks; the tsarevich turned out to be an unimpressive little boy; and the Grand Duchess had a count-trifled look.

Tsaromania has been quick to take a political turn. First monarchists — and then Cossacks — were angered to see the heirs of Lenin appropriating their martyrs. In 1990 Russia's first monarchist party had candidates elected in 18 Soviet municipalities. Since then numerous Christian parties have demanded the return of the monarchy.

Because this is Russia, some royalists discover strange ambitions — like Alexei Brumel, who proclaims himself "regent" with the title Aleksei I. By his own account, Brumel first became interested in the monarchy in the 1950s. He has since given his brother the title of grand-duke and promised the crown of Poland to his President, Lech Walensa.

Among the more improbable people greeting the Romanov family on their visit to Russia last year was Vice-President Alexander Rutskoi. Observing that with the return of the royals "Russia is rising from its knees," he presented the "mig to the throne" with a model MiG-23 fighter plane, and a Cossack hat.

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A man can spin webs of thoughts and imagine worlds of fun for himself because he can visualize what he mentally creates. This imagination is introduced to him through the wonderful stories, fairytales, folklores he heard from his grandma. In fact this is one medium which is easily accessible to the children and very much part of their growing up. But if these fairytales are brought live to them through puppet shows, then, nothing could enrich their childhood more. "For a child's imagination to see shapes and forms puppets are the only medium," says Mostafa Manwar the famous Bangladeshi puppeteer. "Fairy tales belong to no particular country, have no geographical limit and teach the children humanity," he strongly feels. Sesame Street, a creation of American Jim Henson is one of the best puppet shows ever produced," he thinks. The children watching Sesame street learnt their A.B.C or 1,2,3 at a very young age and the results were amazing. They were called the Sesame street age group. Manwar encouraged by all these emphasized on his puppetry here in Bangladesh.

Kua, Kha his famous educational puppet show which was a favourite BTV children's programme in the late seventies was awarded a prestigious Japanese award. Moreover among his endeavours in modern puppetry there are famous characters called Bagha and

Bringing the World of Make-belief to Life

by Raffat Binte Rashid

Meni. They are two friends, one of them is courageous but stupid and the other is witty but coward. But together this odd couple has many adventurous stories to share.

Recently BTV has been running a serial puppet show called *Moner Katha*. It is based on the popular *Shat Bhai Champa* theatre. Parul, the main heroine of this show is an intelligent, soft-hearted, nature loving girl whose main task is to sensitize her brothers about reality.

These stories with human touch actually give children some messages and teach them the morals of good character. "A puppet's main attraction is that it is simple, speaks of ordinary people and of their day to day happenings," says Manwar.

"Live puppet shows are rare occasions in Bangladesh and not given very much thought or priority to. But it is proven that the medium which a child genuinely remembers, understands and absorbs the most is the puppet show. It is enjoyed even more than normal dramas, films or animation."

"I think, just the puppet's movement, without the story, is itself an artistic matter," Manwar who writes the scripts for his stories, designs his own puppets. "The puppet looks exactly what his character demands of him," he says.



He usually uses rod puppets made of bamboo. Each puppet is four to five feet tall placed on top of bamboos and are operated from under the stage. "This gives them the flexibility which the string, shadow or glove puppets cannot enjoy. With rod puppets even eyes and hair do move. I mainly work with rod puppets but also use the other kinds too," he relates.



After television came into being, films were adversely affected but puppetry got a break. It is education with entertainment. "Andho Moner" Manwar's another story basically gives the blind children some messages. "You are blind but you can touch flowers, smell its scent, walk on the grass with a feeling and even imagine and appreciate the beauty around you. But sometimes sighted people with narrow mind cannot really appreciate what they see. Meanness makes them blind. You actually see with your heart not your eyes," he explains.

His story about the dragon, who breathes out fire and the bull who eats green grass, actually gives an anti-smoking messages to children. Likewise with *Parul* he spins fascinating stories, teaches children the basics of life, science and the world at large. TV is not his only approach, he has even held shows for schools like Shurobhi.

"I have opened up a small experimental auditorium for 50 to 60 students and am wanting to hold puppet shows in schools," he says. With the aid of Ford Foundation he opened up a project called Multi Media Puppet Development Centre in May '93. Here he is giving puppet training and doing different experiments. Till now 35 people were given this training. Those trained are all ac-



tors in stage or drama and are very encouraged and interested in this theatre. Mostafa Manwar while still a student in Calcutta Art College was involved with puppetry. "I once saw a Rajasthani folk puppet show and decided to take this up," he recalls. Together with a few college friends and Raghu Nath Goswami a commercial artist,

he started puppetry. "Puppetry is a creative art and any expression is possible through it," he explains. "I was involved with the BTV since the time it started. But I still feel that puppetry should be encouraged more."

In the developed countries puppet theatre is used even in schools, the reason is puppets have been successfully used in

different angles of education. If such a theatre is used in schools, then it gives opportunities to the students interested in painting, singing, sewing. Even to those who want to give their voice, or want to write poetry and stories, and one interested in engineering too. It is a very creative medium and any craft work can be absorbed. "A shy boy can perform very well because here the performance is behind screen," says Manwar enthusiastically.

Moreover, puppetry also helps in therapy and enables mentally retarded children to talk and respond. It is also used in adult education and helps in skill development. "It is basically the general people's everyday drama with social and development messages," he says.

The puppetry has a history 800 to 1000 years old. Some say it originated from India and before Pakistan got separated from India, Bangladesh had many puppeteers. In fact it was the main village opera or entertainment then. "But maybe for religious reasons br

whatever the puppeteers left this region," explains Manwar.

Dhon Miah in Brahmanbaria is one such puppeteer left here. "Dhon Miah's puppets are very simple, only three strings, but his operation of puppet play is done with so much efficiency that it is simply unbelievable. His stories are also down to earth," says Manwar.

Unfortunately Dhon Miah's next generation is not keen on picking up this traditional trade. They are leaving it because it no longer pays well and is not very much in demand. To revive this traditional culture and to expand our child's world of imagination, only a single man's humble efforts are not enough.

To give importance to and implement these age old methods, Rabindranath Tagore once said that "our country should have story telling schools for grandmas." This only emphasises on developing child's thoughts, ideas and imagination.

Now the only thing that can be remembered and maybe followed is what Bernard Shaw predicted long ago. "That our theatre and cinemas will disappear some day with nothing left but the puppet theatre."



Puppets Around the World

PUPPETS are not only for children but for adults too. In Russia, after the end of the communist regime separate puppet auditoriums and museums for adults and children have been established. Russia gave puppetry a special place. In Tashkent there is a puppet complex.

But in Japan, puppet shows are of a different type. Usually the performers are behind the screen with only the puppets on the screen. However, often the man too is on the screen with the puppet as well. It has an old culture of puppetry too.

In Philippines and Indonesia, traditional puppets like shadow puppets are used. These puppets can themselves be presented as an art work. They are made of hide, are transparent and of different shapes.

In Europe the puppet show Punch and Judy, a socio-political satire, is very famous. The

main characters are few hundred years old but still now they are relating stories. Czechoslovakia gave puppetry a new form, even Germany too. Puppet theatres are present all over Europe.

In India it has a history very old. The stories are from general folktales and also some from religious books too. Still the modern puppeteers use history in the script, specially Ramayana and Mahabharata. String puppets were famous in Rajasthan, Orissa and Shadow puppets in South India.

Bangladesh uses rod puppets, made of bamboo. Each puppet is four to five feet tall placed on top of bamboos and are operated from under the stage. The three-or four-string puppets are also used here. These three string puppets are used only in the subcontinent and in the foreign lands string puppets use 10 to 12 strings.



Mostafa Manwar with his puppets