



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

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Born on July 10 in 1885 in the village of Peyer under the district of Chabbi Pargana — now known as Uttar Chabbi 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 Khatoon. Continued on page 11

Now that British scientists have confirmed that bones recovered in Russia are those of the last Tsar, there seems to be no end to the lengths to which Russians will go to exonerate the imperial family in 1917.

Recently the ex-communist newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda* headlined the 102nd anniversary of a visit by the future Tsar Nicholas II to Siberia. The same week the Bolshoi Theatre marked the 380th anniversary of the Romanov dynasty with a performance of Glinka's opera *A Life for the Tsar* in Kastroma — the city where in 1613 the boyar (aristocrat) Mikhail Romanov hid from the Poles.

In the flush of political reforms, in the mid- and late 1980s, tsaromania took strange but benign forms. Homes were suddenly decorated with pictures of splendidly uniformed officers and elegant ladies. People hinted that they derived from a noble ancestry, of which it was only now possible to speak safely. In fact, most of the pictures came from newly enfranchised antique markets.

Then came permission to open co-operatives, and the first street traders cashed in. Suddenly pavement stalls sprouted Romanov family trees, pictures of the Tsar and Tsarina surrounded by their children, and medals and pieces of imperial uniform. The press joined in with eulogies of the "good old days" when gentlemen kissed ladies' hands (instead of stepping on their feet in the Metro).

In all this, the killing of the imperial family at Ekaterinburg (later Sverdlovsk) became the ultimate proof of the excesses of the Bolsheviks — a slaughter ordered, according to historians, by Lenin himself.

Meanwhile the cult spread abroad and communist Russia, new to matters involving royalist subtleties and pretensions, found itself in possession of an embarrassingly rich heritage. Grand Duke Vladimir came out of retirement in France and

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,

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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 nobility 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 courtly 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-duc and promised the crown of Poland to his President, Lech Wałęsa.

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 royal "Russia is rising from its knees," he presented the "heir to the throne" with a model MiG-23 fighter plane, and a Cossack hat.

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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-

Bringing the World of Make-believe to Life

by Raffat Binte Rashid



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. After television, came into being, films were adversely affected but puppetry got a break. It is education with entertainment. 'Andho Mone' 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.

"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.

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 *Shurohi*.

"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

main characters are few hundred years old but still now they are relating stories. Chechoslovakia 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 are 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.

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 *Puneh and Judy*, a socio-political satire, is very famous. The

whatever the puppets 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 followed is what Bernard Shaw predicted long ago. "That our theatre and cinemas will disappear some day with nothing left but the puppet theatre."



Mostafa Manwar with his puppets