

So many of my friends in Bangladesh are secularists that it is hard for me to explain my own interest in both the Islamic and the secular history of this country without finding myself embroiled in conflicts. In Bangladesh, one is confronted with two fundamentalisms, one secular and one Islamic, and the twin can never meet. However, the two books reviewed above are in many ways more for the secularist than the Islamist because they explain in scholarly and non-communal terms the beliefs and practices of the Islamic society, as it developed in this part of the world, and, as for the first of the two books, precisely how it became rooted in that part of Bengal, which is now defined by the borders of Bangladesh.

More importantly, these two books, when read in conjunction with R C Majumdar's magisterial study of the History of Bengal, reawaken in us the whole history of Bengal, including the five hundred years when Islam was the most dynamic and progressive force in the Indian subcontinent. These five hundred years are the formative ones for Bangladesh and it is these years that are most important in understanding the outlook and practices of this country.

And yet it seems to me that among my secularist friends, including many that have been interviewed by me recently, history ends with the Pala dynasty and then resumes with the Senas and then resumes with the Bengal Awakening with Rabi Mohan Roy and the Brahmo movement. From there it runs quickly to De Rozo, liberalism and utilitarianism and socialism, and thence skips over Hindu intellectual awakening that took place in Calcutta around Vivekananda and Bankim Chatterjee at end of the last century, and resumes with Tagore, the socialist movement of M N Roy, and then Partition, communalism, and Pakistan, the liberation war up to BAKSAL. But it is precisely the Hindu awakening at the end of the last century and the five hundred years of the Islamic past that is most crucial to today's political philosophy. We need only recall that next door in India that Hindu civilization is undergoing a great rejuvenation, on a scale unimaginable by either Ram Mohan Roy or Tagore or Vivekananda and Bankim, to see the need to once again take up the issues and opportunities — and problems — of Islamic civilization in Bengal and in Bangladesh, particularly. One does not belittle the contributions of the modern era, in my opinion, by understanding the pre-modern world out of which it came.

Many of us are well aware of the work of Dr Enamul Huq on Sufis in Bengal and his deep understanding of the role of this most liberal and often sympathetic strain of thought to both the idea of a secular state and to the spiritualism found in the subcontinent

Those Five Hundred Years

BOOK REVIEW

The Rise of Islam on the Bengal Frontier 1204-1760

by Richard Maxwell Eaton

University of California Press, and Oxford Press, India, 1994 and

History of Sufis in Bengal by Dr Enamul Huq

Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1975

Reviewed by James J Novak



the new religion, a process that took several centuries before it was completed.

He notes that Aryan Hindu civilization had by the time of the arrival of the Muslim General Bhaktiyar reached on the frontier of the Hooghly-Ganges and the Karatoa rivers. Beyond that settled frontier, Bhati, or what now is represented by Bangladesh, was a forested area barely penetrable by civilized forces. Because the Moguls brought axes with their army, and were capable riverine sailors, and because the Ganges at the end of the sixteenth century had changed its course to the Padma system, that settlement of east Bengal — and Dhaka — became possible. For the new course of the Ganges, the Padma, opened the area to riverine transport and brought Bhati into the mainstream of the rest of India for the first time.

Further, he notes that it was mainly in the Mogul era that Bhati was settled; and that tolerant Mogul policies, in cooperation with Marawari financiers, made the opening of the Bhati frontier possible. He explains how the Moguls worked by cooperation with Hindu and Muslim princes and other Ashraf to create an era of mutual toleration; and spells out how they not only provided that every land grant have a mosque but that Hindu zamindars were required to provide for Hindu mandirs and shrines as well. In other words, there was a proto-secularism in the government, that kept the government free of religion and which also practiced a steady toleration. He even notes that Mogul toleration and practical secular rule resulted in the creation of more Muslims than did the more orthodox rule of the Sultanate and Independent Bengal periods. For the Moguls combined religious 'laissez-faire' with economic improvement and thus won more converts in Bhati than the previous Muslim rulers at Gaur and Lakanauti. For it is in the East, the East of the Frontier, that the most Muslims are to be found and where industry around Dhaka flourished right up until Clive won at Plassey and the devastation of Bengal began before the

scholars, why Islam proved so potent in the Indus and Punjab river valleys in the west, and in Bengal in the east, both of which were so far from the seat of Islamic power, under the Sultanate and the Moguls, in Delhi. Indeed, he proves quite dramatically that Islam was a "frontier religion" that helped settle what had hitherto been fringe areas of settlement prior to the coming of Islam, while it never caught on near the seat of Islamic power around Delhi. He concentrates his attention, however, on the Bengal Frontier area and particularly of Bhati, the area that the Moguls opened up, the old name for what is now called Bangladesh.

He paints an exciting picture of pioneers clearing the land, building shrines and mosques and gradually becoming Islamic in religion so that today Bengali Muslims represent the second largest ethnic group of Muslims in the world after the Arabs. Indeed he argues that east Bengal, Sylhet, Comilla, Noakhali, and Chittagong, became the most thickly settled area of Muslims after the Mogul conquest because the Moguls gave land grants to zamindars to precisely clear the jungle and make it productive. It was this spread of wet rice agriculture accompanied by land grants that provided for the building of local mosques, often huts, not made of stone, that led to the gradual adaptation of the people from their worship of Chandi, Manasa, and other fruits of the jungle people, to

the world that attracted the likes of a commercial company like the East India Company to come here and gave that company access to its wares and markets. And tragically despite its superior army, the forces of Sirajadullah were defeated not by force of arms, for only treachery could have defeated a country that had held off the Marathas for decades before the British arrived.

This history of the spread of Islam to what is now Bangladesh is one that will make Bangladeshis proud of their heritage, not in a communal way but precisely because the heritage is not communal.

It also should make those in the largest Islamic party in Bangladesh examine whether their policies, that is those based on the thought of Maududi, are in line with the Bangladesh heritage or not, or whether they need to learn the lesson that the Moguls taught the British in India, and that is that toleration, and not force, leads to more conversions than the use of state power for religious-ideological purposes. It should also teach Islamic Socialists that Islam can be successful when combined with free enterprise, agricultural and industrial and financial progress. This does not mean that Islamic banking and business practices not be followed. On the contrary, for after all Islamic Banks are profit making business as well.

Finally, it teaches all of us who admire the beauty of Islam that religious freedom leads to more religious participation and faith than does its absence. Further this book teaches us of the Hindu and Buddhist contribution to the heritage of Bangladesh so that when we read Lalan and even Tagore, we understand that the tolerance and outlook they fostered was not created out of whole cloth, but was indigenous, to Mogul India.

Lastly, in this post cold war and post modern era, secularists might learn to take a more understanding approach to the contribution of Islamic civilization to this land we call Sonar Bangla — for it was this civilization that made at least Bhati, or what is now Bangladesh, the Paradise of Nations, Islamic civilization, taken in its state of grace, offers all of us basis for a new era of prosperity and peace, providing we have the vision today to bring the ideas of science and technology and, more importantly, a better understanding of the past, to bear on the situation of today.

It is this reviewer's hope that University Press Ltd Dhaka will hurry in its effort to make this book available in this country so that a wider readership can take look at the "frontier and pioneering" spirit of our ancestors. Mr Novak is author of Bangladesh Reflections on the Water, University Press Ltd and soon to be printed in Bangla by Ittefaq Press. He is a Senior Fulbright Scholar. Last week he reviewed 'The Hindu Phenomenon' by Giritlal Jain.

Viewing Video

by Lenin Gani

In 1978 director John Carpenter introduced a film that would revolutionize a Hollywood moribund horror scene. Carpenter's *Halloween* became an instant horror classic, establishing the stylistic form that has dominated the field for the past two decades. Now with his latest horror entry, *In The Mouth of Madness*, Carpenter once again hopes to reinject some vigour into a style gone stale.

The story begins with Sutter Kane, the world's best-selling horror writer (an obvious bow to real-life horror king, Stephen King) disappearing on the eve of the publication of his new book. Kane's publisher (Charlton Heston) sends his agent (Julie Carmen) and a cynical insurance investigator (Sam Neill) to find him. The two eventually track down the missing novelist to a place called Hobb's End, where they soon find themselves trapped in the middle of the writer's latest storyline.

In *The Mouth of Madness* promises to give the horror buff a real ride. After Blair Underwood a bright black law student, is picked up by police who suspect him of murdering a 12-year-old girl somewhere in Florida in 1986.

Eight years later, his mother delivers a letter to Sean Connery, a renowned human rights lawyer, who now, gives lectures around the country. In the letter, Underwood claims his confession was the result of police brutality. And she pleads for him to take up the case.

If the idea of this is an 'open and shut case' for Connery we are badly mistaken because the producers of the action/thriller *Just Cause* show how Underwood is the real chameleon.

Sharon Stone takes on a new role in the western *The Quick And The Dead*.

Briefly, Stone arrives at a sleepy town to participate in a gunfighters' contest for a specified sum of money.

However, she didn't anticipate on meeting Gene Hackman, the murderer of her father there too.

Obviously it doesn't take two and two to predict what Stone's course of action will ultimately be.



ENGLISH		
NAME	TYPE	CAST
1. Above Suspicion	(Rom/Thriller)	Christopher Reeve/ Joe Mantegna
2. Camp No Where	(Comedy)	Christopher Lloyd/ Jonathan Jackson
3. 24 Hours to Midnight	(Action)	Bernie Pock/ Myra/ Cynthia Rothrock
4. Jurassic Terror	(Adv)	John Ahyas Davies/ David Warner/ Eric McCormack
5. In The Light of Shadow	(Action)	Tim Thomerson/ Anthony Finetti/ Laura Reed
6. Beckett	(Historical)	Richard Burton/ Peter O'Toole
7. Mozart The Magic Flute	(Musical)	
8. The Jerky Boys	(Comedy)	
9. Murder in The First	(Drama)	Christian Slater/ Kevin Bacon/ Gury Oldman

(Based on a true story)

HINDI		
NAME	TYPE	CAST
1. Naajayaz	(Social)	Nasiruddin Shah/ Juhi Chawla/ Ajay Devgan

Source: Film Fair Video and other clubs.

Poetic and Spiritual Surrealism on Large-scale Canvas

by Fayza Haq

KAJOL, who recently had his painting exhibition of acrylic on linen at the National Museum, put his stamp early on the world in '91, when he in coherence with 19 other artists from different countries created the longest mural in the world. This was a 1,200 metre long creation on the walls and floors of a canal in the town of Elche, Spain.

This spurred him on to create the longest street painting "Heaven on Earth" — a 525 metre work — in Sweden's Landskrona city. "This was in connection with a festival. So I put in folk forms bringing in Latin American masks and combining the happy elements of the East and West with basic colours and designs from nature that included birds, animals, fish, comical faces and spirits. I had 30 young Danish artists to help me with the layout and designs." 39-year-old Kajol said. This received rave reviews in both the Danish and Bangladeshi press. The artist explained, "I have done 'alponas' on the streets of Dhaka quite often in the 70's and this gave me the confidence to handle the massive work, the aim of which was to transfer the ugly and banal cement and concrete into



Song of Loneliness, acrylic on cotton canvas 1995



Song of Loneliness, acrylic on cotton canvas 1995

dynamic display of his three dimensional images out of flat surfaces through the use of lines in the striking exhibition "Imbalanced World" at La Galerie, he also helped paint the walls of the Institute of Fine Arts, Dhaka. Last year he experimented with the national flag in his exhibit at "Jojon" in which he showed how "in the name of peace people are trampling the dreams of next door neighbours."

The artist makes, it a point to come and visit his homeland every year during Baishak bringing his exhibition along with him in acrylic which he finds easy to transport. "It is not difficult to do something that will be easily sold. I want to present something that is unique and speaks of my individual style. I admit that for six years I have had to do odd

mission of tempera on walls. In painting one brings in one's own heritage. I do not represent Danish art, and so it is difficult to have overnight success in the Danish market. However, I am sure that acceptance will come gradually, with time. At present I am regarded as a 'resource person'."

Kajol in the recent exhibition, his 26th, has combined various strains of Subcontinental art with the abstraction and Surrealism of the West. "Social realism remains a part of my paintings. My type of Surrealism is poetic and spiritual rather than the conventional grotesque." The artist comments about his work. Accurate and decisive lines delineate his uninhibited flow of imagination. Due to the linen background being left empty, and the artist often working on rectangular panels of colours, the effect is collage-like and geometrical. There is both realism and symbolism combined in his work. The birds in his works stand for ever-present hope, while the geometrical nails stand for pain and disappointment. The artist is still preoccupied with the enchantment of dreams, fragrance and the ever-present lure of nature as seen before in his earlier works. This is despite the predominance of portrayal of agony and suffering, as is obvious in the title of his exhibition "Song of Loneliness."

In the piece "Song of Loneliness," the bird that represents the human soul's quest for happiness, is outlined by red and brown arrows that immediately bring pain to the mind's eye. This is elaborated by geometrical patterns which mingle with the bird's feathers that are shaped and coloured like leaves.

Three female dancing figures, seen in rippling curves, can be spotted in "Dream of Life I." Surrounding them can be seen sails of a boat, outspread wings a series of stars, the head of a white bird and organic forms of flowers and



Red Moon and the Birds, acrylic on cotton canvas 1993

fish presented as circular and wave forms that result in neat motifs. A pigeon with curled feathers framing its face has an ochre sun at one end in "Dream of life II". At the opposite side is a female form seen in a seated lotus yoga position. Layers of multicoloured clouds seem to droop and endeavour to devour the sun. Copper tones enter on both sides of the painting. More organic patterns in swirls complete the mind-boggling creation. Both the paintings usher in the basic elements of human feelings.

The non-figurative paintings "Red Colour in the Black River" I & II have black to stand for the mysterious depth of the river and red to symbolise the blood ensuing from the slings and arrows of life.

One finds a personal vision once again in "Birth of an Angel." The multicoloured wings and the beatific face of the angel are combined with the symbol of the swirling sun, standing for dynamic forces, and flames of fire which represents purity.

What is apparent in this exhibition is an admirable confidence in handling colours and images on a large-scale with the freshness and exuberance of a child.

Politically Biased Academy Awards

Continued from page 9

achievement in every aspect. If Tarantino had given one of his characters a handicap, it might have won an Award.

The question returns now to the actual merits that the Academy honours: This is what essentially distinguishes the Oscar from other prizes, particularly the Cannes Film Festival Awards which appear to have a less political bias. It is inconceivable to imagine Cannes Winner of 89, *Sex Lies, and Videotape* winning an Oscar, not only is it a small budget independent film, it is a story about voyeurism and extramarital exploits. The fact that it is an excellently acted, scripted, and directed film could not overshadow its subject matter. The time has come for the Academy to re-evaluate that endorsing a film with a high morale will not correct American society.

Nrupi Chaudhuri has recently graduated in Visual and Environmental Studies from Harvard University, USA