

Death Takes an Unaging Soul

by Waheedul Haque

Zebunnessa was certainly a major lyricist not only of Bangladesh but of the vast arena of post-Tagorean Bangla song-writing. She excelled in whatever she laid her hands on. Pictures she drew well. And needlework — she could exhibit them only if she were serious about it. She could sing without any effort whatever upto the radio-singer level.

MAN is a peculiar animal which perceives death all around it for every moment of its existence — and yet lives as if it would not ever die. So observed a renaissance intellectual in Italy some five hundred years ago. We ordinary mortals are of this mould. But there are some amongst us — very rare through — who somehow emanate a feeling that whatever they may do, they wouldn't die. They do not give this feeling, death does not simply fit in with their image.

A very good example of this rare species was Zebunnessa Jamal. It was difficult to take in the news of her death. It was the first of April and it could very well have been some prankster's work — but for the fact that she was not the person any one would ever have made anything light-hearted of. Rather than trying to reconcile my idea of her deathlessness with the news at hand I decided to think of her as a living person — which of course she is whenever she comes to my mind.

In Dhakhār, Amal the ailing boy is consoled in his suffering by the promise of a letter from the king to arrive, addressed to him; Zebunnessa got that her letter from the king early in her life. She valued this letter to other people's exasperation. O, that Zebunnessa of the Tagore-letter — was the usual remark re-

ferred to her for most of her life. She was too intelligent not to know about this unintelligent and unkind reaction. But she cared not. She could not stoop so low as to take the cut and want gloriously on to talk of her king's letter. She never took herself as one lofty enough to take in her stride that Tagore letter of unsurpassed wit, affection and compassion to a school going complete stranger. It was something that gave meaning to her life.

Zebunnessa was certainly a major lyricist not only of Bangladesh but of the vast arena of post-Tagorean Bangla song-writing. Why wasn't she influenced in this by the idol of her imagination — Tagore — and why were her lyrics rather modelled on lyrics that amounted to so little when placed beside the great five? Modesty is said to be a great virtue. In her case this seems to have played the role of a great killer of potentiality and talent. She excelled in whatever she laid her hands on. Pictures she drew well. And needlework — she could ex-

hibit them only if she were serious about it. She could sing without any effort whatever upto the radio-singer level. She wrote short stories of the Prabhāshi and Vharatbarsha vintage — with facility and at times with flashes of humanity and even art. She loved doing all this and more — but never for a moment could bring herself to think her output to be of any class. And, knowing in her mind without ever thinking seriously about it that she would never attain anything, she never exerted to attain class. I was struck by the fact that, as she told me, she was never seriously discussed as a writer, and no one ever as much as said she had the thing in her — she was only to labour a little, set her sights high and will sure arrive. Incredible.

I was equally struck by the fact of her publishing short stories and songs in periodicals nowhere near the literary main stream. Paigam, the Momen Khan daily, Akram Khan's Mohammadi or some early dreadful of this or that women's organisation — these were her pasture. Why? The

idea never occurred to her to go for better publications. She thought she was not up to their standard. By and by it appeared that she had herself chosen a literary milieu that had little literacy in it. Not one from among this milieu came to occupy any place in our literary situation. She needed to be told to go seriously for literature and change to a truly literary setting, personal and intellectual. But she preferred to remain the cosy domestic type and there came no one who would take her strivings seriously and goad her into serious writing.

We are lucky that she decided to publish volumes of her songs. This was something of a permanent value. This will surely find her a place, an exalted one, I am certain, among the lyricists of Bangla literature. And I had perhaps gotten her started on the idea of publishing more volumes of her short stories. And to go with all her heart into writing more stories — and poetry. This is strange, poetry never appealed to her as a thing to fashion. But she promised to give it a try. Death intervened.

A decent human being. Cultured to her inwards creative. Unassuming and undemanding. Arid unaging. I have not only lost a wonderful friend. The society has, unbeknown to itself lost a most remarkable member.

Questions that Hillary Clinton was Asked

by Nupu Chaudhuri

THIS past week, as everyone else, I read about American First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton's visit to Bangladesh. I read about her trip to Jessore and the Gramenee Check she and her daughter Chelsea wore. I read about the questions asked by the Jessore women: did she earn her own income? Did she have any cows at her house? Did she not want to have more children? And there was the reference to President Bill Clinton as *Bhaishachch*, and how his presence would have been appreciated. I was amused by the questions, mainly because they would never have occurred to me, and also because, had I had the opportunity to ask Ms. Rodham Clinton any questions, they would be more likely to pertain to her political agenda. Rather than choosing questions which ask why she does things differently from I do, I am curious to learn how she does things the way she does in general.

This pattern stems from living the majority of my life in different countries. Having spent most of my childhood in an English school in Kuwait, I learnt to speak and write English the way the English do. Learning four languages from a young age also taught me to be conscious of the unique sounds each language contains, and the importance of being able to enunciate them correctly. For example, Arabic has a guttural *aa* letter, the sound of which cannot be translated into Bangla or English. Bangla has unappreciated as well as aspirated consonants in its alphabet. French has an *h* which resembles a Sylheti *gho* more closely than an English *r*.

Learning about other people goes beyond learning their language: the essence lies in the unwritten rules of daily conduct. A mere visit is rarely enough to learn the subtle ways other societies operate; you have to live there, and be in constant company of locals who themselves self-consciously follow these rules. For example, in Italy and France, you should wipe your dinner plate clean with bread to indicate your enjoyment; but if you wipe your plate clean in most parts of the United States, it gives the impression that you are greedy. If you look scruffy (some may call it comfortable) in a museum or even a supermarket in Italy, you may be mistaken for not showing respect to the art or to the grocer. Asking for a soft drink or fruit juice with your dinner in France may result in a more expensive restaurant's refusal to serve you.

The easy solution to all these often conflicting rules is to simply go your own way and pay no heed to what is expected of you in foreign terrain. A certain amount of this is necessary in order to retain some sanity, but the great disadvantage of not experiencing a different society's lifestyle means ignoring an opportunity for personal growth. An alternate perspective allows you to question what you have previously accepted, adopt changes or, if nothing else, reinforce your established views. If you refuse to even acknowledge your surroundings, staying home is a better solution. I have a permanent image of some Americans studying in Florence during my studies there: they wore their uniform

of blue jeans, white sneakers, college sweatshirts and baseball caps. They drank American beer, bought American goods, and talked loudly in English, especially to the locals, and were affronted when the Italians could not respond. These Americans are probably the same people who, back in their home country, get angry with tourists who come to America and cannot speak English.

Living abroad became the best education I had. With only myself as a barometre, I learned to understand other people's experiences in relation to my own. Having this done back at me for the first time was a surprise: after being constantly told in Bangladesh that I have a "fair complexion," I was amused and rather startled to hear a Greek friend tell me that when she gets tanned in the summer, she becomes as black as I am. The same colour that I am here and abroad is perceived by people as it is in relation to their own. Another example was when, in preparation for my travelling in Europe three years ago, I had a difficult time obtaining visas abroad because I had the rare Bangladeshi passport amidst a sea of American and European ones. Yet the respective consulates in Dhaka picked me out of long queues and handed me visas for the same countries without any questions. These situations, which make an unjustified judgement call based on preconceived notions and prejudices, is when I realise the importance and necessity in everyone's expanding their outlook.

It is because of my experi-

ences abroad that I never expect everyone else to assume my views, and instead ask questions which allow me to learn about theirs. And it is from their questions about me and my background, that I begin to realise many things I have previously taken for granted. While I strongly believe that I have my own identity which includes Banglaee traits, my relatively few years spent in Dhaka have left me without some of the subtleties which refrain me from connecting more solidly with my own society.

If Hillary Rodham Clinton ever asked me to describe Bangladeshi society to her, I could talk all day and not get to the essence of it — the essence which those questions put forth to her earlier this week captured. The women were understandably curious as to why she, Hillary, has only one child: with the high death-rate in our country, and no pension scheme, a large family is the only security for most of our population. As to whether she has any cows at her house: this would be an indication of her status in society. As to whether she earns her own income: this is a growing accomplishment for Bangladeshi women, as it is the basis for their independence and self-sufficiency, from which they are reaping many benefits. As to the reference to President Clinton, what else conveys the warmth, courtesy, and comfortable familiarity Banglaees feel towards people? After all, are these not the little intricacies which make a society unique? **NUPU CHAUDHURI** has recently graduated in Visual and Environmental Studies from Harvard University, USA.

Accord with Butcher and Barber

LIKE the thirsty mariner in the high seas I too could not drink water for long 24 hours because my language. Her Imperial Majesty the Queen's English, was not understood by those who were in charge of serving water. My English pronunciation might have strayed or accents stumbled or miserably mangled the original, but I could vow in the name of anything holy here or hereafter, the word 'water' poured forth in correct sound from my Asian mouth. Even if there was any local influence on my tongue as it uttered Queen's English, the fault did not lay with my side of the fence. Nathaniel Brassy Helhead (I am not sure whether the name has been correctly spelt), the English man who wrote the first Bengali grammar, should have correctly thrust English language into our unwilling throat before his attempt to give us a Bengali grammar. Bengali was not his business, but English was. However, let us revert to the water issue. At last, a kind English knowing human soul understood my urge for water. Instantly, although it was snowing outside, a jug of water with ice cubes floating, came before us and we drank deep after having crossed a desert of incommunicado. It was after sixteen years I re-visited Geneva, the place of my first waterless day in my life. But this time all kinds of water including milk of human kindness — solid vapourised liquid — waited upon me in abundance.

In Geneva I found many of my friends grew bigger in their jobs, became busier than before without losing any element of friendliness. Their earthly elevated stations did not rob them of their inherent charms, charisma or say character. The water issue of 1974 reminded me of the fate of a proverbial Banglaee fortune seeker who went to Khorashan. He lived there for many years, earned enough to marry a local girl and to raise a family of moderate size. Once the vision of idyllic Bangladeshi village flashed before his inner eyes, he became anxious to visit his kith and kin at home. He came to Bangladesh with better shape

in health and ficher in purse but weaker in his ability to communicate in his mother tongue. He was attacked with malaria, the dreaded fever. While in trance with fever he cried 'Aab dey aab dey' but nobody understood what 'aab' meant. Thus having yearned for 'aab' for two days, the Banglaee born in Bangladesh but bred in Khorashan died. Later the local Persian knowing Maulana translated 'aab' to be water which the Banglaee son sought to drink before death but his unfamiliar Khorashani tongue was not understood by his mother.

I consider my position was little better than the Khorashani Banglaee because before I met an waterless death, a stranger with ability to communicate in multiple tongue said — *Je peux vous aider* — may I help you? In that friendless waterless and helpless hour it was a voice of hope from just across heaven. Allah did not destine me to die without sipping the drop of Bengali water like my countryman who grew richer in wealth in Khorashan but became weaker in communication. In Geneva, I suffered with fortitude some bereavements. I lost my friend, the butcher, near supermarket Placec with whom I made a permanent settlement in respect of percentage of my share in bones

through a bilateral arrangement with the butcher. This was the first material benefit I harvested in Switzerland. But after fourteen years I heard that my friend died and again I have to strike a separate deal with other butchers. Another loss was my friend, the barber, whom too I presented a bottle of Johnny Walker (medium size) during Christmas and thus permanently had sealed his chances of increasing revenue for hair cut. In Geneva, let me explain, there is no fixed charge for hair cutting. It starts from six Francs and can go even up to thirty Francs depending upon the size of your hair. By not going to the barber one does not save money, rather it yields to the barber an opportunity to fix price at his will. The Johnny Walker silently worked for me. My son and I used to surrender our heads and hair to the barber without the overhanging thought of excess payment and the charges never crossed the minimal level of six Francs. In the absence of provision for automatic transfer of treaty obligations to the successor, I have to find out another alcohol addicted barber willing to settle the price for hair cut irrespective of its size. In its absence I must shave my head clean and look either Monkish or respectful. Respectful because once a Greek general reared at Sparta ordered his soldiers to shave their heads clean. Asked why skinny heads, he said that long haired soldiers were easily caught by enemy. It was respectful not to be caught by enemy by hair alone.

Distant Drum

M N Mustafa

while I buy meat. During one Christmas, despite Jesus being non-alcoholic, I presented the butcher with a small bottle of Johnny Walker so as to keep him unmindful about putting more bones on my side of the scale. It worked magic. During Christmas the votaries might have eaten cakes, but I swear, I have brought home more meat and less bone after the unwritten accord with the butcher. Once the wife of an Ambassador, an accomplished speaker in French, asked me whether I liked Swiss food. In reply I told that I had concentrated on eating Swiss *poitrine du beauf* — meat from cow's breast — which I bought cheaper

in health and ficher in purse but weaker in his ability to communicate in his mother tongue. He was attacked with malaria, the dreaded fever. While in trance with fever he cried 'Aab dey aab dey' but nobody understood what 'aab' meant. Thus having yearned for 'aab' for two days, the Banglaee born in Bangladesh but bred in Khorashan died. Later the local Persian knowing Maulana translated 'aab' to be water which the Banglaee son sought to drink before death but his unfamiliar Khorashani tongue was not understood by his mother.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt

HE DIED ON APRIL 12, 50 YEARS AGO

David Pitts writes from Washington

THIS April marks the 50th anniversary of the death of Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR). He was president of the United States longer than anyone else, twelve years, and led the country during the two greatest threats to the Republic since the Civil War — the Great Depression and World War II. The only thing we have to fear is fear, itself," Roosevelt said of the Great Depression. And of the US objective in World War II, he said, "No matter how long it may take us to overcome this premeditated invasion, the American people in their righteous might will win through to absolute victory." Although he died a half century ago, his imprint on American politics and society still lingers. Americans who lived through the Depression and the war that followed can never forget his strong, reassuring words during a time when their beliefs and hopes were tested as never before. Just as a latter generation would remember where they were and what they were doing the day President

John F Kennedy died, so, too, would the day FDR died — in Warm Springs, Georgia on April 12, 1945 — forever be stamped in the memories of the World War II generation. The news saddened not only America, but the whole free world. Victory in Europe was just a month away, victory in the Pacific would be achieved before summer was over. It seemed unthinkable that Franklin Roosevelt would not be there to announce the war's end or to secure the peace to follow. Few leaders have had such impact on their fellow citizens and fewer still are able to reach beyond the frontiers of their own country and touch the lives of people everywhere. Franklin Roosevelt was such a man. On this 50th anniversary of his death, it is worth noting not only what he stood for, and what he did, but also what manner of man he was, and why his legacy remains vivid in the American, indeed, the world's imagination.

He was born in 1882 in Hyde Park, New York. The son of prosperous parents, he enjoyed the full bounty of this life. He was schooled by private tutors, attended an elite private school — Groton — and graduated from Harvard University. In 1905, he married Eleanor Roosevelt, his fifth cousin once removed. Although their marriage would prove difficult, she shared his love of progressive politics and became his "eyes and ears" around the country after he became president.

Roosevelt was politically ambitious from the beginning. He served as a state senator in New York from 1911 to 1913, as assistant secretary of the navy in the Wilson administration from 1913 to 1920, and was governor of New York from 1929 to 1933. His contracting of polio in 1921 — leaving his legs paralyzed at the age of 39 — only strengthened his commitment to public service.

In 1932, he was elected president in a landslide victory by Americans alarmed by the worst economic depression in the nation's history. He swept seven out of eight counties nationwide and every major city except Philadelphia. After taking office, the new president surrounded himself with the best minds he could find, his famous "Brain Trust," and immediately began a programme of direct federal relief and economic regulation that resulted in the establishment of the modern welfare state. The programmes collectively became known as the New Deal.

They included the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), the Public Works Administration (PWA), and the Works Progress Administration (WPA) to put people back to work building roads, bridges and other needed infrastructure. The Rural Electrification Administration (REA) extended power to rural areas.

While moving to create jobs, Roosevelt offered a federal hand to those in immediate need. The Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) provided assistance to the poor. In 1935, the Social Security Act became law providing — for the first time — unemployment and disability insurance, retirement income for those over 65, and survivors' benefits. In 1935, labor



was guaranteed the right to organize and bargain collectively. In 1938, a minimum wage and a maximum work week were established. Roosevelt's efforts did not immediately bring relief to the pocketbooks of most Americans, but it lifted their spirits. The new president struck a chord of hope and optimism among his fellow citizens. They believed him and followed him. "There is a mysterious cycle in human events," he said. "To some generations, much is given. Of other generations, much is expected. This generation of American has rendezvous with destiny."

Not everyone was enchanted with Roosevelt's prescription for national renewal, however. The radical left thought his programme too weak. The radical right felt Roosevelt was conducting class warfare against the wealthy. "A radical," Roosevelt responded, "is a man who has both feet firmly planted — in the air." A conservative, he said, "is a man with two perfectly good legs who, however, has never learned to walk forward."

In 1936, he won re-election in another landslide, consolidating a vast Democratic Party coalition that, for the first time, included large numbers of African who had previously voted Republican. In his second inaugural Address, Roosevelt declined to boast of the successes of the

a year after the fall of France. Roosevelt proclaimed that America would be the great "arsenal of democracy." After Japan attacked the United States in December 1941, Roosevelt felt free to warn his people against the danger of a return to isolationism once the war ended. The lesson Americans learned "at a fearful cost," is that "we cannot live alone," he said. "We have learned to be citizens of the world."

Even as he led the country in war, he fought strenuously for a new direction in US foreign policy to be built upon the United Nations and continued US involvement in world affairs. "The only way to have a friend is to be one," he said. In his famous "Four Freedoms" speech, he detailed the rights that all governments of the world should guarantee their citizens — freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. He also spoke out strongly in favor of public education and the arts to counter the ignorance that he saw as the ally of tyranny. "Freedom of speech is of no use," he said, "if a man has nothing to say."

The wartime friendship between Winston Churchill and FDR became legend throughout the world. "It's fun to be in the same decade with you," Roosevelt once told Churchill. Together — in August 1941 — they concluded the Atlantic Charter, which proclaimed their vision of a new postwar world order based on democracy and freedom.

Historians have criticised Roosevelt for being naive about Stalin and for failing to foresee the dangers that the Soviet dictator's communist state would pose in the post-war world. But Roosevelt, as well as Churchill, saw the wartime alliance with the Soviet Union as essential to victory in Europe. According to biographers, both genuinely admired the courage and valor of Soviet soldiers and civilians in resisting the Nazi onslaught. For both men, winning the war was the number one priority.

As he before the war, Roosevelt continued to console his fellow citizens during years of even greater anguish and pain than they had suffered during the depression. His speeches and radio "fireside chats" inspired them to face the ordeal

"General Manzur approached me and asked whether I could offer them a place to stay."

Memories of Another Day

FOURTEEN years have passed, but the incidents are still fresh in the minds of the people at Aasiya Tea Estate, the little tea garden tucked away in the hills of a remote village in Chittagong district. "See that date palm over there?" points out Siddique Ahmed, now over fifty years old. "That was where they sat. General Manzur had asked me for a glass of water, and then for shelter."

The people of the tea estate were curious why a journalist was visiting the area 14 long years after the incident. No one had bothered all these years and the simple folk of this out-of-the-way place had no idea that the Manzur killing

case had been revived. There was a refreshing ignorance, or rather innocence, among these people, about the current affairs of the state. Perhaps that is why they could recall so vividly the occurrences of that fateful day so long ago. There was an initial trepidation among them since this was the first visit of a journalist there, but once this was overcome, they were only too glad to relate the incidents of the day which later were to become so significant in the history of the nation.

Barun, now a young man of 25, recalls that he was just a young lad at the time. General Manzur had handed him a biscuit to eat. Zahur remembers

how, as a young boy, he had led the General and his group to the place.

It was mid day, June 1, 1981. A little band of people was making its way up the winding path to Aasiya Tea Estate under Bhojpur Union of Fatikchhari thana in Chittagong district. The young Zahur led the way. The group comprised General Manzur, his and Colonel Delwar's families. Major Gias and Major Reza. Suddenly General Manzur halted the little guide Zahur and asked whether they could get a drink of water from anywhere. Zahur pointed to a little hut upon a hillock.

Siddique Ahmed breaks into the recollections. "I was

standing in the yard when I saw this group of men in army uniform along with women and children. I was curious. It was certainly an unusual sight. This man, whom I later learnt was none other than General Manzur, approached me and asked whether I could offer them a place to stay. I was so flustered, my hut was small and flimsy with no one to tend their needs. So I showed them neighbouring Ganu Miah's house. Ganu Miah was a bullock-cart driver. He had a family. So they went there." Ganu Miah is dead now and his house no longer exists.

As news spread about this strange group putting up at

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Barun Kumar Tripathi (left) and Siddique Ahmed, and the hut beside the date palm (above).

— photo: PROBE

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