

I heard a poet say once that words such as golden and silver were becoming dated in English. Perhaps. But in spite of its archaic quality I can think of no other adjective in the context of Mukti Gaan/Song of Freedom, a narrative documentary based on footage shot during the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971, directed by Tareque and Catherine Masud. One could use 'magical', I suppose, but there is something joyous, romantic and light about this word which does not reach deep enough. One could say 'wonder', but then again there is an element of innocence here which a war of liberation cannot have anything to do with. Such complexity, and multiple layers at the very outset... just as the reality of our Liberation War was complex, rich and multi-layered, beyond one's imagination....

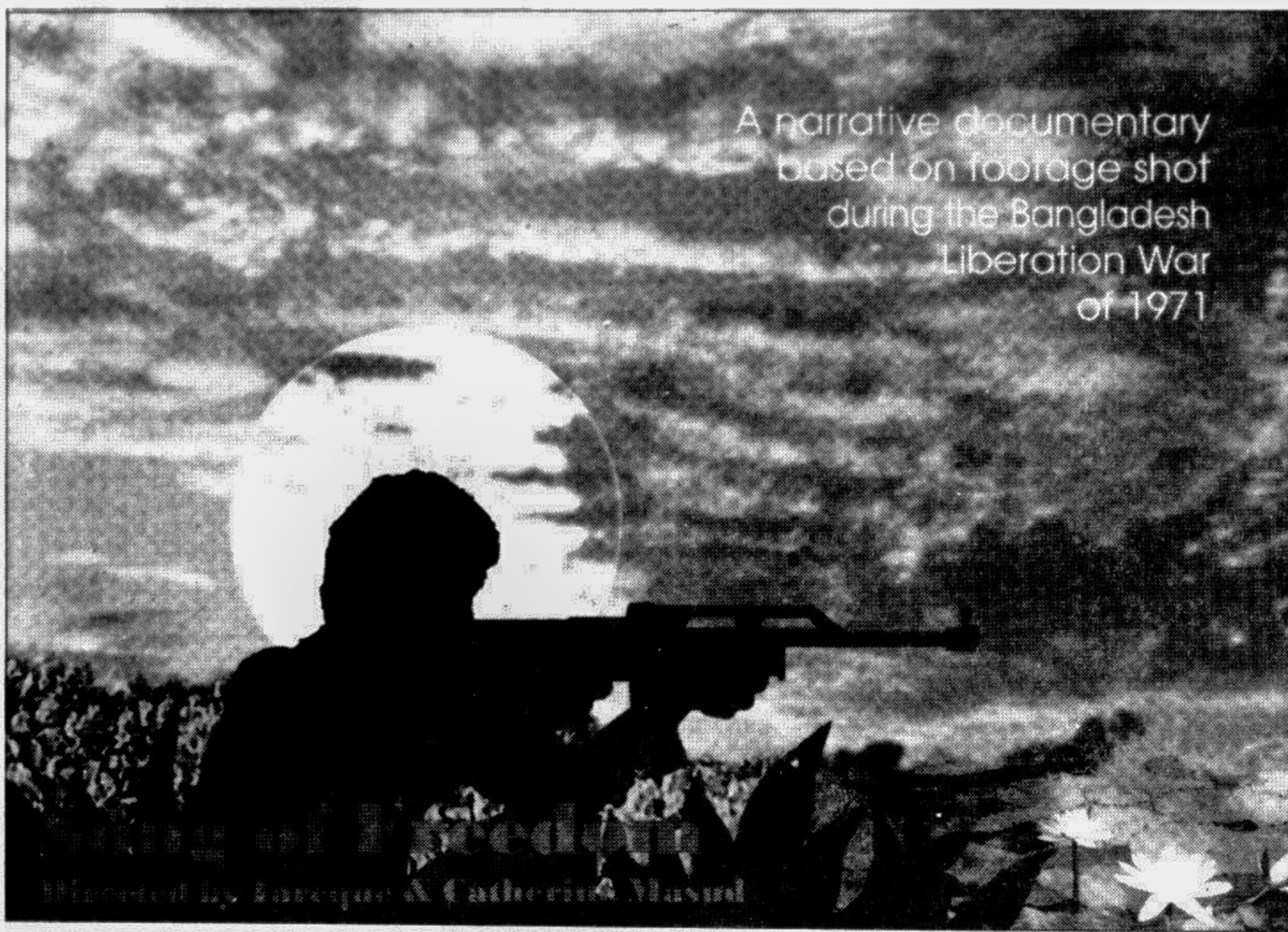
The story behind the making of Mukti Gaan, is a wonder filled, one, though. For me the story started one October day a few years back, sitting in Shameem Akhter's terrace at 42 Kapten Bazar. The conversation after veering from cabbages and kings to shoelaces, who was in and who was out (in the women's movement in particular), of outbreak of revolution in some remote region of the world, started to turn desultory. We were each in our own way getting pleasantly lost (amid the huge urns of potted sthal padma/landlotus, hydrangea and Queen of the Night) in thoughts of our own lost and passing youth our dreams turned sour, turned true, dreams not born — when suddenly Shameem slapped her knee excitedly: "I have forgotten to give you the most exciting news." I looked at her cautiously. Knowing her — was this another attempt to engage me in the real life story of yet another unsung revolutionary hero? No, this sounded different.

Her friend Tareque Masud (did I remember him? Yes — vaguely I think) — well, Tareque had 'discovered' this amazing stock of footage shot during 1971, in the basement of one Lear Levin, an American photo-journalist who had traversed the guerrilla and refugee camps way back during the war, hoping to get an exciting/unusual story on celluloid. Levin had come to this region with his small crew and while scouting around, had one day discovered at a refugee camp, a troupe of artists, singers mainly, alight from a ramshackle truck, with a flute, a baya (drum), and a harmonium. In no time these young men and women who seemed to have materialised from nowhere, filled the air with music and song. Songs of patriotism, of the motherland, of genocide, of resistance and freedom. There, in the midst of this mobile cultural troupe, on the truck with the red banner, which travelled the country-

side from one end to another, was the story of the Liberation War, that he was looking for. The group, Mukti Sangram Shilpi Sangstha, was based in Calcutta but a lot of time was spent on the truck, their second home, which became a familiar scene on countless roads carrying the artists to guerrilla training camps, refugee camps and hospitals, as they sang, talked, reached out and staged puppet shows. Levin joined the group on many of their trips and acquired a 20-hour footage on his camera as the truck sped on its spirited mission with its performing and singing cargo. How did Tareque Masud (and his wife Catherine) learn about Levin? In the same manner as legends get transmitted, as fairy tales get told. Mahmudur Rahman Benu, leader of the troupe is Tareque's elder cousin. And somewhere along the way in his tales of the Liberation War to an enthralled younger cousin — Benu must have mentioned Levin and his shooting of the troupe's activities. It must have remained embedded in the youngster's subconscious. For when Tareque Masud later emerged as a film-maker himself, he talked about it to his wife who was in the same profession. And both of them decided to set out on the trail, to trace the American photographer. Not an easy task considering the length and breadth of the USA. They were helped by Tareq Ali, another member of the troupe and his wife Milia, who were then residents in New Jersey.

They were finally able to trace Levin in New York. In words that have now become legendary among our little Kapten Bazar terrace garden group (and will become legendary in ever expanding circles I am sure) Levin is reported to have said to Tareque when he rang — "I have waited 19 years for this call." Nineteen years. A long time to wait. A long time for a nation to start searching for its past, for its glory. A long time for a film-maker to emerge who stands up and says "I want that footage from the Liberation War. I want to make an extraordinary film."

But it does take this long for one to be able to look back at one's wounds. It takes courage, it takes daring to confront the lacerated spaces left behind after the genocide committed by the Pakistani military junta and the injustice perpetrated by the ruling elite of Pakistan, upon the Bengali race. It took two decades for the composure and objectivity to reset, for the creative faculty to flow again, before one could look back, sorrow, sympathize, recreate and re-emerge, phoenix-like without losing sanity. It took the Nazi ravaged Jewish nation a long time before they could gaze back fully at the horror and the courage of the Holocaust period, and to demand apologies.



That Golden Hour- Reflections Around Mukti Gaan

by Sonia Nishat Amin

But of course with us Bengalis there was always a danger — (Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain articulated it aptly long ago in *Nirtha Bangali*, her satire on the Bengali race) — we tend to lapse into comfortable amnesia. We cry too easily and we forget. Specially when the loaves and fish of office are involved. But some remember and help others in remembrance. Those others who did not even experience the horror of genocide and the glory of the Liberation War. There will always be even among the children of Circe, those who are not lulled into sleep.

To return to Shameem's terrace amid the crumbling bricks and flowering land-lotus. She spun out her tale of Tareque, Levin, the singing troupe and how Tareque and Catherine were envisaging a full length feature film based on Lear's footage. And the main narrator through whose eyes the film would unfold would be none other than Tareq Ali (my brother-in-law). My sister and her husband had moved back to Bangladesh — we live in different parts of the city and do not get to meet so often, but I immediately understood what had determined the young film-makers' choice. The romantic visionary that Ali once was — afire with love of the

motherland — I remember it well.

"And you know, this spectacular scene will leave you spellbound" — Shameem was happily babbling on, seeing she had struck a chord within me. "Its where, the troupe lands on a river bank on land freed by the Freedom Fighters. Well, one of them scoops up a moundful of earth and puts a 'tika' on his forehead. And your brother-in-law, just scoops up two handfuls and hugs it to his breast. Its too moving for words." Her voice was wet; so would mine have been had I been talking.

That was 1993. A year later, around December 1994, we were having dinner at Tareque Masud's house in Lalmitia. The film was complete but now they had to wait for the censor board's permission. I pleaded to Tareque to let me see the film, but he refrained saying "If I give in to such temptations the film may dwindle to the status of a privately screened show. I want it to have all the impact and success of a commercial film in a hall." I immediately saw the reason in this.

So finally, on December 1, 1995 here we were setting in the auditorium of the National Museum waiting for the lights

to go off and Mukti Gaan to come on the screen. Readers, I will not describe the film here. It is being screened at the Public Library auditorium every day at 3, 5 and 7 pm. I urge you to go and buy the ticket at the stall and see for yourself. Words will be inadequate. Let the music, sound and picture tell their own powerful story.

But I can and will dwell a little on the comments that were made in the brief discussion that followed. Waheedul Haque was one of the senior organisers of the troupe. Mostafa Monwar who designed the puppet shows was also called to the stage as was Hasan Imam the well known actor and activist. Waheedul Haque had been part and parcel of the cultural movement in pre-liberation days and several troupe members were his students. What many of the younger viewers did not know perhaps was that cultural activism was part of the resistance to the Ayub regime in the 60s. That was the period when the west Pakistani ruling elite had unleashed its attack on Bengali culture — censoring Rabindrasangeet, the wearing of 'tipi' on national television, insidious attempts from offi-

cial quarters to replace Bengali cultural symbols with Urdu ones etc. It was also the period which saw the Bengalis in East Pakistan cohering into cultural groups — forming pockets of resistance that later merged into the anti-Ayub mass movement. The members of the Mukti Sangram Shilpi Sangstha were already active in this movement. After the crackdown of 25th March 1971 many sought refuge in neighbouring West Bengal where they regrouped as the mobile singing troupe borne aloft a truck.

Waheedul Haque made some thought-provoking comments that evening. He pointed out the role of cultural activism in the history of a nation and the reciprocal relationship between art and politics. He felt the writing of the history of the freedom movement could start with a document like this film. For here one would find people resisting, surviving, nourishing the spirit. No party politics, no power game, no foul play. He ended by asking "How can anyone thrive in these rotting, topsy-turvy times, where ominous forces are trying to corrode the spirit of '71. But this too, will pass. The Bengali race will cross this hurdle as well."

Tareq Ali the narrator in the film, also had a few words

to add: "I used to think, here was a war raging all around and look at me singing songs. But after watching us singing on celluloid today, those dearly loved, songs of the earth — in training camps, to broken soldiers in from the fray or to fresh ones about to embark on their mission, singing to half starved refugees who had lost all, today I marvel at the spirit that worked within us, at the spirit we were able to infuse. I feel proud, finally. And to you I wish to say, Do not lose heart at the rise of anti-'71 forces eating away at the roots of our secular-democratic dream of golden Bengal. We have won that war. We shall win this one."

And what, I was wondering did my 15-year-old, English medium educated son Ashim, make of it all? He who was being bred on a peer culture of Heavy Metal and Rap, on David Eddings and Isaac Asimov. Who had not seen 1971 nor knew about Martyred Intellectuals Day? I cannot erase my complicity in this alienation of his but I had little thought when admitting him to an English medium school that his roots would not strike down deep enough — not on account of the 'medium' alone, of course, but a myriad factors. For after all we were English medium products ourselves (so were Naila Zaman, Lubna Mariam, Shameem Murshed and Tareq Ali of Mukti Gaan, come to think of it) — yet our roots went a long way deep into the earth. Actually, times have changed. Perhaps its not so much a question of English, Bengali and all that jazz as much as it is of consumerism and the pace of life. Perhaps people do not want roots anymore. But wasn't it Marquez who said something like what is a nation without nostalgia?

Fortunately, my son has also grown up on a measured diet of Satyajit Ray the filmmaker and writer; Narayan Ganguli; even the beauty of Suchitra Sen; and coming down to the present the Ekushe boi mela scene at the Bangla academy. And this against several odds. For instance, a few years back his school decided to have the annual carnival on December 14, (Martyred Intellectuals Day). He had spent weeks painting T Shirts with beautiful designs for their stall. But he was disappointed to hear I would not go for I was stunned by the thoughtlessness — a carnival on Martyred Intellectuals Day! So I told him, "For me it is a day of mourning — respect my sentiment. I shall not prevent you from going though — respect is something you must acquire on your own, nobody can force it down your throat. But I am sorry your school chose this day. He was mature enough to keep quiet. On the 14th however I saw him poring over the newspaper which was full of the Intellectuals' stories. Later, after the carnival he

came to me: "You know, ma, very few students know much about this day and the martyrs." There was humility in his voice. I took him to see the plaque bearing names of martyrs in front of Dhaka University; I told him the story of Meghna auntie's (Dr Meghna Guhathakurta) father's death at the hands of the Pakistani army. He listened quietly. I wondered in silence.

So what was his reaction to Mukti Gaan? What did that somewhat run-down truck bearing the red banner, signify to him? Could the corpses strewn on the green fields and the fleeing refugees — convey some of the terror of 1971 to him? Did the war-shots, the bare-footed freedom fighters, gamcha tied round their heads, lungi wrapped round their loins, slithering down the muddy banks in monsoon to their mission, or in tattered coat and humble rifle slung over the arm — did these scenes convey to him the glory of our war. How often have I watched him switch on to Battle of the Planets, War of the Worlds or Galactica type cartoons which made the afternoon resound with the sound of hi-tech laser weaponry, space station battlegrounds and gigantic robots transforming into giant battleships or whatever. But this was for real, son — the barefoot freedom fighter, the makeshift training camps, the guerrilla squad taking cover behind water hyacinth — an entire nation of fisherfolk and tillers transformed, going into battle, half trained and ill equipped — this was real. This was our golden hour the like of which we shall seldom see again. I wonder if you realize this, son.

His voice broke in on my thoughts: "Did you see how brilliant the photography was? The perfect synchronization of the bullet following Mujib's speech? And the refugees — the handicapped guy slithering through the mud to flee the Pakistanis?" And again on the way home, he prattled on "Why didn't they use a logo sketched by Swapan Chowdhury the artist in the troupe? He must have had countless sketches." Probably lost in the war, I replied. But my son had other questions. "What a feat imagine turning reality into such a dramatic, artistic story!" For once I waited expectantly — leading him gently deeper into our War of Liberation. But the steps were his own. They would have to be, for any meaningful journey. For, as I looked at my son I was not seeing him. I saw in his place the faces of countless generations to come, as they gaze back with wonder and pride at the golden hour of our Liberation War — which at the turning of their gaze will be released from the dead weight of past history and enter the zone of the timeless.

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Literature, Culture and Democracy

Kabir Chowdhury

HOW Literature, Culture and Democracy are related? How and to what extent does democracy influence the literature and culture of a country? Usually when we speak of democracy we think only of its political dimensions. Rule of the majority, free and fair elections, independence of the judiciary etc are the concepts that dominate our thinking on democracy. But true democracy embraces considerably more than the above.

Before going any deeper into the subject let me try to refine a little the term culture which defies any neat and compact definition. Viewed broadly we may say that literature, painting, music and dance constitute the superstructure of culture, its aesthetic component, whose growth is dependent on the substructure of culture which is its material component. In considering the latter component which is of crucial importance we must pay attention to the economic, social and political conditions of a people, such as their means and methods of production of essential items, patterns of earning their livelihood, class harmony or conflict, ideological beliefs and the democratic or autocratic institutions that prevail in their countries. Culture, thus, embraces the total life of a people and manifests itself in multifarious ways, although we know that any general discussion of culture is usually confined to the consideration of a people's

language, literature, music, painting and dance.

However, from whatever perspective we look at culture it is admittedly an important weapon in the struggle for democracy, international understanding and world peace and against imperialism, economic exploitation, religious fanaticism, denigration of women, warmongering and all forms of ethnic-racial discrimination. But for culture to grow and develop into such an effective weapon the establishment of truly democratic norms is of the first importance. Not democracy on paper only, but real democracy, where secularism, communalism, preponderance of armed might and intolerance of opinions not in conformity with those of the rulers are absent.

But does democracy of the above kind exist today in Bangladesh and many other parts of the world? We should not hesitate to ask questions, all kinds of questions.

In much of the social, political and economic fields of Bangladesh democracy exists only in name? Let me cite two recent instances, one related to journalism, the other to literature. Some time ago a well-known poet and columnist instead of being prosecuted or a move made against him before the Press Council was summarily arrested and hauled up to jail with a detention order for forty days because he wrote something that could not be countenanced. And again, very recently, a book called *Nari* (Woman), widely acclaimed as a high quality re-

search work by a reputed scholar, a Professor of the University of Dhaka, was suddenly banned three years after its publication and after it had gone through several editions on the imagined ground that it hurt the religious sensibilities of the people of Bangladesh. Many things are now taking place in Bangladesh that deter flowering of literature, culture and democracy there. The upsurge of fundamentalism, for one thing, Shamsur Rahman, the foremost poet of the country, whose poetry is adored by millions, has been declared a martyr. Yet, what was Rahman's offence? Nothing more than his espousal of the secularist cause and his denunciation of religious fanaticism. How can literature and culture flourish and democratic institutions develop if all differences of opinion are stifled and conformism enforced by a steamroller? If we pay lifeless attention only to the observance of the rituals of religion and neglect its spirit failing to practise its teachings in real life we stump and thwart the growth of all worthwhile objects including literature, culture and democracy. Didn't the great poet-philosopher Iqbal say that the idolator engaged in dynamic pursuits was better than the faithful gone to deep slumber in the mosque? In this context I am also reminded of what our great rebel poet Kazi Nazrul Islam said in his famous poem entitled *Man* and I quote:

Who are they kissing so fervently
The Quran and the Bible?
Snatch away the Holy Books from their hands
Who fetch them after slaughtering men.
Hypocrites are worshipping the Books!
Listen, O ignorant folks,
No brought any man.
Adam, David, Jesus, Abraham, Muhammad,
Krishna, Buddha, Nanaka, Kabir
They are all treasures of this world.
Our fathers and grandfathers are they.
In every vein of ours
It is more or less their blood that flows.
In conclusion let me assert that in today's turbulent world there is no alternative to real democracy. In order to bring about such a democracy we must constantly wage relentless war against intolerance, superstition, authoritarian thinking and violence. We must not be upset even when an individual publicly declares that he is an agnostic. Let us face such situations like civilized human beings and argue such issues in a cool and collected manner across the table through debate and discussion and not try to settle them by muscle power. Let us shun the culture of intolerance, violence and arrogance and embrace the culture of tolerance, peace and modesty. Let us encourage freedom of thought and expression, bridge the gulf between the affluent and the poor, liberate women from male domination, eradicate ignorance and illiteracy, and forsake religious bigotry, violence and terrorism. Only then can true democracy flourish and an appropriate climate be created for the growth of rich humanistic literature and culture.

Elections in My Life

PART of this piece will deal with election-memories and part with reflections on election. First memories.

The 1946 provincial election, which can safely be termed as one of the milestones of our political history, took me, from my college life in Calcutta, to a remote, also unfamiliar corner of Bengal. The constituency went by the name of Faridpur-East. If I am not wrong, elections were still held on the principle of Communal Award, and this one was a Mohammedan constituency. Muslim League put up the supposedly influential and assuredly monied Mr Yusuf Ali Chowdhury alias Mohan Mia as its candidate.

The Pakistan issue was high on the agenda of Muslim League. We, muslim students in Calcutta colleges knew that the hotly contested election of the Muslim League Parliamentary Board saw Nazimuddin faction gaining a slight majority over the rival Suhrawardy faction. We knew, too, that this division was reflected in the students front, through the rivalry of Shah Aziz and Nuruddin. Though I had met both, in their respective seats of operation, I was not drawn to either, not being interested in the politics of faction. So when we, in our hostel, were approached by someone — I do not remember who, perhaps, an emissary of Shah Aziz — to form a group, and proceed to Faridpur, we were only too glad to comply.

This was a winter of high expectations. And for me it was a sheer adventure, staying with the group in a one-room house, not too well-protected against the winter wind, nursing our discontent against the gentleman — Mohan Mia's local agent — for his many failings and yet enjoying our meetings with vil-

lage elders. The local agent took a fancy on me as the most effective campaigner compared to other members

Zillur Rahman Siddiqui

of the group, and did me the favour of selecting me as his sole companion on some of his special missions.

Mohan Mia lost to his rival, Badsha Mia, a local Zamindar, who, according to the rumour current at the time, enjoyed the support of Suhrawardy Mohan Mia, despite the defeat, continued to enjoy the patronage of the party's high command, and would always recognise me, even in the busy roads of Calcutta at his Faridpur residence. Our group was treated with utmost consideration by him and his family, and his general courtesy was genuine.

As a campaigner my second experience was my involvement in the Salmullah Muslim Hall Students Union elections of 1950. Our group had found their candidate for the star position — Vice-President in M Habibur Rahman — later Chief Justice, Supreme Court — and was looking for a candidate of the next position, general secretary. In me, they found one not keen about elections but not unwilling either to be a running mate of Habibur Rahman. Shelly, a personal friend from our presidency college days

In a triangular fight, we won and held office for a couple of weeks. Then in the budget meeting, we were opposed by a combined opposition, and failed to get the budget passed. And so we went out of office. I was secretly happy for the defeat, because my M.A. was more important for me. That ends my career as a campaigner in elections. The

second experience gave me direct knowledge of the excitement that goes with elections, and the joy of

sharing an excitement with many.

Next, my experience of elections as a voter. This is the saddest part of the story, as under the military rule in Pakistan, and under two generals in Bangladesh, the institution suffered a distortion, and left most people disinterested in the business of election. The best experience was the 1970 election which was both free and fair. I was told when I was in Pakistan as an election observer in 1990, and 1992, that they too regarded the 1970 elections as the best they have seen. I should add perhaps that the 1991 elections of Bangladesh, which I experienced at two levels — as a member of the President's Council of Advisors, and as a voter — was a very special occasion for me. It was a triumph for the government and also for the people, and if I share the pride of the government for its performance, I may be excused.

I have yet a third kind of election experience — as an observer of elections in a different country. The scene is Pakistan 1990 and 1992 and Sri Lanka 1991. In Sri Lanka, we were members of the SAARC group of observers and the Election Commission of Sri Lanka were our hosts. It was an election of local bodies but it had its own importance in the context of Tamil militancy in the North. The earlier militancy of another group which had all but foiled elections in other parts of Sri Lanka, had by this time been crushed. This time the government was keen to prove that things

were under control, though this could not hold in respect of the North. There were no elections in the Tamil-dominated North. Security, for observers, was tight. Each one of us was provided with a security officer, and we were strictly advised not to move outside our sea-side hotel by ourselves. We found occasions — not many — to slip out and enjoy our walk by the beach.

Election scenario was excellent, from the point of view of order, discipline, and the high level of civic culture, and compliance to rules the Sri Lankans had obviously reached. The importance attached to local bodies elections showed, Sri Lanka had marched ahead of us, Bangladesh in institutionalising democracy at the grass roots level. The high literacy of the people had moulded their politics, too.

Pakistan was a different story, the 1990 elections, as I observed it in Peshawar region, was clearly manipulated by the president of the caretaker gov't. Mr Ishaque Khan, in favour of IDI. The quiet and discipline I found in most places was artificial. Other members of the team had witnessed violence in Sindh and Baluchistan. It was my lot travel on the election day in the countryside close to Peshawar and to realise that observers may be reduced to eyeless men if the authorities so want. The NDI team from Washington must have left with the same impression, despite all their professionalism which they brought to the task.

In 1990, Ishaque Khan, with full backing of the army, had ensured that Nawaz Sharif, not Benazir Bhutto came to power. In 1992, the table had turned in favour of Benazir, who now ~~ensured~~
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