

tributes

I Owed Ilias an Apology

by Shah Husain Imam

THE death of 53-year old Akhtaruzzaman Ilias at the prime of his literary career has shocked us very deeply with its evident prematurity, even though an advancing cancer affliction had made it look inevitable since a year ago.

I have not had a long association with him in the literal sense of the phrase since leaving Dhaka University in the mid-sixties, our paths only crossing, at the most half a dozen times, until he breathed his last. Yet, whenever we met we would feel instantly cozy in each other's company, as if transported to the warmth of our basic bonding at the Dhaka Government College. There, on the hostel lawns, we used to sit down to our almost regular evening chats with him invariably impressing me indelibly as a personification of his own short stories, both published and those



he had woven the plots of, and felt excited about to share with me.

Ilias was a highly charming and engaging person with his clipped accent coming through his thin, visibly linear pair of lips, his abiding sense of life-like simplicity, his literary finesse and aesthetics, and above all, his deeply compassionate nature.

In one word, he was a humanist *par excellence* with a perfectionist attitude to his labour of love — writing; so that, much as he must have been nudged by the evidences of inhumanity around him to write more, he would be held back by the high standards he set for himself. Little wonder, he was not quite in the genre of 'popular writers' as we know it.

He was the literary archetype raring to go to the source, undeterred by his

preoccupations as a Professor of Bangla, for the collection of materials he thought essential for his novels. Once as we ran into each other at a street-corner, he said with a relish — "I just drift, live with a weaver's, fisherman's or a worker's family, and come back developing insights into the light and shade that mingle in their lives." Those were, as he put it, "enchanting rigours" for him.

His works include four collections of short stories, and two novels — the widely-read being *Chilakothar's Sipai* (1987), with its thematic inspiration drawn from the popular movement of 1969. His second novel *Khoabnama*, published in 1996 and almost epic for the time-span it covered — nearly two hundred years — won him *Ananda Purushkar* from West Bengal, a niche in his literary career he reached only a

short while before his death. His previous high-point was a Bangla Academy *purushkar*.

He had planned to write a novel based on *Tebhaga Andolon* and also a *magnum opus* on the Liberation War. These were in the works and, would have taken him perhaps a couple of years more to finish.

I owe Ilias an emotional debt — an apology that I am now addressing to his soul. I was to see him on Friday, the 4th of January, the day before he died at the Malibagh Community Hospital, in the company of Mohd. Farashuddin and Rashed Khan Menon who had planned a visit to his death-bed to hand him in a cheque for Tk 25,000 as a token of our appreciation for the honour he had done us through his literary accomplishments. All of them met him on the appointed date and time on behalf of

Padakhhep-64, an entirely non-political medley of batch-mates at the university, except myself who was thrown off course by the odd twist of the overpowering 'unforeseen'.

He perked up at the sight of his friends, I was to learn later on. And, as they were handing him the cheque with a bouquet, said he without appearing to struggle for words, "Why, your love is my greatest reward." And then pointing at the telephone set as if snuggling with his amputated leg he said without imagination leaving him even in those moments, "That is the rare convenience I enjoy over you as a crippled person."

Even though, in point of fact, I decided to see him on Sunday and apologise for my failure to turn up on Friday, I obviously couldn't do so as he left us for good on Saturday. I have a far greater apology to seek from him now. ■

linguistics

Claude Hagege : A Linguist and a Professor

For the first time in France, the highest award of the French National Scientific Research Centre (CNRS) has been given to a linguist. Claude Hagege, a professor at the College de France, is a polyglot humanist who has drawn up a new linguistic theory by comparing the various languages in the world.

by Emmanuel Thevenon

IN 1985, during the literary television programme called *Apostrophes*, presented by Bernard Pivot, France was completely won over by the intervention of Claude Hagege who had come to present his latest work "L'Homme de Paroles". This essay on theoretical linguistics, written by a professor at the *Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes*, was to become a big bookshop success, in spite of the harshness of the words. Since then, Claude Hagege has restored linguistics to the brilliant image that it had with Naom Chomsky's generative grammar, before it once again became considered as a merely technical subject.

The French National Scientific Research Centre (CNRS) is giving its award to a 'sharp-shooter of linguistics' as Hagege calls himself. In spite of his reputation, Claude Hagege does not head the laboratory of languages and civilisations with oral traditions in which he works. Besides the internationally famous research carried out by this professor who holds the chair of theoretical linguistics at the College de France, the CNRS also distinguishes a subject which is undergoing a revival. Today, to meet new challenges (language teaching, dialogue between man and machine, the context of communication, etc.), the "sciences of language" are increasingly linked up to such diversified areas as psychology, data-processing, biology or the cognitive sciences (which study the structure of knowledge in man). Claude Hagege is no doubt quite familiar with this development.

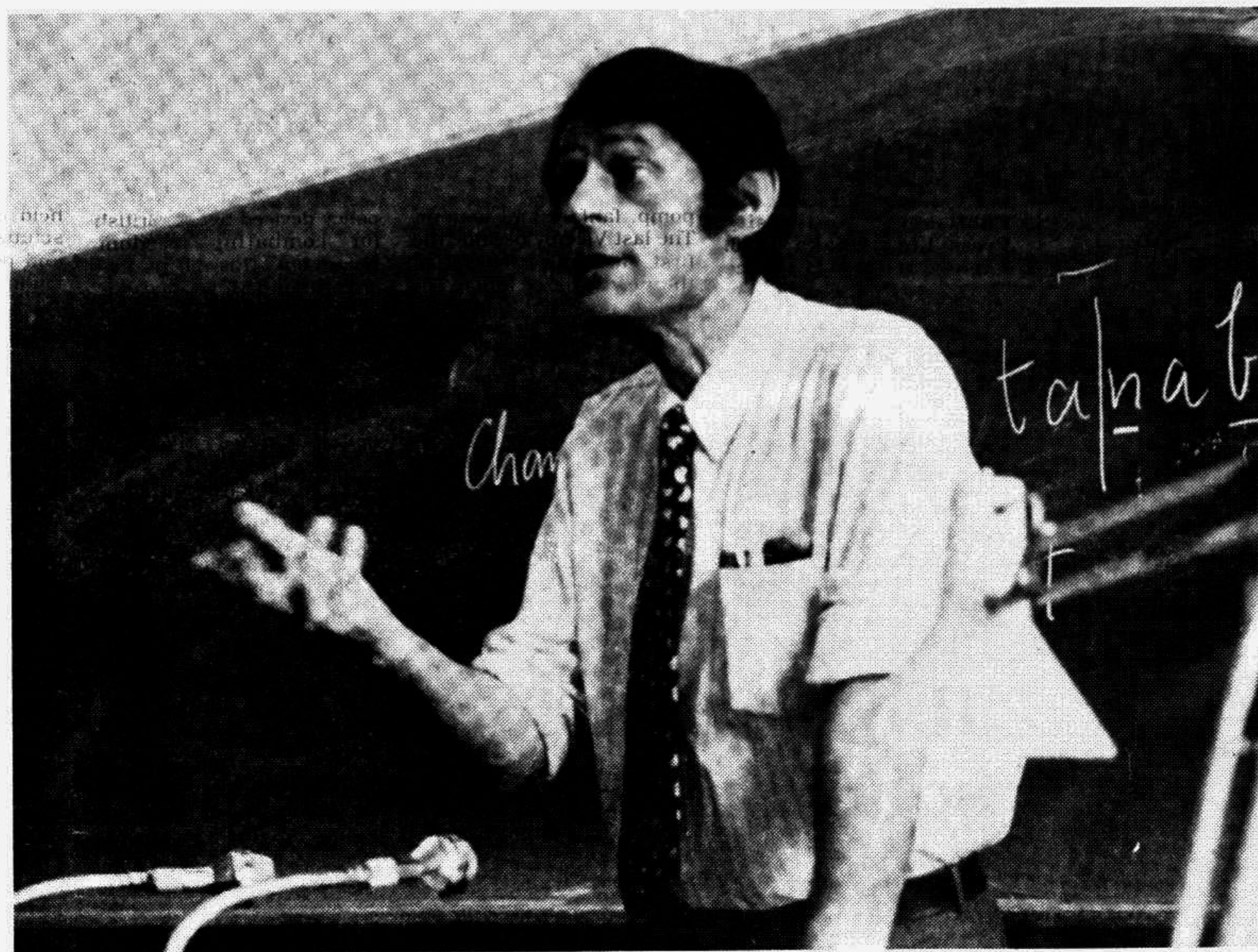
Claude Hagege is fascinated by languages from the most common ones to

the rarest. This linguist, with a classical background, who was born in Tunis in 1936, has carried out research in the field in Cameroon, British Columbia (Canada) and Micronesia, everywhere where there were still languages waiting to be discovered such as Tikar, Comox-Laamen and Palauan.

As a polyglot, he can speak many languages with an oral tradition (about a hundred) and perfectly masters the great international languages in which he can give lectures (from the Germanic languages to the Semitic languages and including Chinese and several Slavonic and Romance languages).

Claude Hagege, who is a follower of the Russian writer Babel, does not seek to simply accumulate knowledge out of a love of languages. Studying them in depth is also a means of defining a theory making it possible to take into account the notions of diversity and linguistic variation. His research has made it possible to find fault with numerous simplistic theories which were in vogue in the 60s. Claude Hagege refuses the primacy of syntax and severely criticized the supporters of a formal linguistics reduced to pure logic which ignored any historical and social dimension. "Languages are not empty goatskins", he is fond of pointing out. "They are spoken by human communities and reflect their cultures. They have a history and contribute to defining individual identities and societies."

According to him, man is an "engineer of languages". He is often more aware of the facts of language than one might think and he is able to deliberately take part in building vocabulary.



As an example, the linguist cites an informer of a Cameroonian language who called his tape-recorder a "*calebasse a paroles*" (word-gourd). "The term was so well created and so accurate", he explained, "that it was immediately adopted by the community."

In spite of their continuous renewal, languages, like all human activities, are bound to disappear in the more or less long term. At the end of this century, the phenomenon, which has taken on proportions that are unprecedented in the history of mankind, has become "one of the most serious cultural tragedies of our time". Hundreds of languages are threatened with extinction today, including nearly two hundred for Africa alone. "Out of the 4,500 to 6,000 existing today, there might only be a few hundred left by the year 2150".

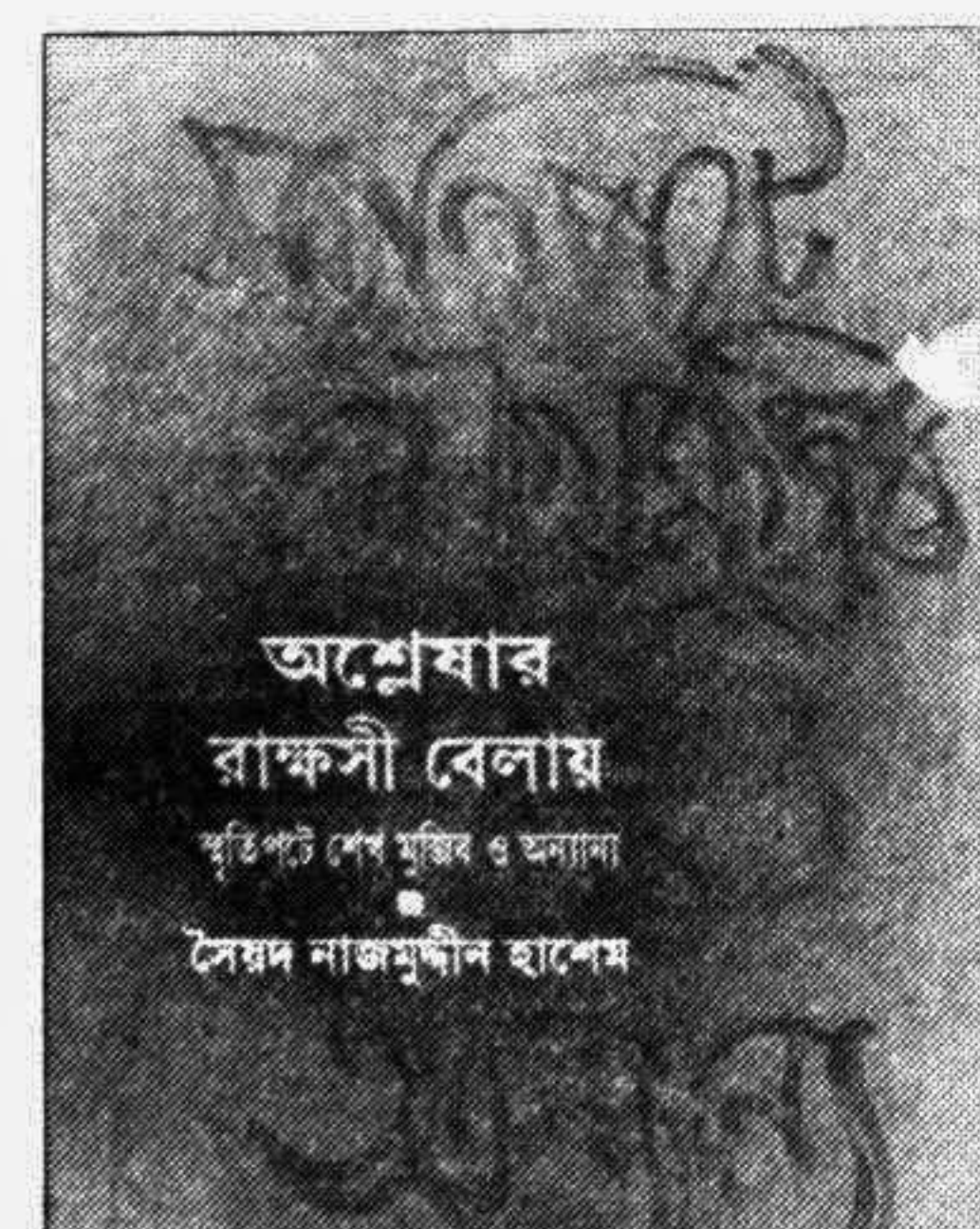
The threatened richness of the plurality of languages and means of expression has led Claude Hagege to be interested in language policies, in the last few years. After a book devoted to the French language "Le Francais et les Siecles", the linguist has studied the future and the fate of European languages in both scientific terms and as a humanist. "What makes the originality of Europe", he considers, "is the immense diversity of the languages and cultures that they reflect. The domination of a single language, such as English, does not satisfy this destiny. A permanent openness to diversity can alone satisfy it. Europeans live plurilingualism. They should bring up their sons and daughters in the variety of language and not in the singleness".

— L'Actualite en France

books

Ashleshar Rakshashi Belai — IV

Translated by Sonia Nishat Amin



Syed Waliullah

AMONG THOSE INTELLECTUALS and writers who had fanned the fire of unrest in the sixties were French poet Paul Nizan, and father of Marxian structuralist thought, Claude Levi-Strauss, holding forth at Nanities near Paris. Waliullah's eyes lit up at the mention of these two. He derived an immense, quiet satisfaction from the knowledge that the pen had still the power to move the world. And then our

conversation would move on to the revolutions in France, Russia, China or Cuba — their ideologies and genesis; our arguments would branch off into diverse zones. Waliullah's erudition, his power of analysis and intensity of feeling never failed to amaze me. He was always concerned with the plight of Bengalees, their enslavement, and struggle for rights/autonomy. The vision of a free 'Bangladeshi' — the kind of polity the Bengalees could claim as a homeland — were concerns even at that early date. He had doubts about the opportunist character of the Bengali middle-class. This also produced some anxiety about the particular brand of Bengali nationalism professed by that class. He was preoccupied with the quick and effective spread of education which could only come under a socialist agenda. He was convinced of this because he felt any change in the status-quo could be achieved not under a selfish, opportunist, rhetoric-prone leadership, but through the alternative development of rural, subaltern cadres. I could not agree with him fully that day, when a startling resistance was beginning to grow against.

I had the opportunity to work with Wali bhai on account of my assignment as Country Representative to the Sub-commission on Communications at UNESCO while its General Conference was in progress. Waliullah was

representing the Secretariat seated on the dais. His indulgence allowed me that year to make assertions and push my arguments through, forcefully.

On the eve of my departure from Paris (due to some difference of opinion with our ambassador there) I met the famed Tagore-singer Rajeswari Dutta, widow of poet Sudhindranath Dutta, at Waliullah and Anne Marie's residence. Rajeswari was known to us in our adolescence by her Punjabi surname

In the Jaws of an Ill-starred Time

by Syed Najmuddin Hashem

'Basudeva'. After her husband's untimely demise, Rajeswari had gone into a phase of stony detachment from the world — no song escaped her lips. Wali bhai was recounting this incident to us. His voice shook slightly.

The first glimpse I caught of Rajeswari reminded me of the goddess Melancholy. I was somewhat inhibited. Though I craved to hear her sing I could not articulate the thought... There was a portable cassette-player on a table. While turning its knob, absent-mindedly, I recited those timeless lines from Sudhindranath Dutta: "*Moder shakkhat holo ashleshar rakshashi be-*

lai/Samudyata durbipake..." (We met in an hour when the jaws of an ill-starred time/Held the world in its grip ...). Rajeswari was startled, mistaking my voice for her husband's, on the tape. The ice thawed between us. My memory retains, to this day, the incomparable strain of her voice singing without any accompaniment — her lament: *Shuni nai, shuni nai, rathero dhani taba* (I had not heard your chariot wheels go by).

Parting from our constant companion of two years — Waliullah and Anne-Marie Thibaux, was painful. Our farewell dinner by candle-light, in their apartment, is still on the canvas of my mind like a still-life.

I met him briefly for the last time in 1970 at Rawalpindi. I was then the Executive Officer of the Pakistan Council. We were holding a reception in Waliullah's honour. The room was teeming with people. After my address, Kalimullah read excerpts from Wali bhai's '*Lal Shalu*' translated in Urdu. Others paid their tributes. Waliullah was visibly moved, and said "Will

anyone remember me in my own land, after so long a lapse of time?"

Wali bhai had written a long letter on his return to Paris, describing the unprecedented, spontaneous, welcome and receptions accorded to him in Bangladesh (East Pakistan) during his visit that time. He mentioned Shawkat Osman, Sanaul Huq and Munir Chowdhury, specifically. The essence of his letter was:

"When one finds the likes of selfless, sincere people such as these in the ranks of the narrow, envious Bengali middle-class, my hope for that nation is renewed. I share your visions of the fate of eternal Bengal."

And then, I saw Waliullah for the last time, on my way from London to Rangoon, at the shady cemetery of Meudon, near Paris, in August 1980. The cemetery lying at the end of a gravel path — lined by trees which cast their shade all day on the grassy green. Flowers, the weekend's offerings were strewn over the stone covered graves. As I stood silently beside his grave, Sanaul Huq's lines (written for him) came to mind. "Why here, in a grave at Meudon, so far from Chattal?" Anne Marie had the same question. I told her "Perhaps this could be his epitaph — or his own lines 'He sleeps, because sleep is death'. But I prefer the first because that links us all — you, Wali, distant Bangladesh." But Anne was unresponsive. She was

pained and puzzled by the callous behaviour of Wali's relatives and friends after his sudden demise. Her children Irej and Simin were disenchanted with Bengalis, too.

Waliullah was one of the visionaries who dreamt of the freedom of mankind; during our War of Liberation he had worked ceaselessly to mount public opinion in France in favour of the Bengalees' struggle. And yet the bureaucrats of independent Bangladesh had raised petty questions regarding Waliullah's nationality and deprived his widow and children of their rightful share. I found among Simin's papers, the condolence message sent by the then President of Bangladesh to Anne-Marie. It was written in April 1972, seven months after Waliullah's death. The message contains references to the friendship between the two of them; eulogies of Waliullah's works; the place he occupies in the generation of post-independent writers of Bangladesh. What is missing in the condolence letter is a categorical recognition of Waliullah's role in the nine months of Liberation War.

That is why I had no answer to Anne Marie's question that day at the cemetery at Meudon 'What should be his epitaph?'

Rangoon, Burma, October 1980.

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