



memoir

Abba at War

(or, my father as a Colonial Subject, being the opening section of *A Post-Colonial Life*, an autobiography in progress)

by Kaiser Haq

Following is the first installment of 7-part unpublished opening section of *A Post-Colonial Life*

In our tiny community of a half-dozen households Abba — Father — was looked up to as a model of education, smartness, manliness and experience of the world at large. His chief distinction: five years in uniform, the last as a member of the British Commonwealth Occupation Force in Japan, billeted just outside Atom-saluted Hiroshima. True to the colonial categorisation of Indians into 'martial' and 'non-martial' races, Bengalis in the Army were as few as Punjabis were numerous, so it was hardly surprising that Abba's friends saw him as a Sinbad, back from perilous seas and were avid to hear him reminisce. On the other side of the bamboo partition separating sitting room from bedroom my gaze lay inert on an open page of *Radiant Reading* while my imagination accompanied Abba to Calcutta, Lahore, Poona, Hyderabad, Mysore, Madras, Bombay, and from there aboard a seven-storeyed ship (Wonder of wonders! It was as tall as the tallest building in Dhaka) to Singapore, Hong Kong, Hiroshima. At friends' urging Abba set down his impressions of Army life and when the book came out in 1963 — the first of three memoirs in Bengali — I devoured it with unalloyed pleasure. Rereading it more than three decades on, despite my awareness of its literary defects — understandable in a work dashed off amidst onerous official responsibilities — I can easily relieve my delight in its view of the Raj from the Indian NCOs mess, particularly relishing the ambivalence, the see-sawing between admiration and condemnation.

1942. Abba was waiting for his IA (Intermediate Arts) results. If he did well, in the normal course of events, he would have gone on to study for the BA. But normalcy was under suspension, prices in the bazaar rose daily, jobs

were scarce. A year hence the terrible Bengal famine, outcome of administrative callousness, would leave three million dead. An elderly friend counselled: 'I was a fool not to join up in the Great War. Afterwards I ran like a scrawny pie-dog from door to door, begging for a thirty-rupee-a-month job, only to be turned down each time because I had no war service to my credit. So what's the point of getting a BA or an MA? Join the war. If *kismet* brings you back safely, you will easily land a cushy job.'

The lure of adventure, the prospect of living and working with different peoples, especially the British, was decisive. And so without waiting to hear he had passed the IA examination in the First Division, Abba bade farewell to the two persons dearest to him, mother and elder brother, and after a summer night of train travel alighted at Calcutta's Sealdah station. Hailing a jinrickshaw he began haggling over the fare to the Army Recruiting Office. It was a situation for comedy and drew forth a bemused bystander to explain that it was an impracticable distance to travel by rickshaw.

'Is this your first visit to Calcutta?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'Then you'd better come along with me. It's risky to roam around unfamiliar streets.'

Judging from appearance the man was a *bhadrolok* — a gentleman. Abba accompanied him to Shyambazar, the heart of Hindu Calcutta, where he lived in a 'mess', a house rented by a number of lodgers who also shared a servant and cook. He suggested that Abba stay with him till the formalities of recruitment were completed, and apologized embarrassedly for not being able to offer food as well.

'I have no prejudices myself,' he said, 'but this is a Hindu mess and others might object if I asked you to eat here. I hope you won't mind eating in restau-



Abba in uniform

rants.'

Far from minding, Abba was overjoyed at having found sanctuary in a strange city.

At night the kind gentleman offered Abba his own bed, overruling Abba's vociferous protests, and himself slept on the floor. He remains enshrined in Abba's memory and in my imagination as a model of tolerance and generosity. If his qualities were more generally in evidence we wouldn't hear so much about the subcontinent's 'communal problem'.

War trailers had induced dreams of combat, but Abba's brother had extracted from him an oath not to go in for anything but a desk job. Abba kept his word and signed on as a Havildar Clerk, Grade III, in the Royal Engineers Corps, a Havildar being the subcontinental equivalent of a Sergeant. In three years he was promoted to Grade II and appointed Unit Head Clerk, in which capacity he sailed to Japan. He was recommended for training for a commission but some technical hitch postponed the final elevation till too

late: Partition loomed and, his contracted five years ended, Abba applied for release. [But Clerking didn't spare Abba the usual drill, weapon training and Battle Course, for everyone in the Engineers Corps was classified a combatant.]

Following recruitment in Calcutta Abba had little to do in the office and happily knocked off *The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dogs* on the typewriter, till one day a Punjabi recruit through inept handling snarled the typewriter ribbon and — like the proverbial brown fox, the memoir notes — put the blame on Abba. At once the 'culprit' was transferred to Kirkee, near Poona, a thousand miles away.

A new landscape. A different set-up. Soldiers bivouacked in tents, five or six to each. Abba's tent-mates were a rascally crew. Gul Khan the Pathan, Abdullah from Patna, and two Punjabi youths, antipodean to Abba's prudish, serious-minded, lower middle-class Bengali self. Their boisterous friendship spiced his life for the next three years in the 351 Independent Bomb Disposal Company, a mixed unit of British and Indian troops.

On their first pay day Abba's tent-mates decided to visit a brothel. The next morning Abba woke to tumultuous squabbling. The evening had been spoilt by the unpredictable Khan picking a quarrel with a girl; a rumpus ensued; Khan turned off the light and started pillaging the joint. The present hullabaloo was over the division of the spoils: looking-glasses, combs and other odds and ends.

Suddenly Abdullah exclaimed that his pocket had been picked.

'Payment for the merit you acquired last night,' Abba quipped.

Tall, strapping, handsome, laughter-loving, generous, impulsive, Khan was a true innocent, existing well beyond good and evil and this was the first of many scrapes and escapades in which he em-

broiled his friends. Once in a cinema he became excited at the presence of a handsome youth in the row in front. He swapped seats in order to get closer to the boy and when the lights dimmed leaned over and planted a lascivious kiss on his cheek. Abba's memoir recalls his shock at the 'revelation of such a loathsome aspect of life in the presence of so many civilized people.' He had been so astounded that writing about the incident twenty years later he couldn't call a kiss a kiss: Khan 'did such a thing to the boy's cheek that I was astounded'. Abba's memoir is peppered with prudish outbursts at manifestations of sexual intimacy, and when he himself feels any attraction he goes into romantic flights: Nirad Chaudhuri identifies such a combination of Victorian prudery and romantic longing as being characteristic of beneficiaries of western education under the Raj. Khan's aberrant behaviour seems to have given Abba the sharpest jolt. To Khan, though, it was all perfectly normal: Pathans and Afghans are openly bisexual, and it is not uncommon for a tribal *sardar* (chieftain) to throw a feast to show off a new *launda* (catamite), who sits on a dais, bedecked like a bride, showered with admiring glances.

Khan's imprudence raised the fear that the friends of the object of his passion might seek to avenge their honour. Unperturbed, Khan chattered about tactics to adopt should the other group become obstreperous. Fortunately they were deterred by the numerical superiority of Khan's group. Khan was overjoyed at the 'double victory' and all the way back to barracks danced and sang lusty Pushko songs.

A few months later Abba's unit was transferred to Madras. Abba accompanied the transport convoy on a thousand-mile journey at sixty miles a day. The varied landscape and chance to sightsee around Hyderabad and Mysore relieved the tedium.

exhibition

Rebel Rupam Not without a Cause

By Ekram Kabir

THERE are some people who never hesitate to face life's chase even if the fares are high, and journey, long and taxing; they always find a cause — 'man-has-to-do-something' phenomenon. This ultimately ends up as a pursuit for 'beauty'. Rupam Chowdhury is one of them.

But Rupam's week-long second solo exhibition that underway (Aug. 22-28) at Gallery Tone has narrowly escaped to have called a 'painting' show for the sheer presence of 87 of 87 dissimilar shapes and heights. Had there been no tin, bin, can and canister-like pieces of earthenware, one -- the onlooker -- could have easily found him/herself looking at some dazzling brush-works. These brush-works have been more than visual relief, amalgamating the display of "clay-play" with "colour-play". Still, alongside this

feeling, the pottery exhibition would have turned out to be something like, buttered toast without coffee.

And that is what makes Rupam an eclectic artist -- he can go beyond the confine of which many text-book craftsmen, perhaps, may not. He is always ready to venture into a new medium of art. This is so, because in September '95 at his first display, Rupam had presented a collection of wood-carvings that took seven years to complete.

He was then working with an inner hell, while observing human injustice on human beings, especially on women. For he was appalled by human rights violations at one of the largest non-governmental organisation, which trumpeted itself as an upholder of human rights, where Rupam used to work in the organisation's Accounts Department.

Rupam's success lies in presenting the urban version of the age-old craft, because in the countryside, pottery is

he grew up -- from a boy to a man -- he discovered a man with visions within himself, saddled with an array of imaginative skills, as he said: "I did not have the opportunity for any institutional erudition; if I could have, well, I don't know, I might have been 'more zealous' or 'more commercially clever'." Indeed, it's praiseworthy for a simple graduate to attain this acme of wisdom.

These earthenware exhibits of Rupam exposed him not as "clever", but "wise". It was essentially meant for collectors and those, these days, fancy to beautify their households with decoration pieces like vases, table lamps, urns, pots etc., that have novel aesthetic value. And to his delight, Rupam has been more than successful in satisfying their fascination, for a considerable number of buyers have spotted many of his artifacts for purchase at the gallery.

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nothing new -- and it never was. What Rupam did was that he extensively travelled in surrounding districts of Dhaka at village potters' houses and collected -- and sometimes prescribed the shapes -- all this earthenware and added more artistic intricacies in his own way.

While working on these, Rupam detected a painter in his psyche, which he wishes to practice in the future. His stroke spoke of nature, and mostly of history, as he painted last several centuries of the subcontinent's myths, culture, love and war, trials and tribulations of its people etc., in realistic manner which finally leading to Bangladesh's Independence depicting some stages of Bangabandhu's political career and his role in the country's independence on a four-feet high pot. As Rupam promised to work on, a piece of advice could be useful -- "If realism be the heart of painting, paint on."



book review

A Straight Forward Publication

by Haroon Ur Rashid

THE book comprises two sections: the first deals with design theory and the second with architectural process. Apparently the two sections may seem independent and separate, but they do support each other in appreciation of the book. The book brings together different aspects of design theory and architectural process in a single volume.

The first section starts with a brief history of the evolution of design. From its origin in prehistoric man's simple desire for a better life, design evolved to address more complex issues of the present. The section traces the principles of design to mother nature: nature in its diversity amidst uniformity is a repertoire of design principles. Definition and description of the basics: elements, principles, discipline and process occupy and justifiably so, a good part of this section. This is fundamental to the understanding and appreciation of de-

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Book Planning and Design: Farid Imamuddin
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sign and its process. The section clearly brings out the reciprocal influences between man and environment. Under the influence of man's social and technological advancement, the design process has become complex. In spite of its complexity the design process is more open today than was ever before. What was essentially a mental process of the "inner most self," can now be externalized for others to participate, understand, or just appreciate the process. The argument in support of this contention, however, remains vulnerable. The section concludes with a discussion



on the role of human senses, knowledge, philosophy, values and culture in perception and appreciation of design.

The second section deals with architectural process. It draws a substantive picture of architecture in totality. Elements, principles, geometry, discipline, scale, proportion, process, materials, built environment, and visual and aesthetic perceptions all find their due niches in this section. Some of the discussions here are repetition, but with a subtle difference. In the first section the reference is generic while in the latter it is specific to architecture alone. The discussion contributes to an understanding of the variety and richness of architecture in its different manifestations. It illustrates the use of the same time-honoured principles and disciplines in architecture of different periods, civilizations and religions. Architecture has a social purpose to which it continually responds. The author contends that so pervasive is the social influence that a study of architecture can give a fair picture of the social context

of its origin. Social change and development, therefore, have drawn architecture from the realms of royalty into that of laity. In conclusion the section discusses the varying influences of culture, technology, prevalent value system and knowledge on architecture and its perception.

The book follows a logical sequence: starting with the simple and elementary, it progressively gets complex. The photographs and sketches supplement the language in understanding the content. If it were not for the illustrations, it would have been a difficult book to read much less to understand. To say the least, the language is difficult. Considering the target audience for this book — primarily the students — the language should have been simpler. There are many repetitions particularly in definitions and descriptions of design elements, principles and process in the two sections. Cross references could have avoided these repetitions. At a few places the book goes into unnecessary details, the exclusion of which, would

not have lessened the outcome.

Objective writing on architecture is difficult. Architecture is a subjective discipline that has no absolute right or wrong. An idea is valid only within the limits of one's own convictions. Under such limitations the author has approached the subject with boldness and objectivity. There are a few traces of subjective judgment, but such is the nature of architecture. The few lapses do not in any way diminish the merit or the utility of the book. There is no single book in either English or Bengali that deals with such a wide range of discussions. The book is not a magnum opus, but a straight forward publication that brings the important aspects of design and architecture to bear on appreciation of architecture in totality. The book will be useful to the students of architecture and will be of interest to professionals as well. The book does serve the intent of its publication. The author deserves commendation for successfully undertaking the task of writing such a book.