

reflections

Of Men and Spiders

by Jan Johansson

A few years ago I conducted anthropological field work in the Bangladeshi countryside. The house I rented was simple, yet far superior to the accommodation the majority of the population has to be content with. At my disposal I had a roomy bathroom which happened to provide a home for an abundant variety of animal life. There were insects and small animals of all imaginable kinds. As I squatted over the toilet (of "Asian" model) I was able to observe the activities of a large spider. From my oblique perspective it seemed to brace itself at the centre of the Y where the walls were united with the ceiling. It was a fascinating sight which I associated with Tribeni, the confluence of three rivers — a frequently recurring theme in many Bengali songs and myths.

One of my visits to the bathroom I noticed that the spider had caught a fly. The spider was trying to compress the fly's body into a mouth sized morsel. But the fly struggled and suddenly managed to escape. Safely distanced from its

enemy it seemed to sigh with relief. For some reason I felt a strong desire to intervene in the drama. The life of the fly consequently met a sudden end under the sole of my slipper. I picked it up with a leaf, climbed up onto a chair and let it drop into the web. The spider at once resumed its activities. Hanging upside down by its rear pair of legs, it let the remaining half dozen spider legs drum about the lifeless victim. On my way out from the bathroom I wasn't actually repentant but I did feel a sense of wonder at my behaviour.

It later occurred to me that the whole scenario could be perceived as an image of the social drama taking place around me. The social actors of village life are often described in terms of patrons and clients. The clients are stuck in the patron's network and if they against all odds manage to liberate themselves there is still a significant risk that they will be crushed by some other self-styled ruler. My actions towards the fly-client also conformed to a common understanding of the effects of western missionaries' and development experts' work.

The fact that the event then began to live a life of its own is not particularly surprising. The anthropological imagination is an excellent hotbed for spider

fantasies. Clifford Geertz, for example, is of the opinion that we are all suspended in cultural webs of significance that we ourselves have spun.

Obviously both men and spiders are weavers. But certain people seem to be more industrious and target-oriented in their weaving than others. According to Weber they are driven by the ethics of individualism and Protestantism. It is above all from their point of view that the spider's work appears more rational and human than the fly's apparently aimless meandering. *Homo oeconomicus*, like the spider, is by nature a hermit and regards individuals from his own species as enemies or prey.

Back home, in the tranquillity of a Swedish small town, I read a condensed version of Robinson Crusoe to my sons. This character — frequently encountered in text books of economics — is of course nothing less than *homo oeconomicus* personified. It turns out that Robinson's first pet is a spider which is fed with flies. The relationship between Robinson Crusoe and the spider is portrayed as considerably more egalitarian than the one which he later develops with his servant, Friday. It is true that Friday is a member of the same species but he is also a representative of an inferior race.

In our civilisation the spider as a species is usually granted a position within the limits of human sympathy. The fly is almost always situated beyond these limits. According to the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss certain animal species such as dogs can be regarded as metonymical humans, in that they are close to man and are often an important part of our lives. On the other hand we tend to emphasize the similarity between humans and certain animals which are socially more distant. Levi-Strauss speaks of birds as such metaphorical humans. I believe even spiders can be included in this category. But how should flies be categorized? Their life form is usually included as vermin in our society. In other words they are close to us in a very negative sense. Could not flies be considered as metonymical non-humans?

According to this reasoning Robinson Crusoe's spider is a metaphorical human whereas Friday advances during the story from a fly-human to a dog-human; the 'real' human's best friend.

It is very probable that I was predisposed to carry out my deed in the Bangladeshi bathroom by a long line of literary descriptions. It was not until afterwards, however, that I noticed how common the spider theme is in literature.

In Kirkegaard, for example, we find the spider at a fixed point — if not at the centre of the confluence — from where it falls into the void of agony. Another example brings us back to the bathroom milieu. The American philosopher Thomas Nagel recounts that he for some time had noticed a spider in the university urinal where it seemed to be engaged in a dangerous struggle against the water. Finally Nagel removed the spider and put it on the floor, only to find it dead in the same spot a few days later. For Nagel this example becomes a warning against confusing essentially different life forms, each of which posses a specific mode of relating to the environment. The desire to create "the gold life" for "the other" ended with a catastrophe. In my case the metaphorical other survived, but the fly, the radical other, did not.

Text means web, and good prose according to Walter Benjamin is created in three steps: A musical step where on composes, an architectural step where on constructs and a textile step where one weaves. That authors feel a certain kinship with spiders is therefore completely natural.

Primo Levi establishes that the spider's thread is a remarkable example of

the solidifying of a fluid. The fact is that the thread becomes solid the moment it is subjected to traction. Chemists do know of processes in which solids are formed by blending two fluids. The spider on the other hand has only one kind of raw material: its own secretion.

Here is an obvious connection to the distinction between authors and writers. Since the author is using the uniform substance of his own experiences and reflections as the raw material of text weaving he is, in a sense, his own point of departure. The writer on the other hand blends "outer substances" into his text and thus behaves like the fly stuck in the web of current opinion as well as in the web of the "real" authors.

Many authors seem to prefer writing about flies rather than spiders. But even though they identify with the fly they often ward off that aspect of themselves. Through an apparent literary retreat from "the higher sphere" the author transforms his fear of fly-buzz into good literature. In this way the flies become part of the spider-author's secretion.

The writer on the other hand is content with buzzing on about the buzz of others. Bzzz!

book review

Service-man's Soul-searching

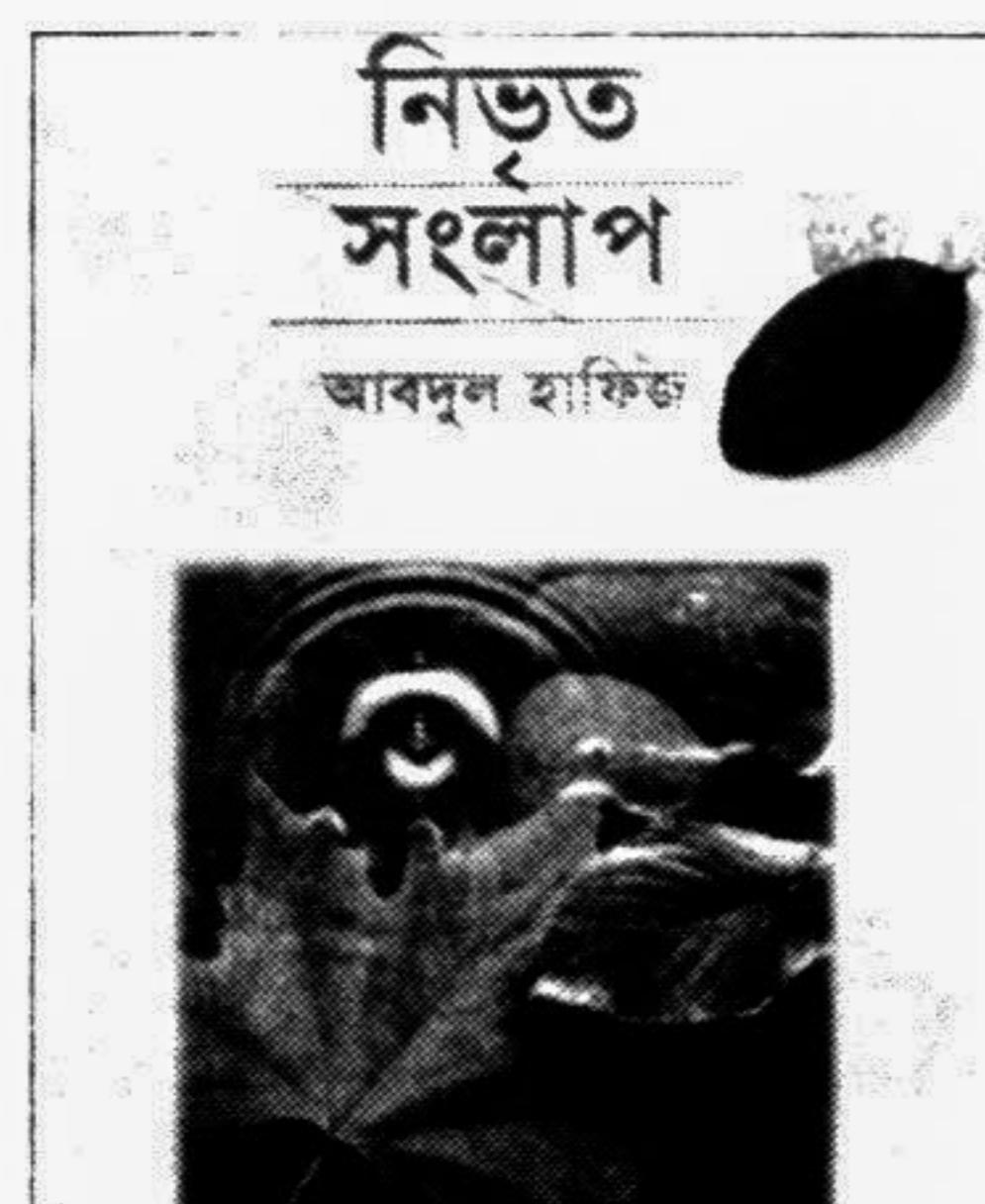
By Ekram Kabir

NIBRITO SANGLAP (A COLLECTION OF RECOLLECTIONS)
By Abdul Hafiz
Parama Prakashani
198 pages, Taka 150

in the Bangladesh Army, is one of those few.

Nibrito Sanglap is not all about soldiering, but his 198-page publication — a memoir-like recollections — to a great extent serves the purpose of an information storehouse of the armed forces of the subcontinent of which the post-independence generation is unaware, although Hafiz dwells mostly on his Pakistan experience.

But again in his 17-chapter book, he



takes his readers to the international level — from the colonial past, to the laborious liberation and down to the New World Order. His first-hand experience acquaints the readers with many aspects of Bangladesh's past, for the penman joined the Pakistan Army in 1960 when change of wind was strongly blowing. After his commission, he fought two wars — one in 1965 and the superlative one in 1971. While taking positions in the frontiers of the latter, he had to charge his former batch-mates. This should be more than interesting to read in his rather hastily written (there is numerous appearances of printer's devil) *Sanglap*.

These-days in Bangladesh, joining in the defence forces is one of the most sought after — second only to government offices — jobs among male youths,

because although career-oriented, it is an assured life-long employment in this times of near-absolute unemployment. But there was a time when soldiering as a profession was a quite rigorous job, for during the Pakistan period the Army was really kept busy by the government, because there was a lot to perform in the form of about-to-fight with the neighbouring countries. They were also officious at the diplomatic level the legacy of which still continues.

One of the striking features of Hafiz's work is the life-style of the khaki-clad people (or should one say combat-dressed warriors?), and contribution and war tactics of some legendary officers, British, Bengali, Indian and Pakistani. History of some wars (e.g., Nepolianic ones on horseback) adds attraction to the book.

The ex-defence man travelled a lot, both while in service and after his retirement and met numbers of international dignitaries; and he writes about his trips and the people he encountered. For who would know that Srimati Sheela Gujral, wife of Indian prime minister I K Gujral, is a poet in Punjabi language? Well, there are more such interesting facts, if not surprises, for the readers.

Mr. Abdul Hafiz himself, it is apparent from his *Sanglap*, is an attentive reader of various kinds of books, especially literature and history. In doing so, he has been able to separate odds and evens from the intellectual point of view. And now, it's time for him to make others attentive about his own writings.

He will succeed, no doubt.

travel

Memorabilia

by Syed Waliullah

Continued from last week

My Hosts

BOTH Glen and I were working toward our Ph.D programmes in the same department. Our acquaintance grew out of our interest in social change. His was 'family life' and mine was 'family welfare'. In no time our two families met and got tied into an ever lasting friendship.

Jensons were our friends since the

ninth month of the first year of the decade of seventies. We were given by Jensons luxuriant warmth and affection to make us comfortable and deal with our cultural adjustment with their society. Our ways were so entwined to each other that my family did never feel that we were different in race, colour and language. Without asking, we had them on our side and whenever we needed emotional support and encouragement in those bleak days of 1971. They were the ready made extended family for us, away from the family at home. It is a great feeling to know that the Jensons are there and in good

health.

When we left for home in 1974, their first child, Jennifer was in her adolescence and by then she was the big sister to her little brother Erick. Now they are both young adults and married. Both are in the profession of social work, following (?) their father.

Both the children (sorry they are no longer so and perhaps would not appreciate to be addressed like that) have done their compulsory missionary work after graduation in Europe and South America as a duty to the church. Their attitude toward life has the character of internationality, compassion

and understanding. While Jenni (Jennifer) is quiet, artistic and thoughtful type, Eric is exuberant and so is his wife. I did not see Jenni's husband but understand he is a jovial young man with a longing for professional excellence. The third child born to Jensons after two years of our departure is now a lovely youthful Natalie (lovingly called Nat by all in the family). She is a great help to her parents, 'tutor' to her older brother and likes to jostle with him. She has already started learning violin and plays well and was recently offered two college scholarships. She has decided to take the one as

offered by the Idaho College. It has been a great joy to see all members of the Jenson family together who keep themselves delectably amused.

Kathy is a great homemaker, a teacher, a piano player, a friend and above all, a mother. Nothing can get a miss in the family and not getting her attention and corrected in time. The needs of a careless visitor, like me, were noticed and take care of. She and my wife are so similar in running the family affairs and raising children in a way that the children could start their lives with confidence and a forward look.

My visit was rounded off with paying

a visit to Glen's mother, (unfortunately Glen's father has since passed away) and a visit to Kathy's parents. These two occasions were family reunion for me. The fact that I came to visit them from half the world away and that we had many uncommon life stories to share made these get together delightful. My visit also included a trip to Glen's family ranch. There I saw milking cows were more civilized and well disciplined than man when the question of satisfying respective basic animal and human needs are concerned. This is a different story to be told later.

to be continued

poem

History

by Nadeem Rahman

"History is just a fable that everyone has agreed upon."

I

History is who writes it,
unlived and lived again
history changes
with the pen,

who writes history walks on water,

distorts the sleep of buried dreams,
and transforms to wine
the stream of time,

history is the contrite
blood of Christ.

II

History is an apparition, of wisdom's
holy ghost in extradition,
history is a fractured vision, caught
in oceans of inscrutable time,
history is the crucible

of the heavens,

who walks with history
talks in parables, whose words consort
with rhymes and riddles,
who fiddles a sad psalm,
history is a dust storm.

III

History is a living thing,
a gusty tree, growing and bestowing,
its roots, unforgiving
spread deep in grief,

extending steep its limbs to implore
an end of its repetition,

who reads or heeds it
understands, history is a crust of bread
that feeds a multitude,
from the palm
of broken hands.

IV

The coagulated thread
of civilizations bled,

the scourge of God, Noah's flood
the rod of Moses parting seas,

and Ali's forked sword
is history, the morning star of Al-Zulfiqar,

history is a dead moon, exhumed
by Ibne Khaldoon.

V

History is the light
of a rainbow
at midnight,

history is the rain's ablation
the wind's intuition, and extinction
of the animal kingdom,
history is the death by flight
of the ozone layer, the glare of radiation
history is suffocation
with a green house effect,

history is a nuclear future.

VI

History is a chronicle of crimes
destiny by design,

the indestructible soul
meandering through time,

history is the romance

of destiny by chance.

VII
History is a cryptic beauty, and
Oxonian or Smithsonian historians
when you dip your sharpened pencil
into the silence of antiquity,

do be sure
to be secure of fate,
before you embrace
the subtle curvature
of time and space.

VIII

Before dismembering the Gordian knot
remember Lot, and his wife
that statuesque pillar
of the salt of life,

who seeks her favours, savours
the flair for snare, inherits the curse
the face and Medusa's head of history,

and listen to the wailing dead,
their orisons too late.

IX

History is a hooded figure,

disfigured by love and hate
history has a painted face,

concealing in disgrace a congenital eczema
an emotional leprosy of the soul,
history is a charlatan curing all
with an hardening of the arteries,

history is Hiroshima.

X
Tread carefully my friend
the lover of destiny, must circumvent
the quicksands of a faltering
palmistry, and

who binds history, is a blind poet
stumbling through the wooded pathway
of his sonnet, to a wounded gate

where history
has many streams
and waterfalls,
into infinity ...

XI
History
is the garden
of Allah.