



fiction

# The Back Square

by Mohit Ul Alam

**M**UMTAJ went to report a fire at Goal Para. He rode his motorcycle up to the intersection at Enayet Bazaar. There he first caught the burnt smell in the air. He also heard the great roar made by the people gathered at the place of fire. The neighbourhood of Goal Para is situated on a hillock, which is part of an elevated landmass that spreads westward and disappears into the horizon. On the month of the narrow lane, he found a strong contingent of the police cordonning off the place against a pressing crowd. Mumtaj had to produce his identity card to get entry.

People who inhabit here are mainly day labourers and rickshaw pullers huddling together in cheaply rented thatched houses with tin roofs. But the place earned its name from the main business pursued by its inhabitants. There are hundreds of cowsheds built on the west side of the hills where oxen of very high breed are raised to mate cows. The place stinks of cow dung all the time. But it was a big fire that broke out from a tea-shop at two o'clock in the morning and, with a helping wind, swept across the whole area, gutting the houses and the cowsheds in its blaze.

Mumtaj parked his motorcycle in front of a barber shop, which luckily escaped the fire and whose owner, a dark-skinned paunchy man around fifty with a big white moustache, now was enjoy-

ing the privilege of having visitors come to him for queries of all kinds. When Mumtaj requested him to keep an eye on his motorcycle, he obliged him by landing his haunches on the back seat of his parked bike until he returned.

As Mumtaj now led his way into the lane, which spun like a snake along the edge of the hill, he was accosted by a strong hot wind that unleashed itself from the lane into the main road. Mumtaj sneezed violently, and abruptly dragged forth a handkerchief from his pocket to block his nose. The lane was crowded with all sorts of people — those who lost everything in the fire, and those who came to console their relatives or help them to shift to other places. The roaring was deafening, as wailing and shouting from the afflicted

people surged up in the air.

Ten steps from where the police put the cordon, Mumtaj led himself into a press of people who were grieving over the charred bodies of two children — brother and sister — laid on a bamboo mat just beside the road. They were the only casualties as Mumtaj happened to gather the information. Their father, a middle-aged quiet looking rickshaw-puller, squatted himself beside the corpses, as if guarding them against further damage. His lungi just merely came up to his knees, showing his legs wired with fat tubes of veins. He wore no vest, and his arched back shone against the morning sun that was growing hot every hour. His spine dipped in the ridge between his shoulder blades, but protruded up before disappearing into his

lungi. He lifted his wistful eyes to the assembled crowd, as if soliciting them to understand the enormity of his grief, though one could also detect a calculated expectation for donation in his gaze. But this didn't bother Mumtaj, rather he found it natural. He unwound his small Canon camera from his shoulder strap, and took a few quick snaps of the corpses before the crowd got time to demonstrate against his behaviour. But free movement was almost impossible as the walkway was jammed by torn thatched roofs and tin sheets which were pulled down, and furniture and utensils which had all been dragged out of the houses, and out of the licking flames, the night before. However, everything had been awash like clothes as a squad of firemen had showered their

hose pipes on them until dawn to douse the fire. He saw two firemen now rolling the pipes into big coils before they got them back into the fire van.

The morning sun now shed a skin-blasting heat, and people were seeking whatever small shade they could find under either a singed coconut tree or the burnt frames of the remaining bamboo and wooden structures that had not been dilapidated. Mumtaj weaved his way further exploring more badly gutted areas. He came up to a yard which had the wreck of a house standing on it. Beside the house he saw a pair of coconut trees that got the blaze singed through them, but in the little shade which they still helplessly offered Mumtaj discovered a woman sitting.

To be continued

## book review

Hasan Azizul Huq's 'Ma-Meyer Sansar'

# A New Turn in The World of His Stories

by Ali Ahmed

**O**NE of the foremost short-story writers of modern Bengali literature, Hasan Azizul Huq's latest collection of short-stories entitled *Ma-Meyer Sansar* (The household of Mother and Daughter) will surprise many of his admirers. Why so we will deal with a little later. Before that let's try to take a very brief overview of the world of short-stories in Bengali literature and Hasan Azizul Huq's place in it.

In Bengali literature, the genre of short-stories is very rich and varied, and can be compared with the same in any literature of the world. Like in many other fields of Bengali literature, the magic touch of Rabindranath Tagore, of course, had really modernised the genre of short-stories and uplifted them to that standard. Although many writers contemporaneous with and subsequent to Tagore have since produced an abundant crop of very successful and artistic short-stories and some of them had often broken new grounds, but only a very few can actually be said to have reached the height of his creations.

Tagore's world of short-stories has a very vast canvas covering a wide field of Bangladesh's rural landscape, where he composed most of those stories, and its ordinary men and women with their poignant pains and pleasure, hopes and aspirations, sufferings and fulfilment. It also encompasses a large number of stories depicting the then urban life of Bengal as well as the inner world of the characters of those stories. Then a new generation of writers appeared on the



scene, who carried the reach of short stories further and deeper into society and human psyche. A group of very talented writers with avowed commitment to social justice took to writing as a sort of a crusade in favour of the underdogs, at least to bring to the fore the nature of their suffering and exploitation, if not to correct them. The famous novelist Manik Bandyopadhyay stands out in the forefront of this group. His short-stories, like most of his novels, champion the cause of the have-nots and the under-privileged in society. Hasan Azizul Huq belongs to this group.

Had Hasan been just a member, even if a talented one, of this group of writers committed to social justice and the cause of the destitute, he would probably not have merited much of a discussion.

The unique style of his writings, almost forcing a close attention of the readers and critics alike, lies not in just depicting the helplessness of the poor and the destitute. It lies precisely in the way he presents them, his own reality presented in his own very personal style. Manik Bandyopadhyay, no doubt, is a master craftsman of stories and his superlative presentation of the world of the exploiter and the exploited in his novels and short-stories has earned for him a permanent place of pride in Bengali literature. Yet his stories seem to be a narration, albeit a masterly and sympathetic one, by a 'rather' detached onlooker who has seen those happenings from a close range. But Hasan's stories seem to have been crafted by a person who was very much involved in them, almost present on the spot and suffered with the characters of the stories. His unorthodox use of similes and employment of unheard of metaphors, along with a detailed, often microscopic, description of persons, things and places, not only makes his language inimitable and penetrating, it also distinguishes and differentiates him from Manik Bandyopadhyay and the like. Perhaps, only one other writer of modern Bangali fiction, namely, the Late Akhitaruzzaman Ilias, can be compared with Hasan on this account.

Only during the last three/four decades have a few short-story writers appeared on the scene of Bengali literature, who can claim an individual, distinctive place of their own. Hasan Azizul Huq is one of them. When his first collection of short-stories had appeared in the early 60's, the Bengali readership welcomed him with an unusual acclaim, and he had soon won the topmost

literary award of the country. Hasan is not what is called a prolific writer. But he is not sitting idle, either. He has since then very slowly, but painstakingly, been crafting his art and producing one gem of a short-story after another. Only machines churn out articles of mass production in very large volumes, but artists create their works through an unbelievably painstaking process of mental labour. And Hasan Azizul Huq is an artist.

His very finely-chiselled craft of short-stories present us, of course, with a very grim world of poverty, exploitation, helplessness, and drudgery. When one enters the world of Hasan's stories, one enters, as if, a labyrinth of blind hopelessness and fear. His style of writing is inimitable, his picturisation superb, and his prose unique. But the world he creates is suffocating, where the helpless continues to suffer without any hope or prospect of redemption. The artist, no doubt, would say that he is presenting realities as he finds them. That is true, of course, as far as it goes. But still a reader at times would perhaps expect a respite.

In this new volume of his short-stories, Hasan seems to have provided his readers with that long-hoped-for respite, and a new world of realities with hopefulness. Besides his asphyxiating world of the realities of hopelessness, Hasan had based almost all of his earlier stories on the background of his place of birth, adolescence and early youth, i.e., West Bengal of India, with its cropless wide fields, flute-playing cowboys and dry, dusty lands. His place of domicile in Bangladesh, especially the southern part, with its almost endless green foliage, its innumerable rivers

and rivulets and damp, almost moist, lands were surprisingly absent in his stories. Not that it matters. But still it's a point that was not missed even by his ardent admirers. Almost all the stories of this rather sleek volume have, for their physical background, the geographical nature of Bangladesh just described. But the most important departure that any careful reader would discern in most of the stories of the present volume is the very tenor of their make. Hasan's partiality to the poor, the downtrodden and the oppressed is well-known, and one would perhaps feel happy about that. But the oppressed and the downtrodden in Hasan's stories of the present volume appear to be of a different breed. They no longer, like Hasan's previous characters, take injustice and oppression lying down. They protest, they revolt and, like the mother and daughter in the title-story, launch counter-attacks on the culprits. It would, no doubt, appear as a great departure from Hasan's earlier modes of depiction of reality.

With land and persons of Hasan's new stories, their themes have also changed. Shrimp-culture is a new agro-industry in Bangladesh and much is talked about its successes and prospects. But few have gone into its hard socio-economic realities. His story called *GHER* (The Enclosure) has brought into sharp focus the hard realities of cruelty, deprivation, even depravity, religious communalism, greed, and exploitation lying beneath the glitter of an ostentatious commercial success. This story therefore is not only a matchless piece of art, but also a very dispassionate social study revealing the festering wounds of unimaginative commerciali-

sation of marginal agriculture in a poor economy like that of Bangladesh.

It would be unfair to the writer Hasan Azizul Haq and an offense of the depiction of half-truth if we fail to make a mention of another major departure that he has made in some of the stories of the present volume. The lead story *Sammelan* (conference), I think, needs a special mention in this connection. By making a sharp departure from his trodden path of realistic stories, Hasan, in this story, makes a very successful and artistic blend of the real and the unreal, the experience and the imagination, to forge a story postmodernistic both in form and in content. Hasan, through this piece of writing, has proved his mettle as a composer of this latest type of fiction, which is increasingly being talked and written about in Bengal also.

Another thing must be mentioned, at least in passing. While the majority of Hasan's stories is called realistic, they are a reality of the artist, and not of the journalist. His presentation of reality therefore is superbly artistic. A distinctive style of writing called Kafkaesque after the famous writer Franz Kafka is also discernible in at least one story of this collection, viz., the second story called 'the man is dying' in translation. The stories contained in this volume therefore are a mixture of realistic, Kafkaesque and metafictional and postmodernistic fictions. This book of short-stories therefore is a departure in many ways from Hasan's previous books of short-stories in landscape, tone, tenor, characterisation, form and content. Above all, they are world class.

# A New Book Looks at an Old Problem from a New Perspective

by Mustafizur Rahman

**T**HE issue of efficient management of service delivery systems has preoccupied policy makers as well as institutions across countries and over time. The need to confront this challenge has never been so urgent as it is in the present times, since in almost all the countries across the globe we find a concerted effort to curtail subsidised welfare-oriented services on grounds that these are inherently inefficient and intrinsically non-viable from a cost-benefit perspective.

In the backdrop of such holy crusades pursued by policy makers belonging to parties across the political spectrum, the common person's vulnerability is further increased. Under the circumstances the role of the research community becomes very critical. It is the responsibility of the researcher community to identify those policies which whilst raising the level of services would not be a burden on the service recipients. Unfortunately, the onslaught of market forces everywhere has led to a situation where attention has mostly been diverted to searching for ways to downsize the public sector and/or privatisate the service systems on grounds of inefficiency. In many instances this has led to a fall in the level as well as quality of services. The private sector, in their preoccupation with cost effectiveness, has also been not keen enough to identify innovative ap-

**Language Barriers to Health Care: Cost Benefit Analysis of Providing Interpreter Services at Health Care Setting, by Khaleda Nazneen, Ph.D., Published by Prachya Vidya Prokashoni**

proaches which whilst reducing costs raises the quality of services at the same time. It is thus not much fashionable these days to spend time and resources in search of practical ways which may enhance access of the ordinary clients, specially the clients from disadvantaged groups; such investments are thought to be by definition cost ineffective. That innovative approach to these issues can raise the efficacy of such systems and can be cost-effective is beyond the perception of the predominant mindset amongst the policy makers, and a large section of the research community.

It is Dr Khaleda Nazneen's distinction that she has taken up the challenge on herself to prove that service delivery systems can be made effective as well as cost beneficial if the policy makers are able to locate areas which actually caters to the needs of the clients. In doing so she has answered the critics and the skeptics in their own language — she has carried out detailed cost-benefit analysis and was able to demonstrate that incremental benefits accrued from such interventions exceed the incre-

mental costs which are incurred on account of the additional investment. Dr Nazneen has selected a particular area, the health sector, and a particular group of patients, the relatively disadvantaged, and set out to prove that it is indeed possible to substantially raise both access to as well as quality of health services received by such patients if their particular needs and requirements could be properly identified and adequately addressed. She has found that quality of health services received by limited English language patients, in her case minority group patients of Hispanic origin in the USA, are seriously undermined because of linguistic barriers in a predominantly English-speaking society. Dr Nazneen has exposed the limitations imposed by prevailing systems dominated by traditional mindsets which tend to be insensitive to special needs of those who are economically underprivileged and also socially undermined, patients belonging to groups who are condemned to remain outside of the mainstream. It does credit to Dr Nazneen that she has set out to prove her point not on social welfare grounds, although her compassion for those who are on the fringe of the society and are marginalised on a daily basis is evident, but on economic grounds. She has collated rich empirical evidence, carried out a thorough analysis and was able to prove her point in the most convincing manner.

On the basis of indepth analysis of the relevant information Dr Nazneen

comes out with surprising finding: her findings show that language does matter. She examines primary level data on patients of Hispanic origin and discovers that language barriers can lead to wrong diagnosis, and often seriously undermine both access as well as quality of service received by disadvantaged groups of patients. On the basis of cost-benefit analysis she shows that the potential returns from any incremental investment in the form of providing interpreter service to the Hispanic patients far outweighs the costs involved in providing of such services. The message is clear — health delivery systems need to be more attentive to the needs of those for whom they are set up in the first place, the patients, specially those who require special attention and whose interests tend to get marginalised in mainstream thinking.

The message of the book is that, needs of people belonging to different groups based on economic, social, linguistic or any other criteria are bound to be different. However, as it appears, everywhere service delivery systems are busy in search of the representative client, for which a homogenous system is to be instituted. But such systems always end up by discriminating against those who are on the fringe of our societies. From this perspective Dr Nazneen's findings are equally true for countries such as Bangladesh. Have we ever thought of the poor person who comes to Dhaka from a remote interior village of Gram Bangla with his/her se-

riously ill child, enters a government hospital (she wouldn't dare to enter a clinic) and encounters the polished Bhaddralok language of the doctor? Can he/she readily understand what the doctor asks? Is the doctor patient enough to understand the intricacy of a local dialect? — this parallel may just be symbolic, but should it not give us some food for thought?

This book reflects Dr Nazneen's keen interest in an area an interest in which she had developed at BIDS where she worked as a researcher and at Harvard where she did her Masters; subsequently she chose this area for her doctoral research at Brandeis University. As a matter of fact, this book is the published version of her Ph.D thesis. As such the book could not perhaps avoid the burden of the graphs and equations which are quite a few in her book. This, whilst being very useful to the specialists who would be much benefited by the rigour of the analysis, may perhaps deter the inquisitive layman from setting his/her hand on the book. One can perhaps recall here what Stephen Hawking wrote in the preface to his eminently readable and popular book *A Brief History of Time*: some one cautioned him that for every equation he would put in his book he would lose half his potential readership. We know he did indeed heed to this advise but could not avoid one equation — Einstein's famous  $E=mc^2$ ! But the potential reader of this book may not perhaps be discouraged after all — reader can avoid the equa-

tions and graphs but can still be greatly benefited by the discourse in the book and the insightful comments of the author which is presented in a very lucid language. For those who have an interest in health economics, an area of specialisation which has become very important in recent years but which is a relatively lesser known terrain here in Bangladesh, this book should become an essential reference book. We do hope his work will also be able to inspire others in Bangladesh to take up research in health-economics related areas. Such research will definitely contribute fruitfully to better management in the health sector of Bangladesh.

In the preface to the book Dr Nazneen mentions about her commitment to the needy. The book's message is a pointer to the seriousness of her commitment. It can be confidently said that having read this book the reader will appreciate both the mission as well as the message of the author.

The quality of publication of this volume does credit to Prachya Vidya Prokashoni — it is indeed satisfying to note that relatively lesser known publishers in our country such as this one are able to attain such high standards of publication, and have developed the capacity to bring out books in such presentable form.

*About the writer Mustafizur Rahman is professor of Accounting at Dhaka University and project director at Centre for Policy Dialogue.*