

FOCUS

Calcutta Book Fair and West Bengali Intellectual Elite

by M Rashiduzzaman

The historical reality that Bangladesh is now a separate and sovereign state, through the momentous developments of both 1971 and earlier in 1947, deserves a genuine recognition and mutual respect before a lasting and friendly understanding between West Bengal and Bangladesh can work.

HERE is a fracas over the evidently discourteous treatment that the Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina recently received at the Calcutta Book Fair, an Indian national and indeed a bigger regional event on its own right. The organizers of the book exhibition deeply disappointed the visiting Bangladeshis when their Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was formally introduced in the gathering as the Mukhaya Mantri (chief minister) of Bangladesh, a designation reserved for the Indian provincial head of the government. Even her name was incorrectly cited! Such an episode could be ignored as a goof (PM Hasina later told reporters that the organizers of the book exhibition had personally apologized to her), but that was not the last of the insensitivity in that significant occurrence. One of the same fair-organizers said that the "two Bengals" were bound by inseparable bonds without qualifying that Bangladesh was not just another Bengal, but a separate, independent and sovereign nation.

In his opening speech at the Book Fair, Poet Shamsur Rahman is known to have modified the organizer-speaker by adding that despite many similarities, the "two Bengals" were different, which, however, should not deter the mutual cooperation and friendship. But the Calcutta press did not publish that qualifying part of his speech, according to one observer.

Those two episodes and reactions display strange drift, a combination of neglect, arrogance, disrespect and a communal undercurrent that has swept the West Bengali political and intellectual elite. But this is only the tip of the iceberg that is yet to thaw, it's also a legacy from the past that is dying hard in West Bengal! At the heart of the Calcutta-based influential community's disparaging attitude to Bangladesh, there are seemingly irreconcilable paradoxes. They are less than enthusiastic to show the deserving recognition for Bangladesh as an independent and a separate nation-state, but they should also know that Bangladesh, since separated from Pakistan, has not demonstrated any desire to join West Bengal, and becoming a part of India.

In the eyes of the mainstream West Bengali intelligentsia, Bangladesh, a Muslim majority nation, was little more than a continuation of East Pakistan with a different nomenclature, and much of their anger is still attributed to the earlier 1947 division of Bengal, deeply embedded in their mindset! For them, today's Bangladesh, backed by Muslim separatism, was

planted in history much earlier than 1971! For those Hindus who fled the country in fear and under very exceptional circumstances, after the partition, Bangladesh is still remembered as an exotic land, full of trees, golden paddy fields, meandering rivers, abundant fruits and vegetables, and pristine ponds and lakes brimming with fish. So many non-fiction books, novels, essays, short stories and poems conjured the "Golden Bengal" and decried the partition of Bengal, and lamented the "ethnic cleansing" that they allegedly suffered since then.

The emotion-filled narra-

tives, the free floating accusations, hidden assumptions and sometimes the appalling indifference towards Bangladesh have littered the intellectual landscape of West Bengal since 1947. They have also shaped the political twist and reckless inattention that is under review here. Partly driven by the literary conjuring, a segment of the West Bengali writers occasionally fanaticized to unravel the Bangladesh sovereignty. Indeed, one such anti-partition imagination expressed in a poem (Teler Shishi Bangla Bale...) by Anna Shankar Roy came under fire recently. The poet himself reportedly recited it at a Calcutta poetry conference of the poets from the "two Bengals" in 1998 December. One of the participants at that meeting wrote that the poet dismissed the political barriers between Bangladesh and India as an artificial separation. Mr. Roy's poem was by no means a literary feast to the Bangladeshis, and his alleged comment, if true, betrayed an intellectual arrogance and the worst form of political insensitivity. More importantly, this was not a voice from the "lunatic fringe" but he represented the literary gems of West Bengal.

In numerous such fictional accounts, it is the Muslims who are, directly or indirectly, portrayed as the sole perpetrators of violence and expropriators of the Hindu jobs, land, business and properties in what is now Bangladesh. The invariable message in many such works is that the British Raj favoured the Hindu nationalists, and gives an impression that it was the Muslim communalism, fanned by the colonial masters, that divided Bengal in 1947. Actually, that is a questionable allegation, and even some professional historians have advanced such tainted narratives. But I am aware of a few West

defly through the prolific literary surge for which there is an audience both in West Bengal and Bangladesh.

Bengal's political history, a fascination of many Calcutta writers, features amply in numerous fictional narratives. I like reading Sunil Gangopadhyay's historical fictions, but, unless I am mistaken, I cannot help detecting a subtle accusatory tone when he narrates the united Bengal's history of Hindu-Muslim relations although I don't perceive him as a rabid anti-Muslim storyteller. For example, when he writes about the Communal Award in his Purba Paschim, Vol. 1, he conveys an unexamined presupposition that it unfairly benefited the Muslims over the Hindus, which resulted in Muslim majority in the former Bengal legislature after the 1937 elections. To him, it was designed to teach the caste Hindus a "lesson" by the British for spearheading the Indian independence agitation. But he ignores that the so-called Communal Award, which distributed the provincial legislative seats to different religious/ethnic communities, was not the sudden and one-sided concession by the British. An outcome of negotiations through the Round Table Conferences, the Muslims deserved the legislative majority by virtue of their demographic strength, which was not acknowledged during the earlier 1919 constitutional reforms that first created the quasi-parliamentary institutions in the British Indian provinces. Also the caste Hindus were not alone in the freedom movement, the lower caste Hindus, the Muslims and other religious minorities were also active in the anti-British campaign.

The influential Bangladeshi intellectuals generally carry the reputation of looking upon Calcutta as the cultural Mecca, and the mutual exchanges and meetings between Calcutta and Dhaka writers, artists, singers and musicians have increased significantly. Half a century after India's division, the Calcutta-based lingering pejoration of the 1947 Bengal partition, sustained through Bangladesh that broke away from Pakistan, is confounding. Bangladesh has been unable to resolve the rancorous encounter with its own history and identity (that I examined in The Daily Star recently), and indirectly, the West Bengali callousness to Bangladesh is the outcome of that acrimony.

Ms Taslima Nasreen, a controversial feminist writer was an embarrassment even to many liberals in Bangladesh.

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Bengali scholars, who did not make the Muslims the sole "culprit" of the 1947 religious division; however, outside the serious academic domains, they don't appear in the flourishing popular literature in Calcutta.

As a contrast, the contemporary Bangladeshi intellectuals rarely wailed and whined about the sufferings of the Indian Muslims, including those from West Bengal, who fled to what was then East Pakistan, to escape the heat of communalism in West Bengal and other parts of India.

The plight of the so-called Biharis seldom attracted the literary imagination of the Bangladeshi writers (even before 1971). Few established Bangladeshi authors, in their recent short stories, novels, poems and essays deliberately blamed the oppressive (Hindu) landlords, the biased politicians and the exploitative monied ones for their unconscionable treatment of the Muslim peasantry. Some Bangladeshi secular thinkers are considered to be the local validators of what the West Bengali intellectuals thought of the Bangladesh history and identity. Still, Bangladesh has demonstrated a spirit of a historical as well as literary reexamination that does not seem to be happening in West Bengal, at least not in their imagination of Bangladesh. Bangladesh has its own share of religious fundamentalism and political Islam, but they were not so prominent in the mainstream intellectual establishments.

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but her book Lajja, with no great literary distinction, did not move off the best seller list for months in Calcutta. Sadly, the work was a bonanza for the communal forces in West Bengal and other parts of India with the BJP being its principal backer. It was the "geopolitics" of the book Lajja that made a debatable writing so well known, much of the international publicity of its controversial writer came via Calcutta.

She received the Ananda prize from the Ananda Bazar Patrika, a popular Calcutta Bengali daily newspaper. From 1958 to 1994, no other Bangladeshi author or book had previously received that award. Many Bangladeshis believed that the award to Taslima Nasreen was politically motivated, and it was considered a calculated insult to the Bangladeshi litterateurs who usually had profound respect for the Calcutta literary circle. It was a pity that the West Bengali intellectuals, with a few honorable exceptions, used a contestable fiction to prove the charges of unhindered communalism in Bangladesh.

Some of the intellectuals from Calcutta were unhappy when the first Bangladeshi constitution declared that the Bangladeshi citizens would be identified as Bangalees. I consider this an extension of the old ambivalence over the Bengali Muslim identity. Curiously, the Muslim aristocracy is connected with geography since the Muslim aristocrats in Bengal often claimed to have come from outside.

But the Bengali Hindu bhadralok, in general, also did not quite consider the Bengali Muslims as real Bangalees; they were more looked upon as Muslims, purportedly the outsiders! Nirad Chaudhuri, the celebrated Bengali writer, in his Autobiography, has recorded the arrogant (Hindu) contempt for the Muslims and a deep-seated hostility towards them. We can link the on-going re-examination of numerous West Bengal writers to their predecessors like Bankim Chatterjee for their anti-Muslim contempt and the convoluted contempt for the Muslims that characterized some of their famous novels. Few of the great Bengali classics (written by the Hindu writers) ever depicted the Muslims and their way of life as the pivot of their narratives.

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Child Labour in Garment Industry

by M Ashraf Ali

Apparently, the issue of child labour is delicate. It has both national and international dimensions. The loud criticism of garment manufacturing units by human rights activists in this country and the various pressure groups like the CLC in the USA have to be taken into consideration for adoption of corrective measures.

THE issue of child labour has now received the attention of the people in the world. It took centuries, before it could draw the attention of the people in general and the powers that be in different continents in particular. It is in 1990 that the UNICEF organised the World Summit for Children and adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child. As many as 71 Heads of State and Government and 88 senior officials, mostly at the ministerial level, attended the world summit on September 29-30, 1990 and adopted a Declaration on the Survival, Protection and Development of Children and a Plan of Action for implementing the Declaration in the 1990's. May be one will see a different world by the turn of the century, when the Plan of Action will fully be implemented and the rights of child will be fully safeguarded.

With the industrial revolution, the relation between worker and his work place has been spelt out in the form of jobs — with skill requirement. The subject of work became a matter of concern for those also in management. The current spate of references to skills, productivity, management and the like in preference to traditional avocations is largely an outcome of the changes that took place over the past century or so. The current move to prescribe age-limit within which one may be considered suitable for a given job is quite innovative and normative.

In the World Declaration on the Survival, Protection and Development of Children adopted on September 30, 1990 in New York different dimensions of the work including the challenge, the opportunity, the task and the commitment were spelt out in clear terms. This declaration envisaged that all will act together "for programmes that reduce illiteracy and provide educational opportunities for all children irrespective of their background and gender, that prepare children for productive employment and life-long learning opportunities; i.e. through vocational training; and that enable children to grow to adulthood within a supportive and nurturing cultural and social context."

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cording to Article 1 of the Convention is one below the age of 18. Since the adoption, substantive actions have been taken by UN agencies, national governments and even trade unions and NGOs for protecting the rights and interests of children in general and child labour in particular.

Interestingly, the definition of child as per age appears to be diverse. One remaining below the age of 18 is a child as per the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989, while the laws in different countries set the age limit to 14 or 15 years or less as per provisions of enactments. Even in the same country the connotation is different vis-à-vis the age of entry into wage-employment. As per the Factories Act of 1965, one attaining the age of 14 may qualify for employment in different establishments subject to some conditions. The Tea Plantation Workers Ordinance of 1962 has an enabling clause, whereby a child attaining 12 years of age will be rehabilitated after proper education and vocational training. In view of prevailing poverty both employment and rehabilitation of retrenched workers have become difficult in this country.

It may be worthwhile to examine the problem of child labour in the country, and for averting any crisis and for ensuring absorption of child labour retrenched from garment manufacturing units to other fields of activities. The direction for such corrective measures has been set not only by the well-meaning among the owners of garment manufacturing units but by official agencies like the UNICEF and the ILO.

On the top of all, the provisions of law have to be enforced by official agencies like the Department of Labour and the Office of the Chief Inspector of Factories and Establishments. The current deficiencies of these official agencies have to be removed by putting in more funding resources, manpower and other facilities. These agencies should work in collaboration with employers' and workers' organizations in the garment manufacturing sector. Necessary arrangements should be made for tripartite consultation and united activities needed for handling the sensitive child labour issue. The process of unionization and bilateral discussions should also be taken to its logical end of the rights and interests of the employed are to be protected. Though it is a new dimension of work, rehabilitation of retrenched child labour is all the important.

Apparently, the issue of child labour is delicate. It has both national and international dimensions. The loud criticism of garment manufacturing units by human rights activists in this country and the various pressure groups like the CLC in the USA have to be taken into consideration for adoption of corrective measures.

The figure of child labour in garment manufacturing units has become debatable and that due to the fact that none of them can show their birth certificates as a proof of age. In the absence of such a survey one may go with the views of some trade union leaders and state that over fifty thousand of the workers in garment manufacturing units fall in the category. The employers are, however, found telling that very few children below the age of 14 are employed and such child workers are

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Contempt Petition against PM: Full Text of Judgement

In the Supreme Court of Bangladesh Appellate Division
Present:
Mr Justice ATM Afzal, Chief Justice
Mr Justice Mustafa Kamal
Mr Justice Latifur Rahman
Mr Justice Bimalendu Bikash Roy Choudhury
Mr Justice AM Mahmudur Rahman
An application of Mr Habibul Islam Bhuiyan, President,
Supreme Court Bar Association.

Mr Mahmudul Islam, Attorney General of Bangladesh.
Date of Hearing: 17th February, 1999.

JUDGEMENT

ATM AFZAL, CJ: By an application dated 1st February, 1999, Mr Habibul Islam Bhuiyan, Senior Advocate and President of the Supreme Court Bar Association declaring himself further as an officer of this Court brought to my notice certain statements published in the daily "Dinkal" and daily "Sangram" of 30 January, 1999 which were alleged to have been made by Sheikh Hasina Wazed, the Hon'ble Prime Minister, at a Press Conference held in the Gana Bhaban on 29 January, 1999 on her return from India.

It has been alleged in the application, inter alia, that the said statements clearly amount to contempt of Court of the highest degree because she knew well that such statements will create doubt in the public mind about the integrity and wisdom of the learned Judges of the Supreme Court and of the Hon'ble Chief Justice of Bangladesh and yet she made such false statements consciously lowering the high image and unimpeachable integrity and wisdom of the learned Judges of the Supreme Court and of the Chief Justice of Bangladesh in the estimation of the public at large. The petitioner prayed for drawing up of an appropriate proceeding for contempt of Court against the Prime Minister.

The application was listed for hearing in Court on 3rd February, 1999 with notice to the learned Attorney General.

During hearing the alleged offensive portion in the statement of the Prime Minister was pointed out by the petitioner and marked by us as follows:

.....প্রতি ২৫ ও ২৫ অঙ্গটি দুলিমে হাইকোর্টে ১২শ মাসাদের জামিন হয়েছিল। এটা কখনো

হতে পারে না। এর কোটি পরিবর্তন করা হয়েছে। কিন্তু এখন কিভাবত এ কাপার কেন নেন।

Daily "Sangram":

....প্রতি ২৫ ও ২৫ অঙ্গটি দুলিমে হাইকোর্টে এমন অবস্থা করে রেখে প্রতি ১২শ মাসের সরকার যে, দুইদিনে

১২শ মাসের জামিন হয়ে যাব। কিভাবে হলো, কেন হোলো? এটি কেনের কাপার প্রতি ২৫ অঙ্গটি দুলিমে হাইকোর্টে এক অঙ্গটি দুলিমে হায়ে