

## book review

# An Account of Contemporary History

by Taj Hashmi

BANGLADESH is the only country in the modern world to have the distinction of attaining independence twice in the short span of 24 years between 1947 and 1971. As one knows, both of these two liberation movements evoked extra-ordinary expectations among the bulk of the population and were achieved at high prices, especially the second one, in 1971. Bengali Muslim elite led both the movements mobilizing Muslim masses, mainly peasants, promising them their utopias—"Sonar" or golden Pakistan and Bangladesh, respectively—albeit by culturally and politically hegemonising the gullible masses by arousing "false consciousness" among them. In short, in the wake of 1947 as well as 1971, East Bengali Muslims (Hindus and others as well after 1971) had gone through short periods of mass euphoria and long periods of autocracy and misrule. They were somehow led to believe by their shrewd leaders that their cherished goals had already been achieved and that "the uninterrupted flow of milk and honey" would begin in no time. However, one also knows that for the bulk of the population both the promised golden eras remained elusive and unattainable. Consequently a section of them remained angry, disillusioned and perplexed, while the majority resigned to their miserable fate not long after 1947 and 1971, a behaviour typical of the fatalist peasantry throughout the peasant world. While both 1947 and 1971 brought "the best of times" to the members of the ruling elite and their cronies, a small but assertive section of the East Bengali intellectuals and politicians (unfortunately, the two were not synonymous) on both the occasions pointed out the flaws in the rhetorics of prosperity of the ruling elites, by telling the people how their "spring of hope" had been fast turning into the "winter of despair". Enayetullah Khan is most definitely one of the handful of such intellectuals who never thought of the consequences and spoke the truth (and suffered at the hands of autocracy). This volume under review, *A Testament of Time*, testifies my assertion. This volume is based on columns and editorials of Enayetullah Khan written for his Holiday during 1965 and 1975. This work is a candid account of how the disillusioned masses, intellectuals, workers,

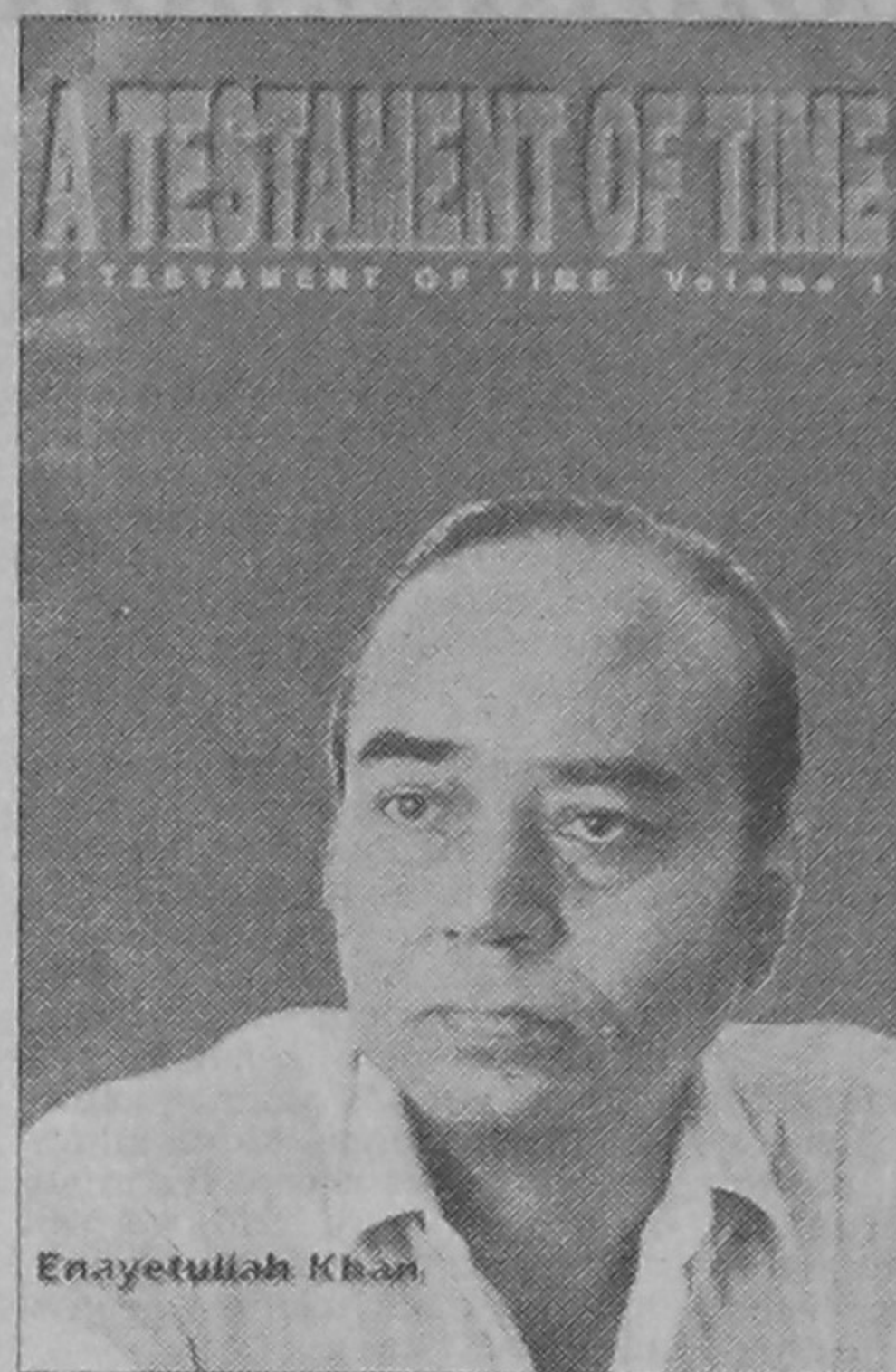
I believe that readers of this volume would immensely benefit from some of the timely, reflective and even prophetic observations by the author, reflective of his hindsight, honesty, scholarship and above all, concern for the man on the street, in Bangladesh or Vietnam, Palestine or Nicaragua. While on the one hand, Khan pointed out how the eastern wing of Pakistan had been maligned by the western wing, he on the other, did not hesitate to point out how Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's Six-Point Programme would hardly enthuse the people for not accommodating a strong economic programme in it.

peasants, politicians, teachers, students and others suffered under tyranny, unleashed in the names of "Islam in danger" or "Liberation in danger", and felt about their leaders' broken promises during the last days of united Pakistan and the early days of the "second liberation" (1971-1975). While members of the powerful Muslim League and Awami League oligarchies remained complacent and their cronies compliant with the hope of getting some crumbs of bread if not a bite in the pie, in the post-1947 and post-1971 periods respectively, a handful of brave men and women showed indomitable courage and integrity to defy and expose the corrupt and inefficient oligarchies on both the occasions. The volume under review testifies this but what one finds here is just the tip of the iceberg. An in-depth study of the weekly Holiday since its inception in 1965 to the present reveals much more about the integrity and courage of its founder editor than what one discovers in this volume. The book is, however, not about how brave and bold the editor had been during the period (1965-1975), this is rather an honest and humble attempt to reproduce some of the editorials and articles by him written during the period under review. This is, indeed, a valuable compendium of our modern and contemporary politics and history—political, social, economic, cultural and intellectual—and is also about the political culture of both the superordinates and subordinates of Bangladesh. This is nothing short of a psycho-history of the people of Bangladesh in particular and South Asia in general. It may be mentioned here that Holiday is not only read and admired by South Asians but foreign diplomats and intellectuals interested in the contemporary history and politics of Bangladesh and South Asia are avid

readers of the weekly as well. As one knows, as a son of Justice Abdul Jabbar Khan, a very influential and powerful Muslim League leader (speaker of the National Assembly of Pakistan during the Ayub regime), Enayetullah Khan could easily instal himself to the citadel of power and fame with a little bit of acquiescence during the Pakistani period (and also later by kowtowing the rulers). Instead, he chose not to comport and compromise with autocracy and tyranny. Despite perpetual pressure from the military and civil autocrats during 1965 and 1975, he remained unshaken and uncompromising. This collection of his editorials and columns are self-explanatory in this regard.

This collection of Enayetullah Khan's selective writings is not only readable but also very important to every conscious Bangladeshi, especially because Bangladeshis in general suffer from chronic "collective amnesia" and have hardly any sense of history and objectivity. The dearth of objective writings—both popular and serious ones—is also responsible for this lack of objectivity and sense of history among them. One has every reason to believe that "the Great Khan" (in the domain of Bangladeshi journalism) will be ever remembered for his incisive and enthralling writings by Holiday readers as well as by those who would go through this important compendium. How fact is more stranger than fiction, especially with regard to our history and politics, can also be gauged from this volume. One gets clarity about the metamorphosis of how East Pakistan became Bangladesh and how leaders successfully hegemonised mass consciousness and managed to rule throughout the period under review.

Alsan Chowdhury's Prologue is simply fascinating, extremely well-written and reflective of his finesse;



*A Testament of Time, Vol I, by Enayetullah Khan. Holiday Publication, Dhaka, 1999, Price: Taka 500.*

scholarship, urbanity (a rarity in the region) and above all, objectivity. He has done a commendable job to introduce this important volume.

I believe that readers of this volume would immensely benefit from some of the timely, reflective and even prophetic observations by the author, reflective of his hindsight, honesty, scholarship and above all, concern for the man on the street, in Bangladesh or Vietnam, Palestine or Nicaragua. While on the one hand, Khan pointed out how the eastern wing of Pakistan had been maligned by the western wing, he on the other, did not hesitate to point out how Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's Six-Point Programme

would hardly enthuse the people for not accommodating a strong economic programme in it. He, however, correctly pointed out that the demand for regional autonomy was as old as the Pakistan movement (April 3, 1966). The author did not have any reservations about or prejudice against Sheikh Mujib and his movement upto March 1971. Which is why he portrayed Mujib's release on February 22, 1969 from Pakistani prison as "A triumph of the people" (Feb. 23, 1969) and expected proper leadership from him in the wake of the 1970 Parliamentary Elections. However, he did not hesitate to point out that the Awami League leadership was inadequate to meet the challenge of guiding the people on the right track after the Elections which it had "invited upon itself without calculating the risks involved" ("History beckons Sheikh Mujib" Jan. 3, 1971). His warning vis-a-vis the Pakistani military crackdown, "They are not finished with you yet, Bengal" (March 14, 1971) was simply prophetic and reflective of his brilliance, courage and foresight. One would notice in the volume that Khan neither spared the Pakistani rulers, including Ayub Khan, Z.A. Bhutto and Yahya Khan nor did he spare the Mujib government as early as in the first quarter of 1972. His articles condemning the rabid ultra-nationalism (read Fascism) and patriotism (read cronism) during 1972 and 1975 are simply superb, both in contents and style. He boldly criticised all attempts in usurping the Liberation War by a section of the "patriots" in early 1972 ("They also fought", Jan. 9, 1972 and "Sixty-five million collaborators?", Feb. 6, 1972). His criticism of the Government's economic policy (the so-called Socialism) was done without any fear of reprisals as well ("Economic policy going hay wire", Jan. 20, 1972). More than once he crit-

icised all attempts to gag the freedom of the press and expression in the country. His criticism of dictatorial methods and ways of thinking were simply in-ambiguous. His warning the Mujib government not to "expose the real face of Fascism" ("Sanctions to kill dissenters", April 2, 1972) may be cited in this regard.

His portrayal of the post-independence economy, polity and their total dependence on donors and the mighty neighbour, India, which was emerging as the new hegemon in South Asia, are simply superb and are worth re-appraisal today.

One may, however, point out several flaws in the volume (most definitely, not the lucid prose and style of the inimitable Khan, often unfairly criticised by some readers for not being able to comprehend his "difficult" prose), especially the absence of Contents and Index; nevertheless the fact remains that this volume is an invaluable account of our modern and contemporary history and politics, economy and society. The author should be congratulated for his untiring efforts and dedication, integrity and above all, the courage to call a spade a spade. I know of very few intellectuals in Bangladesh (let alone the journalists) who may be compared with Khan. Most of them are nothing short of vacillating weather cocks—pseudo-intellectuals, perpetually busy kowtowing the party in power. Enayetullah Khan should be forgiven for his slight vacillation for accepting a diplomatic assignment during the Ershad regime, as he remained faithful to the cause of truth, justice and decency both before and after becoming an ambassador. One of the reviewers, on the very day when the volume was officially launched last year, condoned this lapse by Enayetullah Khan and considered the period of his diplomatic assignment as when the Holiday "was on a holiday".

In sum, this volume is an example of how courage, honesty and integrity may be shown by journalists. Had there been several other Enayetullah Khans to guard the freedom and conscience of the nation as sentinels, the fate of Bangladesh would have been better. One would be more than happy to see additional, updated compendiums of Holiday editorials and columns by Khan and others in book shops in the near future.

## fiction

# Jagob

by Banaphul

Translated by Helal Uddin Ahmed

IT has been only a few days that Trilochan Sarkar qualified as a legal counsel. He is very intelligent, but he doesn't have any clients. All clients are queuing up at the door of bald-headed Shashi Hajra, whose Rai Bahadur title, diabetes and an ugly potbelly speaks about his wealth. The clients are all flocking at his doorstep, while the shrewd and razor-sharp Trilochan is without customers. After failing in both Judicial and Civil Service examinations, he was now putting his full faith on the expertise of middleman Riday Biswas. Rumours have it that the practice of many a lawyer blossomed due to constant propaganda by Riday Biswas. Thus, repaying full faith on Biswas, Trilochan was spending his nights in anticipation of a sunrise in his career. An incident took place at that very juncture. It is unnecessary to go into details of what was being circulated. The incident in short was that Jagu had killed his boy-servant with a single slap, the police arrested him, and he was sitting dumb in the jail saying nothing. Some well-wishers of Jagu went to Shashi Hajra, but after learning everything the honourable Mr. Hajra declined to take up the case. Trilochan was tempted. He did not feel like wasting any more of his time by relying on Biswas' uncertain power of bringing forth a sunrise. He decided that he would try to take advantage of this opportunity. He therefore climbed on a bike by pulling up his dress up to the knee and faced Jagu in jail after doing the needful for setting up an appointment.

[2]

Jagu opened his mouth after the police guard moved away. "You want to fight on my behalf, that's OK, but right now I

can not give you a single paisa. I do not have anything at the moment.

If you save me, I will pay your fee later on."

"So you really killed that boy-servant?"

"Yes, I slapped him because he was repeatedly pestering me for his salary".

Jagu went silent.

Trilochan also sat silently for some time.

Then he said, "OK, then--".

[3]

Trilochan was determined that he must save this man. It has now become a necessity to change the public perception that only Shashi Hajra is clever and the rest are fool. Besides, even if not now, Jagu will certainly pay his fee someday. Thinking in this line, he had Jagu released from jail on bail by investing his own money. But on reviewing the police report, the attitude and number of witnesses, the doctor's report, etc., shrewd Trilochan realised that gallows for Jagu was a certainty. It can never be proved that Jagu did not kill; any attempt to disprove that might prove to be catastrophic. But when one is possessed with so much intelligence, a way forward is always found by cutting through all possible avenues. It happened in this case as well.

Trilochan advised Jagu, "you will have to pretend insane".

[4]

Jagu pretended he was mad.

The judge asked him, "did you slap your servant?"

Jagu made a queer noise.

"Oy, Oy", then he giggled aloud and pointed his fingers at the judge. Everybody was surprised. The Court Inspector asked, "what are you doing, misdeemeanour in front of the judge! Give reply to his question, say, did you kill

the servant?"

"Oy Oy".

Jagu again giggled as if tickled and this time pointed his finger at the Court Inspector. Trilochan then rose and addressed the judge, "your honour, my client is completely insane. He killed his servant in a bout of insanity. You ask the people belonging to his household and his neighbourhood, they will all say he was always a bit loony, but nowadays he has become fully lunatic--". The witnesses were all ready at hand. They came forward one after another and pronounced that Jagu was mad. The Court Inspector or the Public Prosecutor could not rattle them through questioning. The judge then ordered as per legal provisions that Jagu be placed under the observation of a Psychiatrist. The lawyer Trilochan had anticipated that something like this would happen. He did not stop at mere anticipation, he even rehearsed Jagu on the main symptoms of madness, according to the advice of a smart doctor.

[5]

After some days it became apparent that Jagu was not merely bad-tempered, he was also an accomplished actor. He could even deceive the eyes of a specialist doctor who pronounced that he was really mad. The rumours centring on Jagu's involvement in taking bribes were probably

baseless, we should be all praise for his expertise in acting!

Whatever might have been the reasons, Trilochan's expectations did bear fruit. Jagu was not hanged. The rope, which was tied around his neck due to a legal twist, was withdrawn through another twist. The judge ordered that he would have to live in a lunatic asylum. Jagu felt like getting a



LYRICAL IMAGE 4 '99, Oil on Canvas by Mohammad Eunus

new lease of life. He will stay in a palace-like asylum. Scores of children in his broken house, a constantly pestering wife, paralysed father, hysterical aunt, rheumatic uncle, sickness and deficits at regular intervals, outside the house—a moustached landlord, filthy drain, unemployed life—he would be freed from all these!

At an opportune moment one day,

Trilochan went to meet him; as usual, he had to part with some money while making arrangement for that.

He pleaded, "brother Jagu, now do something for me. I have saved you from the gallows, now my fees please; besides, I had to spend a lot from my own purse while running your case; different techniques, you know very well--".

"Oy, Oy". Jagu giggled aloud and pointed his fingers at Trilochan.

[ Banaphul was the pen-name of Balaichand Mukherjee (1899-1979), an outstanding Bengali short story writer of the twentieth century. ]

Helal Uddin Ahmed is editor of Bangladesh Quarterly