



reflections

The Middle Class Bengalee

By Alif Zabr

RECENTLY there was an illuminative essay on secularism and the role of the Bengalee middle class (DS Oct 2, Saturday Lit page) which traced, through the pages of literature and history, the rise and subsequent dormancy of secularism in the Bengalee society.

Secularism was acceptable on paper and as a topic for the Bengalee adda sessions, but in real life it was neither black and white nor displayed in any colour except tones of grey. The author analysed the Bengalee psyche as cultivated by the Bengalee middle class, then represented by the Hindus during the days of the Raj, followed by the sporadic rise of the Muslim middle class in Bengal. The middle class in Bangladesh is a product of the formative process; and it is interesting to touch on some nuances of the Bangladeshi middle class mind in the year of the millennium.

Today the middle class has pockets in other areas, mainly the middle class business community; in contrast to the former confinement to intellec-

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tual pursuits, which engaged in the famous adda sessions of leisure time activity. The leisure in the upper classes sprouted from the feudal zamindari system.

When some section from the labour and agricultural tiers started enjoying slightly better economic freedom, due to more opportunities in the expanding and competitive market place, the budding mini-entrepreneurs were more inclined to indulge in rentseeking pursuits, perhaps subconsciously following the zamindari image of the leisured class. Today we see a large number of small shops or centres of

fering various services such as fax, telephone, and photo-copy facilities. What is this symptom?

The attitude was to sit and collect; instead of work hard and create, to enter the market with a new or unusual product. Adulteration and fake goods is another symptom of the short-cut philosophy; which involves the principle of getting something with short-payment. The negative peak is toll collection, at other's expense. The disease is mental laziness. Fertility of the soil also promotes laziness and indolence. The deltaic region of Bengal has rich fertile soil and plenty of water. Rais-

ing a crop is much easier here than in parched lands with scanty water. Agriculture dominates the economic activities, reducing the attraction for other types of culture. Fish, which is rich in phosphorous, is said to be good for brain power. The success of the Bangladeshi expatriates working abroad emphasizes the adaptability of the fertile Bengalee mind. But the mental humour is rather phlegmatic when concentration and the sense of responsibility are evaluated in the local cultural environment. Thus tolerance is also affected, remembering that the average Bengalee is ruled

more by the heart than by the head.

This trait brings up the cynical accusation that the brilliant Bengalee mind cannot use the brain as colourful as he uses his imagination and emotional encounters. Cold rationality is not the Bengalee's forte. He must warm up to the subject, and take it to heart, heat up, and burst. Emotional outlet is his easiest means of ventilation. One British sahib (of the colonial days) likened the average Bengalee to a bottle of soda water. Open the bottle, and water remains after the gas is gone.

This alleged soda water energy and enthusiasm got us Bangladesh, but

now, with water only, we cannot run the country even after 28 years! Now, in reverse gear, we got arsenic poisoning through the water! Before independence, we were known in the other Wing as the insects of water (fish eaters), but they had distant, and distinct, respect for our upper chamber. Now the chambers to be filed in are located further below, at the pocket level. Money in circulation creates electromagnetic waves; resulting in other kinds of waves (toll collection, hijacking, ransom, politicization, indiscipline, unionism, gangsterism, highway blockades, drug addiction, and a host of allied social distortions). We are fast thinkers, hence the intolerance in the society.

The only consolation is that this is a passing phase. The nation is ready to take-off economically. The plane is revving at the runway, ready to be airborne... .. if the bug does not hit us again. We got a virus inside our system, and the anti-virus cure is still under development. Till then, we will meet again, as there is nowhere else to go.

poems

Uncollected Poems of Jibanananda Das

Translated by Fakrul Alam

Remarkably, scholars keep discovering poems written by Jibanananda Das published in little-known, as well as famous, magazines, and in the many notebooks he had left behind. By now the number of these uncollected and /or unpublished poems exceed the nearly three hundred poems included in the volumes of his verse published during or after his lifetime. What follows is a selection from these poems.

To a Woman in Pain

Kono Bathitake

You have a bed to sleep late at night
The room is soft and dark
Peaceful and silent;
don't think of anything now
Don't listen to any voices now.
Wipe your bleeding heart
Enfold yourself like the tuber rose
In sleep.

Where could You be Now

Janina Kathay Tumi

Where could you be now — when evening comes to the reeds —
When the river calms down,
When the white-breasted kite cries no more — flying all
alone — And crickets keep quiet,
Then your features — the beauty of your face — bloom in my
heart like magnolias fragrant in the dew.
The kite disappears into a palmyria forest — evening's soft
colors bathe the reedforest in blue.

The Poet

Kavi

I took a look at the poet
I had a really good look at him
He was writing happy poems one after another
And yet he needs to earn money desperately,
For no one has left him anything in their wills.
He doesn't have a job
He doesn't understand the intricacies of business
In fact, he asked me: "what if the share market turns bearish?"
Imagine, asking me!

He wants to know: "isn't it a good idea to take a life insurance agency?"
"How about buying a lottery ticket? Not the Derby — Nor the
Irish sweepstakes — Goa's or Boubazar's?"
Having had his say, this wintry morning, he wraps his shawl
even more snugly around his body
Every once in a while, he scratches his face
Bares his yellowed, unbrushed teeth, and grins
Behind minus eight lenses his halfalive fisheyes flicker: still
alive! or almost dead?
Did he ever enjoy the delights of youth? or didn't he?
The thick foggy glasses seem to have taken over from the fisheyes
The almost expiring minnow
Somehow sucking in the world's delights
Reassuring everyone there is hope
Celebrating love.
Through his yellowed teeth
The smell of bile seeps out
he survives on cheap cigarettes
He'll never be a life insurance agent, he says,
The thought that even after a thousand and one Arabian nights
he won't be able to procure a policy for
Oriental or Hindustan Life
Comforts him,
isn't that something, he asks?
How about getting him a job in *The Dally Anandabazar*?
But will that be a big help?
If only someone left him something in a will!
Only then
Wiping his lenses
Wrapping his shrunk shawl even more tightly around his body

to keep the cold from biting
He could have kept on writing poems effortlessly.
Happy poems.
Perhaps he would have bought a prophylactic toothbrush then
And used Forhan's toothpaste
His teeth and gum would have become healthy and white
he wouldn't have halitosis
Nor dyspepsia
heartburn
Streptococcus.
His greasy sweat-filled shawl would have got a new lease on life then
But never mind — what do these things have to do with poetry
Especially happy poems?
And what should we do when we meet the poet?
We will read his book of happy poems
His books published in art paper by an arty press
With their ineffable covers
Sometimes in dark tones, sometimes starry, sometimes showing moonlight
On the stump of a tree in a field — or even the ghost of moonlight;
His demi-size books pouring out one after another
During the festive puja season

Or during the riotous Christmas holidays.
I find a copy of one of his books in my hands reassuring.
I wonder: does he make some money out of them?
He possibly doesn't
But surely he makes money out of his novels
Never mind —
Let's read his poems
Countless optimistic poems
Each like a goldflake cigarette
Popping out of the loaded slotmachine of his life.

A Star Appears

Ekti Nakhatra Aashe

A star appears: and then ambles all by itself past
The tamarisk tree this star-filled late-autumnal evening.
It seems she will come this way — when will her practiced hands
Open my door in the darkness!
All of a sudden in the evening
She comes and shows how the touch of her hands
Puts to sleep the sea, the sun, and all motion,
And brings about nightfall.
Up above in the sky and far away
The movements of planets and stars, bright or dim,
Bring about *Aghran's* autumnal night;
Does history recall anything more vivid than this lustrous night?
The last tram has gone, the last sound fades; in a Calcutta
Life, nature, and the world itself is in its final darkness;
Everywhere the press of houses, broken bridges, and tombs.
Fatigued, decrepit, she treads her eternal way
As if she has crossed innumerable oceans
The ancient heart of a woman in her newly full body.

Where have all Those Birds Gone?

Kothay Giyechhe Aj Sheishab Pakhee

Where have all those birds gone now — and those horses —
And the women in those white houses?
Wet with the fragrance of acacias — tinged with golden
sunlight
Those birds — and those horses —
Have left our world behind;
My heart, tell me where — where have they all gone now!
Darkness; like that dead pomegranate, silence.

Grass

Ghas

Death disfigured him and left him lying on the river bank.
Foaming sunlight lapped him in the afternoon.
A green breeze swept away whatever withered on earth
And dug in its stores to try and make him whole again.
Excited, the voluble waters tried to restore him
To smoothness — yet — the debt he owed to Time
Gradually took him towards grotesque, skeletal bareness.
Then, seeing hell opening a distinctive door of its rampart
To take him in, his bones hid inside the *kanasona* grass.
Since then, the world's grass has been giving amusement,
For six months to jackasses, and for six delicious months to geniuses!



Evening Descends

Shondhy Haye Ashe

Evening descends — evening descends
All alone in wind swept fields
Roam I — sit I on grass
Far off can be seen some sari's scarlet border
Must be Prasad's wife — next to her
Must be Prasad himself — its getting darker.

Four years back the two had married
I recall: though time has passed
The two have not become lost to sight.
Every evening they will pass by
And on grass at the end of day lie
Looking up at the star-filled sky.

They keep lying down — to me it seems
They keep talking of the moonlit scene
Their two souls feel so serene.

I know full well
These two people have what it takes to jell
That they have no questions — no doubts — I can tell.
With deep desire for each other
They will stay close forever
Lest they are ruined when torn asunder.

Life's formula for bliss — precisely is why
Prasad always lets chances of pilgrimage go by
If this question to him I let fly
Do you plan to let Death pass you by?
But never mind... look at the two of them lie
Like two birds — wings tucked up, looking at the sky.
The stars look on and wonder from up above
At such deep bliss — such wordless love;
Could it be earth has such a treasure trove?
Because of stars in the sky
Blue red lights blaze up high
Illuminating what below them lie:
Men's minds with thoughts of blood run
Rome was destroyed... so was Babylon
All tales told under the sun
Will one day die like insects... will turn to dust
Rome is in ruins... Babylon too didn't last
Yet one heart for another still will thirst.