

## interview

# An Interview with Hasan Raja's Translator

Edward Yazizian was born in 1955 in New York. His interest in folklore and music was perceived at a very tender age. He plays guitar and violin and also knows how to play a handful of other musical instrument. In 1974 he left home and began a journey throughout Asia which lasted ten years and took him to Japan, Hong Kong, Bangkok, India and finally Bangladesh. He learned Bangla while in West Bengal and there began an affair with language and the culture. The recently published 100 Songs of Hasan Raja is the labour of his intense love for the Bengali language and culture. Interviewed by Ziaul Karim

Q: How did you learn Bangla?

A: I have always been interested in Bangla literature from the time I was may be twenty-year-old. I went to India, Calcutta precisely, and learned Bengali Language. At first I was interested in *Padabali kirtan*. I liked it and I still like it.

Q: Was it through Vaisnab padabali that you had had the taste of the language?

A: Right. In fact it was the padabali the first thing that I ever really read.

Q: What was that in padabali that drew you to it?

A: I just thought the language of padabali itself, the way things were written was really beautiful. There was a lot of alliteration in mediaeval Bengali poetry. Just the way the words sounded, a lot of times I did not understand it though I could read it. I did not know what the words meant yet. But the sound of it to me was just like beautiful music. I also lived for a while in Nabadeep where a lot of padabali kirtan is performed still. After hearing it I liked it even more. I have been a musician since I was very young. So, music was in my blood. It appealed to me basically it was very musical, very poetic and the images when I finally learned the meaning of the songs appeared to me even more interesting. The sentiment that came from the songs were just beautiful.

Q: How did you come to know Hasan

Raja?

A: I was introduced to Hasan Raja much later. To be very precise only recently. I'm not just interested in Hasan Raja. I'm interested in any kind of, I guess you could call, mystic poetry or songs of Bangladesh. But I first heard of Hasan Raja from a professor who teaches history at Dhaka University. She is Dr. Sonia Amin. She came to our school Syracuse University in New York to show a film about Begum Rokeya. We were invited at a dinner where I had the opportunity to listen to Dr. Sonia. Later I



Edward Yazizian, the translator

wrote to her that I was interested to coming to Bangladesh for the last semester of my school and asked her for suggestion of people I could, you know who might be interesting to me that I could come here and study their songs or poetry. And she suggested Hasan Raja. I really knew nothing about him. And I never even heard of him before I came in Dhaka in January 1999. When I read his songs they were, to me, very intense and I was very intrigued by him because he is a very complex person. By most people's opinion he was illiterate, he may be could sign his own name that's about it. He dictated all of his songs to his servants. He was a jaminder, a very wealthy man. But he lived very simply towards the end of life. When you read about him you get a very complex picture: some people say he was cruel, he was very hedonistic. Even his own sister wrote a song about him saying how cruel he was, how he stole money from orphans and old people and did not care about anybody. And then you get the other side of Hasan Raja which was very compassionate-- gave away land to poor people, was very kind to animals. Then you find out towards the end of his life he changed completely. Then he wrote those beautiful songs. That is how I go my interest in him. But very little is available about his life.



100 Songs of Hasan Raja  
By Edward Yazizian  
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Q: Do you any exposure to modern Bengali poetry?

A: Very little. I have always been interested more in the time period between the fifteenth and the nineteenth century. I think I'm very lacking in reading modern poetry. Of course, I have read some Rabindranath and some Nazrul. But I have always come back to maddha yug( the mediaeval era).

Q: Why do you like mediaeval poetry over modern literature?

A: That is difficult question to answer. I think I just like it. I don't know how to explain it otherwise.

Q: Is it because you do not find contemporary life interesting?

A: I think any thinking person has always from time immemorial been unhappy with the way things are. I don't think there is anything new to modern life. If you read something like say the *Chandimangal* by Kabikankan you will find he was very unhappy with the way things were. That is how things change for the better. If we are happy with the way things are then nothing will change. I do not believe in the good old days. It is garbage, quite frankly. I think there has always been dissatisfaction with the way things are in the world. And it is good thing.

Q: What were the challenges you have faced while translating Hasan



Hasan Raja (1855-1926)

Raja into English?

A: It is really impossible to translate sentiments from one language into another. You can only give sort of a rough idea. I do not pretend to be able to really give a perfect translation of anything from Bengali to English. There are words in Bengali that just do not have any parallel in English and vice-versa. Rabindranath Tagore did a lot of his own translation of his works, *Geetanjali* for instance. When I read the Bengali it is beautiful, but quite frankly when I read the English it is not just the same. It does not resonate for me the same way.

## book extract

# Hasan Raja: The Mystic Song-writer

by Edward Yazizian

THE name of Hasan Raja is well known throughout all of Bangladesh. He might well have remained an obscure author of mystic songs known primarily in his district of Sunamganj if not for the interest shown in him by a fellow zamindar poet, Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore mentioned him in various articles and lectures both in India and in his "The Religion of Man" speech given as part of the Hibbert lecture series at Oxford University in 1930. Pandit Kshitimohan Sen also included a few of Hasan Raja's songs in his well-known book *Banglar Baul*.

Today most Bangladeshis have heard of Hasan Raja and many can sing or cite at least a line from one of his songs. Even so, there is very little written material available about him in Bengali, and I found virtually nothing in English except for a few isolated quotations. When I researched the life of Hasan Raja by reading available material and interviewing various people, a profile of an extremely complex person emerged. Hasan Raja seems to be a man of contradictions, even to the point at which he seems like two completely different people. Although the stories told by various people about Hasan Raja also present conflicting portraits, the most striking contrast is between his day to day life as we know it and the spiritual revelations in his songs. When I first read the songs of Hasan Raja, I was struck by their directness and passion. I had the distinct feeling that I was reading of direct experience rather than something learned from a book or heard from another source. The songs are mostly written in the regional Sylheti dialect, and although they are considered by many to be unpublished from a literary point of view, they burn with an intensity that I have rarely seen elsewhere. Like many other mystics of South Asia, especially in greater Bengal, Hasan Raja

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is not easily pigeonholed into any one religious heritage but belongs to a more syncretic tradition that takes inspiration from many different sources. His songs are influenced by *Vaishnava padavali kirtana*, Sufi poetry and even Buddhism, and he draws on various images and sources to express his deep longing for spiritual union.

Deowan Hasan Raja Chaudhury was born on January 24, 1855 in the village of Lakhansiri near Sunamganj town (presently an independent district), Sylhet. His father Deowan Ali Raja (Reza) Choudhury was a very powerful zamindar (landlord) of the area. His properties included the area of Laksmansiri and Ramapasha in Sunamganj, as well as the Amberkhana, Sadagarhtala, and Tilagarh sections of Sylhet city. Hasan Raja's mother Huramatjahan Bibi was the widow of Ali Raja's cousin. She became Ali Raja's third wife and married him in his old age. Hasan Raja's birthplace Laksmansiri was originally her property but became part of Ali Raja's holdings after their marriage. Hasan Raja had a half-brother named Ubayadur Raja who was the son of Ali Raja's second wife. He was 22 years older than Hasan Raja. Hasan Raja also had a half-sister named Shahifa Banu who is known as Sylhet's first woman poet. She was the daughter of a wife of Ali Raja's who resided at Sadagarhtala. She wrote two books: *lyadgare Shahifa* in Urdu and a book of songs written in Bengali called *Shahifa Sangit*.

Shahifa Banu was locally known as 'Haji Bibi' because she traveled to

Mecca to perform pilgrimage on more than one occasion. She apparently disregarded the rules of *purdah* (a variety of practices aimed at protecting the modesty of women, e.g. veiling, indoor seclusion) that were usually followed by women of her social standing, and freely traveled throughout Sylhet without covering her face.

The family of Hasan Raja originally migrated to Sylhet from the town of Ayodhya (the kingdom of Avadh?). Uttar Pradesh sometime in the 16th century. They were originally Hindu Kshatriyas, but Hasan Raja's great-grandfather Birendrachandra Singhadev converted to Islam and changed his name to Babu Khan. According to family legend it was a *foujdar* (military general) of Sylhet who converted Babu Khan to Islam. When Babu Khan's father, Baranasi Ray, found out, he presented a silver elephant to the *foujdar* and begged him to return his son to the fold of their Hindu family. When the *foujdar* refused him request, Baranasi Ray then asked that his son at least be permitted to marry a girl from an aristocratic Muslim family. The *foujdar* honoured Baranasi Ray's second request and arranged Babu Khan's marriage into the prominent Quresh family of Sunamganj. (In the next page I have included the genealogical chart that was collected from Hasan Raja's family in Sunamganj).

When Hasan Raja was born, Ali Raja took the advice of his older son and named his new-born son Ahidur Raja.

Later a close friend of Ali Raja's, a scholar of Persian and Arabic by the name of Najir Abdullah named the

boy Hasan Reza, Reza being the Persian version of Raja. This was the name he would be known by for the rest of his life. Hasan Raja was said to be extremely obstinate and uncontrollable as a child. From all accounts his family allowed him to do as he pleased from a very young age. Most likely being the son of a powerful landlord made him exempt from the scolding of his father's subjects. He was left to roam about on horseback with his friends wherever he pleased. Hasan Raja disliked school as a child, so he never really had the benefit of a formal education. His first biographer Prabhat Kumar Sharma claimed he was totally illiterate, but not everyone agrees with him.

Some relatives of Hasan Raja claim to possess manuscripts directly written by him but no one has had the opportunity to see anything written in his own hand except for his signature on a few official documents. Without such evidence it would be difficult to assess his level of literacy, however it would probably be more reasonable to assume that he was at least marginally literate. It was a tradition in Hasan Raja's family for everyone to begin their studies with both Arabic and Bengali. He most likely learned the basics of both languages but did not pursue his education for very long. In any case, because of his limited writing skills, Hasan Raja composed his songs orally and then had one of his employees write them down.

In his later years he regretted his lack of schooling and donated quite a bit of his wealth for the education of those who could not afford it. He also supported the education of women

which for that time and place was unusual.

When he was in his early teens two events changed Hasan Raja's outlook on life radically. The first was the sudden death of his older half-brother Ubayadur Raja.

This sent him into a deep depression. Before he could recover from the loss of his brother, his father passed away just forty days later. As he was the only male heir left in the family, he was expected to take over his father's duty as a zamindar. Literally overnight and at the young age of fifteen, he became responsible for his family's vast amount of property. At first members of his family were unsure of his ability to take on such a great amount of responsibility, but he proved to be a very effective zamindar. His duties included managing over 200,000 bighas (approximately 100,000 acres) of land plus property in Sylhet town, collecting rent from his tenants, and assisting them with cultural events such as marriages, celebrations and religious ceremonies. He worked like a madman and managed not only to put the existing family properties in order but also was able to almost double his land holdings in a relatively short time. Perhaps he immersed himself in his work to forget the sorrow of losing both his brother and father so suddenly. From all eye witness accounts and as shown by his existing photographs, Hasan Raja looked and acted the part of a king. His appearance gave evidence of his ancestors from northern India: many writers have used the word 'Aryan' to describe his physical features. He was about six feet tall, had a prominent

nose, light skin and piercing yellowish-green eyes. Photographs show him with thick shoulder-length hair and a large mustache. Hasan Raja had a taste for fine clothes an could often be seen dressed in fine embroidered garments and a turban.

His ankle-length black velvet garment (chapkan) embroidered with gold thread along with a sword and walking stick are on display at the family home in Sunamganj. There are many conflicting accounts of his early years as a zamindar. To some of his subjects he had a reputation as a cruel, greedy landlord and a decadent womanizer who was more interested in his hobbies of horse racing and the breeding of birds than the welfare of the people living on his land. To others he was a generous and beneficent landlord who was compassionate to humans and animals alike. There is a story about the compassionate side of Hasan Raja that was told to Prabhat Kumar Sharma by one of Hasan Raja's employees:

One night I was returning from the market. It was the monsoon season then and raining very hard. When I arrived at the house, I noticed a light on in the stable. I was surprised to see a light on there at such a late hour and called out to see who it was. I then heard "it's me (Hasan Raja) come here quick." I quickly went over to where he was standing and saw that he had a plate of food and a glass of water in his hand. In front of him were an old lady, a boy and two infants lying in the hay. They all looked as if they would die at any moment from lack of food. The Saheb said, 'hold the lantern.' I held the light while he carefully fed them all by hand. He then personally fixed them a place to sleep. A few days later the boy and old woman died, but the babies survived. He named one Muchlim and the other Momin. He arranged for their education. Momin has since died, but Muchlim is still alive somewhere working as a constable.

ami koribe mana, apremike gan  
amar sunbe na

I forbid anyone who is devoid of love to hear my songs  
I swear that no such person should touch my book  
Again and again I say that they should not read my book  
This world is not for those who are lovers  
Those without love in their hearts won't understand a thing  
When they hear my songs  
A blind person can't see the bright color of gold by touching it  
Hasan Raja forbids anyone who does not know love to hear his songs

khoda mile premik hoile

One can only meet Khoda if one is a lover  
You won't get Khoda by performing namaz and fasting.  
If you want to catch Khoda you must increase your love.  
You will find Khoda by becoming drunk with love.  
You won't get Khoda by counting on your beads  
or by repeating Khoda's name.  
Whether you chant Allah Allah or read the kalama  
Or bang your head on the ground until you die  
You won't find your Dearest.  
Hasan Raja says, give up other paths and travel on the path of love  
You will find Khoda there.

lagalore piriter nisha hasan  
raja hoilo bedisha

When love's intoxication came upon him  
Hasan Raja lost all sense of direction  
I'll leave my homes in Lakhansiri and Rampasha  
I'll leave my neighbors and Lakhansiri  
I'll live in the jungle keeping only my Friend in my heart  
With this in mind Hasan Raja remains devoted to his Friend.  
The servant Hasan Raja says, I don't want anything else