

## Book Review

### Barisal by the Bay

*Translations are a finicky, delicate, punishing matter. Dr. Johnson growled that "Poetry indeed cannot be translated." So what, as the revolutionary once wrote, is to be done? Do you do the literal word for word and thereby introduce the poet's world in the most unmediated, direct but 'unpoetic' way, or do you choose a richer, but perhaps more dangerous and difficult, rhymed verse? What is to be, content or style? Fakrul goes for the latter.*

By Khademul Islam

EVERY summer for the last six years I and a friend have been going biking through wildlife sanctuaries on Maryland's Eastern Shore, right by the Chesapeake Bay. It is an immediate and exhilarating experience, to pedal through tidal marshes and grassland beneath a vast sky, to pump legs on trails past hickory, beech, pine and white oaks, glide past saucer magnolias and black-eyed susans. On any given ride, we spot ospreys, herons, wood ducks, plummeting sea hawks, wading egrets. Turtles, the striped muds, the yellowbellied slider and diamondbacks, sense us and freeze. Returning at evening, overhead we see Canada geese (then honkers as the locals term it) in V-formation from their migratory Atlantic Flyway routes.

It was then, headed for home, with the bay's waters a lonely, hopeless indigo and golden eagles circling in the dying light, that long-forgotten lines of Jibanananda Das kept coming to me unbidden. Lines from poems in Ruposhi Bangla and Banalata Sen, about Dhanshiritir teeray, about rivers and dew, about hawar raat. Upon hearing all this my sister sent me Abdul Mannan Syed's volume of Das's poems, complete with appended essays and the stunning photocopy of the poem Abar Ashbo Phiray in the poet's own hand. Since then I have always packed the book on my cycling trips. A vanished Bengal comes alive with Jibanananda Das gently elbowing me in the ribs:

"Look an owl."

"Where?"

"Ojai Lokkhi pecha."

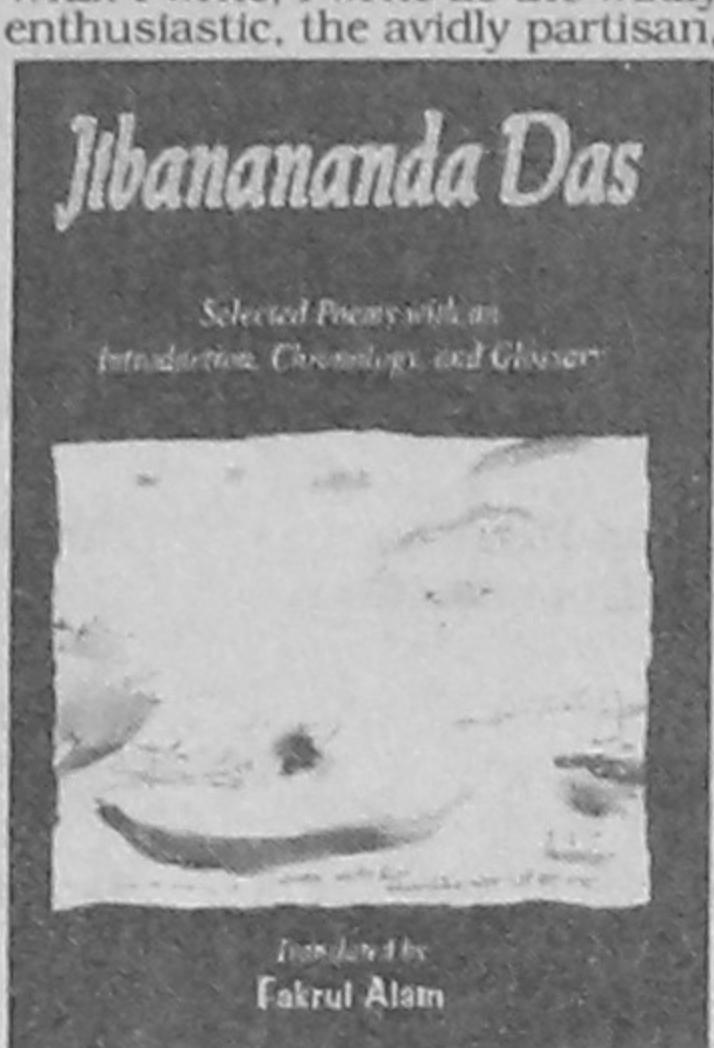
"Taito."

"On a shrim tree branch."

In Ruposhi Bangla it is his specificity that I delight in: that particular owl in that particular tree; the "neel 'shopor' bon," the "utterly Bengal" music of "kochi kochi shaympoka" in Ashina's crop-shorn fields. In Banalata Sen it is the fusion of the themes of mortality and death with metaphors of birds and rivers. With the aid of a trusty Samsad Bengali-to-English dictionary, I have ventured further, more tentatively, into the despairing later works, into Bela Obela Kaalbela and the uncollected poems. Into Buddhadew Bose's Das.

I also read Clinton Seely's A Literary Biography of the Bengali Poet Jibanananda Das: 1899-1945. It is an amazing work, a hermeneutic effort by a Westerner who lived in Barisal and steeped himself in local people, language and natural surroundings. Then, due to the vagaries of mail couriers, almost a year later after it was published, my sister sent me Fakrul Alam's translations of Das's poems into English. Aha, I thought to myself, what hath the man wrought?

But first things first: I am no poetry critic. Though I have been reading poetry fairly constantly for the last ten years and count among my favorites poets such as



Jibanananda Das : Selected Poems with an Introduction, Chronology, and Glossary, translated by Fakrul Alam (The University Press Limited, Dhaka 1000, Tk. 290.00)

reader of Jibanananda Das.

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The result is predictably varying success, something Fakrul Alam himself acknowledges implicitly. Of the eighty poems translated, thirty-two are from Ruposhi Bangla and Banalata Sen, a fortuitous choice since these contain the poems that a non-Bengali should be introduced to. His best efforts are supple creations, aided by a felicitous vocabulary. For example, Abar Ashbo Feere, which was the first poem I turned to, thankfully is translated as Beautiful Bengal, not I Shall Return

(thereby raising the specter of, say, General MacArthur in the Philippines) works for me. On the other hand Biral (The Cat), that affectionate caress by Das, does not. I can't quite pinpoint why. Perhaps it is the line:

After its success somewhere in stripping a few pieces of fish to the bone.

Maybe it is that muddled "success" and the thoroughly unsatisfying filler of "some-where", I did read each poem in the book, sometimes going with the poems in the original, sometimes against translations in my own head. I like An Orange (Kamalaebul), An Overwhelming Sensation (Both), the dusky

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He needn't have fussed. Fakrul writes that he feels "happy" about his translations "because they gave almost always the feeling that I was involved in the poetic act." That is indeed an endearing confession, since it means that he followed, via the "poem as a ghostly map" (Mary Kinzie's words), the many paths not taken by the author, was able to see the provisional nature of a poem in the making, discern how Das hovered above the abyss as he combined and recombined elements of orthodoxy and the experimental before conjuring up the finished product. It means that Fakrul Alam approached his task with sensitivity, and that should be defence enough. So the introduction, especially since it is meant for non-Bengali readers, should have been a little less studied, should have loosed itself aloft with a tad more charm and helium.

Ah, but I quibble too much. I should not, but I can't help it. It is one of life's small, but distinct, pleasures to bicker with a translator about a favourite poet and his poems. Fakrul Alam's is an original effort. Every line in it is his own. It is not rehashed material, mimetic exegesis culled from works already existing in Western libraries. For that alone he should be commended. Fresh translations, attempts like Fakrul Alam's, revive Das as a living, breathing poet, force us all to look beyond the entombed figure in the mausoleum, busily being erected by the Bengali literary establishment. Fakrul writes that Professor Seely "has done his translations out of his love for the poet. He himself had one less. His book should be on the shelf of every reader, Bengali and otherwise, of the poems of Jibanananda Das.

All birds come home, all rivers, and all life's tasks finished... to Fakrul Alam's version, his line:

All birds home rivers too life's transactions close again.

I don't get that "all birds home." Does it mean homing in?

And that "again" just to set up a rhyme with "Sen" doesn't make sense, since in the original it is life's unceasing transactions coming to a close this one, final time. Though when I thought about it, I could not come up with a better word for "transactions." Nor with a better line. See, dear readers, the hellish nightmare of translation!

The glossary is both necessary and a delight. I quarrel only with the definition of the krishnachura as "a colorful tree which blooms in spring." That's it? Where is its crimson blaze, its scarlet flowers? Jibanananda Das, a poet of almost clinical exactitude when it came to nature, would, I think, agree with me. The other caveat I

The writer is an ex-teacher of Dhaka University and lives in Washington D.C.

and the other to the left. Each stairway consists of 110 steps, every four or five of which are made of a single stone slab. Such is the construction that even horses could negotiate the stairs. Roger Stevens has emphatically declared "Since staircase building is an art of which we have learnt nothing and, it often seems to me, forgotten something since 500 BC, I append the measurements and other details for the benefit of future practitioners. One climbs without any sense of effort. Massive, rugged, devoid of ornament, designed perhaps to terrify but not to fire..." the climb is an easy assault as Stevens declared. Reaching Persepolis on horseback, a nineteenth century French traveller Jeanne Dieulafay wrote in "La Perse, la Chaldee, la Susiane," The steps are so slightly inclined that it is easy to go up and down team on horseback, and they are so broad that ten men can walk along them side by side."

Reaching the top of the terrace, we came to terms with the vastness of the fallen city. Trumpeters would have welcomed us at the top of the stairways. The procession of guest would then have been heralded into the Gate of All Nations. We passed two massive and terrifying winged-horses that were built to repel with their symbolic power and evil spirits that may have lurked and threatened the night of Persepolis. Elsewhere, a bas-relief depicts the king fighting a lion, a popular theme in Persian art. Winged animals were one of the heraldic symbols of the Achaemenian dynasty. However, while Man proposes God disposes and the might have fallen.

He recorded his impressions in "Letters Persanes."

A short distance away from the tent city of Mohammed Reza Pahlavi lies the rocky platform 46 feet above the plain on which was built the fabled city of Persepolis. Entrance to the vast complex (135,000 square metres) is made via two splendid staircases. One sweeps to the right

fire that is alleged to have been ordered by Alexander the Great to have been started at this site. Some 3 metres of soil and cedar three ashes were found on the floor when party excavated in 1878 by Mohamed Farhad Mirza, the Governor-General of the Fars province. The revengeful act was a response by the Greeks for the burning of the Acropolis in Greece by the Persian king Xerxes some 150 years earlier. However, the few columns that remain reveal the grandeur of the scale. Brick walls were used extensively. Brick being a more perishable building agent than stone; almost the entire royal complex has been thus lost.

You could also choose to move to the Apadana built by Darius the Great. Here too as far as the eye can see are some remnants of decorated columns and many bases. In Pars and Persepolis by Werner F Dutz and Sylvia A Matheson, we are told that the Apadana palace had "ceiling beams of cedar, ebony and teak and were gold-plated, inlaid with ivory and precious metals." A double-headed lion sculpture was the spatial carved atop one of the slender columns. Today excavated, it sits squat on the ground, remarkably intact. Its state of preservation is due to its being buried underground for a long spell. Reconstructed etchings in the above book bring forth vividly the magnificence and sheer opulence of what once must have been. Henri-Paul Eudouze, in "In Search of Lost World's specks of the close relationship between architecture and sculpture," the art of Persepolis is cosmopolitan and composite; it recalls the art of Assyria, Babylon and Egypt, and that of Greece. However, all these geniuses has transformed these elements into a harmonious whole and given them a genuine originality.

One could then choose to enter the Hall with a hundred columns (70x70 in metres) that contained in its heyday 100 columns 12 metres high. Few of these soaring pillars today remain. The

Raana Haider is the wife of the Ambassador of Bangladesh to Iran

### Two Publications on Reproductive Health

By Andalib Rashdie

**SOUTH-SOUTH CENTRE, BANGLADESH** brings out two important publications in reproductive health areas. One is the *Directory of Reproductive Health NGOs* and the other is *Inventory of National Experts on Reproductive Health*.

The concept of reproductive health as redefined and restructured in the present contest is a post-International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) phenomenon. ICPD, an unprecedented consensus of 179 countries in 1994 shifted the problems and prospects of population and health from a narrowly focused vertically structured family planning programme to a broader area of reproductive health. Bangladesh is among the pioneering countries to bring the ICPD message of a comprehensive reproductive health home and attempt implementation of ICPD Programme of Actions. Health indicators for Bangladesh suggest an impressive rise in life expectancy at birth, steady decline in population growth rate, increase in contraceptive prevalence rate and a general decline in child and maternal mortality and morbidity. Yet health services remain illusive to the rural masses and urban slum dwellers.

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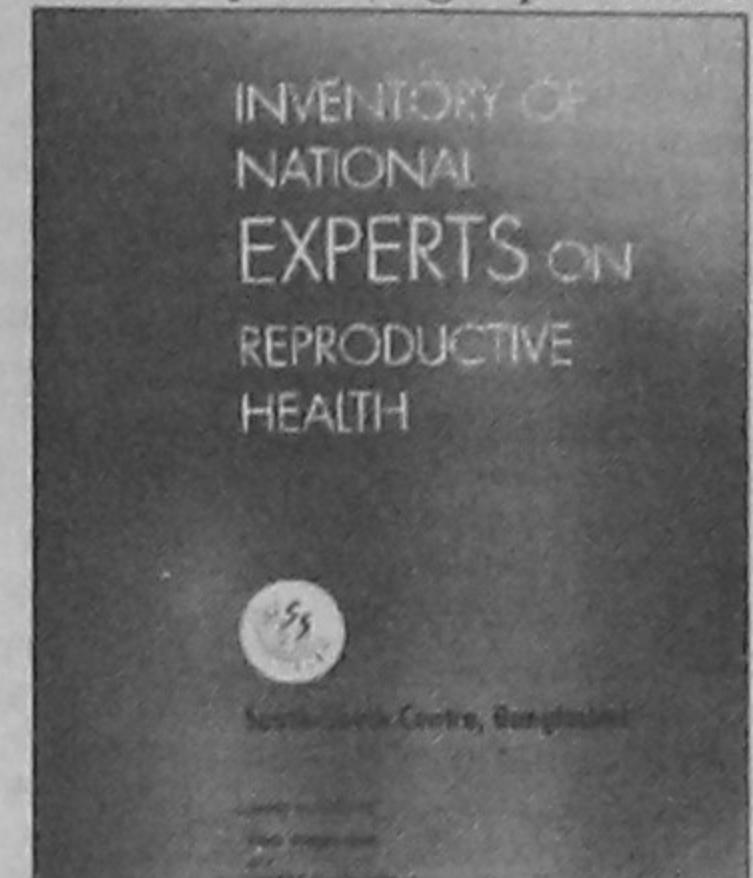
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was instrumental in selecting the functional reproductive health NGOs and document these in a formatted directory. The Directory of Reproductive Health NGOs records more than hundred NGOs with particulars



Inventory of National Experts on Reproductive Health  
South-South Centre, Bangladesh

capable of contributing to the critical areas of health and population and development. The inventory notes the area specialisation of experts and their working experience as consultants with international organisations. It is viewed the inventory will be of high utility for different stakeholders in the areas of health and population. This is a handy and useful tool in gaining access to national consultants and makes appropriate use of their expertise. It will help in establishing an effective linkage between national experts and the users.

Both the directory and inventory have some omissions and mistakes. A few not so significant NGOs' and professionals' names appear in these publications. In the forwarding of the publications the Centre Director however assures of correcting mistakes and updating information in the revised edition.

Just after the pronouncement of National Health Policy, launching of two health-related publications is of great interest and utility. UNICEF supported the publication of *Directory of Reproductive Health NGOs* while the publication of *Inventory of National Experts on Reproductive Health* got support of WHO and UNICEF. These two publications are informative, interesting and useful. Both the directory and the inventory are well planned and aesthetically designed with catchy covers.

Individuals and agencies having a stake in reproductive health may not like miss these publications any price.

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including areas of activities and sources of funding. The document gives a first hand idea of organisations and specialised knowledge of their operational areas. Inputs that were gathered by administering questionnaires were adapted for the purpose of the directory.

There was a dearth of consolidated information on the expertise available within the country in the areas of reproductive health. The Centre facilitated the implementation of Programme of Action of ICPD, undertakes in and inter-country sharing of knowledge and information of among individuals and public, private and NGO sector institutions. A networking of public, private and NGOs initiated by the Centre

persuasive argument. Clearly, he has done Malaysia immense service in its remarkable build-up, its economic growth and political cohesion over 20 years. On this evidence, there can be little doubt of his fundamental commitment to the public good; whatever his shortcomings; and he has fully earned his place in history. His emergency measures of 1997-8, restricting currency trading and capital movements during the crisis, have ultimately worked, confounding the critics, admittedly at a certain price in international standing and investment, but sparing Malaysia a worse meltdown. For that, and for defying the crude free-market fundamentalists in full cry, he deserves respect and praise. As the prophet of a new order, the exemplar of a bold stand against exploitation, he merits a strong sense of mission. This leads him into what looks, to Western eyes, maltreatment of opponents, critics and dissidents.

In a way, and considered against his background, this may be understandable. Human rights may not be universal, but Asian culture undoubtedly differs from European. He has to operate in a radically different context, and has done so quite successfully for a quarter of a century, warts and all. Who are we to criticize? Are not his overriding stress on multi-ethnic harmony, no-nonsense nation-building, economic and social rights, and distrust of civil and political liberties understandable, given the tensions of the region? Did he not witness the Singapore riots of 1969, and those of Indonesia in 1998, only a few hundred miles from where he sat? They clearly traumatized him, like other Asian leaders. He does not, on the evidence of this book, want to destroy democracy as a sort of patriarchy, as did Sukarno, Tito, Nehru, indeed all the leaders of the non-aligned Bandung Group before him; and when we watch the renewed convulsions of Indonesia today, we may feel he has a point.

Where I part company with him is on the politics. His treatment of Anwar, his former deputy and designated successor, was harsh, vindictive and bigoted. True, Anwar represented the kind of free-for-all capitalist fundamentalism that he detests, and may well have been, as such, by forces hostile to Mahathir. He hints as much, but does not produce the evidence. Political, as well as financial, destabilization was clearly attempted by his enemies. But Mahathir's response was none the less excessive. If he suspected disloyalty, he could simply have sacked Anwar. It was a gross error to persecute him on what are to outsiders, suspect sexual grounds. The argument, repeated in this book, that Malaysia would not be respected if led by a proven homosexual is grotesque and provincial, judging the wider world by narrowly domestic criteria.

His anti-imperial instincts, developed during the decolonization struggle, and determination that the West shall never again rule into Asia are entirely understandable, but lead him at times into excessive and exposed positions, such as the diplomatic and military support given to Indonesia over East Timor, in the name of "Asian solidarity", national sovereignty and non-interference. His recent opposition to investigation of Indonesian Army brutality in Timor is another example, flying in the face of his protestations of support for basic human rights. His unsureness of touch in this field is almost purely defensive. At times he relapses into old-style politician's rhetoric, as in the conclusion. No Westerner now respects such language, even if some Third World leaders, raised in a different culture, still unabashedly use it (even Mandela's conclusion in "No Easy Way to Freedom").

Another weakness is his reluctance to admit errors, except that of having been too a pupil of free-market capitalism. His stand is almost purely defensive. At times he relapses into old-style politician's rhetoric, as in the conclusion. No Westerner now respects such language, even if some Third World leaders, raised in a different culture, still unabashedly use it (even Mandela's conclusion in "No Easy Way to Freedom").

No book is perfect, and no principled statement will please everyone. The merit of this book is to stir the pot, expound his position in greater depth and clarity, to de-demonize the author, and to publicize his wish for a decent compromise. East/West tolerance and mutual respect, and a protected future for the rights and achievements of his fellow Asians.

Malathir's New Deal for Asia

(II)

Success is Malathir's most

### TRAVELOUGE

### Pageantry at Persepolis

By Raana Haider

Continued from last week

THE Achaemenian dynasty came to an end in 330 BC when Alexander the Great routed Darius III's army at Marathon. Alexander the not-so-great then proceeded to loot the immense