

Event

World Festival of Poets-2000

"There now, comes the 21st Century! Looking Forward to a new century of poetry"

By A Z M Haider

The World Festival of Poets-2000, organised early this month to commemorate the 50th anniversary of CHIKYU, a poetry magazine of Japan, singled out as its theme 'There now, comes the 21st Century! Looking forward to a new century of poetry'. Raising this slogan, the Festival of Poets dwelt on the role and responsibility of poets in the current century and sent a clarion call to poets all over the world to strive for a new global order based on love, peace, amity and universal fraternity and shorn of conflict, tension and ruthless wars as are being fought in Bosnia, Palestine, Kashmir and elsewhere in the world.

Staged on land of the rising sun, the festival drew a crowd of 150 poets from 40 countries. Fazal Shahabuddin, a major poet of Bangladesh and editor of Kobikantha, the lone poetry magazine in Bengali language, was invited to take part in the 3-day festival beginning on November 3, 2000. The galaxy of poets who participated in the festival included Ales Debeljak (Slovenia), Kim Namjo (Korea), Jorge Timossi (Cuba), Hannen A Awad (Palestine), Satoko Tamura (Japan), Kazuko Shirashi (Japan), Humberto Akabai (Guatemala), Anthony Baah (Ghana), Authur Binard (USA), Matthias Kneip (Germany), Paolo Ruffilli (Italy), Kama Kamanda (Congo), Teri Hidaka (Japan), Anise Coltz (Luxembourg), Philip Hammill (Australia) etc.

The World Congress of Poets lent generous support to CHIKYU in organising this convocation of poets. The editor of CHIKYU and an important poet of Japan, Yutaka Akiya, who happened to be an influential member of the World Congress of Poets managed to mobilise its support for CHIKYU in organising this grand festival.

Yutaka Akiya struck the keynote of the festival when he recited a self-composed poem at the opening session of the festival to give vent to his pent-up feelings to mankind standing on the threshold of the new millennium.



Beaming Fazal with a section of participating poets at the World Festival of Poets 2000 held at Hanyu City, Tokyo.

"We have languished for love and adventure
And longed for wandering alone
Our mind stood on days of the 20th century
Covered with thunder and clouds like poems of Kastner
In the wintry morning the war broke out
I went to the front as a soldier
Peace visited the cities devastated by civilisation
Tail foreign soldiers came too
The doors of the Church were closed among burnt poplar trees
The sky of the evening glow across the ruins

What did I sing at that time?
Of war?
Of peace?
Empty voices are only trembling in my ears
Our words are still hungry in the endless flame of wars
It is fifty five years since then
You, foreign poets, have come through the autumnal light
A poet with a musical instru-

ment in your arms from the desert
A poet for Haiku from the waste land
A poet from yellow soil with a deep scar on your breast
Oh, Debeljak, a missing poet in the dark
What will you sing in this age of crisis
Our songs draw a large arc
As the watchtower turns round."
(translated by Takashi Ishira from Japan)

The world we live in torn to shreds by dichotomy and dissension, injustices, intolerance, sectarian sentiments, fundamentalism and ethnic violence etc. Selfishness, greed, inordinate lust for power, position and wealth are driving people to indescribable inhumanity which has brought countless thousand mourn to our planet and made it painfully sordid.

It is at this cross-road in the history of human civilisation when man stands dazed and disillusioned, poets from all parts of the world descended upon Tokyo to chart out their course of action for the emerging world order bedevilled by utter disappointment and frightful confusion.

Right from the outset or perhaps from a decade or two before its advent the world has started slipping into the grip of soulless technologies. The Information Technology, for instance, with its remorseless strides is on the verge of devouring our planet. A section of humanity, as has been stated in the course of discussion at the Tokyo festival of poets, is labouring under the impression that poetry is gradually turning helpless and redundant in the emerging world order infested by a large variety of technologies. But these technologies, despite their salutary impact on the functional side of human life, have failed to touch the cord of human emotion. These technologies have fostered material advancement of man. But they have flopped in fathoming the dark depth of his soul and contributing to its edification. People

are, therefore, sick and tired of relentless headway being made by soulless technologies in the work-a-day world and consequently looking for escape to the world of poetry which sublimates human soul and transcends it to a serene and blessed land of peace, love and solace. In this world of science and technology machine takes precedence over spirit. Poetry, which provides food for soul, contributes to its enrichment as well as to invigoration of spirit.

The World Festival of Poets dwelt exhaustively on various attributes of poetry namely sound, motion and imagery. It is because of these characteristics that poetry retains an overpowering appeal to mind and spirit of men. Thus the domain of poetry begins from the point where the ruthless race of science and technology ends. Poetry is like an oasis at which a man, like a traveller, tired of trudge in the Sahara of life, gazes with deep longing for little rest and respite. In effect, poetry provides peace and spiritual edification to man in his suffering and suffocating agony.

T S Eliot stated a real poem should be felt before it is understood. What Eliot wanted to drive at through his statement was that a reader should be able to drink deep into the fountain of poetry before trying to decipher its diction to comprehend its innermost thought. Eliot's 'The love song of J Alfred Prufrock' or metaphysical songs contained in Tagore's Gitanjali cause drowsy numbness in the heart of a reader despite his inability to pierce through diction and imageries deployed in these immortal verses with universal appeal. The World Festival of Poets discussed poetry in all its ramifications and was found to be in agreement with the observation made by T S Eliot about half a century ago.

Illustrating Eliot's contention of poetry, Fazal Shahabuddin recited the self-composed poem written in Bengali. After he concluded the poem entitled 'The loneliness of a poet' a number of poets confessed to Fazal that



Fazal Shahabuddin flanked by German poet Tobias Burghardt (M) and Argentine poet Kirokan (R).

they could get into the core of the poem without having nodding acquaintance with Bengali Language. It was the sound of the poem that worked like a magic on the poets present there and they felt what the poem was all about without learning the language in which it was written.

Addressing the festival Fazal later said, "A poet through his works gives vent to his experiences which are beyond ordinary human imagination and which help mankind establish a very deep, intense and never-ending relationship with nature. And in this process to discover a vision wherein one can encounter that moment when one can like Eliot feel the 'third who always walks beside him'. It is this third person between a poet and nature who begins his strides from the point where science and technology end their journey."

It is precisely because of this reason, notwithstanding inescapable influence of technologies in this new age of information, that the impact of poetry can be means be blotted out of the mind of man. That is why people are increasingly turning to poetry. Colombia Poetry Interna-

tional, Barcelona Poetry Festival and World Festival of Poets at Tokyo, held with great vigour and popular enthusiasm in the course of current calendar year, are cases in point.

It is due to reasons stated above that the World Festival of Poets at Tokyo has picked up as its main theme 'There now, comes the 21st Century! Looking forward to a new century of poetry.'

Before I conclude, I am inclined to ask myself why Bangladesh, described as a land of poetry is unable to organise a grand convocation of poets of the type held at Tokyo. We did organise Asian Poetry Festival in Dhaka in 1987 and 1989. The experiences we gained in organising Asian Poetry Festival should enable us to stage World Poetry Festival in Bangladesh.

May I take the liberty to urge our leading poets of this country to close their ranks and concert their endeavour to stage a festival of poets of the type held by CHIKYU. Kobikantha can be helped to initiate the move. Is it very difficult for Kabikantha to stage a poetry festival of an international scale?

Fiction

An Asian Encounter with Romanian Communism

By Mohammad Amjad Hossain
Continued from earlier week

ON being permitted, Rouf went to see Gupta in jail on condition that discussions would be conducted in English in the presence of an official of the Ministry of Justice. On the specified date and time, Rouf met Gupta in the jail and also took along a meal for him.

Gupta was brought before Rouf in one of the rooms. Rouf asked Gupta in Urdu, 'How are you? Are you having any problem in the jail?' As Gupta wanted to explain (in Urdu) the difficult situation in the jail, in view of the insufficient heating system, the Romanian officer concerned immediately intervened and requested them to speak in English. In the meantime, Gupta uttered bad words in Urdu about the behaviour of the police and the inhuman conditions in the jail. Knowing fully well that he would be beaten or harassed as soon as Rouf left the place, Gupta spoke in Urdu against the regime, which was totally corrupt and immoral.

After the meeting, which lasted 15 minutes, Rouf came back to the office.

On the suggestion of Gupta, Rouf sought a meeting with an official in the Ministry of Justice for the release of Gupta, who had already spent about a year in the jail for a minor offence.

It was difficult to fix an appointment with a bureaucratic official in Romania. However, Rouf managed to get an appointment with a Director in the Ministry of Justice. One day, Rouf went to the Ministry of Justice and was received by Vassale in the Ministry of Justice.

Rouf took the privilege to open the dialogue with regard to Gupta's release. Mr. Vassale showed him Gupta's file. The Romanian authority considered Gupta to be a criminal. Not only foreign currency, alcohol and cigarettes had been found in his room, he had also beaten the police physically. Finally, an interesting deal was made. If Gupta was prepared to pay US\$ 10,000, he would be released. The calculation was made on the basis of the jail term. This kind of system was unheard of Gupta's sister, Jharna, and his brother-in-law flew from Germany where the brother-in-law was assigned in research work with the Ford Motor Company. Gupta's sister met Rouf to find out the position of Gupta's case and she expressed the wish to visit her brother. Rouf arranged the meeting with Gupta for his sister. She discussed the matter with Gupta and was prepared to pay US\$ 5000. Gupta told his sister very firmly that he would only take a loan from his sister. He did not want a favour. If they could arrange US\$ 9000, he would be prepared to pay it back within one month of his release. Gupta's sister apparently was offended on hearing such remarks. Jharna spoke to Rouf in tears. Jharna said, 'I was shocked by the way my brother talked to me. Gupta was our elder brother, and loved one, but the way he talked to me transpires that I belong to a third family. Let him do it the way he thinks better. I am no more interested in my brother.'

After staying a couple of days, Jharna, accompanied by her husband, left for Germany the place of posting of her husband. In about one month's time, the President of Romania, Nicolai Ceausescu, declared clemency towards foreigners sentenced to serving a 5-year term in jail. On hearing of this news, one day Gabriela came to see Rouf at his office about the acquiring of Gupta's belongings which had been seized by the police. Mercedes old car, colour television, radio old clothes, video camera, typewriter, shoes (both male and female) and US\$ 1500 in cash belonging to Gupta in the custody of the police.

Gupta gave a letter to Gabriela to get hold of the items which were lying in Rouf's office. Rouf asked Gabriela how she had managed to get a letter from Gupta directing her to collect his personal belongings from Rouf's office. Rouf was not aware of the belongings as Gupta had been arrested long before the arrival of Rouf in Bucharest. Gabriela said, 'I had been to jail to see Gupta when I was informed of the items. I visited Gupta two times but subsequently I was not allowed to visit him. This letter was posted by Gupta jail.' It was written in the Romanian language. The Romanian language originates from Latin. There is a similarity with French and Italian.

Out of sheer curiosity, Rouf made a query to Gabriela: How she was permitted to see Shah in jail as she was not related to him. Rouf came to know that no one could have access to some sensitive places, including jails, without prior permission. In this case, Gabriela succeeded to meet him in jail. Gabriela, in her reply, said that she had submitted an application to the jail authority as Gupta's girlfriend, indicating that both of them had agreed to marry on Gupta being released from jail.

To be continued

To be continued

Poem

In unison with Poet Shamsur Rahman and Obaidul Gani Chandon, we, from the depth of our heart, feel the same intense pain of ignominy that is being felt by the Mystic Bauls of the Chheuria Akhra nowadays. It's our solemn wish to make it possible for our Mystic Bauls to return honourably and to get back their Beloved Chheuria Akhra as their permanent abode for practicing Lalan Shadhur Shadhan (ascetical meditation of mystic Lalan). Translator

Sometimes shed tears sometimes fire

By Shamsur Rahman

That's our heart swings time and again,
In tune, swings in tune of the mystic Lalan songs.
I know it for certain chheuria is
neither rugged soil nor a full-flowing river,
not even a treeless barren desert.
Chheuria is the bosom of Lalan's own,
chheuria is the sacred place of meditation for innumerable Bauls.
Chheuria
is the full bloomed unique rose in our heart.

We see the grotesque face of fanaticism in the unblemished assembly of tranquility,
underneath a terrorism to evict the Bauls is born.
For the naked and cruel attack by paid and armed
hooligans; the one string instrument and songs of Lalan are wailing.

The rose that blossomed within our heart now bleeds because of the digging spades,
ancient trees have fallen down. Soon on the shrine of Lalan
the neck of a different high-rise building will finally cast
its detestable shade like a giraffe.
The one string instrument of Lalan will truly sound again after a long time

in unbearable humiliation, grievance and grief:
The tune of melancholy will make nature much too sad. One, two, three, four

thousands of protesting one string and two string instruments
will sometimes shed tears sometime fire
at dawn, pensive noon and even at night.

The Shrine of Lalan

By Obaidul Gani Chandon

Once upon a time innumerable Bauls had their abode
in the shrine of Lalan Shah with love-enfolded,
and it's only by them this holy shrine of Lalan
had so long been aply taken care of and nurtured.

Why then abruptly today
the Bauls are going down on their fate?
because they haven't any shelter in the shrine
the Bauls are loitering hither and thither on the street.

The Shrine of Lalan Shah
shouldn't go to any one's possession,
this had long been an assembly of the Bauls
this is where they should stay all in congregation.

Translated by Tito Choudhury

Fiction

Yet another Ahalya

By Usha Mahajan

She bent herself a little backward and looked at him once again through one corner of her spectacles. He was still seemingly engaged in writing in the same manner. Seemingly, because sitting here at a considerable distance from him she could not guess correctly whether he had written anything at all in those sheets of papers spreading before him. But he was definitely holding a pen in his hand and was taking some time off at regular interval to cast an empty gaze outside the window.

She was half lying in her old couch made of cane in the open balcony and was basking in the sun. She could not see him clearly as the sunlight directly hit her eyes. The sunlight did not use to fall in the direction of his room. Besides he was stooping forward resting his elbows on the table right in front of the window in such a manner that only his back and right half of his body was visible. The little light entering through the window grills cast stripe like shadows over his face, chest and arm but his back was totally covered with the darkness of the room.

She trembled a bit. How was Aju looking? Like one of the silhouettes drawn by him, engulfed with a veil of mystery. Something must have gone wrong. Since his return from Ira's place he was looking such absent-minded. She had an urge of walking up to him silently; stroking his back and holding his face in her palm to ask him, 'Aju, what's wrong with you anyway?'

But alas! Gone was that simple relationship between a grownup son and a mother in which anything could be asked and answered easily. She felt so embarrassed whenever he came near her as if he had been a stranger not her own son. This was a kind of a mystery as to when this wall of silence would creep up between parents and the children. This was the same Aju who would feed on one of her breasts while holding the other. She used to clean his excreta and bathe him naked for years together. Today she was hesitating so much to ask him a simple question.

Last time when he got sacked from his job he became sullen like this for so many days. But he never told a word of it. It was Ira some of his friends who told her

that he had quit his highly paid job after a fight with the employer. During that time she was dying to know the cause of the dispute between him and his employer after all both were so friendly. Then Ira told her, 'Auntie, they became very close together to such an extent that the employer had been calling the shots on Aju's behalf. Aju had no liberty to act on his own. How long he could play a puppet in his hand?' Ira went on, 'You know auntie, becoming very intimate with each other ultimately tells upon the longevity of the relationship.'

She had this intense desire of asking Ira, 'You two have grown so close together. Tell me dear what will be the outcome of...?' She really could not understand the nature of their relationship. She had been finding her a regular visitor to this house for last 5 to 7 years; sometimes alone, sometimes with Ajay and other friends. In this big city she was living all alone without her parents or any brother or sister. She had a flat of her own. Whenever Ajay would disappear from home for a couple of days he would leave Ira's telephone number. He was not at all ashamed of admitting the fact that they were spending their time under the same roof in the same bed. Proclaiming their love for each other he would say that they did not believe in marriage. Right now they were sizing each other up.

She has spent her whole life and failed to understand what was love and what sizing up meant. She was married at an early age when she used to play with her friends in the alleys. She was sent off as a bride with a total stranger. It did not matter how he treated her or whether he was good or evil. Being her husband he was supposed to be her god, the almighty. She used to think of him in this way till she became a widow. She used to fast and offer pujas throughout the whole year praying for his long life. She bore him 7 kids one after another. Ajay was the last one. She could never dream of a woman's hesitation in offering her body to her husband whenever the later wished or demanded so. Neither she knew or cared to know whether raising kids and looking after the family was the duty of a woman or an act of slavery.

Now there were these duo Ira and Ajay. What on earth did make them talk so much? Over which issue did they fight so passionately? What story of solitude written by the boy would fill pages after pages? And how could Ira paint so many torsos with head or feet?

Ira used to say that she brought out the finest feelings of a woman's heart in her paintings. Once she took her to one of her exhibitions. There was this big hall full of life-sized paintings portraying women in innumerable forms... woman standing upside down, woman impatient to fly but devoid of wings, terrible looking woman with eyes and horns like animals, vivacious woman like Durga and woman with cruel and aggressive looks of Kali. There were women all over.

Was it so that women had become so important these days? Said Ira: 'Probably you will not understand auntie. Men kept the women of your days unconscious by making them sniff the chloroform of slavery. Their minds and bodies were hypnotized to serve them. Women to them was kind of a...'

'Still everything was going fine!'

'Nothing was going fine auntie. The dissatisfied womenfolk with their unfulfilled dreams are eager to get from their sons what their men had deprived them of. 'Don't you hear about the bride burning these days? Now what are all these? They are nothing but the expression of frustrations of these women tortured and oppressed for hundreds of years.'

'All right, at least your generation is lucky. You people are free to do whatever you wish...'

'My generation? Free you said? Auntie, the fate of women of this country is not going to change in one or two generations. Wherefrom will the freedom come for us? All are eyewitness. What kind of freedom is it anyway? At least not before the men change their attitude.' Ira gave a sarcastic smile and supported her as she moved forward to another painting. Said she, 'Come, take a look at this. She's Ahalya. You must know what she signifies... a woman physically and mentally unfulfilled. Her mind and body were never harvested or irrigated. She remained neglected and a statue for centuries together for the touch of a great man, an ideal man...'

An ideal man? She knew only of one man who happened to be her husband. She never bothered about his being ideal. He was a man and she was a woman. She never thought of

the thirst of mind and body. Did anyone ever try to read her mind? None ever asked for her suggestion or sought her comments on any matter. She was never considered worth for all these. And to talk of the thirst of body... he would come in the dark, enforce his right and then go away. She would never dream of the idea that there could be something like a woman's right of physical fulfillment. But even then there was a feeling about the existence of her body. There was this fellow Nikka - a cousin of Ajay's father and two years younger to him. He would always touch her fingers while taking the key of the godown or giving back the empty glass of lassi. And with those touches her heart used to pound. He was handsome with curly hair and cat's eyes. She secretly desired if she could... what a shame... Her inner self admonished her that it was a sin to think of another man besides her husband even in a dream. But she could not help it when she really had dreams. It was in her dream she felt that her eager body turned suddenly stiff as a long the moment Ajay's father's bad breath entered her nostril. She had no control over such dream. She had seen Nikka in dream leaning over her body with such tenderness and subtlety as if he were worshipping it. As she awoke her mind was filled with guilt; her whole body lay perspiring... Perhaps she had sinned. She used to hide her face the whole day so that none knew about it.

And here was Ira; shameless and without any remorse. The first time she saw her she was dumbfounded watching her behavior. Without greeting her she gave a straight look and entered Aju's room puffing her cigarette as if she was not Aju's mother but some kind of ghost and her presence was unsolicited one. Perhaps Aju had never told her that she was his mother. He did not at all bother about her. She at such an old age, despite all the physical handicaps was doing his housekeeping because he was her son. But he did not know about a son's duty, otherwise why he would treat his old helpless parents in such a way. These men had only one type of attitude towards women because... Anyway she would understand it to some extent had it been done in a belittling manner. He should have got married and settled down by now. But that was

nowhere in sight... only...! When ever asked he would always reply, 'I'm not in a hurry.' She wondered why he was not bringing this girl here for good observing all legal and social formalities when the latter was spending her whole day in his room. She would not mind that because by now she developed a kind of affection for her.

In Ajay's absence she used to come and sit beside her. She gradually opened herself up and shared all secrets of her life with her as if she were her friend. 'Believe me auntie,' she said, 'I was innocent - some kind of a fool when I got married. I did not even reach my 18th birthday then. My parents found the groom's family an aristocratic one and his earning a decent one. They never thought twice before pushing me into his hand, as they did not want to lose him. He was twice my age. He would neither read my mind nor would he allow me to do anything after my choice. At home I was as free as a butterfly, none would forbid me to do anything or impose any restriction on me. And here after marriage I was to watch every step of mine. Don't do this today, don't do that tomorrow etc. All the rules and regulations were meant for me only. On one hand I was slave to my in-laws' wishes, on the other I had to surrender myself to my husband's desire whenever he wanted. To tell you the truth auntie I hated him so much. Yet I endured everything till he resorted to physical violence. I returned to my parent's home and that was for good. That scoundrel himself came to get the divorce papers signed by me. I got rid of him at last. There was only one regret however; he could not give me a child...'

What a shameless woman! Last week she came and sat on the floor resting her head on her knees. She took her hands in her own, looked at her and said, 'Auntie, I finished a new painting of woman.'

Ira used to talk in such irrelevant manner always. But this time she said, 'I am glad that at least one of my dreams is fulfilled...'

She had been suspecting it from Ira's gait and behavior from the very beginning. But she suddenly started looking at her face with a puzzled expression. And she told her everything unabashedly.