

NON-FICTION

MURTOZA BASHIR

(Translated by: A. Ahsanuzzaman & M Md. Kabir)

20 February, '52

...People standing on the street seem strangely lifeless. Sometime back students on a horse-driven cart had ridden through the streets announcing tomorrow's hartal. No sooner does their last trace vanish that the government van declaring the imposition of Section 144 sweeps by clouding every mind. Even I am overcast. A strange shiver runs through me. Well, is it really moonlight, or are my eye-balls staring at haze? A desolation.

21 February

The entire city is dead silent. Some shops are open, some closed. The students gather at the university ground. The street is full of police, trucks. The sun above our heads is scorching. Veins on either side of the forehead throb. Every face blazes in excitement. Jaws are clenching. Questions emitting from every eye and face. Everybody wants to know: *What will happen, what do we do now?*

The government has declared Section 144. Going ahead with the demonstration now means violating Section 144. *But that will be of no use, with the likelihood of serious disturbances --*

On hearing this everybody is angry.

Traitors.

We won't turn back. Amid the jeering and shouts, the voice of the speaker comes to a stop.

We've not come here to listen to sweet words. We just want to know what we'll do.

One from the crowd jumps on to the president's table and says: Comrades, the government has seized us like an octopus with its Section 144. Comrades, we must violate it. But no processions, no public meetings. Instead we'll proceed towards the assembly hall in tens. There we'll place our demand, the demand of forty-five million people—the demand for our mother tongue. In the excitement, in the heat of the sun it is as if the blood wants to burst out from every body's eye and face.

One sentence floats over the heads: Let's go to the assembly hall. Meanwhile the process of building long lines for the march has begun. Pushing and pulling to see who gets to stand at the front.

Standing off to the side, I think, what should I do? Do I join them? But what if something happens? Falgun month is almost here—which is why Mother has sent me a letter: Come soon. I keep looking at the street. Trucks crammed with police. The oiled knots of their sticks and bayonets blazing in the sunlight.

They'll fire tear gas—a whisper moves trembling over the procession. Everybody is talking. People ask questions of each other, speak with hands on the shoulders of strangers, unknown comrades. Talking like friends.

One's whole face is sweating. The ear is

hot in the heat. Is the sun releasing fire today? Inside everybody's veins, nerves, blood? Pondering over the course of action. What will I do? Today is our art exhibition, where hang my pictures. Today is a day long dreamt-of.

But I don't know how and when I made up my mind and walked over to the pond to wet my handkerchief as protection against the tear gas. By the time I realize what's happening I am heaving and pushing to get through the police barricade and chanting in unison with the voices around me: *We want Bangla as the state language. We d-e-a-n-d Bangla as the state language.*

The police lathi-charge is like a bolt from the blue. Some at the head of the procession are arrested. People run, scatter in all directions. Then after some time, they look back at the street. At the prisoners in trucks. Their comrades. They can't think of what to do, except simply raise their voices again: *We demand Bangla as state language.*

They file out of the gate in tens again. Shouting: *We demand Bangla as the state language.* They also are arrested. Again, the procession heads out. Arrested yet again. Pushing to get out. The same question on everyone's lips: how many people they can throw in jail? How much space do they have in their jail? Everybody joins in the scramble to get arrested: all the way from M.A. students to students of class four. Artists, writers, poets—everybody!

Cracks begin to appear in the foundation under this combined pressure. So now it is time to launch tear gas shells. Long-range. Not only on the streets but inside the university as well.

Everybody runs. Children and seniors all. All coughing at the same time. Tears streaming down eyes. Dark night thickens on the eyelids. Suffocation.

Water! The university turns into the field at Karbala. All rush towards the pond. A drop of water is more precious than a piece of bright diamond. I too run.

All flee. But there is no respite. An incessant volley of tear-gas. Unarmed students and armed police. They pause, retreat, but do not surrender.

Crowd broken up. Policemen laugh, holding their rifles loosely in their hands. Lick their lips with tongues. Wipe the sweat off foreheads with their calloused palms.

Officers light cigarettes at the corners of their mouths, pressing the cigarette carefully in the left corner of the lip, smoke curling thinly into the air.

Poisonous fumes come floating through the air. Gas. Enters every house through windows and cracks in doors. Coughing. Students. Professors. All cough harshly. Somebody's handkerchief passed on to another. Given voluntarily. No brows furrowed. People do not care about themselves only. In pain. Yet today every stranger is a friend. Even greater than friends. Comrades.

This is all beyond belief. People look around with occluded eyes at one another. Astonishment. Nobody even dreamed they would be attacked inside the university. People gather in knots here and there.

Faces and eyes glittering in excitement. Faces wet with perspiration turn hard as iron. Soft hands used to holding pens now frozen solid.

The sun is directly above our head. Burning like fire. Heat spreading underneath. Everything getting hot. Field. Street. Water. Man.

Many become angry. Puffing up like a cobra pinched and poked at. *Let's up beat the bastards.*

*Friends, don't lose your tempers. We'll continue our movement peacefully. Won't make trouble.* Many entreat angry young men with folded palms. Their voices hoarse. Sweat running down faces. Flecks of spittle at the corners of lips, spraying those gathered around them. *Peaceful!* One bursts

Continuous lathi-charges on the students inside the hostel. Police charging forward like maddened wolves. To break into pieces the most precious future gems of the country with their sticks.

As desperate resistance. Shirts dripping with sweat. Hands swollen from throwing bricks.

More tear-gas. Incessant. Death thickening in the air. Poisonous gas. The whole air over the medical college hostel has turned to gas. The sky! A boy with a pitcher full of water stumbles on a tear gas shell.

All try to run towards the assembly hall. But can't make it. The barrels of the machine-guns of soldiers guarding the assembly hall gleam in the bright light. Some



out anger. Traitors, all are traitors.

Yes, peaceful. Our aim is not to fight with the police. We have to march on the assembly hall. Keep that in mind.

Again people in tens move towards the entrance. Slogan raised: *We demand Bangla as state language. Won't tolerate police atrocity.* Section 144 is tossed aside. Breaking through the police cordon they move in groups towards the medical college. Clash there, too. First a police charge on the women's procession, then arrests.

Anger in every head. Not just the students, but clerks, peons, rickshaw-pullers and plain bystanders, too. The students however remain calm, their hands and fists seemingly glued to their sides, determined not to cause any trouble. Yet it happens.

Forced into it. Police fire tear gas at the medical college hostel. The matchstick thrown on gunpowder. Anger bursts like glowing lava out of a volcano. Spreads from one to another.

Both sides engage in pitched battle. Sort of light beamed at them from there, dazzling their eyes.

Students keep shouting their slogan. The children too. A suffocating sensation in throats. Lungs burning. Yet desperately they press forward. Outburst of intense hatred: *Come out of there, MLA's ---*

*Resign from your posts.* The police officers say: *Send representatives. Talk with us. We are aware of your demands.*

Students stop. Look questioningly at each other. Thinking it over.

Silence for a while. Someone wipes his feet against the bosom of grass. Others smoke. Wipe sweat off the face with their handkerchiefs.

While we're busy in conversation with each other, we are startled by some sharp, sudden sounds. Some boys lie down, take cover on the road. Confusion all round.

Bullets come tearing through the air. Shards of flame, the screaming lead searching out the heads, stomachs, the

cheats of the best, the brightest among us. The students crouching trembling on the grass, on the paved street, on verandas of houses, many of them perhaps the only sons of their parents, others husbands, others perhaps something more, much more.

Like flood-driven animals everybody runs. Death lunging at them from behind. Lead bullets. It is as if a great restless, indomitable wave, with all the power of the sea, strikes against a steep mountain, but then is smashed by the hard rock into countless drops which then fall back into the waves. We're those scattered drops, and the medical college barrack the waves.

*Blank fire.* Someone says in a low voice. People to the sides of those injured in the firing. Many others stare, dumbfounded, rooted to the spot, or curse loudly in order to relieve their minds of agony. *What happened?* It is as if they have suddenly been robbed of their wits by hypnosis, their shoulders touching. More astonishment than fear.

Many are carrying the injured ones. A scream: *Brothers, we must avenge this murder.* Directs his shouts towards the standing students: *See, this is what we get for wanting Bangla.*

A whisper from behind: *Don't say that, he'll be nervous.* A fallen figure close to us.

No, this is nothing, nothing at all, we console him. As if we're subsidiary players in the drama, the injured ones the prime characters. We say these things painfully, biting down on our lower lips. How hard feels the lower lip! How very heavy!

Like water from a tap blood pours out in an unending flow on to the green grass. Here, where just a short while back we had been chatting, lazing around, telling each other tales, tapping cigarette ash to the ground, now no sooner the blood touches the grass that it begins to clot, much like our thoughts.

*Water.* The voice of the injured student is barely a whisper. We wipe his face with our wet handkerchiefs. He keeps whispering the words—*Send a message to my home.* Murmurs—name Abul Barkat, address Bishnupriyo Bhaban—Paltan Line. Whether or not anybody is paying attention to his words does not seem to worry him, alarm him.

*There is nothing to fear,* we console him. Though we feel as if he is a pretext, that in fact, it is we who need the consoling. Our ears are alert, as if we are in class taking notes.

*We won't give in, no,* he keeps mumbling. By now we've reached the emergency.

Nurses and medical students busy attending those wounded by lathi-charges and tear gas. As soon as we enter, they startle up as if touched by an electric current. The injured ones open their wan eyes, astonished by what they see in front of them. Tell the nurses, *go take care of them.* See to them. Some of them burst into tears, unable to control their emotions.

The injured keep coming in. Crowding in on us like ants around food crumbs. One, two, three. How much can we count? How

much can the human nervous system withstand?

The polished floor of the ward turns red. As if today were the *dolpurnima*, and everybody has come in after playing with blood-red colours. After a while, looking at the dead body brought on the stretcher, we all feel numb. Forget the language of cursing, of speaking out the mind's agony. Look on as if hypnotized—the skull blown away, the brain out on one side of the stretcher.

*Oh, how ghastly,* a schoolboy cries out covering his face with his hands. Blood between his fingers.

*They were not supposed to target the heads of political activists, were they?* The speaker perhaps does not know whether he is asking a question or answering it.

*They shot to kill. Killers—dacoits!* The boy whispers rubbing an eye with both hands.

*Is he your brother?* Somebody caresses his hair, looks at his lips inquisitively.

*Brother? No, we're together side by side.*

*This handkerchief, he gave it to me when we got tear-gassed.*

All of us look at his hand. As if that small fist is holding some precious stone. The handkerchief in his hand is wet with blood. Blood drips rhythmically on to the floor. Our faces turn hard like steel. We all look at another. Faces glint like sharp knives in the light given off by bulbs.

The news spreads like wildfire throughout the whole city. Like a fire fed by the wind, from this street to that street. From this corner to that one.

People mass in the streets. Forgetting Section 144. As if the sheer force of a fierce storm has made them self-assertive. They ask each other, even a rickshaw-puller says: *Shot to death?*

*Un-huh. And now some of the corpses are disappearing.*

*Seven at the last count. Only Allah knows how many more to go.*

A line forms. Everybody marches forward with long strides. As if life itself now is closely entwined with the course of this line. This line is different from the other one, the one which continuously surrounds us from awaking in the morning till sleep at night.

Old, young, children, all filling the hospital to the brim. In the hostel, the bloody clothes of the martyrs hang like flags on the barrack. Bloody places is sacred ground around which people cluster.

*Where's the dead body? We want to see the dead body.* A furious cry from all.

But nobody was allowed to see them.

In the evening's lowering light the crowd lessens. Like people in ancient times they head back in small bands. Hatred burning within their chests. Fire. Burn everything to ashes. Destroy all...

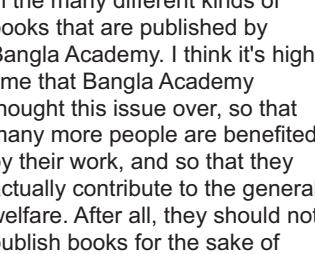
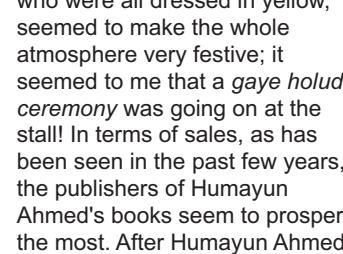
Murza Bashir is one of Bangladesh's premier artists. Ahmed Ahsanuzzaman teaches English at Khulna University. M. Md. Kabir is a graduate of Khulna University.

Ekushey Boi Mela

RAFI HOSSAIN

Just like previous years, the *Ekushey Boi Mela* is also being celebrated this year in full flow. But unlike other years, the arrangements of the fair are quite different this time around—a change dictated by the times. The first thing about the fair that catches the eye is the enormous queue of visitors that stretches from the fair entrance all the way to the National Museum at Shahbagh. Over the last few years, due to security-related issues, the queuing process has become orderly and organized. This year the strict security controls have made it quite impossible for people to break the queue or insert themselves somewhere in the middle, and this is something quite unusual for Bangladeshis to adhere to. As unusual as it may be, people are lining up properly to enter the fair. Even people who have grown up with the mindset of a life free of authority, like poets, artists and other rebellious beings, have expressed some discontent about the strict rules, they have also accepted this way of doing things.

I finally got in after waiting in line under a scorching sun. As soon as I entered, a group of people dressed in yellow greeted the entering visitors by saying, "Aprni ki janen, je aaj Hrimur Biye?" (Do you know that today is Hrimur's wedding?) It took me some time to comprehend what was actually going on. Then I realized that they were publicizing the publication of Humayun Ahmed's new book, "Aaj Hrimur Biye." Soon I saw that the line of fans in front of Ananya Prokash to purchase the new book was almost as long as the line of people who had queued up to



Some items from the Little Magazine chottor.

Haque, and others. Even though the overall sales figures of Bangla Academy publications is impressive, their sales consist mainly of dictionaries. Which brings up the question: why are other books published by the academy not being sold? The Bangla Academy authorities should publicize their diversified range of publications so that people

are informed and get interested in the many different kinds of books that are published by Bangla Academy, publishing houses such as Mowla Brothers, University Press Limited, and some others always publish a few such titles/volumes along with works of fiction, and the sales of Mowla Brothers and UPL are quite commendable in this regard.

Current trends indicate that with the exception of Bangladesh Shishu Academy, Muktodhara, Tonatuni and a few other publishers, there have not been too many notable publications of children's books. Even though this area is important, it has not developed significantly in recent years. We cannot ignore the needs of young, growing minds. It is somewhat heartbreaking to note that though the young ones are one of the most enthusiastic groups to visit the book fair, they return home almost empty-handed.

It's quite interesting to leaf through the going-against-the-tide publications at the 'Little Magazine' stalls, from where many avant-garde ideas and concepts come to the forefront. The assortment of authors and writers who produce their defiant materials and manifestoes form quite an intriguing scenario. They give birth to a lot of controversies, which, however, they view as quite normal. One thing, however, that struck me is how corporate advertising has taken over everywhere. They have penetrated into almost every field. Advertising and corporate houses are trying to promote DJuice culture. What is this culture? The advertising language has become an odd mixture of two languages, and the blend I believe is ruining the beauty of both Bengali and English languages. Where will this eventually lead? Should we

not think before we start flowing with this tide? Even one of these 'Little Mag'—counterculture stalls has published a magazine called "DJuice little mag." If advertising can penetrate even the field of revolutionaries in front of our very eyes, then we cannot afford to be idle and let it happen. It is time to wake up!

The setting of the stalls was a bit haphazard. It's very easy to lose your way while traipsing through the lanes and to keep track of the whole layout of the fair. The organization of the stalls needs to be more precise so that people can roam about more comfortably; the fair, for example, can be structured into suitable quadrants according to genres, or sizes, et cetera. Also, this year quite a few books are behind their publishing schedules, and titles that have been advertised word-of-mouth have failed to arrive at the *mela* even a week after its start.

The best thing that marks this year