

NON-FICTION

Foreign Office Follies and Foibles

SHAHID ALAM

There was a time when I thought of taking up diplomacy as a career. To tell the truth, I did a lot of soul searching before deciding that I would quit being a lecturer in the Department of Public Administration, Dhaka University, and take up a position in the country's higher civil service. But I decided to take the civil service examination, and ended up as a Foreign Service officer in 1979. Correction; I was first a probationer, and, on completion of the necessary formalities, the real thing. So, I first worked as a probationer with no specific duties, but a lot of getting-acquainted-with-the-foreign-office-and-its-senior-officers routine, interspersed with lounging around with fellow probationers, and, then, on confirmation to the service, as a desk officer in the International Organization division.

To be honest, I did not work that much, or that long, at the Foreign Ministry. Before I could barely rub the dust off my chair, I, along with a batch mate, was packed off in 1980 to get an MALD degree at The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, USA. Some of the Tufts University undergraduates would call it The Lecher School of Flaw and Duplicity. I rather liked this depiction of the august school! On the completion of my degree requirements, like a cad, I sent in my letter of resignation from the service, having decided that the 8:00 to 2:00 (as the office hours were then) grind was not for me. So, you see, my actual stint in the service was short and sweet -- for the most part. There were sour moments, too, maddening, frustrating, irritating -- oh, boy, had I stayed the course, just think how compounded those moments would have become! But the sweet moments would have been compounded, too! Oh well, you can't have it all good all the time, now, can you?

For me, though, being in the Foreign Office meant being periodically yanked out of my regular desk job to work as a protocol officer on several state and other important foreign visits. My director was not too happy about that, though, and even lodged complaints a couple of times with the appropriate higher-ups about his officer being taken away when he should have been performing onerous duties pertaining to specific aspects of relations between Bangladesh and certain international organizations, but to no avail. I did not complain. I enjoyed being yanked away from the daily chore of putting up files! Actually, my several getaways as a protocol officer began when I was a probationer.

So I remember being a glorified accessory (wallpaper, more like it!) to a visiting West German Education Minister, to the far more interesting celebrated actress Liv Ullmann, who, if I recall correctly, was a goodwill ambassador of some UN agency, to being there at the



artwork by subyasachi hazra

airport when the super hush-hush visit of Egyptian Vice President Hosni Mubarak took place for a few precious and ultra-security-

ridden hours during a time when the Muslim world was not too kindly disposed towards the recent normalization of relations between Cairo and Tel Aviv, and feeling important that I was part of some great national and international scheme of things. The old ego felt a whole lot pampered, all right! As did the old stomach with some choice gastronomic fare! But you still had to put up with some bumptious officials who took being self-important too seriously. They really rubbed you the wrong way, but, fortunately, their numbers were small enough not to arouse disgust for the entire service.

Then there was that day when I had to do protocol duty on a national mourning day precisely to appropriately honour the dearly departed for whom the day was being observed. Senior Minister Mashiur Rahman (Jadu Miah) had died, and an obituary book had been opened on the Foreign Ministry premises for foreign diplomats to pay their homage. The ministry needed a protocol officer to receive them, and guide them to the book, and, by now, you might have guessed the identity of the person the higher authorities chose to be the sacrificial goat! For once, I hated having been selected, to be on constant alert from morning till afternoon, and, that too, without any food! How revolting! And so, at different intervals, I solemnly greeted (and was I rigorously solemn, while masking my intense irritation -- I must have realized my considerable acting potential then!) a stream of ambassadors, high commissioners, charges d'affaire, and other diplomats, who, after expressing their sorrow at our country's great loss, went on to record their feelings in the obituary book. Inwardly I would muse, just how many of them actually felt what they said and wrote, and wondered if the dark sunglasses-wearing Soviet ambassador was not really a KGB agent. With his bald pate and lean hard features, to go along with the glasses, he certainly looked like one! He would have made the perfect spook against Sean Connery's 007. By the time he arrived, I was in a foul mood. By the time it all ended, I was in a villainous mood.

Then there were the state visits, where I would be basking in a self-imposed delusion of grandeur at being the protocol officer to the second in order of hierarchy (his name escapes me) to Gen. Ne Win of Burma (now Myanmar) who was on the state visit, the Foreign Minister of Nepal, when King Birendra was making the state visit, and the Indian foreign secretary, Jagat Mehta, when Prime Minister Morarji Desai was on a state visit, in, if memory serves me right, reverse order of visitation. You can discern that I was gradually elevated in importance of protocol duty, from being the officer attached to a mere foreign secretary to the august personage of the second man in the government, no less! Ah, I must have done some good to have deserved such promotion of sorts!

Those were heady days of pompous entourage rides during state occasions, gastronomic delight at the state guest house, where we the Foreign Service officers reigned, more familiar Mughlai dinners (and decidedly losing out to the state guest house in the quality of cuisine) at Bangabhaban, where the President's ADCs reigned, and we felt miserable, to be inevitably followed by a feeling of despondency when the visits ended, at the dreaded prospect of going back to the drudgery of moving files.

The Indian visit was interesting. First, an overly concerned and overbearing senior officer gave me a dressing down for having the temerity to sit in the back seat with Jagat Mehta. No matter how much I explained that the foreign secretary had insisted that I sit by him, he was not mollified ("you should have told him that it was not the pucca thing to do," or something to that effect). The upshot was that I got to sit at the back with not just Mehta, but also the Nepalese and Burmese dignitaries every time we traveled! And then there was the rather rummy episode involving Couto and Medhekar (as far as I can recall, both were joint secretaries to the government, or, maybe, one was, and the other an additional secretary). The two had been assigned one car, and, on one occasion, some official function had been arranged one afternoon for the delegation. Some of the protocol officers were not required to attend. So I lounged around the guest house when I heard Mr. Medhekar yelling blue murder. I related the essence of what happened to (probably) my batch mate Mahmud Hassan (later secretary-equivalent ambassador), who had also come to investigate the commotion:

"Well," I said, "in a nutshell, Couto to futo, aar Medhekar ka chitkar." Couto had taken the car to the function, leaving his colleague behind! "I can quite understand his agitation."

And then off to Fletcher (or Lecher). One of the perks of studying there was to be able to cross-register courses at Harvard University. I duly did so, and one bitterly cold winter evening, I was making my way to the John F. Kennedy School library. As I was about to enter through the gate, a hand fell on my shoulder with a simultaneous "keysey ho bete" (how are you, son?) directed at me from someone with a pronounced whiskey breath. I turned to stare at the face of Jagat Mehta! He had come to the United States as a research fellow or scholar at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University.

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Little magazines of the region

MOHAMMAD SHAFIQL ISLAM

Boipatra, an exceptional bookstore near Alhamra at Zindabazar, replete with rare books of various subjects, magazines, etc., is not only a bookstore, but also a meeting place for writers and poets resident in Sylhet. Many famous poets, writers, journalists come here to buy books, spend time and get news of recently published books. Its owner, Mostak Ahmad Deen, a poet and writer by himself, recently told me about the long and rich literary and cultural practices in Sylhet.

In the 1940s *Balaka* helped disperse the stream of progressive literature in Sylhet. Aside from *Balaka* there were other publications through which the rich literary-cultural tradition of Sylhet reached the people. About one hundred years before the publication of *Balaka*, Gouri Sankar Bhattacharya Tarkabagish edited *Sangbad Vaskar* (1839), *Sangbad Roshraj*, *Hinduratna Komolokar* all of which played a vital role in transmitting literature and culture, establishing rights of marriage for the widows, promoting female education and developing socio-economic conditions. *Srihotto Prokash* (1875) edited by Paricharan Das and *Poridarshak* (1880) edited by Bipin Chandra Paul are also worth mentioning, where regional problems, education, and culture were.

Balaka, edited by Kaliproshonno Das, started in 1935 as a tri-monthly magazine, in spring, summer, rains and autumn. In 1937 it became a monthly publication, then was published irregularly, but in 1939 turned into a daily, starting publication in September 1939. The September issue of *Balaka* was proof that it was an outstanding periodical. It contained Shuvendu Imam's introduction on Sumen Chand's story 'We Three'; in it Projesh Kumar Roy, Tara Prasad Borua, Ashuk Bijoy Raha contributed poems; Sumen Chand, Bhubani Prasad Dutta, Kaliproshonno Das, Monmoh Chowdhury, Kolyan Kumar Soum, Dhurjoti Prasad Dutta, Punnobroto Aditya all contributed stories; Achinto Kumar Bhattacharya wrote an essay and so on.

In 1936, another tri-monthly literary magazine *Srihotto Shahitto Parishad Potrika* (Srihotto Academy Literary Journal) was published. The periodical was published regularly for thirteen years with eminent editors Krishna Bihari Roy Chowdhury and Jatindro Mohon Bhattacharya. The near-contemporary monthly publications of *Balaka* were *Azan* (1941), *Al-Islah* (1932), *Komola* (1931), *Al-Balag* (1931). The monthly *Komola* edited by Romoni Mohon Das and Achyutocharan Chowdhury was published from Akhalia, Sylhet -- those who were in touch with Sylhet periodicals admit to the high standard of *Komola* as a literary magazine. It was published in Sylhet for two years and later some issues of it were published from Habigonj.

Al-Islah, though an Islamic magazine, was published with essays on folk-literature, folk-music and folk-culture of Sylhet. It was edited by Mohammad Nurul Hoque and published in 1932. It stopped after the death of its editor and re-started in 1994 under an editorial panel that included AH Sadat Khan, Mohammad Asaddor Ali and Ragib Hossain Chowdhury.

'Sylhet Academy' was undergoing many challenges and in 1979 it published *Silot Academy Potrika*. Mohammad Asaddor Ali was its editor. As per the objectives of the periodical, the articles on mystical literature (a strong regional interest), heritage and culture of Sylhet were published in it.

In the 1970s a periodical entitled *Mastul* was published from Sylhet with the editorship of Abu Bakar Mohammad Hanif. Only four issues of

the periodical have been published so far. Parikshit Dutta Chowdhury, Abu Bakar Mohammad Hanif, Modhumita Chakraborty Sheuli, Shah Ashraf Hossain among others contributed stories in the fourth issue of *Mastul* published in August, 1980. Hamid Mohammad's *Hridoyer Rongdhonu*, a book containing the contributions by Jishnu Roy Chowdhury, Parikshit Dutta Chowdhury, Setu Basit, the regular writers of *Mastul*, has been recently published.

Swanito Kalarob, with Nosir Uddin Ahmed as editor, was published by 'Muslim Shahtiya Sangsad' in 1980. *Ishan*, edited by Rafiqur Rahman, was brought out as a poetry magazine in 1982, but the next issue, however, had stories and essays. 'Kushiara Shilpigushthi' published *Nodi Nirobodhi* in 1982 and its editors were Brojendro Kumar Das and Syed Mamunur Rashid. On 21 February and 26 March of 1983 and on 21 February of 1984 the periodical *Shikor* was published with the successful editorship of Shuvendu Imam and Hamid Muhammad. Later, in 1993, the editor Shuvendu Imam published another issue of the periodical.

The maiden issue of *Bhashkor* edited by Pulin Roy was published on 21 February, 1990. From the very beginning to the end, though at a slow pace, *Bhashkor* kept developing its standard and earned readers' appreciation. The uniqueness of this periodical was that the editor ensured at least one new young writer/poet in each issue. The young writers' contributions were highly encouraged by the team of *Bhashkor*. To date, seventeen issues of *Bhashkor* have been published.

Ahmedur Rashid published *Shuddhoswar*, taking the role of a mediator to have made coordination between the right and the left, on 16 December, 1990. The fifth issue of *Shuddhoswar* earned readers' attention because it published a supplementary on Kishwar Ibne Dilwar. Suddenly the periodical stopped being published but revived after some years. *Gronthi* by Shamim Shahana was published in 1993. *Paradigm* edited by Ahmad Minhas, TM Ahmed Kaiser, Nasimul Hoque and Sanwar Chowdhury was published in 1994.

Some other periodicals, such as, *Nodi Pakhi Megh* edited by Helal Uddin Choudhury, *Srishti* edited by Priok Rashid, *Nirbyaz* edited by Liakot Shah Faridi were also published in 1994. *Riti*, exclusively a poetry magazine, edited by Fazlur Rahman Babul, was published in 1995. Many veteran poets also contributed to the magazine. Shah Shamim Ahmed edited and published *Ridi* in 1997. Writers of both the West Bengal, and East Bengal contributed poems, stories, essays etc. to the magazine. The story 'Manusher Vasha' by Avijit Sen in *Ridi* was a must read for the readers. *Khuab* edited by Habibur Rahman was published in 1996. The first two issues published only poems. The third issue brought out a supplementary on *Baul* songs. Shah Abdul Karim was highlighted in that issue of *Khuab*. Jawaher Hossain published *Ektara* in 1999. Though only one issue of *Ektara* was published, the readers enjoyed some beautiful poems in the magazine.

Orchid edited by Rakesh Chakraborty came into light in 2000. In the first issue of this periodical, the editor gave space for writings invariably but its second issue was with selected writings. The West Bengal poet Nirmal Halder was highlighted in the third issue and it was highly praised by the readers. *Bangla* edited by Salman Farid was also published in 2000. Young writers of both Bengalis contributed in the periodical.

Sunrito edited by Ahmed Sayem lasted from October 2000-2007. This little magazine used

to publish supplementaries several times. The notable supplementary was on Ahmed Safa. It encouraged quality contributions by the writers. In the fourth issue of the magazine, Ruhul Mohsin expressed his disagreements with Syed Monzoorul Islam in one of his writings which made Mohsin known in the region. There were some translations published in its fifth issue which were worth mentioning. The last issue contained a complete novel by Ahmad Minhas and the translation of English poetry of five hundred years by Subroto Augustin Gomez. *Pathokriti*, a periodical of poetry edited by Shuvendu Imam, was published in 2001. No sooner had it been published, than the readers flocked to it. *Chhayya-prochchhaya* edited by Mahboob Elahi, *Boonon* edited by Khaled Uddin and *Ovimot* edited by Mukhtar Ahmad, were also published in 2001. The *Ovimot* has recently published a special issue featuring Shah Abdul Karim. *Boitha*, edited by Ujjol Das and *Shajibub* edited by Sheram Nironjon, boosted awareness of the readers.

The first issue of *Jarul* was published a few years ago and its second issue featuring some excellent poems by young writers came out in January 2007. *Ujanga*, the periodical based on poetry, edited by Chybon Das came out in 2005. *Onkut* edited by Muhammad Mamun and Rezaul Sumon was published ushering poems, stories and translations.

The *Mobile Pathragar* published *Chhayalop* edited by Abid Faisal. In each issue of the magazine, a prominent personality was covered. *Shoshyaporbo* edited by Nazmul Albab has been recently published. The magazine contains poems worth reading. Besides, many periodicals such as *Bonotulshi*, *Poth*, *Prokshapon*, *Ahona*, *Shohobash*, *Sangom*, *Adda*, *Onneshon* were published several times from Sylhet.

Sylhet, the city of a bud and two leaves and also of shrines, is a lush place where many enthusiasts of literature and culture were born. It is also affluent, and literary activities in Sylhet are running smoothly with some people here enthusiastically supporting literary activities.

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NOTICE

The Literature Page of The Daily Star will bring out a **Special Eid issue** of English translations of Bengali short stories. All translators, as well would-be translators, who have wanted to be published in a reputed publication, all those who have a favourite Bengali story/s/he thinks ought to be translated should submit their entries. We are looking for stories that depict contemporary life in Bangladesh, by younger, edgier authors who otherwise tend to be given short shrift in standard translation anthologies and collections, as well as the lesser known of short stories written by our classical authors. The short stories ideally should not be more than 3000-3500 words, and first-time translators should be aware that it is extremely taxing to translate stories beyond that length. The translations, along with a copy of the Bangla original (if a photostat, then the reproduction should be clear and legible) should be sent to:
The Literary Editor
The Daily Star, 19 Karwan Bazar, Dhaka -1215
Email: starlit@thedaily.com.net

Entries should be clearly marked
"For Translation Eid Special."
The last date for submissions is August 24.

Separately, the last date for submission of articles for The Daily Star nonfiction anthology has been extended to October 30, 2007.

Elegy for an Empire: *The Last Mughal*

KAISER HAQ

A writer strikes gold--figuratively, if not literally-- when he chances on a subject that engages his whole being. William Dalrymple struck gold both figuratively and literally with his discovery of the eponymous White Mughals of his hugely successful book (2002). The term is apparently his own coinage and designates Occidentals of rank who went native in India: the likes of British Residents at the courts of (Maha)rajahs, Nawabs and Nizams who chewed *paan*, puffed on hookahs, wore pyjamas instead of trousers, married Indian 'bibis' or kept them as mistresses, took at least a dallantantish interest in Indian culture, and sometimes even converted to Islam or adopted Hindu ways.

The White Mughal's heyday was the early colonial phase, from say 1770 till 1830; but pretty soon he had clearly become an oddity, and after the 1857 Uprising he simply wouldn't be tolerated by the new Raj. The colourful hybridity of the White Mughals has long been common knowledge and a subject of historical investigation, e.g. in Percival Spears' *The Nabobs* (1963) and a host of more recent studies. Dalrymple's chief distinction is that he writes beautifully and with passionate empathy (he may in fact be described as a latter-day White Mughal, spending half the year in India). The Urdu literary efflorescence centred on Bahadur Shah Zafar's court, with Zauq and Ghalib locked in implacable rivalry, is vividly evoked, as is the life of the White Mughals around Delhi, among whom there were a few outstanding Urdu poets. Both the major and minor characters caught up in the cataclysm are memorably portrayed. Zinat Mahal, the young Queen, secretly in league with the English, tries till almost the end to have her feckless son recognized as the heir to the throne. The doomed emperor has Lear-like moments when he appoints courtiers as satraps to provinces long out of Mughal control. Denied use of pen and paper as a prisoner, he scribbles verses on the wall with a burnt stick; and gives in to childhood excitement when on his way to exile he sees his first train or contemplates the sea travel that awaits him: sad comedy indeed! The maniacal determination with which the decimated Brits regroup and strike back is the stuff of thrillers.

Two more notable traits of the book should be mentioned, one having to do with intellectual content, the other with its scholarship: Dalrymple extracts from the age of the White Mughal a message for a world apparently trapped between clashing fundamentalisms (to adapt Tariq Ali's phrase); and he makes use of a vast trove of Mutiny Papers in Urdu, recording the experiences of ordinary Indians, which amazingly had all these years lain unexamined in the National Archives in Delhi. Dalrymple cannot, understandably enough, resist the temptation of taking a smart sideswipe at so-called subaltern historians who have increasingly resorted to an off-putting jargon while claiming to resurrect the repressed voices of history. The copious and revealing quotations from the vernacular records will make *The Last Mughal: The fall of a dynasty, Delhi, 1857* (Delhi: Penguin Books, 2007) a useful sourcebook for students.

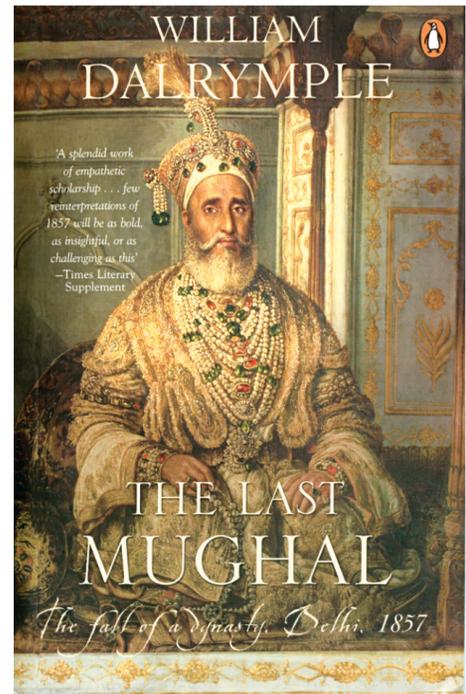
There is a neat connection between the earlier book and *The Last Mughal*. The decline of the White Mughals led to the crisis that finished off the Mughal dynasty. From the time of Lord Cornwallis, who arrived in India fresh from his defeat at the hands of George Washington, through succeeding administrations, Company rule was hardening into a racialist colonialism, with the increasing arrogance and prejudices of the rulers steadily alienating them from the ruled. Matters were not helped by the advent of Evangelical Christianity, whose adherents were to be found not only among the clergy but among Company officials and soldiers as well. Both Hindus and Muslims began to fear that it was British policy to convert them wholesale. The bonhomie that had once bound the Indian soldiers and their British officers quickly eroded. Everyone knows how the Uprising was triggered off by the introduction of the new Enfield rifles and the cartridges greased with cow and pig fat that had to be bitten off before firing.

When rebellious sepoys from Meerut poured into Delhi and proclaimed allegiance to the 82-year-old Bahadur Shah II, he found himself on the horns of a dilemma. He could not countenance the rude manners of his new subjects nor entirely trust them since they had proved themselves capable of treachery. On the other hand, they offered him the only chance to preserve his dynasty: the British had already decided that after his death none of his heirs would succeed to the throne and the Mughal dynasty would become defunct.

Very reluctantly, he assumed leadership of the rebellion.

Despite their initial successes and overwhelming numerical superiority, hindsight reveals that the rebels in Delhi were foredoomed. Among their fatal drawbacks were lack of leadership (the Indian officers were not trained to lead large formations), lack of intelligence (the British by contrast had an efficient spy network in the city and the court), and a threatened rift between the Hindu sepoys and citizenry, on the one hand, and, on the other, the suicide jihadis who flocked to Delhi in increasing numbers. The ruthlessness of the rebellion and of the British reprisals makes sickening reading, but it is the underlying ideological implications that still provide food for thought.

The Sepoy Uprising was a spontaneous outburst



resulting from simmering discontent. It set off a chain reaction that engulfed almost the whole of northern India and cut across religious boundaries. Yet the kangaroo court that tried Bahadur Shah accepted the absurd prosecution claim that he had been the linchpin of a global anti-British conspiracy involving all the Muslim powers from Turkey eastwards, and further, that in this evil design 'Hinduism...is nowhere either reflected or represented.' The post-1857 Raj gave in to cross Islamophobia, which in turn infected the ascendant Hindus, facilitating the divide and rule policy that kept the Empire going until it was time to divide and quit.

Indian Muslim society split into two opposed camps, one advocating westernization and modernization; the other, inspired by Wahabism, advocating total rejection of the West and a return to 'pure Islamic roots'. Once again the latter are producing suicide jihadis to oppose Western neo-imperialism, which echoes the slogans of Evangelical Christianity. Dalrymple concludes that 'the histories of Islamic fundamentalism and Western imperialism have, after all, often been closely, and dangerously, intertwined,' and that 'There are clear lessons here' that the world will be foolish to ignore. Perhaps what we need to drive home the lesson, at least to the intelligent common reader, is a comprehensive multi-volume history of the varied relations -- not always conflictual -- between Christendom and the Muslim world.

Kaiser Haq is professor of English at Dhaka University. The book is widely available in Dhaka bookstores.