

On poet Jasim Uddin's 103rd birthday

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JAMAL ANWAR

JASIM Uddin was born on January 1, 1904, in a small village, Tambulkhana, in the Faridpur district of East Bengal. That was his grandparent's village, only eight miles from his parent's home in Govindapur. He has described these two villages and their manner of life in his autobiography. Many scenes from The Field and Gipsy Wharf have their setting in these villages. In those books, Jasim Uddin is writing of a time when the land of Bengal had fewer problems than it does at present.

In his autobiography, Jasim Uddin tells much more about village life as he knew it. He swam in the ponds and canals, fished in the rainy season, watched the sugar cane being made into treacle, and ate his fair share of this tasty sweet.

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He knew when and where the best mangoes and plums were ripe. When the travelling theatre, the *Jatra*, came to town he and his cousin, Nehaj Uddin, would sneak off and stay up all night listening to the play. Throughout the year they enjoyed both the Hindu and the Moslem holidays.

Jasim Uddin was proud of belonging to the folk tradition of Bengali literature. He was pleased by a comment of one critic who, praising his autobiography, said: "Reading Jasim Uddin's *Jiban Katha* (autobiography) is like eating country cakes from mother's own hand." On his birthday, I reproduce some parts of his autobiography.

In my books *Nakshi Kathar Math* (The Field) and *Sojan Badiar Ghat* (Gipsy Wharf) I was remembering the people of these villages. Even today, this picture of plenty in the villages gives me pleasure when I think about it. If I

could but change this joyless, needy land of today with all its prejudice for that land of happiness, song and prosperity, I would dance for joy.

It was a land of plenty in those days, with no need for much money or hard work. One might say Laksmi, the goddess of wealth, smiled on Bengal. In former days, in every quarter of the village, there were song gatherings. *Gajir* songs, *Jari* songs and *Keccha* songs, which kept the villages in a state of excitement. The fields yielded good harvests. With a little scraping of the plough and a flick of the wrist to sow the seed, green sprouts appeared, covering the paddy fields as far as the horizon. The rivers, canals and ponds swarmed with fish. One had only to scoop them out by hand. Very few things were bought with money. For a few sheaves of paddy, the blacksmith would forge a plough, the barber would cut hair, the potter make pots; for a little mustard seed the local oil presser would deliver mustard oil to every home. Even now, this method is in use in the villages.

To myself, I kept praising my mother. My mother knows so much. Receiving the magic touch of my mother's hand, the bits of rice and treacle would become such delicious rice cakes and be transformed into something new. This is the task of every artist. He takes what he has to work with and, manipulating it according to his liking gives it new life.

When I must give up something today it is not difficult for me to do so. Besides this discipline, the knowledge I obtained when a boy, of the Hindu gods and goddesses, of the method of accomplishing tasks that at first seem impossible, has helped me immensely in my creative work. The literature of this land (Bengal) is not merely Hindu literature, nor can it be said to be Moslem literature. Since both Hindus and Moslems have written in one language (Bengali), the literature of this land is both Hindu and Moslem. Those who would separate the two and write literature will not last many days, I am

sure. Because of the universality of appeal in the world of literature, sectarian thought is out of place there. If my own writing has achieved anything of universal appeal, then it is thanks to that *sannasi*.

The *sannasi* probably had the strongest influence of any person outside his family on Jasim Uddin. The boy did, however, have other friends who helped him, particularly with his poetry. His interest began when he was very young, perhaps seven or eight years old.

I only remember something he said one day. I had asked the Pandit: 'I want to write Bengali books. You give me some good advice. What shall I do to succeed in this?'

Laughing he replied: 'You are a Bengali boy. Whatever you write will be Bengali. For that, there is nothing you need do. Whatever you have to say, write it in the same manner as all are talking to me. That will be your best composition.' All my life I have tried to apply the advice of this pandit to my work (ibid).

One day it suddenly occurred to me; how would it be if I wrote the words in my notebook in the same ready manner that I composed oral poetry? After writing three or four of my couplets in the notebook I was astonished.

There were fourteen syllables in every line and the last syllable of every line rhymed with the second line's last syllable. I doubt whether Columbus discovering America felt such joy as I felt at this discovery. For so many days I was accustomed to composing my verse to a tune.

Without a tune I could not compose the words in poetical metre. Now that had I discovered how to find the rhythm for my verse, who could hold me back? I filled notebook after notebook (*Jiban Katha*, 1964).

Thus, Jasim Uddin started reciting and composing poems at a very early age. By the time he was a student at Faridpur Rajendra College his poetry had already won him some fame.

Kobor (Graves) was prescribed

as the text for the Matriculation Examination at Calcutta University when Jasim Uddin was still a student in the I. A. Class (Rajendra College, under Calcutta University)

Barbara Painter, Washington, USA writes:

"Gipsy Wharf and The Field, I think, are among Jasim Uddin's major works, but he is a versatile and prolific writer. Like another famous Bengali poet, Rabindranath Tagore, Jasim Uddin has tried his pen in almost every field, like *Boba Kahini* (Tale of an illiterate man) 1964. He has written many short dance dramas: *Beder Meye*, 1951 (The Gipsy Girl), *Madhumala* 1956 (from the fairy tale of Princess Madhumala), *Palli Badhu* (Village Bride) 1956, the plot of which, he writes, is borrowed from Tagore. Jasim Uddin has also collected and rewritten numerous folk tales and folk music (*Jari Gan*, *Murshida Gan*. He has published two volumes *Banglar Hashir Galpa* (Laughing Tales of Bengal), and Vol. 1, 1961, Vol. 2, 1964. Among Jasim Uddin's song books, perhaps the best are *Rangila Nayer Majhi* (Boatman of the Gay Boat) 1933 and *Padma Par* (The Banks of the Padma River) 1949. Foremost of his lyrics are the books *Rakhali* (Pastoral Poems) 1929, *Balu Char* (The Sandbank) 1930, *Dhan Khet* (The Paddy Field) 1932. Other important lyrics written recently are in the books *Rupavati* 1946 and *Sakhina* 1960 (both girls' names). The first book of lyrics published after the partition of India-Pakistan, when the poet moved permanently to Dacca, was the book *Matir Kanna* (Sorrows of the Earth) 1955. This book has been translated into Russian.

During Second World War, poet Nazrul Islam was selected by the British government to head Song Publicity of Calcutta Information Ministry. As Nazrul was sick Jasim Uddin was summoned for this post from Dhaka University (Prothom Alo, January 3, 2003).

Jasim Uddin wrote and tuned folk songs which are still celebrated in the air and sky of Bengal.

Jasim Uddin is not only a famous composer, he also gave all the tunes of his songs which are documented in gramophone records. Jasim Uddin collected several thousand folk songs from

rural Bengal under the guidance of Prof. Dinesh Chandra Sen as a Ramtanu Lahiri Scholar. He has written two books, *Jari Gan* and *Murshida Gan*.

Songs like *O Amar Daradi*, *O Tui Jare aghat Hanlire Nadir Kul Nai O Amar Gahin Ganer Naya Ujan Ganger Naya*, *Nishite Jao Phulo Bane*, *Prano shokhi re oi shone kodombo tole* or *O amar dorodi age janle*, and many others still persist, and have been the backbone of Bengali folk music in this country. "Come to the garden by night" *Nishite Jao Phul bane*, *O Bhomora* Come to the garden by night. My bee.

I shall stay up the night
Lighting the lamp of moon
And talking to the dew drops
My bee.

Come to the garden by night
Should I fall asleep
Tread softly my bee,
Do not break the branch
Or crush my flowers.
Or awaken the flower that is asleep
Come to the garden by night.
My bee.

One of the most popular songs of Jasim Uddin, "Come to Garden by Night," and "Bandhu Rangila," sung by famous Sachin Dev Barman (to immortalise the name of Sachin Dev Barman the West Bengal government did a lot of things and named some memorials after him. Recently, a centenary was celebrated on him with great pomp and grandeur).

Even thirty years after the death of poet Jasim Uddin, nothing has been done by the governments of BNP, Awami League or the present regime. We offered the governments opening of a national museum at the poet's residence to preserve the heritage of tradition and true culture of Bangladesh, but this was not accepted.

Jasim Uddin's deep involvement in non-communal socio-political movements championing the cause of Bengali language and literature gives his lyric and folks poetry a keen edge of commitment and protest. His poems are as popular as part of school curricula in West Bengal, India as they are in Bangladesh.

A country cannot exist without preserving its cultural and national heritage. The independence of Bangladesh itself has been a statement -- that a state cannot be run on the basis of religion



alone, it should take into account other factors like language and ethnicity into consideration.

It is no surprise then that the first constitution of Bangladesh rightly incorporated secularism as one of the guiding principles of the new country.

Jasim Uddin was the champion for the Bangladesh freedom movement, taking the risk of publish-

ing and distributing the poems on the War of Independence -- about 17 poems all over the world -- which created sympathy for liberation.

What we need more urgently now is the strategic vision of what the government must do, how to do it, and when these visions would become a reality. This would bolster the people to act as a united

force of the nation on different fronts, the way the people reacted on the political front to the call for independence in 1971.

On our part, as a small effort, we have started a small museum at the poet's residence in Ambikapur, Faridpur, and a website: www.jasimuddin.org.

Dr. Jamal Anwar, son of Poet Jasim Uddin, writes from Berlin, Germany.

Life in alluvial lands

The dream was like this -- these people will never stop or face obstacles because they are enriched with nature's six seasons. There will be plenty of food, shelter, clothes, and people's fundamental right. The world will look at this golden country with admiration. But, the rivers, which were the source of the natural resources of our agriculture, started drying up, and the people surviving on these rivers started chasing them. A very hard chase indeed!

SHYKH SERAJ

INDEPENDENCE... The long-cherished goal of Bengalis achieved at the cost of millions of lives and immense sacrifice. On December 16th, 1971, this message of liberation reached every corner of the country, from

the state-stratum to every profession, nature and rivers.

The Bangladesh of our dreams started marching ahead with its 80% marginal and agriculture-based people. No more existence of mal-regime of any *burgadars*, aggressors or oppressors. It's time to move onward with commit-

ment. There are over 25000 kms of fertile land, which gives you plants when you sow seeds, and the seeds mean crops, which is the definite way of living.

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There will be plenty of food, shelter, clothes, and people's fundamental right. The world will look at this golden country with admiration. But, the rivers, which were the source of the natural resources of our agriculture, started drying up, and the people surviving on these rivers started chasing them. A very hard chase indeed!

Erosion of rivers is an inevitable calamity for the people living in the coastal belt. The map of the original country surrounded by rivers changed. The rivers, which were a blessing, turned violent, sometimes destructive, and ultimately a curse.

Nature changes everything --

our homes, crops, and the society as well. How long people can stand this? It is a chain of devastation, the victims of which are our unfortunate, landless, and aimless people.

Padma, Meghna, Jamuna, Tista, Madhumati, and Brahmaputra -- all these rivers are eroding in their own ways. And, in each and every community living on the river-side, the burden of sufferings of the river-eroded people is increasing day by day.

Thousands of unfortunate and river-eroded people of Mymensingh, thousands of unlucky people at the Meghna bank of Chandpur, millions of river-eroded people of Mymensingh and Jamalpur, or the people residing by the Brahmaputra of Gaibandha, the 22% alluvial-land inhabitants of the total land-area of Sirajgonj, or on the extensive Padma of Rajshahi, the life-sketches of the river-eroded people are all the same. Apart from this, countless river-eroded people's uncertain lives pose a threat to the urban life-style.

The freedom fighters, Meser Uddin or Aftab Hossain, can't reconcile the present situation with the dreams of independence, what they expected and what they got ultimately. They have turned totally destitute.

Sazzad Hossain lives in Gobindapur of Rajshahi. He came from India to Bangladesh during the Hindu-Muslim riot, exchanging his property. During that time, he led a happy life on the bank of Padma. He had wealth, cultivable land, and grew abundance of crops.

Due to repeated river-erosions, he became a destitute and was ruined. Standing on Char Jazeera of Poba Upazila, Rajshahi, he was saying: "Once you are a victim of river erosion, then there is no way to stand on your feet." He gives labour to the fields owned by others. He didn't get any lands of the river-tenancy... most of the lands are under illegal possession of the tenure-holders or *Jotdars*.

Chars are all around, as far as you can see. On one side, there are landless destitute people. With their lands eroded by river, their lives are also eroded. And, on the other hand, there are the violent land-dacoits and illegal possessors. Although there are no *zamindars* or *neelkors* anymore, these people are continuing oppression with a changed name.

Due to the river erosion and regular change of the river route, Rajshahi is faced with fighting for survival against nature's brutality. Only in Rajshahi, there are 73 alluvial lands, among which Bagha, Charchat, Poba and Godagari Upazila have 21 alluvial land *moujas* (land areas) alone, where at least 30,000 river-eroded people live.

Once upon a time, Padma was regarded as the mighty river... now it is only full of sand where there were households of the people and cultivable land. All through the day, there is hectic work of the sand-trade; trucks are running here and there on the sands. And, within this, there are the temporary households of the river-eroded people who are living somehow.

Cattle-sheds for the cows and buffaloes are there on the chars as well, and they shepherd others' cattle on contract. The ruins of the char have also engulfed the animals, which are given water from Padma. They don't have the capacity to buy cattle-foods. It's a real nightmare!

The fate of these river-eroded people lies in the alluvial lands, fighting for survival with nature's brutality. Although rivers have destroyed their lives again and again, they can't leave the rivers. The char is their final destination.

Here on these sand-lands, at some places we noticed a little bit of greenery peeping where there was cultivation. But, in this cultivation, there is no evident partnership of the alluvial land inhabitants. The landless people can't just

start cultivation in the free sand-area at their will.

The khaas lands are all under the possession of the landlords. Most of the landowners have an extra illegal possession of 4/5 bighas of khaas lands beyond their 10/12 bighas of actual possession. Here, power works, the poor having no value.

I noticed a group of kids who were cutting the arid top of the kash tree. They are of the new generation who are mingling entirely with the nature of the sand-areas. 10 years old Rubel has seen river erosion 4 times within the short span of his life.

Since his birth, he had been with the landless people. I recollect 40 year old Baniz, the van driver of Fulchori ghat in Gaibandha, who said the distress of the river erosion had started long ago and his father was also landless. Confronted with river-erosion, the number of these landless people has been growing during the last 40-50 years or so.

According to the experts, out of 489 Upazilas of the country, 150 Upazilas are affected by river erosion. With river erosion, the number of landless people is also increasing. Bangladesh faces a nightmarish picture, with the miseries of the people affected by the river erosion.

At one stage, there is no sign of *Mouza*, *Daag*, *Khatian* or *Porcha* or even title deed. All these are now memories, which have got no real value. Abul Kalam is a grocery owner of Char Jazeera.

He possesses some papers of lands, which has no value at all. The existence of alluvial land is also threatened. These ruined people, specially these landless labourers, are crowding Dhaka city every day. A farmer who was quite solvent once upon a time is now facing a tragic life after migrating to the capital.

Many of them are plying rickshaws, but many of them can't get to manage that also. These people

also saw the dream of liberation and pledged to build a new country and society.

The millions of people affected by river-erosion are now living below the poverty line. 60% of marginal farmers are now landless and 3 crore out of 5 crore population are in the same condition. This number is increasing day by day. On the other hand, the size of alluvial land in the country is about 1800 sq. km. The people affected by river-erosion are also deprived from the civil rights as well as the laws of river acquisition and tenancy.

Even, the khaas lands belonging to landless people are under the possession of influential *Jotdars*. According to an estimate of economists, the number of landless families is 1 crore in the country and the size of khaas land is 2 crore bigha. If the huge land is distributed among the landless farmers, then each family can be the owner of 2 bighas of land. But, the Land Reform Act proposal is also ignored.

Lacs of destitute people of alluvial lands are moving from one alluvial land to another alluvial land without getting any help from any quarter. Even, the government has not helped them with improved agricultural methods.

During the last 20-25 years, NGOs have spent thousands of crores in the name of poverty alleviation, but has poverty been alleviated? The poverty is increasing with the increasing population.

Their miseries are engulfing the whole country but the government has no long-term plan and effective measures to address their problems. If these people, deprived from all sorts of rights, can't get back their rights... independence will be meaningless.

Shykh Seraj is Agriculture Development Activist and Media Personality and Director and Head of News Channel-L.



A farmer's heart and soul effort to remove sands from his cultivable land. Lalmonirhat, Tista Char, Chinatoli Village.