## SHORT STORY

NAEEM AARVI (Translated from the Urdu story 'Godhra Camp' by Nirupama Dutt and Pratik Kanjilal)

The wind was blowing in her hair. Her face was distorted with rage and both her hands tightly clenched the barbed wire. Blood trickled from her clenched fists down her wrists. She was staring about her crazily and shouting:

"Shams...uddin...Shamsu...ddin." Beyond the barbed wire, a crowd had gathered by the sand dune. In the fenced area, four or five Bengali women were trying to pull her away from the barbed wire, but it was impossible. She was oblivious to everything around her. When she opened her mouth to scream, her big, black eyes flashed with fear and pain. Her haunting cry pierced the darkness of the night: "Shamsu...Shamsu...uddin...

People passing by the dune stopped out of curiousity. Quite a crowd had gathered there. People were whispering and exchanging notes. A young man who looked like a motor mechanic got tired of the speculation. In an unmistakable refugee accent, he told the crowd that the woman was mad. She enacted the same scene every day. Her husband was in the army and posted at Etabaad. One day, he escaped with other Bengalis to Dhaka, joined the Mukti Bahini and died in battle. When the news came home, she lost her mind. She often gets these fits and every time she clutches the barbed wire and shouts. The young man finished his story and looked triumphantly at the people who had been listening to him with rapt attention. "Oh! So she is mad and the wife of Bengali traitor.'

"Is she really mad?" "Yes, she is."

"All right, all right." The crowd soon dispersed. In a few moments, all was quiet but for the rustling of the sand in the heat of the sun. The madwoman was gone. The torn end of her sari hung from the barbed wire, swaying like a corpse. But her heartrending screams still seemed to echo in the big, bare maidan.

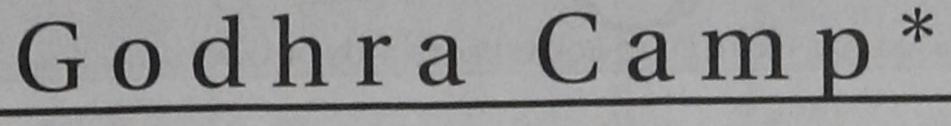
"Shamsu...Shamsuddin... A colony of flats was being built near the Godhra Camp. Work proceeded at a snail's pace. In the beginning, people were curious about the flats, but they soon lost interest. The bus would drive right past the site and

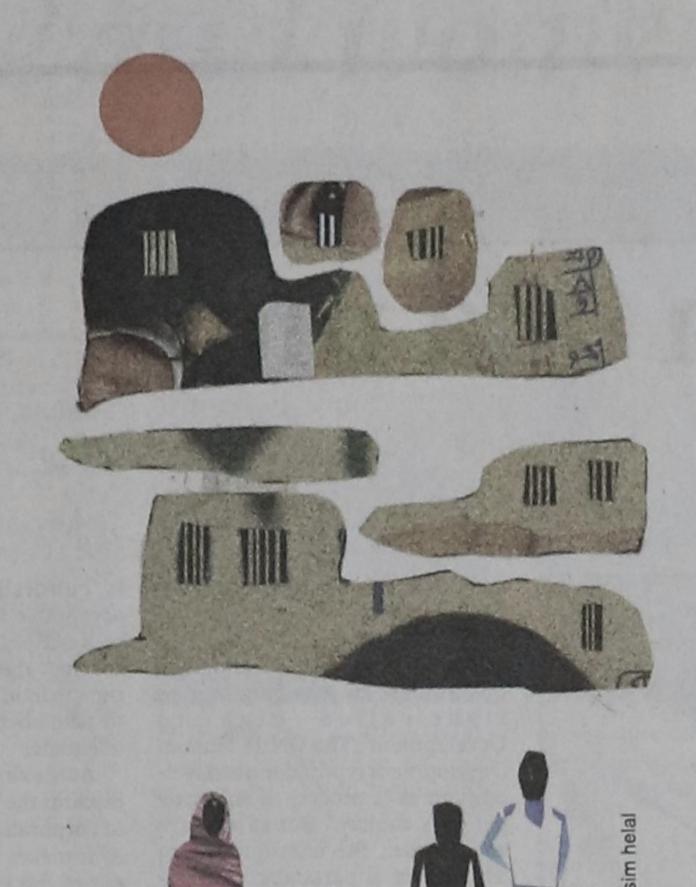
one could scarcely believe that these flats being built in the big, sandy maidan would one day be homes. That this desert would become a hamlet full of people. We used to pass the site without a second glance, and, if it were ever mentioned, we would say in bored voices, "Yes, we do pass the Godhra Camp on our way."

But often, things do not happen quite as we imagine. In fact, precisely the opposite happens. I passed that way day after day and had little interest in the place. But one day I gazed at the site, amazed. Two bulldozers were leveling the ground and barbed wire fence was being set up around it. It looked like a POW camp from World War II. A gate and a sentry-post had been set up. Searchlights turned the night as bright as day. Several labourers were hard at work.

Surprised, I wiped the lenses of my spectacles and looked more closely. A middle-aged patriotic townsman sitting by my side stroked his bear and said, "By the grace of Allah, the Bengali traitors have been grounded." I couldn't understand what he was saying. The patriot went on to explain, "I work in a bungalow of the Defence Society. The owner is a retired colonel. He told me that for the time being Godhra Camp will house the families of Bengalis who had defected from the Pakistan Air Force. They will be kept in captivity here." Bade Mian cautiously stroked his bear and said, "You know, these people turned out to be snakes. These rascals are Muslims, but they joined the Hindus. They have ruined Pakistan! These little darkies have given us hell. How long could Pakistan put up with

Godhra Camp then came to be inhabited by Bengali families. Passing that way, one would see the five blocks of six-storey flats where they were under house arrest. Morning and evening, one would see middle-aged men with unshaven chins sitting on the benches, poring over The Pakistan Times. One could make them out in their lungis and vests from afar. Darkskinned children ran about, screaming, shouting or playing cricket. Ince in a wile, disturbed by the din, an old man would look up from his newspaper and, pushing his spectacles up on his forehead, shout, "Ai chele, gondogol korona (Hey, boy, stop this bedlam)." Sometimes the widow of a flat would fly open and a woman would lean out and shout, "Taara-taarhi aisho! (Come quickly!)"





The barbed wire served as a clothesline. Wet saris, lungis, sheets, vests and children's knickers swayed on it like bulletriddled bodies. The camp was closely guarded. The armed sentry at the gate would not allow anyone through without a pass. There was a tent by the post where the sentries off duty hung around. When the madwoman appeared, grabbed the barbed wire and bloodied her hands, a sentry would get up and try to send her away.

Days passed without any change in this routine. The people around were a trifle disappointed. Now, whenever the discussion turned political among bus passengers, people would lament over the betrayal by the Bengalis.

"Bengalis have never been true to

anyone, and nor will they ever be. Just wait and watch--they will ruin India too some day."

"...Mujib was always a traitor. He was a separatist right from the beginning."

...No, the Bengalis loved the land. East Bengal had taken the lead in supporting the creation of Pakistan. Sher-e-Bangla Fazlul Haq had proposed the creation of Pakistan."

"All this is rubbish. The Bengalis had opposed Quaid-e-Azam when he declared Urdu to be the only national language of Pakistan. They had shouted slogans against him. They are the ones who kept saying that West Pakistan had looted East Pakistan. They are the ones who sowed the seeds of hatred and separatism. Everyone knows this!"

"Neither is Mujib a traitor, not are the Bengalis treacherous. The people of West Pakistan have not looted the people of East Pakistan. People of both sides are poor and thus victims. Those who loot are in peace on both sides."

"Pakistan has Bengal because of the black deeds

of the Pakistani politicians. Bengal has torn itself apart because of poverty and injustice," said an educated man. Some nodded in agreement. Others mumbled under their breath, tuning their faces to the windows. "They are Communist swine...

Communists." "Bhai main, I feel the blame lies with

Yahya. The colourful rascal ruined the whole country." "Why Yahya? Why don't you blame

Bhutto? He had said that Khuda had saved Pakistan. Tell me, how has Pakistan been saved? What is left of it? Bhutto destroyed

"But what did Bhutto do?" "He gave Yahya bad advice. He kept the government in the dark. He humiliated the army, just to gain power."

"If Bhutto's advice was bad, why did Yahya Khan and his cronies act on it? Didn't they have any brains? Bhai, why not call it the result of martial law? Anything is possible under martial law. The people in power are to blame. Forget Bhutto, it's Yahya who calls the shots."

"And are they your fathers, those people who fly the Bangladeshi flags on their cars

going to Dhanmondi?" At this point in the conversation, a quarrel followed. Beginning with verbal abuse, it culminated in fisticuffs. Usually, though, the argument would stop short of that. After a few moments, emotions would subside and people would calm down. People no longer had the strength to quarrel. Sometimes a passenger who had been fast asleep would wake with a start, hearing the loud voices, and try and placate the angry people, "Bhaiyon, why are you fighting? Go after the people who are at the root of all this. Are we to dance to the tune of those in power? Tch! Tch!"

The minibus stopped with a jolt near Godhra Camp. Passengers seemed to have been waiting there for quite some time. My eyes wandered toward the camp. It was completely deserted. Not a soul in sight. Even the burly armed guards from Mianwali and Jhelum were missing. The main gate was ajar. Pages torn from books and tufts of cotton from old pillows whirled in the wind in the maidan. The benches were gone. So were the middle-aged, unshaven Bengalis who had once sat there, carefully scanning The Pakistan Times and scolding naughty children. There were no women either--the women who had worked all day in their kitchens and opened their windows to call their children in. All those sweet, dusky children who had played and quarreled all day long in the maidan had gone away too. The doors and windows of the flats looked spooky. No sign of life anywhere.

In spite of myself, I turned to the man with a running nose sitting beside me and asked him where everyone had gone. He looked me up and down and then wiped his nose with his thick, ugly fingers. The he said in a choked voice, "They were Bengalis. They have gone off to Bangladesh. Bhutto made a mistake by releasing Mujib and the other Bengalis. He should have first sorted out the issue of the Biharis who are suffering there. Those poor Biharis..."

The camp was deserted for a long time,

but the flats were bound to be allotted to other people soon. I wanted to go in and see them. The Bengalis had lived there under tremendous stress, and perhaps had left telltale signs behind. It would have been interesting to see them. The new occupants would paint them over.

What interest could they possibly have in them?

A week went by, and there was no change in the Godhra Camp. I was slowly losing interest, and then one day it took me by surprise. It was like a scene remembered from a film. The camp was teeming with people who looked just like those Bengalis. Sweet, dusky children played in the maidan, dirty and naked. The men had dusty faces and the women seemed tired, burdened with endless household chores. Their eyes betrayed fear and torment, telling the tale of the nightmare they had lived through. I got off the minibus to seen the camp of the Bihari refugees up close. There was only difference between the Bengali and Bihari camps: this time, there were no armed guards. Otherwise, this new camp was exactly like its predecessor.

A middle-aged woman sat by the barbed wire, drawing lines in the sand. A Bihari woman always keeps her head covered but this woman's head was bare. Her sari was dirty and patched. She saw me and lifted her head. I cannot describe the anguish in her eyes. She stared at me, her eyes vacant. The she came up to me.

"Nihal mila thha--Nihal? Babus, Nihal mil jahe to kahiyo tumhari Ma intezar karat hai...(Did you find Nihal? Young man, if you find Nihal tell him that his mother waits for him.)"

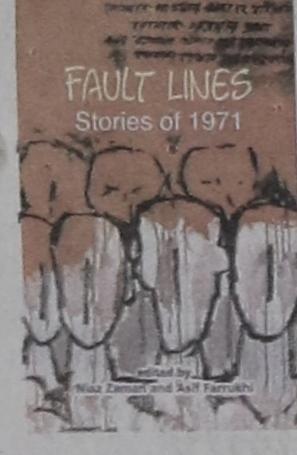
The minibus was crowded when I returned in the evening. When the bus reached Godhra, a young man who looked like a vegetable seller opened the window and looked the camp over. A sly smile played on his lips. He turned to his friend and said, "Rashid, we'll come here tomorrow. I've heard that there are many women here. Women without men."

\*Reprinted with permission from The Little Magazine. Included in Fault Lines: Stories from 1971 reviewed below. Naeem Aarvi (1946-2003) was born in Bihar and migrated to Karachi, Pakistan in 1947, where he worked as a journalist. He published five volumes of short stories, the last of which was a collection of three novellas. Nirupama Dutt is a poet/translator who lives in Chandigarh, India. Pratik Kanjilal is the co-editor of The Little Magazine.

## Idealistic Conviction

MASRUFA AYESHA NUSRAT

ay back I had read Pakistani writer Umme Umara's short story about 1971, 'The Sin of Innocence,' in a collection of stories from Pakistan. It was the



first time I read Pakistani writers on our liberation war. After that, however, I could not access any more of their writing on this subject. Until now, when Professor Niaz Zaman and Asif Farrukhi from Bangladesh and Pakistan have jointly edited Fault Lines: Stories of 1971 (Dhaka: UPL; 2008).

Umme Umara's story, coincidentally, is the first one here. The volume is noteworthy for its attempt to portray the diverse, complicated experience of 1971 from both sides, with stories translated from Bangla, Urdu, Punjabi and Sindhi, as well as some originally written in English. Translations rather than stories written originally in English form the main bulk of the book.

Most of the stories by Bangladeshi writers narrate heroic tales of freedom fighters during the nine months. Fiction by Akhteruzzaman Elias, Humayun Ahmed, Syed Manzoorul Islam, Kazi Fazlur Rahman and Manju Sharker fall within this category. A vital theme covered by Bangladeshis is the contribution of biranganas, or war heroines. 'Double War' by Selina Hossain, Parag Chowdhury's 'Why Does Durgati Weep' and 'What Price Honour' by Rizia Rahman are stories that not only depict feminine bravery but also underline the fate of women in a liberated country where promises made were not kept. Shaheen Akhter's 'She Knew the Use of Powdered Pepper' is an intriguing story of a madwoman's repeated escapes from the clutches of the enemy, underscoring the problem of not recognizing a real birangana. The subject of ordinary people confronting the brutality of war is also another preoccupation of Bangladeshi authors. Among these are 'A Day in Bhushan's Life' by Hasan Azizul Haq, 'The Daughter' by Saleha Chowdhury, Shaukat Osman's 'The Bill,' and 'Returning Home: 1972' by Purabi Basu. 'The Body' by Afsan Choudhury illustrates the Pakistan army's savagery as the decapitated, circumsized body of a Muslim man saves a Hindu family from certain death.

Contrary to some impressions, Pakistani writers were not totally silent about the '71 war. A number of them use a surrealistic style in depicting the war, where the manner of story telling is more prominent than content. This new trend influenced Pakistani writing after '71, observes Asif Farrukhi in his half of the editorial note. It is noticeable in 'Versions of Truth' by Masood Ashar where we read, "Truth has so many faces. One man's truth can

negate another man's truth. And when so many versions of truth clash, everything becomes an absurdity, loses all meaning, all sense." A remarkable story by Golam Mohammad, 'The Travelers,' is a despairing tale from the viewpoint of some Bangladeshi villagers. A story by the Indian writer Mohan Kalpana shows the dangers of how excessive jingoism. Pakistani writer Masud Mufti's 'Sleep' demonstrates how war can blind us to the truth when the Pakistani army mistakenly kills a sleeping West Pakistani in Dhaka. Pakistani authors also focus on the problem of Biharis who could not settle permanently anywhere after the '47 partition and the '71 war. Yet others emphasize how war in general divided people's life in South Asia for generations. Umme Umara's tale, written in this light of partition and dislocation, is also a rare example of Urdu writing from the former East Pakistan. Interestingly, Bangladeshi writers Khademul Islam's 'An Ilish Story' and Neeman Sobhan's 'The Year of the Iron Dog', written originally in English, also depict '71 as an extension and repercussion of the '47 partition. Asif Farrukhi's 'Expelled,' recalls uneasily

his 'fish-eating' Bengali buddy Abdul Batin, who was bullied as a "traitor" in school and never returned to it even after the missionary teachers made his classmates publicly apologize to him. Niaz Zaman's 'A Lucky Escape' touches on the topic of forgiveness and reconciliation.

The bright crimson dust-jacket makes for an attractive package in spite of the occasional errors in grammar and printing. The selection of stories from Bangladesh, I felt, could have been more relevant. Similarly, some stories from Pakistan such as, 'Fork Lift No. 352' and 'A Grave Turned Inside-Out' are not directly linked with '71 but war in general.

The socio-political background in the foreword provides ample information about '71 but the editors' personal accounts and political perspectives clearly do not represent their nations. Although Professor Niaz Zaman welcomed the liberation war of Bangladesh wholeheartedly, she repeatedly questions the Father of the Nation Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's contribution to the independence movement. On the other hand Asif Farrukhi's narration of "double loss," of a fractured land and loss of a language, may not reflect the majority sentiment of his country. This personal prelude may be dangerously confusing and misleading for the younger generation. However, this collection is a brilliant attempt and an essential read for all those, from both countries, who want to get some insight into the "other side" of the story of '71. Fault Lines clearly sprang from an idealistic conviction: that the tales of '71 should be told, heard and shared by all, no matter how differently we view the war.

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## Buddhadev Bose and 1971: bhadralok communalism?

KHADEMUL ISLAM

uddhadev Bose was a prolific letter writer. In Amar Chelebela he narrates how during his Noakhali childhood he was his family's designated letter writer, and about its post office and indolent postmaster. In Amar Joubon he rues the loss of several hundred letters to ravenous termites. Now we have Buddhadev Bosur Chithi, a collection of his letters written to his younger daughter Damayanti Singh Bose from 1962 till his death in 1974. These were first published--178 out of roughly 300--in 1988-89 in West Bengal's Desh magazine. They have been reprinted in a 256-page volume, the language even in these informal, sometimes-dashed-off missives gleaming like zamindari heirlooms. Its flow is marred by busy footnotes by Damayanti, who otherwise has penned a loving tribute to him. In these pages Buddhadev emerges as a conscientious, affectionate father and family man. No less valuable is the portrait drawn of '60s Calcutta, its gritty materiality.

It was therefore with shock that I came upon the letters written during 1971. Three out of a total of 16 refer to our independence war. The first is in a letter dated 23 March, 1971:

পূর্ববাংলা বিষয়ে, দুঃখের বিষয়, আমি প্রদীপের উৎসাহে যোগ দিতে পারছি না ি এ থেকে পশ্চিম বাংলায় এক নতুন দুর্যোগ দেখা দিতে পারে, সত্যি বলতে তার লক্ষণ এখনই দেখা দিয়েছে, এখনই রব তোলা হচ্ছে পশ্চিম বাংলা 'বিদেশী কর্তৃক শাসিত''—যে-কথা আমার মতে মারাশ্বক। ব্যক্তিগত কারণে, আর উপায়ান্তর নেই ব'লেও, আমি আজকের দিনের দুঃসহ কলকাতায় বাস করছি—কিন্তু যেমন বাংলাদেশ তেমনি ভারতবর্ষ আমার কাছে অতি সত্য; ভারতবর্ষ ও হিন্দু ঐতিহ্য থেকে বিচ্ছিন্ন ক'রে আমি আমার নিজের অভিত্ব কলনা করতে পারি না। "হিন্দু" বলতে "সাম্প্রদায়িক" কিছু ভাবিস না—তোর এলিয়ট যে-অর্থে হিন্দু আমিও সেই

ছিল, যে-কোনো সভ্য দেশে যা হ'তো, তা এই দুই দেশের স্বাতন্ত্র্য সম্পূর্ণ মেনে নেবার পরে মৈত্রী ও ব্যবসায়িক ও অন্য সব বিনিম্ম; — 'দুই বাংলা এক হোক'—এ-কথা কখনো যেন আমরা না বলি, আমরা বলবো— ভারত পাকিস্তানে মৈত্রী চাই', সেটাই সত্য পথ ও ফলপ্রসৃ পথ, কিন্তু বাঙালির অনপনেয় সেন্টিমেন্টাল উচ্ছাস সেই পথ ছেড়ে এক আবেগের কুছেলি সৃষ্টি করছে, এটাকে আমি একেবারেই ভালো চোখে দেখতে পারছি না। To which Damayanti puts in a footnote: ৩। "মৃক্তিবৃদ্ধ"-র সমর সেটা। মাত্রাহীন ভাবাবেণে ভেলে পার্টিশনের সমর বাংলাদেশ যেমন পাঞ্জাবের মতো 'টোটাল মাইত্রেশন' দাবি করলো না, মৃক্তিযুদ্ধের সময়েও বাঙালি হিতাহিত ভূলে রোমান্টিক স্বশ্ন দেখছিলো একতার। বাবা রাজনীতিজ ছিলেন না, তপুপরি

অর্থেই, এবং এলিয়ট যে-কারণে শেষ পর্যন্ত খৃষ্টান, আমিও সেই কারণেই শেষ পর্যন্ত হিন্দু। যেটা হওয়া উচিত

'আদি নিবাসে'র প্রতি তাঁর (এবং আমার মা-র) টানও ছিলো যথেষ্ট, তবু অবিভক্ত বাংলার পুনরাবৃত্তি যে কখনো সম্ভব নয়, সেটা কম্যেও

নয়, এটা তিনি সহজে বুঝেছিলেন। বাঙালির তাৎক্ষণিক আবেগ এক অভিশাপ। এ প্রসঙ্গে একটা আর্জি রাখি। আমাদের পূর্ববঙ্গ যেহেতু এখন ''বাংলাদেশ'', ভারতীয় বাঞ্জলিরা নিজের দেশ বিষয়ে কথা বলংখ গিয়ে পদে-পদে হোঁচট খান। 'পশ্চিমবঙ্গ' নামটি ইভিহাস, ভূগোল, রাজনীতি এবং ঐতিহ্য—সব দিক থেকেই সম্পূর্ণ অর্থহীন। সারা ভারতে আমত্তাই শুধু অর্ধাস রাজ্যের নাগরিক নই, এবং নাম-বদল এখন সারা দুনিয়ার আখছার ঘটছে। এখনো বলি আমত্তা এই "পশ্চিম" আখ্যাটি খেকে আমাদের বাংলা-কে মুক্ত না করি একটা রাশ্লনৈতিক অনাচার ঘটবে অদুর ভবিষ্যতে। একটি সার্বিক চেহারা, এবং সার্বিক সম্ভ প্রতিষ্ঠা করে এ পার বাংলার নাম হ্যেক "বাংলা" অথবা "বঙ্গ"। ভারতবর্ষের মধ্য-পূর্বপ্রান্তের প্রদেশ আমাদের বাংলা 'পশ্চিম' কোনোভাবেই নয়। পূৰ্ববালো নেই অথচ পশ্চিমবালো আছে, এ কেমন ব্যবস্থা।

Then in a 12 April 1971 letter he wrote:

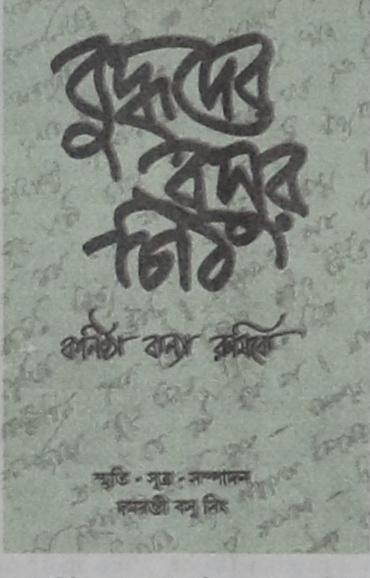
ইতিমধ্যে আমাদের এখানে ঈবং উত্তেজনার হাওয়া বয়ে গেলো—পর্ব রাত্রে কৃষ্টিয়া চুয়াভাঙা থেকে পাঁচটি পূর্ববালোর যুবক এসে উপস্থিত—একজন কবি (নাম আবু জাফর) অন্যরা আওয়ামি লীগের কর্মী। কাল সকালে আবার এলো তারা—অনেককণ ধ'রে অনেক কথাবার্তা হ'লো—দৈবাৎ জ্যোতিরাও এলো সেই সময়ে, আবু জাফর জ্যোতির বাড়িতে চ'লে গেল। ওরা এসেছে বাংলায় নম্বর লেখা 'স্বাধীন বাংলা'র নিশেন-জড়ানো একটা জর্মান ফোল্পবোগেনে, কলকাতার ও পশ্চিম বাংলার রাস্তার-রাস্তার বহু সংবর্ধনা পেতে-পেতে। ছেলেওলোকে বেশ লাগলো জানিস, কথাবাতা সংযত, হৈ-চৈ উচ্ছাস কিছু নেই, ইয়া-ইয়া খান বা ভুট্টোকে কোনো গালমন্দও করলো না। কালকেই স্বস্থানে ফিরে গেছে ওরা, আর আন্ধ একটু আগে, রেডিওতে বললো কুছিয়াতে বোমা পড়েছে, শিলাইদহে রবীন্দ্রনাথের বাড়িও নাকি বাদ যায়নি। ছেলেগুলোকে আবার দেখবো কিনা ভাবছি। ঘটনা যা ঘটছে তা অনেকটা কমিয়ে ধরলেও অকথ্য, কিন্তু পশ্চিম বাংলার ন্যাকামি আর কাছাকাটিও সীমা ছাড়িয়ে

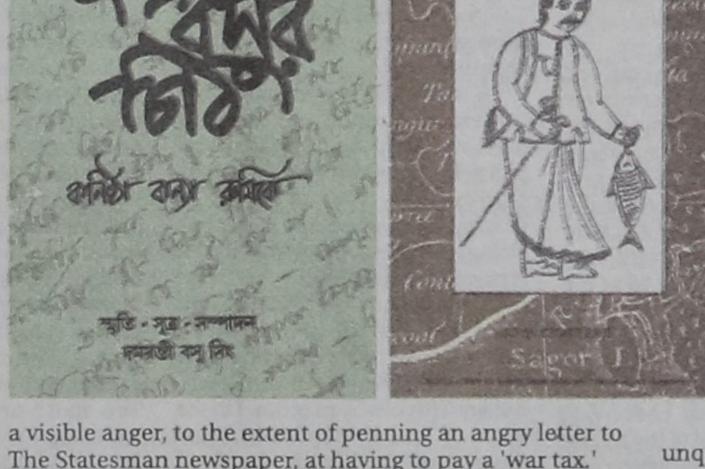
And finally his December 1, 1972 letter:

টালিগঞ্জ-নাকতলার অবস্থা আজকাল একাধিক অর্থে সুশীতল, কিন্তু নগরবাসী লোকের মন থেকে ভয়ের ভারট কাটেনি। যুদ্ধ বাবদ নতুন ট্যাঙ্গোতে আমি ভীবণ রেগে গেছি, আর খবরকাগজগুলো কত যে বিবেকহীন এবারে তা হাড়ে-হাড়ে টের পেলাম। আমার ক্ষুদ্র প্রতিবাদ স্বরূপ স্টেট্সম্যান ছেডে দিয়েছি।

What are we to make of this?

Buddhadev Bose is a major Bengali literary figure, somebody Ketaki K Dyson has rightly termed as "the central figure in a cluster of poets who came to embody post-Tagore Bengali 'modernism'." Yet in these three letters Buddhadev Bose's opposition to our war of liberation is unmistakable. There is a sneer at his fellow West Bengalis-- "naikami aar kannakaati" -- which registers his profound disregard for the terrible human suffering and sacrifice of our independence struggle, and





The Statesman newspaper, at having to pay a 'war tax.' Compounding Damayanti's inanities are the mocking quote marks around the word Muktijuddho. Was it because Buddhadev was a

Calcutta bhadralok? Nirad C Chaudhri, who knew the species well, had written: "The real shortcoming of the true native of Calcutta...was a pronounced lack of magnaminity... (it showed) most blatantly in (their) conduct... towards those whom they did not consider their equals. They would not be exactly rude, but would stare and remain silent as if they were in the presence of some strange animal. This was worse than being rude, it was being reptilian..."

Reptilian! Perhaps an apt word to describe the attitude here! But no, Buddhadev's words point to something beyond class disdain. Curious, I leafed back through Chelebela and Joubon. And discovered that in all those pages there was hardly any mention of Muslims. Buddhadev grew up in a Muslim-majority society and land, but he wrote them out of existence. His Chelebela is all dappled sunlight, mighty rivers and his grandparents. Absent is the Muslim peasantry that surrounded him---that Muslim peasantry which so enlivens the pages of, say, Abul Mansur's Amar Dekha Rajniti'r Ponchash Bochor of roughly the same period. Buddhadev does note dryly that rural Noakhali had no imposing Mughal architecture. Similarly in his Joubon the only Muslims he acknowledges besides 'Dhakaiya kutties' are the critic Abu Sayeed Ayub and writer-politician Humayun Kabir.

The former approvingly since despite being a Bihari Muslim, in language, dress and manners Ayub was truly a 'Bangali' (code for Hindu), while Humayun Kabir kept him afloat during a period of financial distress with a timely UNESCO contract. Amid all the Bengali litterateurs, poets and writers mentioned in the two volumes there is not a single Muslim Bengali writer. The same is true about Buddhadev Bosur Chithi. Though European and Hindu Bengali writers and poets abound in its pages, there is an icy disregard for the epic

changes--in theme, diction and idiom--being wrought in Bengali poetry across the border by the language movement and afterwards, no notice of Shamsur Rahman or Al Mahmud, or of the host of courageous poets fighting for Bengali language and culture. None! And these letters were written during the '60s, as that poetry of protest was coming hot off the stove.

Why? Because I think they simply didn't count. I admittedly haven't read the whole of his writings, but plainly for Buddhadev what counted was Tagore, being a Hindu (whatever being an 'Eliotesque Hindu' may mean!), the Bengal Renaissance (with its core of Hindu revivalism), and Hindu Bengali writers, poets and essayists in an unbroken line from Bankim to Bishnu Dey. He seems to have considered Bengali Muslims and their writing as beyond the pale, and when in 1971 their revolution arrived at his doorstep, Buddhadev responded with scorn and bile: These low-rent upstarts with their quote unquote Muktijuddho!

Joya Chatterji's book Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition 1932-1947 (Cambridge University Press, Indian edition 1995) offers clues here. Her diligently researched book explores the tactics adopted by Calcutta's Hindu bhadralok class when their traditional pre-eminence was threatened by the prospect of Muslim majority rule after the 1935 Communal Award. Central to the bhadralok's strategy was their rewriting of Indian history, of re-inventing a narrative in terms of "Hindu 'cultural' superiority" vis a vis the unlettered and undeserving Muslims, who after all "were, by and large, 'a set of converts' from the dregs of Hindu society." It was a view endorsed by no less a figure than Sharatchandra, who in 1926 flatly stated, "'If learning is simply knowing how to read and write, there is little difference between Hindu(s) and Muslim(s)...But if essence of learning is width of the mind and culture of the heart, then there is no comparison between the two communities ... A thousand years has not been enough time (to achieve this) nor will another millennium suffice." It is seemingly from this ill-lit cranny of the Hindu bhadralok's notion of 'cultural superiority' that Buddhadev Bose

spoke from. That Buddhadev attracted controversy is not in doubt. Even in this centenary year of his birth, his long-time chum Naresh Guha felt compelled to defend him in the pages of Desh (February 2, 2008) against long-held accusations of Buddhadev's pro-Americanism. Yet others might say that the old bhadralok figure today is a thing of patches and shreds (first hooted at in Hutum Penchar Naksha, and deconstructed by latter-day writers such as Sumanta Banerjee), their elitism and attendant communalism something best laid aside.

But that is to deny the continuing hold of Kolkata bhadralok literary culture on our own, to gloss over the fact that Buddhadev occupies a very important part in it, to deny that parts of that idiom and power are tainted in the worst possible way. Any final reckoning of that history, at least by us in Bangladesh, must re-assess Buddhadev Bose's place in it as a human being, and to some extent as poet and writer. To ignore this side of him is to mock our own independence struggle, our own history, our own literature of resistance.

Reading Buddhadev Bose will never again feel the same. Innocence is fled, and a lengthening shadow now stains what used to be a happy, sunlit spot by a riverbank.

Khademul Islam is literary editor, The Daily Star.