

## SHORT STORY

## Ashes Of The Veena\*

JHARNA RAHMAN  
(Translated by Jackie Kabir from Bengali)

Finally the Earth Angel completed his work, the creation of the most beautiful, rare stringed instrument called veena. He made it with utmost sincerity. The dexterous workers of heaven had not witnessed so much time or patience given to any other invention of any designer. It was constructed inch by inch with music of the highest notes from the flowing rivers of heaven. The sun lent its dazzling rays to add cheerfulness and the moon contributed its blue emission for its calmness.

It was the day of inauguration of the magnificent veena. God himself touched it first with his artistic fingers then he placed it in the garden on the bank of the river Alkananda. On an altar under the *Parijat* tree covered with flowers, behind which the silent silver river flew. The veena was made from a stout branch of the sandalwood tree. The full moon of Kojagori purnima, which was reflected on the waters of Alkananda, was made into its podium.

The Earth Angel freed the veena from his embrace and held it up for his disciples to see. He announced: "Can you see the strings? I constructed them from the flowing streams of the Alkananda and Surodhini. These rivers stand both for quietness and fierceness."

The veena was placed back on its creator's lap. It looked majestic with its glistening body shimmering. The creator was looking far ahead as if he was in trance, in euphoria. With his artistic middle finger he touched the strings of the veena. The sound that was produced was magical; it created an unimaginable environment in the moonlit night; it was as if the *Parijat* tree was waiting for this moment to bloom all its flowers, all the birds in the heavenly garden waited for this particular minute to fly in the sky above.

At last its creator put the veena down. He was not a creator of music; he had far more important things to attend to. It was as if everyone around was awakened by the veena's tune. Their astonishment wouldn't cease. They had never been so fascinated with something like this ever before.

Then the Earth Angel asked everyone what they thought of his creation.

'Unparalleled! 'Unsurpassable!' was the resounding answer. No one in heaven had even heard anything like this.

"Was it for the Goddess Swaraswati, who is an admirer of veena?" they asked.

"No! Are you crazy?" said Earth Angel.

He had given Swaraswati a different veena already. It was the eternal veena with some divine mantras to play. If he gave this veena to her he would have to rewrite all the mantras. Besides she couldn't give up her old veena since it was against the heavenly rules. This veena was made to produce earthly tunes and was not an eternal one but dependent instead on its owner.

"Who is the veena for, Your Majesty?" asked one of the disciples. "Is it Laksmi?"

The veena's creator laughed "Laksmi, the goddess of wealth? Oh no! She is always busy with her

household accounts. When does she have the time to play a veena?"

"Then who else is there on this abode of gods to play this beautiful instrument?"

"Well, the veena is intended for the earth where humans live."

The creator touched the strings once again.

"For earth? Such a terrific instrument; who will play it there?" inquired the disciple.

"It will be played by whoever can play it. The earth is in dire state; the people there are always after one another. Even the rivers are drying up. The jungles are disappearing, and birds are no longer singing. This veena could change it all with its beautiful melody."

The creator bent down to the veena asked "My melodious, magnificent creation, tell me who do you want to belong to?"

The veena said "I want to belong to someone who is truthful and good."

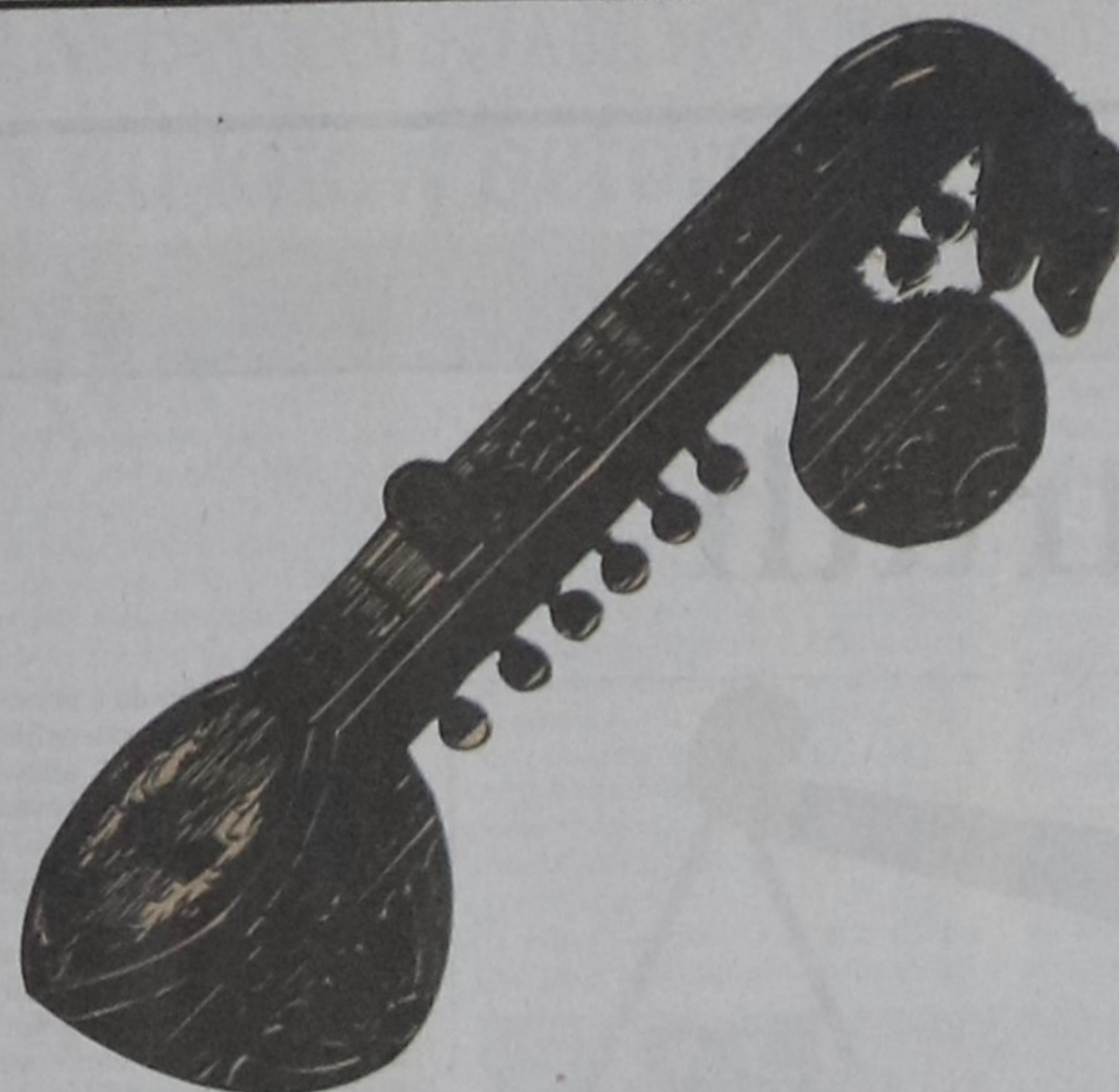
"A truthful and good person? Where on earth would I get a truthful and good human being?" This was the one thing the world lacked; a good human being. The world was getting worse day by day. Even Brahma couldn't find one person who could be chosen as a prophet, God's man.

The veena, however, was insistent, "I want a good and honest person!"

"So be it!" declared the creator. The veena was to be handed over to Shudhoshatya. He was a really good man. He was in a village named Arkpol near Manikanagar. He cultivated his own land. He milked his cows. He led a very simple life and spent more time doing good for others and less to take care of him. He wouldn't hesitate to give the last of his clothes to a beggar and the last grain to the hungry villager.

The veena was sent to Shudhoshatya's house. Shudhoshatya became enthralled on getting this divine endowment without asking for it. But he was at a loss. He didn't know what he'd do with this heavenly instrument, for he was neither a composer nor a musician. The only thing he knew was ploughing. Shudhoshatya placed the veena next to his bed respectfully. Since he was always very busy during the day he could only see the veena at night. It glowed in the corner of his room and he would watch it with admiration. The veena was delighted by Shudhoshatya's appreciation and eagerly waited for Shudhoshatya's touch so that the unnamed tunes could be produced. Tunes that were inherited from the flowing streams of the Alkananda, Surodhoni and Mondakini. But Shudhoshatya had lots of work pending. He went out forgetting the veena and its existence.

Late at night when Shudhoshatya prepared to go to sleep did he cast his eyes on his luminous veena. It was sitting in silence in melancholy. He picked the veena up. The veena ceased its vibrations for it longed for Shudhoshatya's touch. Shudhoshatya didn't know how to place the veena on his chest so he put it next to him on his bed. It glistered; Shudhoshatya put his hand on the round resonator of the veena. Then he held the strings on



the fret board with his palm. Enigmatic sound, tunes out of harmony, filled the environment of the room.

Shudhoshatya didn't notice how out of tune the veena sounded as he was no musician nor did he have any idea about tunes. He kept plucking at the strings. He loved the way it resonated in the air. He used both his hands to produce the sound, out of inquisitiveness he banged on the resonator, the fret board, the brass frets. A strong but sad timbre which was in fact a cry that came out of the veena. Shudhoshatya found this very interesting.

Shudhoshatya played with his beautiful veena till midnight then he fell asleep getting tired. By then hearing the cacophony all the birds had awakened and flew around in extreme distress. Even the moon, getting alarmed by the noise, stopped shining. The river Nirajona's waters, which flowed coyly beside the village of Arkpol, stopped flowing. Only the cool breeze that came through a small opening in Shudhoshatya's room somehow placated the veena from its frenzied vibration.

After that night Shudhoshatya always played his beautiful veena with his inexpert hands. As he got used to the way veena was constructed he didn't have to look for its strings or brass frets. Even when he was lying on his bed he could easily locate where to strike in order to produce the out-of-tune melody. Gradually he came to know about veena's magical powers. It resonated if it was held by the palm, if it was stroked or even banged. Shudhoshatya made it a habit to play the veena before going to bed. And every time he played the veena the natural beauty of the Arkpol village was lost, the trees lost their green luster and the crops failed. The fish died and the birds flew away. Everybody came to Shudhoshatya for help. He

didn't know what to do. He spent all his time trying to take care of the distressed people. He forgot about his beautiful veena.

The veena was left on one corner of his room for a long time. Shudhoshatya was not any expert on music. Day after day the veena would produce tunes out of harmony; which made it lose its softness, its melody. Even then it liked Shudhoshatya's touch and thought it to be the most important thing in its life. It almost forgot the heavenly music it inherited while it was being constructed. Nowadays the veena didn't make any noise at all. It lost its lustre by not being able to produce the only thing it could - the music. Its brass strings rusted, cobwebs covered it.

The Earth Angel was frustrated seeing the condition of his precious veena. He couldn't accept the fact that the beautiful, luminous veena which he assembled with so much love and care was lying in such a deplorable

state. Would it not play its magnificent melody once more before it perished?

The Earth Angel went to Brahma for help. He beseeched the Brahma to at least make the veena produce its melody once so that it could awaken the world from its slumber.

The god needed an instrumentalist, someone who would understand the heavenly tunes. But then the veena belonged to Shudhoshatya and if she went to anyone else she would lose her religion. It would perish.

The Earth Angel looked at his adorable veena with water brimming to his eyes. It didn't have any life, any joy or happiness. It'd be better if it ceased to exist.

Shudhoshatya became ill from the hard work he had been doing for the long time. And he remembered his beautiful veena; but he felt appalled looking at it and didn't feel like touching it.

Nilokdip, a friend of Shudhoshatya, had learnt classical music from his guru DibhyaPrava at the royal palace of the king Chandratilak. He had recently come home, and had heard about the heavenly veena that Shudhoshatya had acquired. One day he arrived at Shudhoshatya's house, who was delighted to see his friend. Nilokdip asked for the veena, which by now had been stored in a room filled with useless utensils. Nilokdip himself entered that room and got the veena out. The veena sprang up with a tune at Nilokdip's touch. Nilokdip cleaned it and placed it on his chest. The whole room was illuminated with the light which was reflected by the round brass fret. Nilokdip took the beautiful veena in his hands and strung the torn string into its brass fret with utmost

care. He took a lot of time to adjust it, then played the finest tunes. The veena shuddered to be able to produce such fine melody for the first time in its life. Nilokdip swooned with pleasure.

Shudhoshatya was almost asleep only to be awakened with the magical melody of his beautiful veena. As soon as he woke up he felt as though he was led in a trance to a wonderful world of music. It was almost midnight. Everything around was awakened; the trees were coming back to life again. The night was animated.

Shudhoshatya left his bed quietly. Following the tune he reached the unused room of his house. It was Nilokdip who was embracing his veena and producing the magical music that caressed the night. Nilokdip had his eyes closed as if in meditation, singing along with the veena's tune. Shudhoshatya had never ever heard anything like this before. He exclaimed aloud his friend's name, "Nilokdip!"

Nilokdip opened his eyes but didn't stop playing. He finished his tune slowly and put the veena at Shudhoshatya's feet. He gently asked his friend, "You have something so precious that no one else in the world has. Why do you not value this precious gift? I'm so lucky to have come in touch with this heavenly instrument."

Shudhoshatya eyes glistened but then he said, "Nilokdip, put the veena in its original place. I don't need it any more."

Nilokdip answered, "But the veena is in good condition now, it is tuned. It vibrates. I want to..." Shudhoshatya screamed, "That's why I don't need the veena anymore. I take away my claim from it. This veena is cursed!"

Nilokdip was astounded. "Cursed! It's a heavenly veena; you acquired it without any perseverance"

"It is cursed with faulty music!" "How can you say that; this veena is blessed with melody. It has all the vibrations from the heavenly rivers flowing through it. You must honour it."

Shudhoshatya was trembling with anger. He kicked the veena. The veena resonated and flew apart. The strings became loose. The resonator got separated from its body. Nilokdip ran towards it. But before he could go near it Shudhoshatya stormed out. "Let it perish," he said.

The veena shattered into pieces and turned into ashes.

Nilokdip was shocked at the incidence. Shudhoshatya left the room. A cold wind blew through the room. Nilokdip collected the ashes and spread it in the river Niranjaona.

The wind took away the ashes back to heaven where there was *Kojagori Purnima*.

\*This story has been abridged for publication. It is included in a forthcoming anthology being edited by Professor Niaz Zaman. Jharna Rahman is a Bengali short story writer. Jackie Kabir is a writer and translator.

## Durga Puja experiences last year: From Dhanmondi to Daspara



SUBRATA KUMAR DAS

Last year Hindus observed Durga Puja with enthusiasm. It was possible due to the enabling presence of the present caretaker government, which went a long way in erasing the scars created after the 2001 October parliamentary election. Last year many people's prayer to God was if this could have been the permanent scenario of the different religious communities of the country!!

As a Dhanmondi resident I have to say that the absence of a Durga Puja *pandal* in the adjacent area was distressing to Hindus. The small arrangements in the Rayerbazar Puja Mondop and its inconvenient location could not attract people of nearby localities to attend there. Consequently they had no other alternatives but to go all the way to Ramkrishna Mission in Tikatuli, old Dhaka, or the Dhakeswary Temple at Bakshi Bazar. What Hindus of Dhanmondi and Kalabagan desired, as well as a number of its Muslim residents too, was to see a Puja here. The dream came true in 2007!

During the last weeks of September of last year our Khaleda Apa, Dr Khaleda Begum, made a phone call to me and told me in her affectionate voice: "Subrata, we are arranging a Durga Puja in Dhanmondi this year. This is the first time it is going to happen. You must keep in touch with us and..." so on and so forth. She explained that one day some religious Hindu ladies had expressed a desire at the gathering of the Surodhuni Chatter of the Dhanmondi lake to perform a Puja in the neighbourhood. The idea immediately resonated among many and people in the organisation got to work.

The phone call was encouraging, but doubts were there: Which place, could anybody give so much time, who would perform the Puja rituals, how to collect the needed money, where to look for the *protima* (the idol). Professor Mozaffar Hossain and I began to attend meetings though Puja has never created that much religious fervor in me. But I have never been able to deny the importance of it as a social event and in developing stronger bonds between the people of a neighbourhood. My problem was I had committed to

pass my Puja days with members of my village family since I had not been able to do so the last two years. I however pitched in, and did what I could: arranging the materials for a brochure, contacting the right people to deliver talks on the historic, philosophic and religious aspects of Hinduism, Durga Puja, et cetera. Then, before the Puja started I had to leave for Kamarkhali, my village home in Faridpur with my family.

Kamarkhali, though a small business centre now, has a long heritage of arranging colourful Durga Pujas. I can still recall pre-independence Puja festivities when huge numbers of people, even from the nearby district towns of Faridpur, Magura, Jhenidah, would visit the Kamarkhali Puja Mondop. But what really made me happy was when I found that arrangements had been made for holding of Puja in Daspara itself. Daspara is a small area of Mochhlandopur, an adjacent village of Kamarkhali. The people of the Das families, some of whom were wealthy during Pakistan days, reside there. The Durga Puja of the *para* used to be a thrilling event for the locals since it had a history of more than three hundred years. The above fact was related by Provaboty Datta, an 89-year-old *didima* (grandmother) of the village. During the 1971 liberation year the Daspara community lost its homes, assets and hopes. Moreover, the *mandir* (temple) was totally destroyed. And during the thirty-six years after the liberation war the Das people could not muster the necessary courage and spirit to resume their traditional Puja. It was only last year that some local youths dared to take the initiative to perform the rituals of the largest religious, social and cultural festival that their forefathers had performed for so long. I asked them, mere boys (Bishu, Suju, Achinto, Szal, and others), how they had dared to do so. Their answers centered on the peaceful law-and-order situation in the country. No gangs, or *mastans*, from the surrounding areas dared harass Puja devotees or tease Hindu girls visiting the *mondops* or start unpleasant scenes that, in bygone days, were common in village areas during Puja days.

During my Kamarkhali days I got regular updates over my cell phone from Khaleda Apa about the Puja function, cultural performances, large crowds, media coverage on the Dhanmondi Sarbojonin Durga Puja -- her sincerity made her give detailed reports about the festivities to me. She understood how happy I would have been if I could have been there with them, so she shared everything about the Puja with me. Her phone calls filled my Puja days with real satisfaction and happiness, thinking how the Hindu community was enjoying its Puja days in its own way without the rowdiness from local *mastans*, without the anxiety generated by communal disharmony--unburdened and free.

The Durga Pujas of both Dhanmondi and Daspara makes plain the deep desire of a minority community across the whole country to be able to perform their Puja rituals within the context of a peaceful and harmonious situation. This year too it was expected to be the same and I pray and hope it will remain so for the coming years as well.

Subrata Kumar Das has set up a web site [www.bangladeshinovel.com](http://www.bangladeshinovel.com)

## Kali O Kolom Ashwin 1415 -- September 2008

KHOKON IMAM

The *Ashwin* issue of *Kali O Kolom* starts,

appropriately enough, with three articles (by Rafiq Kaiser, Sarkar Abdul Mannan and Abu Hena Mustafa Enam respectively) on Mahmudul Haque, the Bengali short story writer and novelist who died recently. Sarkar's lucidly-paced piece fills in many of the gaps of Haque's life--the writer grew reclusive and tired of Dhaka literary life in the last twenty

years of his life and his life became shrouded in the mystique of authorial silence. Rafiq Kaiser elucidates the author's fondness for characters who were lumpen, rootless and of what used to be called the 'lower orders,' while Enam examines the modern element in his fiction. A previously unpublished short story by Mahmudul Haque, *Asroy* ('Shelter') has also found its welcome way in the short story section, which also contains an alluring contribution ('*Kosha*') by Papri Rahman, whose use of 'vernacular' language and raw-earthly idioms is striking. The other short stories are '*Palki*' by Niharul Islam and '*Desh Jokhon Naiye*' by Sharshij Basu. There is a tribute to the writer Mahmood Darwish, the 'voice of Palestine,' who also died recently and whose death went relatively unmarked in the literary pages of Bangladesh dailies (including this one). Accompanying it are some of his poems translated into Bengali, though it is not mentioned whether they are double translations (translated from English translations of the Arabic), or straight from the Arabic. Art reviews are getting to be a major part of the fare provided by *Kali O Kolom*, with poet-architect Robiul Husain becoming a regular contributor. In this issue he dwells on the 11 Indian and Bangladeshi artists who had a show at the Gallery Kaya recently. This issue too covers two probashi artists, one in Japan and the other in the United States, while Zahid Mustafa writes on Nurul Islam's solo show at Bengal Gallery.

There are three notable in-memoriams (testament to the fact how a generation of writers and artists are beginning to fade away, in the months and years after Shamsur Rahman took his leave of us), with theater being hit hard: Abdullah Al-Mamun and Selim Al-Deen, and the third being the poet Samudra. Ramendu Majumdar's write-up on Mamun is an endearing one, penned from the intimacy acquired from over a lifetime's friendship and working relationship. Among the book reviews Habibullah Shiraji takes an interesting look at Rafique Azad's latest volume *Borshonay Anonday Jao Manusher Kachay*, while in '*Kaajer Buar Kotha*' AZM Abdul Ali gives his somewhat surprised take on Baby Haidar (a housemaid in India who a couple of years back wrote a bestselling biography).

The cover painting '*Khole O Jhompotoboi Poddoo -- 2*' is by Nilufar Chaman, a product of the 'Chittagong School' of art pioneered by Rashid Chowdhury.

Khokon Imam works in an NGO.



## Karl Marx in Bangladesh

ZAHD MUSTAFA

Would he rage at our libraries at tilted shelves and fallen theories text his travel agent fly to London in a rage his brooding beard a-twitch to type *theses on dhakabach*?

Would he stalk our streets vanish among the pavement poor to ponder their nightly nets of green 'workers of the world unite' re-appear to scream and cry?

Would he gaze at our peasants doubt the moon's ancient question re-plow old equations say young hegel's a ditch that drowns and betrays, doze on a reed mat wake up in a dream to torch this opiate world?

Zahid Mustafa is an ex-corporate moosehead in Canada.

## City of Wars

Rubana

They hit the wall  
Fall flat  
Crawl back to the pit that's bred them...  
These are word-bodies of our cities

They watch the neon streets  
The 'legit' cars and the audacity of greed  
Blindfolded...  
These eyes are doing a home run

They touch the platter  
Palms retreat,  
Abandon...  
These are the collapsed hands of our times

In this city of willing walls  
Winds rest in graves

In this land of the lords  
Shame impales sight

In this boundary of the blind,  
Palms pray,  
Eyes feed on death,  
And words wield wars...

Rubana is working on a PhD at Jadavpur University, Kolkata.