

The things a diplomat remembers

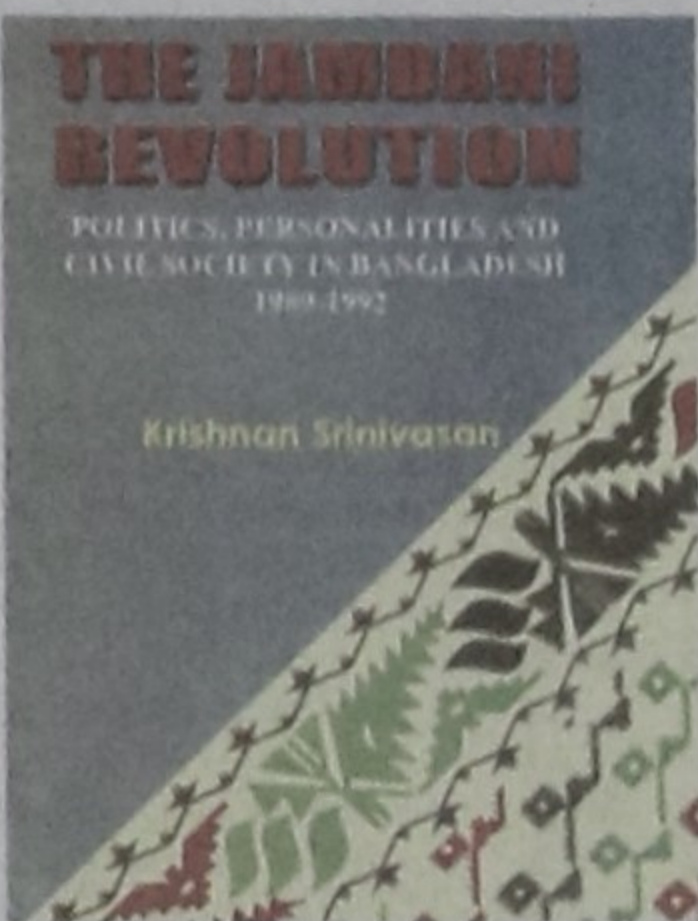
Syed Badrul Ahsan goes through an unusual sort of journal

HERE are books and there are diplomats' books. All these years we have come across memoirs, some smart but most quite shoddy, from superannuated diplomats around the world. And include in that world: the People's Republic of Bangladesh, where diplomacy has regularly been a shoddy affair in the way its politics has been. But while that is true, equally true is the reality of diplomats from abroad making their way to Dhaka, spending a few years and then moving on with their accumulated experience, sometimes wisdom. Krishnan Srinivasan comes to mind here. Remember him?

The Indian was his country's high commissioner in Bangladesh at a pretty dramatic time for the Bengali nation. No, it is not a term he employs in his narration of events. He does call it, though, The Jamdani Revolution, surely with some European images in mind. The Velvet Revolution, the Orange Revolution and all that, if you must know. Srinivasan's work might initially lead you to wondering about his interest in Bangladesh's indigenous jamdani industry. But then you turn the pages and you realise that that is not what he meant at all. See how useful TS Eliot can get to be at times? But the years (1989-1992) in which he served as his country's spokesman in Dhaka were without question exciting ones, for the good reason that Srinivasan (he was later to go to the Commonwealth secretariat in London as deputy secretary

general) began his assignment at a time when General Hussein Muhammad Ershad appeared infallible. Despite the relentless nature of the opposition to his authoritarian rule, the military ruler had little reason to think he would soon be sent packing. And that was when Srinivasan found himself in Bangladesh. He was to stay in the country till 1992, by which time Khaleda Zia would safely and securely be in office as the country's prime minister.

It was within that time frame, obviously, that Srinivasan went through his experience. And what a load he carried on his shoulders! Tin Bigha, the Chakma problem, trade, illegal migration, democratic rule in Bangladesh and political pirouetting in India and a host of other issues took up huge chunks of the high commissioner's time. And given the fraught state of India-Bangladesh relations, Srinivasan knew what to expect on his plate. That said, it is quite another aspect of these recollections of old times that should draw readers' attention. Briefly, these are his comments (or call them assessments) of the men and women he has had cause to interact with during his stay in the country. Naturally, such interaction was for the most part with Bangladesh's leading political players, apart from a smattering of individuals in other fields of activity. And lest Srinivasan be held guilty of passing unsolicited judgment on people in the country he is assigned to, it needs to be said that



The Jamdani Revolution
Politics, Personalities and Civil Society
In Bangladesh 1989-1992
Krishnan Srinivasan
Academic Press and Publishers
Library

his views on politicians, bureaucrats and military officers are equally harsh. Some might call it criticism that is grating.

Again, this is not a book in the sense that books generally are. They are (and this will come as rather refreshing to many readers) a record of events, incidents and meetings the high commissioner kept pretty much regularly in the course of his stay in Dhaka. His arrival in the country does not appear to have been a happy experience, for President Ershad kept him waiting for a good number of days before he could present his credentials. It was 14 March 1989

when he was able to go through such diplomatic formalities at Bangabhaban. And this is what Srinivasan has to say of the president: "The president, whom I saw for the first time, seemed rather shy and easy." That is only the first of his comments on the dictator. But if Srinivasan is unkind to Ershad, he is only too ready to offer up his thoughts on Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia. He is clearly irked by both, the former for her constant focus on the conspiracies she sees around her, the latter for her inarticulate as also imperious bearing. The diplomat expends a good length of time on the bitterness defining relations between Hasina and Abdur Razzak, then leading his tiny Bakal faction. He is not kind to ASM Abdur Rab who, in his view, "is on paper the leader of the opposition but in effect a protégé of Ershad's." But there are also those he establishes good rapport with. Foreign minister Anisul Islam Mahmud, communications minister Anwar Hossain Manju and the civil servant Shamim Ahsan come off well in this narrative. And so it goes on. On his frequent trips to Delhi, Srinivasan is exasperated with the lethargy of government officials. He has little regard for politicians. He detests Rajiv Gandhi, is not particularly fond of VP Singh and has little respect for Chandrashekar. His fellow diplomats in the Indian foreign office, save only individuals like Muchkund Dubey, do not qualify for his respect. Srinivasan is espe-

cially irked by the arrival of what he patently believes to be ignorant men at the top of Indian diplomacy. New foreign minister MS Solanki has no idea of foreign policy because he does not read anything. The high commissioner tells his readers how difficult a time he and his colleagues had in briefing him before the arrival in Delhi of Bangladesh foreign minister Mustafizur Rahman.

Journals or diaries are generally taken to be faithful in that they are a record of thoughts occurring to one at a given time. In Srinivasan's case, there is hardly any exception. There is, though, that certain element of condescension readers might detect in his pronouncements on politicians in Bangladesh and India. He holds few of them in high regard. Then there are the military officers, particularly men like General Rodrigues, the Indian army chief. Srinivasan makes note of the fact that on his visit to Dhaka, Rodrigues did not win any friends because of his tendency towards pontification. He was an endless talker and a bad listener.

You might be tempted, once you have come to the end of The Jamdani Revolution, to pass judgment on Srinivasan in precisely the way he has hurled his comments at others. No one would blame you. But do read Mizanur Rahman Shelley's foreword before you take up your bow and arrow.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star.

AT A GLANCE

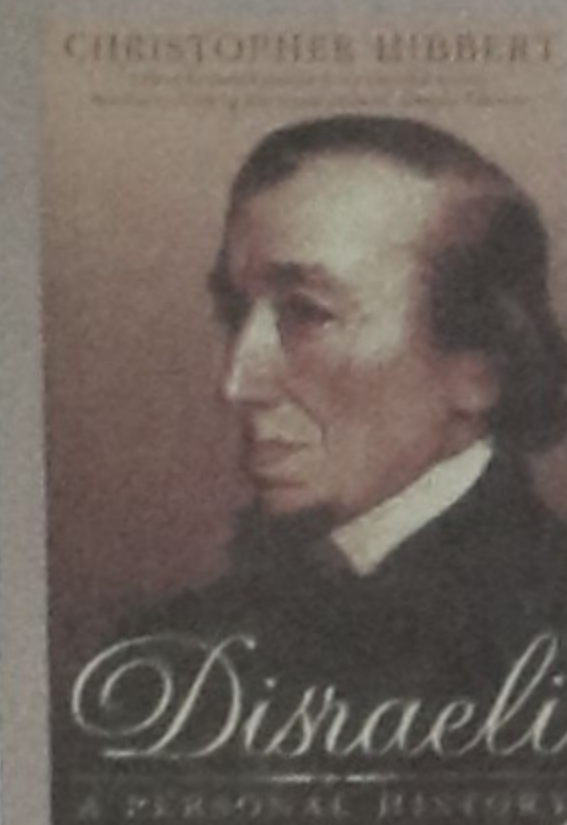
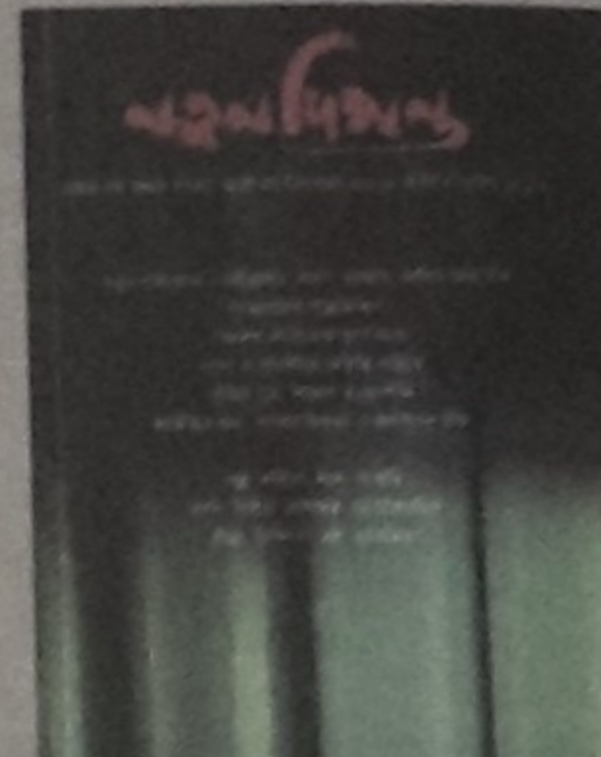


Prangon
Shahityo O Shangskriti Bishoyok
Troimashik
July-September 2009

Here is a journal that should go a long way in satisfying the urge for knowledge. What you wish for in an aesthetic scheme of things is here. The magazine brings before you serious articles on those very subjects that may have exercised your mind for a long time. It is good weekend reading.

Notun Diganta
October-December 2009
Samaj-Rupantar Odhoyon
Kendra

As always, here is one more instance of critically good writing. With a focused editorial board directing things, Notun Diganta remains the periodical to turn to for a reasoned analyses of the issues. Do not miss it. It brings to your table all the issues, or at least some of them, you might have been mulling on.

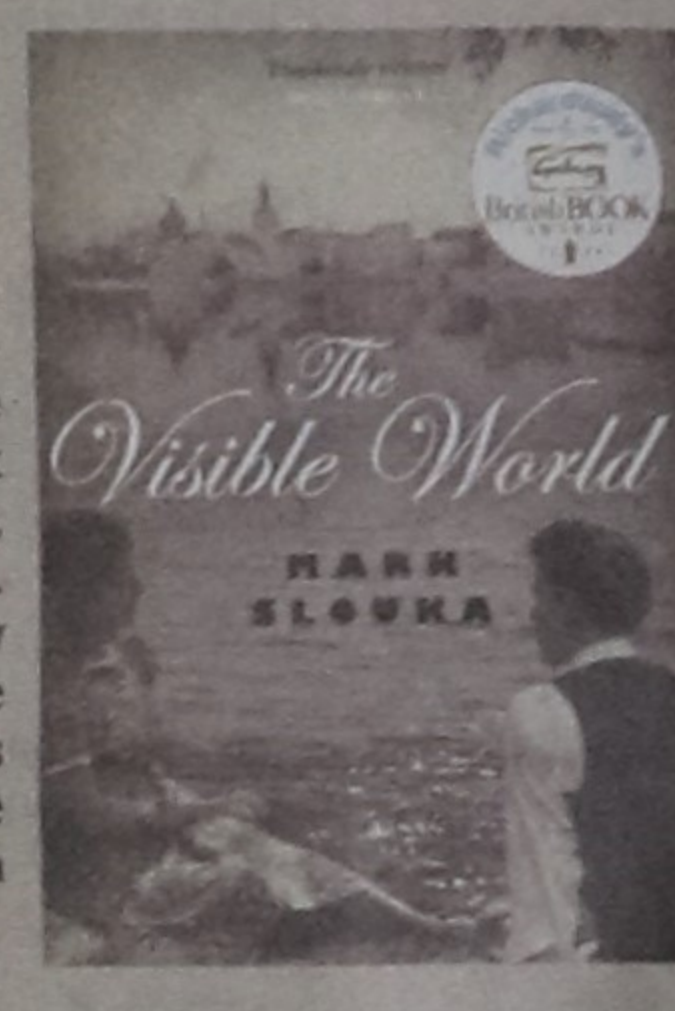


Disraeli
A Personal History
Christopher Hibbert
Harper Perennial

Benjamin Disraeli has been a pivotal figure not only in British but also global history. Much has been written on him and you can be sure much more will be written on the impact he has had on the world. Here is another. Chances are you will enjoy it for the personal details of Disraeli's life it brings before you.

The Visible World
Mark Slouka
Portobello

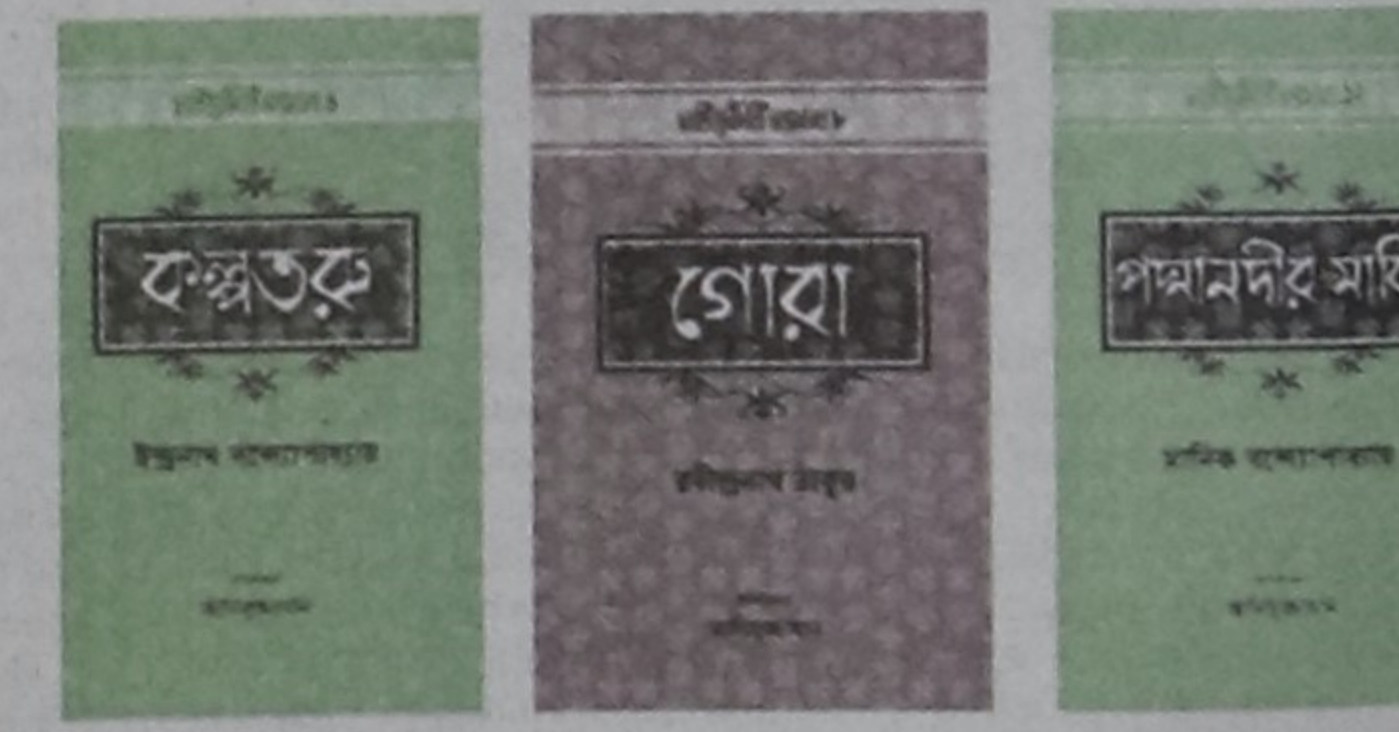
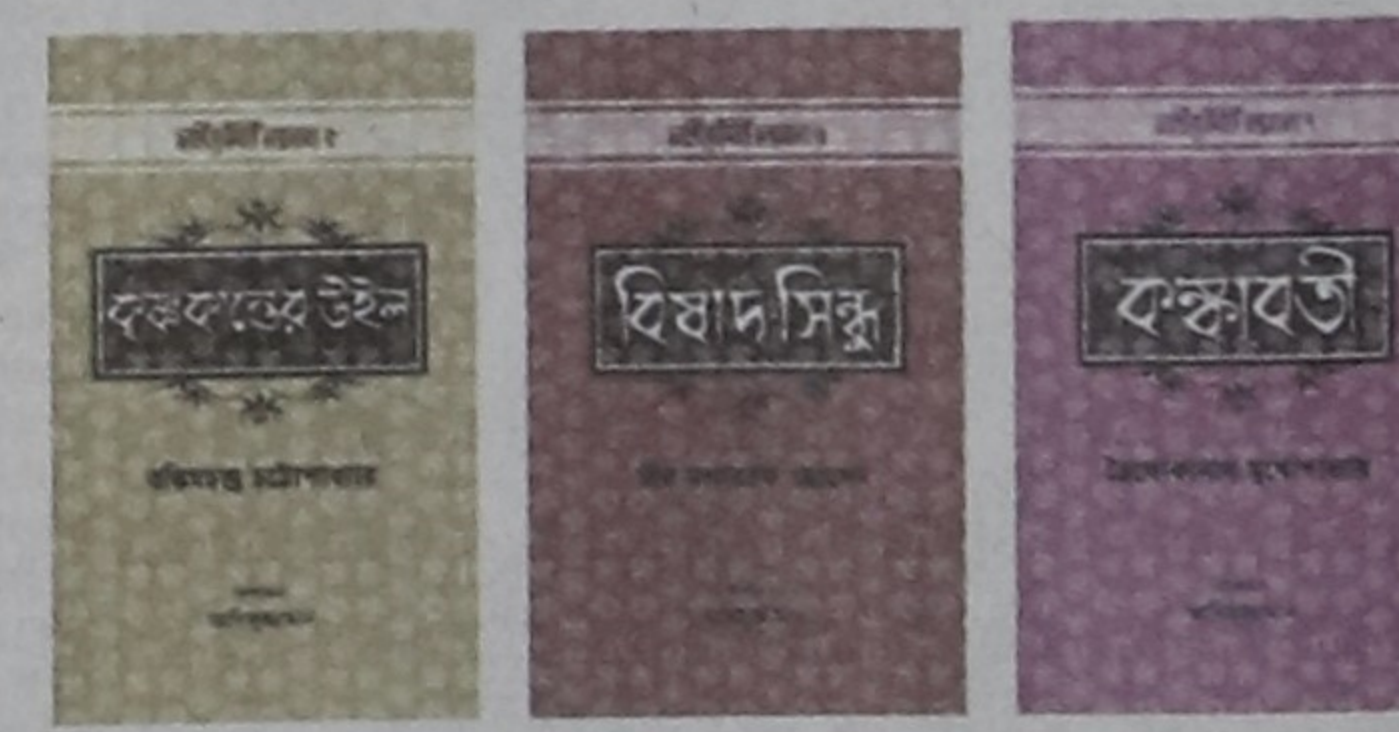
A serious novel. It makes you think of life, of the tortuous paths it traverses. The author makes it a point to let you know, in so many ways, that it is all autobiographical. He travels to Prague, to know of his parents' past. He delves into his mother's youthful romance. In the end, he looks for his own identity.



Book news

Adorn Publication recently brought before readers a set of old, immortal classics in the field of Bengali literature. The following images are a glimpse in to the Adorn enterprise. Readers may contact Adorn Publication telephonically at 9347577 and 8313019.

- Review Editor



Orphaned child of an Irishman

Mohsena Reza Shopna admires an old Bengali tale

BORN in 1861, Rabindranath Tagore was one of the key figures of the Bengali Renaissance and translating a book of this great man is a feat undoubtedly praiseworthy. Half-willing at first, but then seeing Radha Chakravarty's name I happily decided to go for the review. An English teacher in Gargi College, University of Delhi, she is known for her translation of several of Tagore's works, including *Boyhood Days*, *Chokher Bali* and *Farewell Song: Shesher Kobita*. Gora appeared as a book in the Bangla year 1316 (1910). The present translation is based on the Rabindra Rachanabali, now regarded as the standard edition. This impressive book full of energy, alive and pulsating with ideas, passion and conflicts is popular till today. The present translation attempts to redress some of the lapses and omissions in earlier translations seeking to offer a lucid, readable version of this massive, complex novel to 21st century readers who do not read Bangla --- an immense challenge for the translator! Henceforth many translations have been published, but it is Chakravarty's singular skilful demonstration of parlance which has energised this translation par excellence.

Binoybhusan, a journalist, comes across Poreshbabu, a Brahmo, his daughter Shucharita and son Satish who later acts as a bond between his family and Binoy. He secretly falls in love with Lalita, Poresh's daughter. Lalita plays a vital role symbolizing revolt and the social changes taking place at that time.

Gora's unfair imprisonment and the magistrate's non-cooperation make Lalita revolt. She breaks away

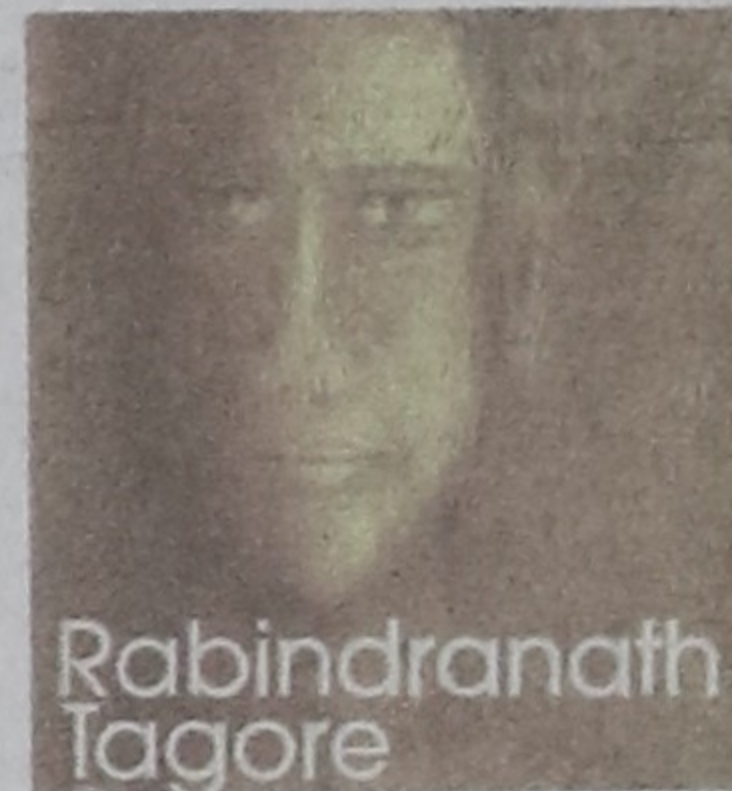
from the straitjacket when she joins Binoy alone on the steamer way back home. Her *faux pas* is the turning point in the story as it is a blow to the *esprit de corps* of the Brahmo Samaj affecting her entire family. But Poresh had always encouraged them to think and understand things for themselves instead of making a habit of parroting his opinion or someone else's. Her sensational marriage to Binoy is a concern for Harimohini, Shucharita's aunt, who tries hard to keep her away from this exposure. But it is Gora's boldness and his dedication to his vision of a 'real' Bharatvarsha to which Sucharita succumbs.

Binoy's childhood friend Gourmohan is a pure nationalist named 'Silver Mountain' for his rather blatantly fair complexion. Gora, a cognoscenti 'titular' Hindu, opines that those who claim proudly to be a Brahmo must bear the pain of being denounced by non-Brahmos and predicts if Binoy, a Brahmo was to mix with them, he would not hesitate becoming one of that 'Samaj'.

Our memories travel back to Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* when we observe Boroda shundari, Poresh's ambitious wife, hustling and bustling to get hold of eligible bachelors for her marriageable daughters. An acclaimed Brahmo, Haranbabu is also greeted as Panubabu does not have the wit to realize that he is *persona non grata* in the Poresh household and is insistent on his marriage to Shucharita, constantly trying for a tete-a-tete with her. Shucharita, who is at first averse to Hindu fanaticism, is glad to encourage him. It is only towards the end when she gets enlightened that she keeps him at

arm's length for his "communitarian zeal and narrow minded dullness."

At the outset, class distinction is depicted through conversations. Gora's ma Anandamoyi has a Christian maid and because of her, Gora does not dine with ma nor does he allow Binoy to, being a staunch follower of traditional custom and restrictions. His father Krishnadayal had compelled Anandamoyi to renounce orthodoxy to please his "Shahabs". His



Gora
Rabindranath Tagore
Translation Radha Chakravarty
Penguin

sudden about-face cannot make her retract which equips her with the strength to combat the world in bringing Gora up.

Gora, who is bent on shaping a real Bharatvarsha, immerses himself completely in philosophical discussions, harassing his opponents in every possible way! It is towards the end that he discovers he is not a Hindu but the orphaned child of an Irishman killed during the 1857 uprising. Gora, who has

contempt for Brahmos, realizes Shucharita's need in reshaping Bharatvarsha and feels that he has now become a true Indian. He goes to Poreshbabu... "Make me your disciple, initiate me today into the mantra of that who belongs to Hindu, Muslim, Christian and Brahmo and whose temple doors are never closed to any community who is the deity of Bharatvarsha." The *eminence grise* who had hold over the entire countryside today sat at a Brahmo's feet offering pranam!

Back home Gora kneels at Anandamoyi's feet, bowing his head, "Ma, you are the mother I sought everywhere, the ma, who was waiting in my own home. You have no caste, no discrimination, and no contempt for anyone. It is you who is my Bharatvarsha."

Radha's technique of translated imagery is pure professionalism --- "the morning light had dawned, pure as the smile of a suckling infant."

Whenever Haranbabu tried to hurt Poresh, Shucharita would react instantly "with the ferocious intolerance of a wounded female serpent." Radha's accounts of various situations are simply exotic and only a scholar like her is capable of such unmatched rendition from Bangla. "Her feet with their lovely flower like soles rested on the bed, stilling all the restlessness like music at the end of a festival, her breath, rising and falling very gently as if in rhythm with the poem that was her slumber." This captivating English conversion of the imagery to describe Lalita's tranquility is a brilliant piece of effort.

Binoy's "ever cheerful countenance now resembled a lush green field suddenly devastated by a

plague of locusts." Discern her awesome play with words! Not only that, because of her flowery language, boredom is distant. There we go again. "Listening to Gora, Shucharita felt flashes of lightning dance through her blood." Breathtaking, isn't it? The *dramatis personae* are figures of flesh and blood in this work of art and many a time there are words of wisdom between the lines. Notice when Anandamoyi remarks, "If we bear the problems quietly in time they too disappear."

That the original is in Bangla is obvious from the title 'Gora', which has been left untranslated. Besides, Bangla kinship terms 'Thakurpa', behai, mashi, bhai, bapu, names of months, days and seasons have also been retained. Some displacements of meaning are of course inevitable, for a translation is not just a linguistic but also a cultural transfer. It is only to keep the original alive, seeking to bridge linguistic and cultural divides.

Some of Radha's other works in translation includes Bankimchandra Chatterjee's *Kapalkundala*, and stories from Bangladesh and India. Her latest book is *Feminism* and contemporary women writers. She is currently translating a collection of Tagore's writing for children and co-editing The New Tagore Reader for Visva Bharati. We wish her all the luck! This mouthpiece of Gora's translation will endlessly remain magnum opus and belles-lettres for ages to come. We cannot but congratulate her on this account.

Mohsena Reza Shopna studied English literature at Dhaka University and is Past President, Inner Wheel Club of Dhaka North.

Spring in the soul

Kazi Abul Kalam Elias is enthused by a play

DILWAR Hasan needs no introduction. Since his teenage life he has been cultivating the cultural field of poetry, short story, recitation and acting. He is an artist of Bangladesh Betar and TV.

After the liberation of Bangladesh, it was Hasan who was the founder and general secretary of the recitation association, Abriti Sangsad, while studying at Dhaka University.

The radio magazine programme 'Darpan' produced by him evoked wide appreciation at home and abroad. His short story and poetry have been highly praised by no less an individual than Syed Ali Ahsan, a well-known intellectual and a connoisseur of criticism in Bengali literature. The late poet Shamsur Rahman eulogised Dilwar Hassan for the book of poem 'Dolaiba Brikher Shabuje'. Selim Al-Din, the prominent dramatist of recent memory, spoke highly of his drama *Basanter Dinraat* and all his cultural activities. Professor Mobashsher Ali, a renowned critic, was also an ardent admirer of his short stories, poetry and drama.

Drama is a form of art in which the artist imagines a story concerning persons and incidents, without himself, describing, narrating or exploring what is happening. It is by using words alone that the dramatist creates his imagined characters, incidents in which they are involved in a shaped and purposeful plot and background of place and time in which everything

is imagined as occurring.

Conflict is the real truth of drama. But conflict is not only personal criticism. Conflict of different thinking, conflict of opinions and ideals, conflict of interest, relation of individuals to society --- these also have been dealt with in this play.

Basanter Dinraat was first broadcast by Bangladesh Betar and was highly appreciated by all sections of listeners from every nook and corner of the country.

As with radio drama, the performance may be one which can only be heard and not seen; but even then the actors and actresses create the characters and create the incidents by expressing vocally the full significance of the words.

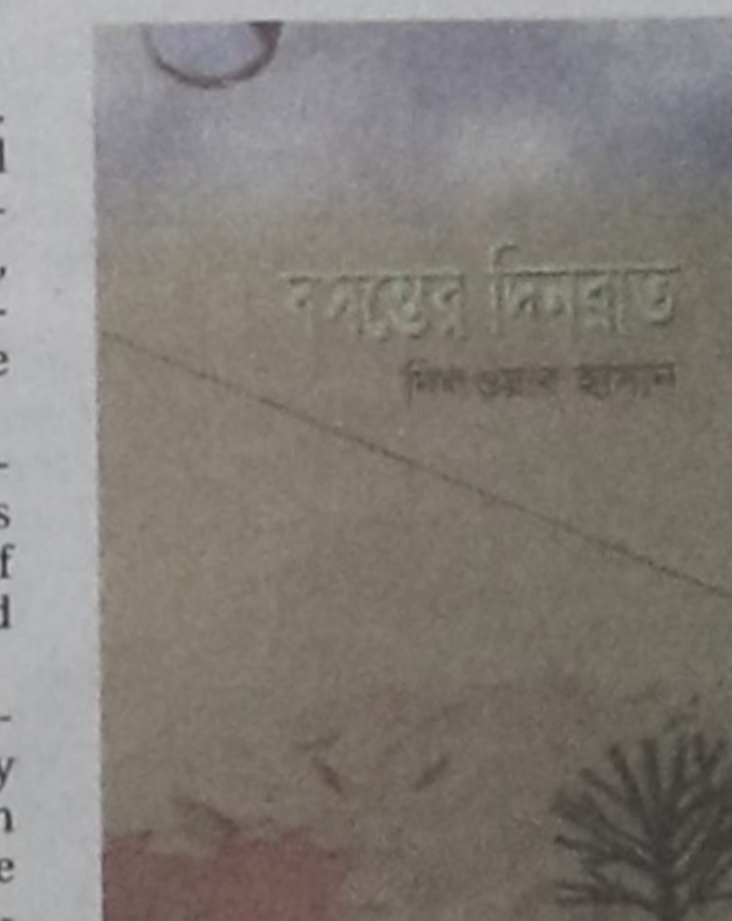
A distinction is sometimes made between drama for sheer entertainment and drama which expresses an insight into life and its problems, at the same time. We find both entertainment and instruction in this drama.

There is something of a lyrical quality about the monologue in this play. Dilwar Hassan has used soliloquy in different scenes with great subtlety and artistic style.

This drama, consisting of nine scenes, comprises six characters --- Bulbul, Bijoy, Sohel, Rumana, Naz and Bithi.

The stage is divided into four zones --- college garden, hostel room, university corridor and festival platform.

Bulbul is a reciter, orator, painter and poet as well as a rhapsodist (one who writes speaks or recites with



Basanter Dinraat
Dilwar Hassan
Aftab Book House

great show of feelings and exuberance of emotion, full of life and vigour).

In the very first scene and the last one we come across an intense yearning for searching.

Naz, well-wisher and intimate friend of Bulbul, says in the very beginning of the drama, "Ah! I seek, but don't find anywhere." In the last scene our hero Bulbul's outpouring finds a sympathetic echo in every heart of the spectator.

"I hastened to the outskirts of the enemy, at the time of war, unprepared. I don't know whom I am seeking. If their bullet would strike the skull of my head, they would see my preserved memories, where

everyone craves a bleeding heart."

Bulbul has fallen into profound love of Rumana. It is reciprocal love at first sight. But none admits it face to face. No sooner they had come nearer to each other than the war of liberation began. At the end of the war, Bulbul returns to the free country with great expectations. But Rumana does not recognise him at first.

In scene five, (college garden), Bulbul says to the heroine Rumana, "Rumana, I was looking forward to your coming, some day or other, I was thinking about telling you something. But the liberation war crowded in upon us. The whole country turned topsy-turvy. After liberation we came back to a free country, but you did not come and say anything." Rumana says, "I did not recognise you after your arrival at the end of the liberation war. I was scared at your sight, a long bearded stranger, long hair upon your head."

But at a point Rumana comes into close contact with Bulbul, and declares her courage of conviction in affairs of love. She is ready to embrace death for the sake of love.

Ever smiling, Naz in the long run longs for the love of Bulbul. After the complexity of the love episode, Naz, gets rid of her interest and goes far away. Rumana is at last compelled to face stern realities to go her own way. Thus the profound emotions of the trio in the face of tragedy explore their own identity and self existence.

In the last scene of the drama

Bulbul, hero of the drama, says at the time of the spring festival: "Believe us, we want festival, we desire it ardently, we want to go forward in the re-invigorated atmosphere of spring. We long for the proximity of life."

The conflict of characters has been delineated in the drama. The conversation and dialogue express the very sentiment and feelings of the inmost core of the heart.

"Style is the man." The choice of words and style of the writer are thought-provoking, and full of similes, metaphors and pathos.

The songs in the interlude of this drama have added to the grand success of the spring festival and fulfillment of the climax of the drama.

In a nutshell, Shakespearean conflict, soliloquy and dynamism (movement and force) in dialogue have found expression in this drama. It is admitted on all hands that in Bengali drama dialogue has been very weak and slow. The storytelling method (kathakata) of dramatists and autobiographical element in this drama has left an indelible impression upon our minds.

Perhaps the title is intended to attract the younger generation who are as drawn to the term 'spring' as to the blossoming youthfulness. This excellent play deserves much wider readership and publicity.

Kazi Abul Kalam Elias is a poet, researcher and educationist.