REFLECTIONS

# Images of society

QAZI MOTAHAR HOSSAIN

Trans. FARIDA SHAIKH

Qazi Motahar Hossain (1897-1981) remains a powerful voice in Bangladesh's intellectual circles. As a writer, scientist, statistician and journalist, he was --- and is --- unique in the many dimensions of life he explored. He knew Kazi Nazrul Islam and Kazi Abdul Wadud and many others who were to leave a lasting impact on life in Bengal, indeed in the Indian subcontinent. A formidable chess player, he was at the same time known as an inimitable

conversationalist.

The following article is a translation of a section from Qazi Motahar Hossain's Shomaj Chitro as it appears in Qazi Motahar Hossain Rochonaboli, Tritio Khondo, published by Bangla Academy

We present it to our readers in two installments. The second installment will appear next week.

Crossing the twenties, she just stepped into her thirties. No more the young woman she once was, though her body is still tight and trim. She lives in Mohonpur village of Jessore district. She is poor and makes a living by doing household chores in the neighborhood --- paddling the dheki to pound the paddy grains into rice, wet wiping the mud floor of the thatched huts, or washing clothes. Quite contrarily, though she always wore a smile on her face, everyone pointed to her as the sad one. Her parentage was unknown and no one was bothered about this. She never became a mother to a daughter, though there is much doubt about that. However, to make it all convenient and easy, she was called Pachir Ma. She did not object to this given name, so others thought it was useless to have any further discussion of the subject.

Agile and alert, Pachir Ma talked freely to the men and women in the village. Not being a gossipy type, her source of information was what she heard from the household inmates when she went about her daily chores. And she rationalized that as no one was taxed for hearing anyone talk, so she would hear for free whoever talked on whatever subjects. Sometimes five different persons would ask her about five different things, and she would give five corresponding answers. It was for this reason the ultra smart youths of the village named her 'gazette'; for the women she was a 'gossip monger' and men said she was a 'doublemouthed' creature. The Hindu munshi and the Muslim mullah called her a 'tale-tattler.' Pachir Ma ignored all these epithets. She thought that even if it were some fatwa --- a village decree--- it was her responsibility to make a response. This was how it had been and how it would be in future.

Some among the villagers were habitual gossips. They would indulge in talking fictitiously about people to others. Pachir Ma had a clean reputation, and not even her enemies would dare point a finger at her to suggest she had been gossiping about herneighbors. No one was her enemy in the entire neighborhood. She had one outstanding characteristic, which some said was good while others disagreed. Free of inhibition she was quick at repartee. The moment someone asked or said something to her, pat would be her answer. Without a care, she was bold and straightforward even if she were confronted by a judge or a magistrate or a Hindu priest or a Muslim moulvi. This attribute of hers dispelled enmity of any kind.

Pachir Ma was overjoyed. For the past couple of days, she had been waking up early to make chira out of parboiled paddy grain, grind wheat grain into flour, make ground turmeric, wet wipe the earthen floor, wash clothes and attend to all

household chores. It was endless and there was no time for her to bathe or eat her meal. She felt that the work was too much. But then, she banished such thoughts. She was over the moon. Nasir Mia said, 'Pachir Ma, you work nonstop. Why don't you take a break in between your work? It is still three to four days before Ryaisa is to be married.'

Prompt was her reply,
'Just hear me out for once.

I am going to work for
your daughter's marriage. Why should I hesitate, pause and take a
break? Go away, don't
disturb me when I am
working.' She was working so earnestly that it
seemed all responsibilities rested on her, and
indeed so they were to be.
Some twenty or twenty

Some twenty or twenty two years ago, Pachir Ma was not called by this name. Nasir Mia was in Rangpur. A terrible famine had gripped the countryside. Acute pangs of hunger had reduced the sense of friendship, love and affection, for were these not vain qualities now? It was better that instead of all persons becoming weak due to hunger and die collectively efforts be made by each person according to his capacity to fend for himself?

When Kulsum was married she was still a teenager. Shortly, within a year, she lost her husband. Already a severe famine prevailed throughout the country. So she had to seek shelter with her parents. They were sad. Whatever food they could get they gave to Kulsum. However, all around all they could hear was the refrain of 'no food...no food...' So how could they get food for their daughter? People were prepared to mortgage or sell their belongings and valuables for procuring food. There were no buyers, for everyone was in the same plight. Those who were working on monthly wages were better off than the others. So the old parents of Kulsum approached Nasir Mia, begged and pleaded with him to keep Kulsum for good. He was so moved by the plight of the poor parents that he agreed at once to their proposal. Both the parents heaved a sigh of relief as their daughter had got shelter.

Kulsum began to look after Nasir Mia, doing her work faithfully. Though he was a short tempered man, he got no chance to say anything harshly to her. In six months' time, Nasir Mia married Kulsum. Subsequently, after a period of about

three or four years, Nasir Mia took leave from his work and returned home to his birthplace. He wanted to leave Kulsum behind in Rangpur. During those days it was a practice among the male shareef, the elite, to have nikah, or marry females from among the common classes in town or place of work. When such a person would be moving out of the place of work he would leave behind the woman he had wed, not considering the situation of the woman.

But Kulsum was a stubborn woman and did not let go of Nasir Mia. In turn he made her promise that on no account would she disclose the matter of the nikah. She would have to live like a maid, work in neighbour-

ing households and earn her own living. She would have to forego all her rights to save the reputation of Nasir Mia's descendants and family members.

From then onward Kulsum lived a shadowed life. The deep desires of her heart were like an unknown energy that lay buried in the darkness of the ocean. Her physical activities, whether rigorous or recreational, took a uniform colour. She wore a smiling face. And whatever else remained of Kulsum was transformed into Pachir Ma.

The groom is expected to arrive at dusk. The five bride's maids have bathed her, dressed her up and kept her secluded in a room. She is not allowed out--- not to see the shadow of a male figure. Fearing slander about the girl, Pachir Ma kept watch over things from a distance.

About 10 o'clock at night, amid crackers and fireworks the bridegroom arrived. The village boys were so thrilled at seeing the fireworks that they forgot to detain the groom's palki and obtain payment, chada, from the party accompanying the palki for the football club, the school or the mosque.

The elderly guests came out and began a discussion on what was the proper thing to do on such an occasion and what was not. Soon the groom from the palki was brought into the assembly of guests. After a while everyone was served with a sweet drink. And those present were of the opinion that after the maghrib prayers the nikah should be done and the feast of eating should follow afterwards. In the meantime, the sweets, sarees and ornaments that the groom had brought with him were sent in for the bride. Every item was selective and everyone was very happy to see the collection, expressing their opinion almost at the same time. It seemed that without the 'million words' no marriage was complete.

Suddenly there was a disturbance. Nasir Mia's aunt, stunned upon opening a box, exclaimed, "O Ma! Just look at what has been sent. They are Hindus and wear shindoor in the parting of their hair, how awful! Use shindoor? In a respectable family? Ha! Ha!'#

When Pachir Ma heard this she burst out, 'So what? If more of shindoor has been sent, why not return it to them?' The moment her remarks ended, a huge commotion of conflicting words set in within the inner section of the house. Nasir Mia's aunt looked at Ryaisa and said sarcastically, 'Here you are, dress yourself in shindoor. It has been sent for you--- you will be the painted bride. Let me go and get you some chandan, sandal wood paste, and decorate your face with chandan spots; you will match the Hindu and the Hindu thakur.' While she was speaking thus, her words and utterances spread around quickly. Nasir Mia's uncle came from within and spoke of the debate that was going on inside the house. Following this a torrent of arguments erupted between the Hindu munshi and Muslim mullah based on the Hadith kitab. Someone said loudly that shindoor was used among the low castes, and crackers and fireworks were signs of the heretical. It was haram, forbidden in the Muslim religion. From the groom's side some one whispered, 'Everyone was enjoying the fireworks display. It was thrilling and not a poor show. But now that the play of lights is over, it is said to be haram.' This led to more arguments on ancestry, heritage and family connections. The details on the faults of each family and clan began to be discussed, in terms of who had married into a lesser family, and what the scandals were between families. The deliberations on the subject were so varied that it seemed like a sea vessel endlessly churning out muddy water.

### ... from Nahid Khan

### In search of you

I thought I found you
Just over my head
In that tree so tall,
With its calming shade.

Then there you were Suddenly I reached Flying in the sky Blue horizon ahead, For freedom to fly.

But lest I forget
The ocean seamless
Rivers from my eyes
Run straight to you.

There was me in the shell Your waves opened apart The saved precious gem Freed up from old spell.

You are the middle of night When I dream large in depth The hope for rest of the black You would come as dawn-light For life is not bleak but bright.

#### The accidental martyr

Neda died today, the world has learnt
A very beautiful teenage girl,
Had a dream of life who just got caught
In the midst of blood swirl.

For no particular reason that she knew Stood there following others, Seemed like posing for a camera crew Became martyr within hours.

All the websites published her well
New agenda out already,
Burning issue for democracy to tell
Her death is the remedy.
She loved someone and was loved

No one knows for sure,

Nobody would deny, not that absurd
They longed to be together.

Maybe they had a plan for the future
In just a year or two,

Could have their dream home for sure
Dream that she drew.

We don't know all that details of her plan
Its not so hard to imagine,
What a beautiful young girl would and can

Do for their ambition.

See that child, placed the wreath on her body
Could it be herself?

The unborn child whom she named already

The latent parent in oneself!

World may have seen just Neda's death Not the death of hope, Politics takes lives in life, inside the wreath More than humanity can cope.

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Non-fiction

Nostalgia

## Recalling the Hatch-Barnwells

WAQAR A. KHAN

Flashback! One sunny, summer afternoon in Dhaka of 1961. Our father had just picked us up, me and my sister, after school in a Willys jeep, probably a World War II vintage vehicle. He knew that his children cherished a little ride around the enthralling beauty of Ramna Park before heading for home. We were leisurely cruising down Minto Road savouring the verdant foliage, the lush greenery, interspersed by colonial era red-brick bungalows. It was a picturesque sight to behold. Scenic, serene and somewhat languid. Hardly much traffic in those days. Dhaka was still a laid-back provincial capital then.

Suddenly, father drew our attention to a tall, lanky figure ahead of us, slowly riding on a bicycle. He was dressed in all white, as gentlemen were wont to in those days. He was wearing a loose half-shirt which was flapping in the breeze, baggy half-pants and sporting a solar-topee (pith helmet), a relic of the British Raj. "That's Mr. Stephen Hatch-Barnwell, I told you about", father said. He motioned the driver to draw abreast of the cyclist and greeted him respectfully. Both our jeep and the cyclist slowed down and stopped by the roadside. As my father got down, the tall Englishman dismounted from his cycle, which I later learnt was his hallmark. They shook hands, spoke for a while, after which father called us out. We froze. Father was tall, but this man seemed to loom large over him. To add to our discomfiture, he was a saheb, an Englishman. We were just children then. It was rather intimidating. After some initial hesitation we gingerly alighted from the jeep and were introduced. The usual must have transpired --- the basic exchange of pleasantries. While my memory still serves me 48 years on, a few vivid details are etched



in the 'labyrinth' of my mind. As the towering Englishman stretched out his arm to shake my hand, it appeared to be the longest limb I had ever seen. And when he clasped my little hand in his, it simply disappeared. It frightened me. Great was my relief when he finally let go. He seemed to smile a lot, winked at us children, and exuded a natural warmth. There was none of the proverbial stuffiness about him, usually associated with former Raj officials or Englishmen. From all available accounts Stephen was an affable, soft spoken, humorous an easy-going person. Awed by his height, I remember gaping up at him. And, that was that.

On our way home we were excited and chirpy. We must have bothered our father with incessant queries about Hatch-Barnwell. He seemed exasperated. Much later, I learnt more about Stephen from others and my father, who had first met him in Calcutta in 1944, when he and a few close friends, bright young graduates of Dhaka University, joined the Civil Supplies during the war period.

Stephen Benedict Hatch-Barnwell of the once coveted Indian Civil Service (ICS) opted to serve in Pakistan after the partition of 1947, and was absorbed in the erstwhile Civil Service of Pakistan (CSP). He served for long with the provincial government in East Pakistan, retired in 1962 and went back home to England.

Fast-forward! Dhaka, 2001. I came to know from the print media that late Stephen Hatch-Barnwell's son Philip and his family were visiting Dhaka on a nostalgic trip. I was intrigued. I managed to get in touch with Philip Hatch-Barnwell, who was staying with his family at the Bangladesh Institute of Administrative Management (BIAM) facility. We spoke for a while over the phone and hit it off rather well. Philip was in Dhaka to relive his dad's last service years spent here. He too, had spent part of his early life in Dhaka and wanted his family to share in the experience.

Philip had already been to the Dhaka Club which his dad

joined as a member in 1936. He too, had fond memories of the Club. I offered to help him as best as I could, hoping to get him in touch with some elderly civil servants who had either known his dad or worked with him. My father, who was unwell, warmly welcomed Philip to the house and reminisced about his dad, Stephen Hatch-Barnwell, while Philip always the attentive listener, would ask an occasional question and take notes.

Philip had converted to Islam after his marriage to Tatik, an Indonesian muslim lady. They have three children Charles, Helen and Oliver. We spent some memorable time with Philip and his wonderful family.

The Hatch-Barnwell's in Dhaka, 2001 left to right: Helen, Charles, Tatik, Philip and Oliver

Before he left, Philip told me of his dad's unpublished manuscript which was lying with him in London. And that he was eagerly looking for a suitable publisher. I got excited about this. As one belonging to a generation of the 'post- midnight's children', that is, those of us born in the early 1950s, I grew up reading and loving books. Apart from the must read classics, I had developed a penchant for the biography, autobiography or memoirs. I immediately contacted Mr. Mohiuddin Ahmed of University Press Limited (UPL) with the news. He said he would be very interested to look into it. Some years back, UPL had published the memoir of an Englishman, P.E.S. Finney, OBE, entitled, Just my Luck: memoirs of a Police Officer of the Raj, which was well received here. Chris Finney, son of P.E.S. Finney, then a technical consultant with the Government of Bangladesh in Dhaka, was instrumental in publishing his father's book. Chris lived in Gulshan and was known to me. Before he left for home, he was gracious enough to give me some of his father's photographs taken during his service days with the British Raj.

I requested Philip Hatch-Barnwell to send me his dad's manuscript once he got back to London. He kept his promise. Soon a package arrived with it. Even a cursory read of the unedited manuscript convinced me that it was excellent material. I promptly passed it on to UPL. I also received some rivetting photographs sent by Philip from his dad's album. Having carefully shortlisted the best ones for the forthcoming book, the photo-restoration and writing of the appropriate photo-captions were painstakingly completed with Philip's help.

Well, it now seems that the collective endeavour has finally paid off. Regardless of inordinate delays, the book The Last Guardian memoirs of Stephen Benedict Hatch-Barnwell is due for publication by UPL, having been edited by the deft hands of Mr. Khalid Shams, himself a former civil servant. This book, I am confident, will be a delightful read not only for those old timers who will be able to relate to it, but would also be of interest to the younger generation. The wealth of information in the book including the felicity of expression, literary flair, anecdotes, wit and humour should attract the attention of the civil servant, history buff, academician, writer and the sundry reader.

Having said the above in appreciation, a word of polite caution for the prospective readership. The book should be read in the context of the times. Otherwise, one can lose the perspective. It should be borne in mind that while Stephen Hatch-Barnwell may well have been a progressive person, compared to most of his contemporaries (Britons) who served the British Raj, he was still very much a byproduct of the same colonial regime. As such, some of his candid observations were perhaps not totally free from inherent prejudice, that is, the mindset imbibed from the ethos of the Raj. All in all, the book is a good read. And, I must confess that I feel gratified for the privilege of having been associated with this publication.

Meanwhile, do keep an eye out for the forthcoming

publication of The Last Guardian by UPL. Remember to get your copy and enjoy reading it!

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## A tale of literary adda

JUNAIDUL HAQUE

We left the university almost three decades back. At this age I feel that there can be nothing better than a weekly adda or a session of gossiping. Work hard to earn money, eat, help the needy and gossip. Don't harm anyone, don't backbite --- and gossip to your heart's content. No experience can be more delightful than gossiping with your near and dear ones.

Literature was my passion even when I was a child, but it became my life and death when I was studying intermediate at Dhaka College. Adda came along with it. We might have gossiped even in our higher classes at school in the playfield, before and after classes and during the tiffin period. We might have talked about politics, literature, sports and cinema. In 1971 school was closed for nine months and we spent our time in the village reading, listening to Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra and gossiping. We gossiped with relatives and friends. We talked about our liberation war, the sufferings of our people and the future of our motherland. I used to play a lot too. Cricket, football and chess. Did a lot of free hand exercise as well. From a tall and lanky 110pound weakling, I turned myself into a tougher 130-pound youngster in only nine months! All this to prove to my mother that I was ready to join the Mukti Bahini and fight for my country. (My present weight? Nearly 200 pounds!)

At Dhaka College we gossiped in the canteen. There were chops and cutlets to eat and tea to drink. Literature, politics and sports were our favourite topics. Mohammad Rafiq, the poet, was our favourite English teacher. We watched with envy as he chatted happily in the teachers' room. Abdullah Abu Sayeed was our favourite Bangla teacher. He edited Kanthashwar as well as the Dhaka College magazine. As a budding writer I occasionally visited his home and participated in the adda there.

At Dhaka University I was a seasoned addabaj. We five or six classmates spontaneously formed a group and gossiped to our hearts' content. We were together everywhere in the department corridor, in the seminar, on the Arts Faculty lawns, in the neat IBA canteen and the irresistible Madhu's canteen. It was an 'all boys' group. Girls were more practical and spent their time usefully. We talked to them sporadically. They were not supposed to gossip for hours together. We had a great time for six long years two years more because of session jams. When we look back we find that our greatest pleasure at DU was the company of our favourite teachers and, of course, our adda. An hour with your favourite young lady is as thrilling as an hour with close male friends. You need both in life. Girls will agree that a soulful young lady can be as lovable as a good boyfriend.

By that time we knew a thing or two about all famous literary addas. We had learned about Sukumar Roy's Monday Club (affectionately called Monda Club by the participants because a lot of sweets were eaten during each session), Sudhin Dutta's Parichay adda, Buddhadev Bose's Kabita Bhaban adda and Dhaka's Samakal adda. I went to the Samakal office a number of times during my student days. Sikandar Abu Zafar was no longer alive and Ismail Mohammad alias Udayan Chowdhury sat in his chair.

Sadly we hade adject to DII and started our work life.

Sadly we bade adieu to DU and started our work life. But how could we bid farewell to adda? Adda was necessary to fight the melancholia that ruled our hearts. Why were we melancholic? Because we were getting old. So? We wished to remain twenty five or eighteen for the rest of our lives. We wished to live for a thousand years. How could we die leaving our dear ones behind? So, we and sorrow became synonyms. We gossiped with like-minded colleagues in the office. A beautiful, intelligent and affectionate young woman from Marine Drive in Mumbai joined our group and talked literature, aesthetics and politics for hours together. Who said girls couldn't shine in adda? I



grew very fond of her. When she left Bangladesh after a couple of years, I was even more melancholic. (She appears in some of my recent Bangla stories as a very witty and soulful young lady.)

We gossiped in the evenings at Senorita in Shahbag during the eighties and early nineties. Then for a few years there was no after-office adda for me. The late Anwar Ahmed poet, storyteller and little magazine editor introduced me to the Aziz Supermarket adda at Shahbag in 2003. For several years at a stretch I enjoyed the adda at Gonomudran and Pathak Samabesh immensely. Aziz Market has more than a dozen floors. You get everything there books, eatables and handicraft items. Soon I hope to follow Ahmed Sharif Sir and have an adda at home once a week.

At Aziz Market I came to closely know a lot of my favourite writers, artists and cultural activists. I became very friendly with people like the immensely talented Abid Anwar and the popular and utterly likeable Samudra Gupta. Some of my teachers who are themselves prominent writers used to join our adda at times. We used to eat a lot too. Occasionally we would meet friends whom we had not seen for a long time. The whole week I used to wait eagerly for my Thursday Aziz Market adda.

My latest adda is on Friday morning at the Food Court 'island' near Dhanmandi Road No. 5. As usual I formed the group in September 2005 and its members now number nearly fifty. I have been affectionately chosen as the Speaker of the adda 'parliament'. We sit after completing our morning walk. Sometimes we have breakfast. Succulent parathas, bhaji, booter dal, fried eggs and beef. Most of the time we have an endless supply of tea, cigarettes, water, chips and singaras. We are all there writers, former student leaders, former sportsmen, journalists, engineers, doctors, lawyers, future parliamentary candidates and businessmen. At a time twenty members turn up regularly. We defend William Shakespeare when someone criticizes him with superficial knowledge during the month of his birth. We likewise defend Rabindranath Tagore or Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. We talk about the future of our country as well as the world. Adda divides our sorrow and multiplies our happiness. Since the prime minister's husband's residence is located near our adda, she would enquire (as Opposition leader in 2005-2008): 'It is raining. Are they still gossiping?' We would tell her staff 'Tell Apa that we are not only gossiping but keeping watch on her and her house as well. No one can harm her as long as we are here!' Apa would smile at her younger brothers a harmless group of patriotic gossipers.

Only adda gives us the strength, to quote Shamsur Rahman, to say 'Stay away!' to death.

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