Splendid success story in snowy Toronto

Afsan Chowdhury finds Bengali culture thriving away from home

Bangla Journal

UIETLY tucked away in the rather bland environs of Toronto, Canada, a high quality literary journal called Bangla Journal has been making its yearly presence felt for over a decade. The editor of the magazine, Prof. Iqbal Hasnu, is from Bangladesh but his audience is from all over the Bengali-speaking world. While many journals carry a distinct geo-national identity mark, Iqbal Hasnu has crossed these boundaries by choice and in the process has even brought closer common interests, concerns and interests of the two peoples living in Bangladesh and West Bengal. And it is bi-lingual to boot. Since its debut in 1999, first as a twice yearly and now an annual, the Bangla journal has reached a point of excellence in a mature cultural space.

Hasnu's dedication to the journal is reminiscent of ventures undertaken by people of a vanished time and space where passion towards the arts and literature as well as politics was considered a form of dharma, which deserved total commit-

"I see this venture as a link between literature and life in an organic sense. Questions of sacrifice, commitment and joy are part of the same mental process that leads to the production of the journal. I accept the pain that comes with the responsibility and satisfaction."

Living in Toronto, Iqbal Hasnu has the opportunity to look at the Bengali world and respond to it as a cultural unit rather than political nationalities. Much of his work is about hunting down contributors, often willing and sometimes unwilling, but in the end he has succeeded in delivering riches and excellence between two covers. The journal reflects that sense of his psychological location, poised in between several conversations that are happening in the Bengali speaking world.

House) is an ideal example. Now out as a book, this piece is worth its weight in gold. Not only is it an eminent read but the reflections show the cultural construction of the new Bengali as an emerging Bangladeshi which subsequently laid the foundation of the psyche of the nationalist movement of that era. As luck would have it, Dinu Billah

has been a long time resident of Canada construction of the saints, church, coloand a supporter of the journal. But then, an editor is entitled to a touch of luck every now and then.

"Dinu bhai's work is remarkable because he portrays a world we rarely get to hear about. It describes how broadminded the Bengali Muslim middle class was and how families inter-acted with each other at a community level. This is such a valuable social diary that its merit is immediately understood. It's also a window to a world that is now gone, culturally, physically and emotionally."

Journal traverses into many worlds and is quite eclectic in its subject choices.

Welcoming both English and Bengali contributions has meant a rich harvest. Ketaki Kushari Dyson, the wellknown litterateur from India and the UK, has turned in a significant piece on demystifying Mother Teresa which is interesting not just for the subject but also how it is approached. As is said by some, Mother Teresa was 'constructed' by the British journalist Malcolm Muggeridge, an establishmentarian who doubled in later life as a Catholic establishmentarian upholding all things

expat residing in London and other related stuff to hack down her image. She argues that Teresa is quite the opposite of what Muggeridge claimed, that she used Kolkata and its people to glorify herself and the Church. In the process, this piece, which is neither an investigation into Teresa's work or ideology nor an analysis of cultural

nialism or such matters become more of a rant than one would have wanted.

Here was this remarkable person --- evil if you have it --- who lived in that city and became a part of its myths yet in the end was a simple Albanian nun of deep belief and prejudices who refused to look after a dog as it had no soul. It deserved a better treatment based on some sort of social semiotics rather than a piece which uses well known material that is known to many. More of an opportunity lost, but what we get is also what we usually don't get and anyone wanting to learn about the other Teresa will be satisfied.

"I have avoided taking any positions including on politics but some values are deeper which deserve attention because they support the identity of my journal itself. I am for an education system that is free from dogmatism, I love discussion on all topics, freedom of thought and speech, cultural competence, anti-imperialism etc. I am open on all matters.'

The discussion on the Iraq war as a post-modernity phenomenon held just before the Iraq war at Jadavpur University in Kolkata which has been reported verbatim is a real valuable commodity. It develops a theme that is far more complex and sophisticated than

the typical anti-US abuse. It does treat the war as a product of the present age and late capitalism that has been cooked by the contemporary world. This intellectual approach of what is a very emotional issue for many is refreshing and helps *Journal* be what it has become, such a major achieve-

The variety that is on offer is a major contributor to this magazine's success. Of course the editor has to deal with many demands, cultural, geographic and focuswise. Some of the gems are just waiting to be discovered and provide great pleasure. French-Canadian Fortier's lost memoirs on the Calcutta theatre of the 19th century is a fine find. It is a discovery to read such a

piece on a period that is entertaining and illuminating of both Kolkata as well as the mind of the writer coming from remote French-Canada.

The list of quality writing is endless. The journal has attracted many of the best writers as well as some new blood that is very illuminating. A reworking of the ancient Mahabharat myth of the monsterwoman Hirimba and her son Ghotothkach is notable. Hirimba was married to Bhima. one of the five Pandav brothers, but was left back in the forests where they had met while Bhima's son grew up to be a fabulous warrior who died at the battle of Kurukshetra. These characters originated from the non-Aryan culture but were appropriated into the invading Aryan myths. Interestingly, just as they are imagined as demonic and monstrous, they were also given beautiful faces and seductive powers to which the Aryans reluctantly succumbed to. It describes the uneasy but growing inter-actions between the Mahabharata and local cultural imagin-

In "Ghatakhkach-Hirimba dialogue" by Monohar Mouli Biswas, the theme itself is taken into a new space where humanizing the demon is the main objective. Hirimba's role as a mother occupies a larger space than others, reducing the traditional imageries of these characters in India's cultural history. The discovery of these characters as brave and noble souls is already enjoying a spree with the mainstream media and there is even an animation series on this theme. Bangla Journal will have introduced this trend to a new readership, particularly those looking for literary reflections of fresh cultural interpretations. The avant garde sits well with the traditional in Bangla

There are many such examples on the pages of this splendid product.

In essence, Journal is both a reflection and a constructor. While its pages mirror the declared ideals of a Bengali society in two states, which also differ from each other, they also show the many common threads and bonds that exist. The common historical and social values are implicit in most pieces, making it a great showcase of what this culture is and also what it rejects.

And by focusing on these aspects through literary endeavours, it is acting as the constructor of common aspirations and values. It is a great double-edged cultural sword. And Iqbal Hasnu wields that sword magnificently.

Afsan Chowdhury, a renowned journalist and historian, is Research Associate, York Centre for Asian Research (YCAR), York University, Toronto, Canada.

ESSAY

It's all about reading

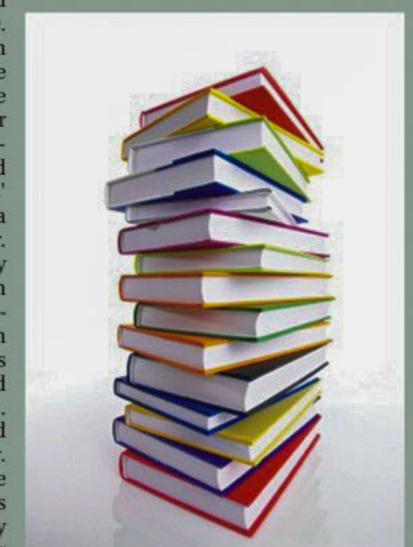
SYED BADRUL AHSAN

Crass commercialism seems to be taking over at Dhaka's Aziz Market. What used to be a place for books, for good conversation, could soon be a thing of the past, forced out by boutiques and beauty parlours. Ask any bookshop owner there. They will tell you they cannot cope with any more increases in rent. The boutiques and the parlours can, of course. And there's the rub. Your reading is going down. And now it is the bookstores that are an endangered species. But let us talk of reading, for now.

You wonder at times about the state of reading in the world you are part of. There is the sense that it is dying, that indeed these increasing levels of sophistication coming into technology are in essence putting holes into our old habits of reading. Not many people read today, which is a pity. Worse is the knowledge that bookstores are being downsized because business is not good. And what you have in place of these truncated, eventually murdered bookstores is storehouses of all those things that reflect the decline of intellect in our times. Visit any bookshop in Dhaka. Chances are it will be empty or perhaps a visitor or two will be there. Those of you who might be tempted to visit the bookstores at Aziz Market in Shahbagh too cannot boast of high visitor numbers, though you have some of the best books, newly published, to be had in the shops there. The old shops in New Market are yet there, but there is something about the arrangement of the books on the shelves, together with the narrow space in the shops, that is pretty disquieting. The stores that specialise in English language works, of course brought in from abroad, today offer hardly anything that shows light at the end of the tunnel. Besides, there are the prohibitive prices to consider. Omni at Dhanmondi has seen its book section confined to an increasingly narrow space. Et Cetera started off well. It is only the past about it you recall now. Words N' Pages, in Gulshan, is yet out there. Will it stay that way? At the old airport in Tejgaon, The Bookworm remains a beacon of happiness. How much longer will the lights gleam?

Time was when reading formed part of life in Bangladesh. It was especially the middle classes that cultivated the habit of reading. Nearly every member of the family would be holding a book; and homes, beginning with the drawing room, would be a delight

because of the books and journals that met the eye. In the early 1960s, back in those black and white days, men with large baskets perched on their heads would come bearing works of fiction and journals that our mothers' generation would spend a whole week waiting for. Recall if you will the frenzy with which these women pounced upon such magazines as Begum and then devoured them even as they cooked lunch and bathed their children. Their men never missed reading the newspaper. And, to be sure, there were the novels and sometimes the works on poetry they were always laying their hands on. Their school-



going children, forbidden to neglect their studies in favour of fiction, nevertheless found time to smuggle books into bed and read them by the light of flickering candles. It happened in the towns. And it was happening in the villages. But of one thing there was hardly any doubt: everyone wanted to read.

There are the authors you can cite with ease. Tagore and Nazrul were there, as encouragingly permanent fixtures. But there were also Manik Bandhopadhyaya, Michael Madhushudhan Dutta, Jibanananda Das, Mir Mosharraf Hossain, Tarashankar Bandhopadhyaya, Bishnu De and so many others. Buddhadev Basu drew readers by the scores. Maitreyi Devi was a gem of a writer. In the movies produced in what was then East Pakistan, it was not uncommon for the leading men in them to be portrayed as bright, intelligent students at college or university, often weighed down by a load of books in hand. The beautiful women they courted were often spotted reading in bed before breaking into hauntingly charming love songs. The culture of reading was all. It was a common sight coming across young men in the villages reading well-known works of fiction and discussing their discoveries amongst themselves. In the early 1970s, poets like Shamsur Rahman, Rafiq Azad, Abul Hasan, Shihab Sarkar, Rudra Mohammad Shahidullah, Nirmalendu Goon and Mahadev Saha were the craze. Poetry was evolving into its post-modernist mode and everyone wanted to be part of it.

That is, or was, the legacy. You are, given the desolation all around you, today tempted to ask if reading cannot be revived in this land where the Ekushey book fair is endlessly a reinvention of the national soul. Yes, there are yet the symbols of hope --- the Jatiyo Grantha Kendra, the Bangla Academy, Shahitya Prokash, Adorn Publication, Pathak Shamabesh, Papyrus, Ekushe, Prothoma --- for us to build on. Bishwa Shahitya Kendra, with its soul-uplifting mobile library programme, is an instance that could be replicated by others.

And then there is television with all those channels out there. They appear to be popularising everything, from politics to agriculture to music to talk shows. We have no problem with that. But the question remains: how many programmes are there on that ubiquity of television channels that cater to books, to reading? There are nations that are privy to book discussions on television, to authors talking about their works. Surely similar discussions for an hour so every week can be injected into the television schedules in Bangladesh? There are newspapers, Bengali as well as English, which come up with weekly reviews of books. It would not be a bad idea calling in reviewers and bringing them in touch with readers through the medium of television and radio.

There are rivers that nourish the land. And books nurture the soul. Need one say more? Ah, here's a spot of good news from my friend Shona. She tells me that in Shantinagar a good library-cumbookstore, replete with arrangements for coffee and an ambience for

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Star Literature and Star Books Review.

exercises of the mind, has come up. Perhaps all is not lost yet?

'holy' and ranting Hasnu is very inclusive as far as his con-**Bangla Journal** against everything tent choices are concerned. Nor does he **Editor Iqbal Hasnu** 'new'. In his earlier prioritize by any criteria. He tends to give years he led quite a the same attention to a book review as he promiscuous life and so did his wife, does to a longer piece of fiction or essay though to a lesser degree having mothered reflecting his sense of worth of what he a child from another man and so on, so publishes. typical of the English between the wars, Many of the published pieces have caught with their world in tatters and their become well known for their literary and pants down and at the same time not being sociological value. The memoirs of a young able to figure out what to do with either. Muslim boy growing up in a liberal Hindu Ketaki does a job on Mother Teresa by household in 1960s' Dhaka by Dinu Billah ment. using the writings of a Kolkata Bengali in "Kakababur Toyhouse", (The Uncle's Toy

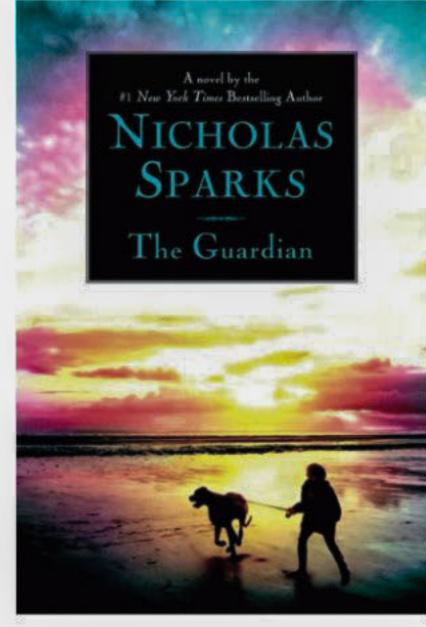
The dangerous paths of love

Tulip Chowdhury enjoys a tale of passion and fear

PARKS certainly knows how to tug the reader's heart strings! A rich assortment of characters, romance, intriguing plot and mystery make The Guardian a book that is to be read by holding one's breath till the end comes. The saga continues to fill the heart with the joy of reading and excitement bubbles even long after reading the book! Four years after her husband Jim's death,

Julie Barenson is still unable to pick up the ropes of life. Living in Swansboro, a small town in North Carolina, she is just getting along with the life typical of such a town. She has friends who stand by her and support her in her times of need. Working as a hairdresser in a local salon named Clipper, she knows most of the people in the town. Mabel, the owner of the salon and who is also her deceased husband's mother, is more like a friend than the boss. Julie loves the hours she spends in her work. In her lonely hours she can turn to Henry, her husband's friend, and his wife Emma. Both are wonderful people. And there is Mike Harris, her husband's best friend. After Jim's death Mike has become her best friend, always there in deeds and words. When Jim dies he leaves her two gifts. One of these is the Great Dane puppy and the promise that he will always be watching over her. The puppy grows into a huge dog and Julie names her Singer. Singer is always beside Julie, guarding her and accompanying her everywhere. Julie cannot think of a day without the dog beside her.

After four years of staying single Julie decides to go out on dates again. She has a feeling that Jim, watching her from heaven, wants her to be happy. She is certain that he would not have wanted her to spend a lonely, desolate life. Just then Richard Franklin, a handsome, sophisticated engineer, comes



The Guardian **Nicholas Sparks Warner Books**

to the town. Richard starts asking her out right after their first meeting. He is the Prince Charming any woman would dream of meeting. Andrea, Julie's colleague at the salon, is head over heels in love with him. But Richard is after Julie, coming regularly to the salon to meet her and going out to fantastic places just to entertain her. Richard takes Julie to expensive places and buys her

expensive gifts. Julie is flattered. She visits calls her from an unidentified phone places for the first time in her life. She is completely carried away until one day she is not wearing a locket that Richard has given her and Richard suddenly shows his angry self. Julie is confused over this new face of Richard and does not know what to make of the man to whom she has just begun to give herself completely.

between herself and Richard. She refuses to go out with him anymore. Mike Harris has grown to love Julie secretly after his friend died. When Richard started dating Julie Mike realized that he was about to lose Julie. He wants to let Julie know about his feelings but is afraid that she may turn him down. He has been a very good friend to Julie all along. And he is certain that Julie does not think of him as anything other than a friend and a well wisher. But Mike's brother Henry tells Mike to let Julie know of his feelings. Mike and Julie go out one day and find that they like to be out together. From that day they start seeing each other regularly. Singer plays a strange role in all of this. Whenever Richard is near he starts growling and becomes restless. But he wags his tail when Mike comes and follows him around. Singer indeed is like a guardian given by Jim and Jim himself seems to be there watching her.

As Julie stops seeing Richard, Andrea starts dating him secretly. At one point, Andrea fails to turn up at the salon for one whole week. She is found bound and beaten in the wood. No person other than a psychopath could have done the beating. Police start suspecting Richard as she was seen last with him at a restaurant. Just when the police start asking questions Richard disappears. Although Richard is not at his home, Julie catches him stalking her. Her

number and tells her that she is meant to be with him, that they will be happy together. He calls her Jessica. Investigation reveals Jessica to be his missing wife. Now Julie's life is threatened as Richard continues to stalk her. It becomes evident that he has changed his appearance. Mike takes Julie to a far away beach house to hide out from Richard. But Julie starts putting some distance Julie as well as Mike become Richard's targets. The police find out that he had killed a man and stolen his identity. And the search for his real identity is intense as Julie and Mike try to hide out in the beach house.

The suspense digs deeper into the climax as Singer is poisoned. That means Richard must be nearby. The police come in to give Mike and Julie protection. But even the police can hardly make out the real identity of Richard and hence how to find him? Meanwhile, Mike never lets Julie out of sight and Julie feels as if Jim has sent Mike to her. He has all along been the guardian watching over her. The only dilemma is whether Richard can be caught before he harms Mike or Julie. Mike and Julie's love is indeed a test of time and circumstances. From here the reader has to start turning the pages until the last page is read!

In this richly imagined novel Sparks plunges the reader into a borderland between romance and mystery, between exclusion and privilege and between desire and frustration. The characters are sewn seamlessly into the storyline. There are some fascinating insights and compelling characters that mesmerize the reader. The story is deeply felt, poignant and engrossing. It creates a profound emotional impact. A "catch the breath" reading for everyone!

Tulip Chowdhury writes fiction and teaches

The life and times of a revolutionary

Subrata Kumar Das explores a centenarian's career

B INOD Bihari Chowdhury, the iconic revolutionary figure of the subcontinent, turned one hundred on 10 January this year. By all accounts yet a young man, he has produced a book called Ognijhora Dingulo (The Flaming Days) through dictation where he has deliberated on his long as well as told and untold stories of his eventful life. There is no doubt that the politico-cultural personality. The chappublication of the book will help us learn ters include 'Amar Priyo Gram' (My more about this centenarian figure who has observed the three phases of the evolution of the Bengali nation the British era, the Pakistan era and the present Bangladesh era and thus has made himself an erudite figure in the historical perspective.

Born in Chittagong to Kamini Kumar Chowdury and Bama Chowdhury, the veteran revolutionary Binod Bihari Chowdhury started his academic life at Rangamati Board School in Fatikchhari Thana of Chittagong District. Later on he attended Coronation Uchcha Biddalaya of Fatikchhari, Chittagong, and P C Sen Saroatoli Uchcha Biddalaya of Boalkhali, Chittagong, where he pursued secondary education. Chittagong College and

studies. He did his MA in English in 1939 and graduated in law subsequently. These are the facts that are revealed in this recently published book.

But more than that the book, in fact, delineates the simplified stories of the different phases in the life of the veteran Beloved Village), 'Amar Bere Otha' (My Growing Up), 'Amar Biplobi Jiboner Suchona' (Beginning of My Revolutionary Life), 'Jubo Bidroher Kotha O Jalalabad Juddho' (The Story of the Youth Revolution and Jalalabad War), 'Jalalabad Juddho O Amar Kotha' (Jalalabad War and Me), 'Ferari Jibon' (My Fugitive Life), 'Amar Jailjibon' (My Life in Prison), 'Jailkhanai Porashona' (Studies in Prison), 'Bhasha Andolone Sompriktota' (My Involvement in the Language Movement), 'Bhasha Andolone Chottogram' (Chittagong in the Language Movement), 'Muktijuddhe

Amar Sompriktota' (My Involvement in

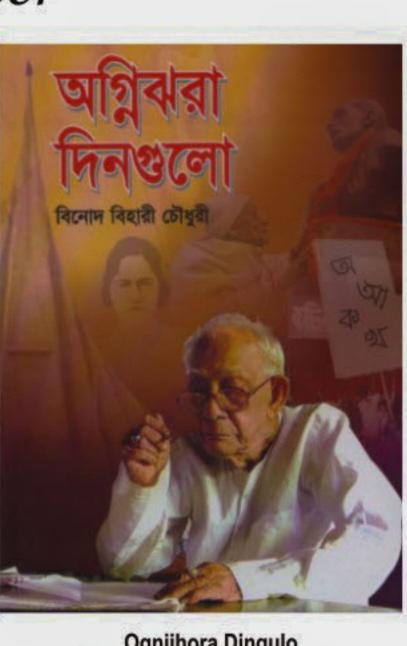
the Liberation War), 'Bangabandhur

Hotyar Shorhojontro O Amar Kotha'

(Bangabandhu Murder Conspiracy and and My Statement) are the episodes that Binod Bihari Chowdhury has enjoyed dictating to Tapati Roy and Hossain Anwar who made transcripts of them to be published in a book form.

The titles can easily delineate what spans of his life are demonstrated in the thin but invaluable two-cover production. It is a well known fact that Chowdhury joined the group of revolutionaries called Jugantor and thus became a very close associate of the revolutionaries Mastarda Surjya Sen, Tarkeswhar Dastidar, Modhushudon Datta and Ramkrishna Biswas. His devotion and sincerity in the anti-British movement made him an integral part of our history. But he contributed not only in the movements against the British rulers, but subsequently against the Pakistani military junta as well. His fiery nationalistic sentiments never remained silent whenever the existence of the nation was in trouble.

The stories that the revolutionary relates are not that much unknown to readers who have an inclination toward history, especially accounts of the British



Ognijhora Dingulo Binod Behari Chowdhury Savdachash Prokashon, Chittagong

colonial days. But the speciality of Ognijhora Dingulo comes through the personal tone which seems to be rather a novel approach for readers. So many events were he involved in, so many great people he met with, so many phases of our historic movements he has been engaged in that it all seems incredible. And yet that is the incontrovertible truth. Chowdhury is polite with his readers. He does not patronize. Think of the qualities that can make a legendary personality like him write: 'As I don't have enough practice in writing, there could be found many errors. But I have tried to picture some of the revolutionary events in the hope that the youth of today will attain bravery leaving behind all their lethargy. This is the reason behind the writing of the book. I will be grateful if knowledgeable people bring the errors in the work to my notice. This is my request.' Maybe this modesty is a common feature among illustrious people like him?

A particular attraction of the book is the 72 photographs of the revolutionary, though all of them show the elderly Chowdhury. These include some with famous personalities like Prime Minister

Sheikh Hasina or Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus; while some others depict his family people in a very informal milieu. Some photographs also tell of the sweet moments of the later-life activist, like celebrating his birthdays, et cetera. It would have been a better collection if photographs covering his whole life, in its various phases, had been accommodated in the volume. The respected-by-all personality

Binod Bihari Chowdhury's Ognijhora Dingulo is a careful presentation of its publisher Sanjit Banik, a real devotee of the 100-year old dignitary and an enthusiast of Bangla literature. As the proprietor of Savdachash Prokason, he has many worthy books to his credit and Ognijhora Dingulo is certainly a rich addition to the list. Sanjit Banik deserves real appreciation for making available to us such a black and white documentation of the momentous days of our pride, namely, Binod Bihari Chowdhury.

Subrata Kumar Das, author of the web site Bangladeshinovels.com, can be reached at subratakdas@yahoo.com. This review is a