

Splendid success story in snowy Toronto

Afsan Chowdhury finds Bengali culture thriving away from home

QUIETLY 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.

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 commitment.

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.

Hasnu is very inclusive as far as his content choices are concerned. Nor does he prioritize by any criteria. He tends to give the same attention to a book review as he does to a longer piece of fiction or essay reflecting his sense of worth of what he publishes.

Many of the published pieces have become well known for their literary and sociological value. The memoirs of a young Muslim boy growing up in a liberal Hindu household in 1960s Dhaka by Dinu Billah in 'Kakababur Toyhouse'...

has been a long time resident of Canada and 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.

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 well-known litterateur from India and the UK, has turned in a significant piece on Mother Teresa which is interesting not just for the subject but also how it is approached.

though to a lesser degree having mothered a child from another man and so on, so typical of the English between the wars, caught with their world in tatters and their pants down and at the same time not being able to figure out what to do with either.

Ketaki does a job on Mother Teresa by using the writings of a Kolkata Bengali 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.

construction of the saints, church, colonialism 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.

"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 achievement.

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 focus-wise. Some of the gems are just waiting to be discovered and provide great pleasure.

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 monster-woman Hirimba and her son Ghototkach is notable.

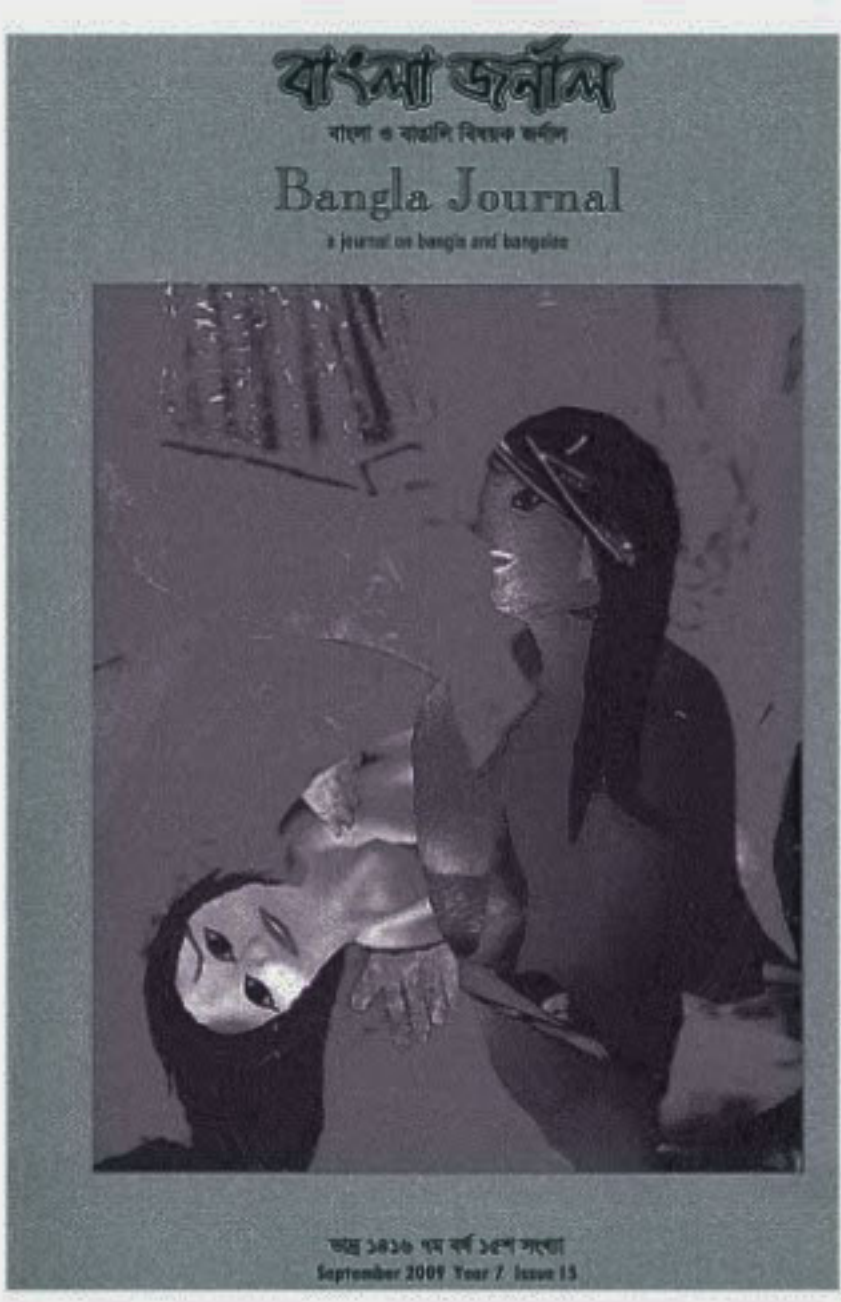
In 'Ghatakhkch-Hirimba dialogue' by Monohar Mouli Biswas, the theme itself is taken into a new space where humanizing the demon is the main objective. Hirimba's role as a mother occupies a larger space than others, reducing the traditional imageries of these characters in India's cultural history.

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.

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.

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Bangla Journal Editor Iqbal Hasnu

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.

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.

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.



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 Madhusudhan Dutta, Jibananda Das, Mir Mosharraf Hossain, Tarashankar Bandhopadhyaya, Bishnu De and so many others.

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.

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-cum-bookstore, replete with arrangements for coffee and an ambience for exercises of the mind, has come up.

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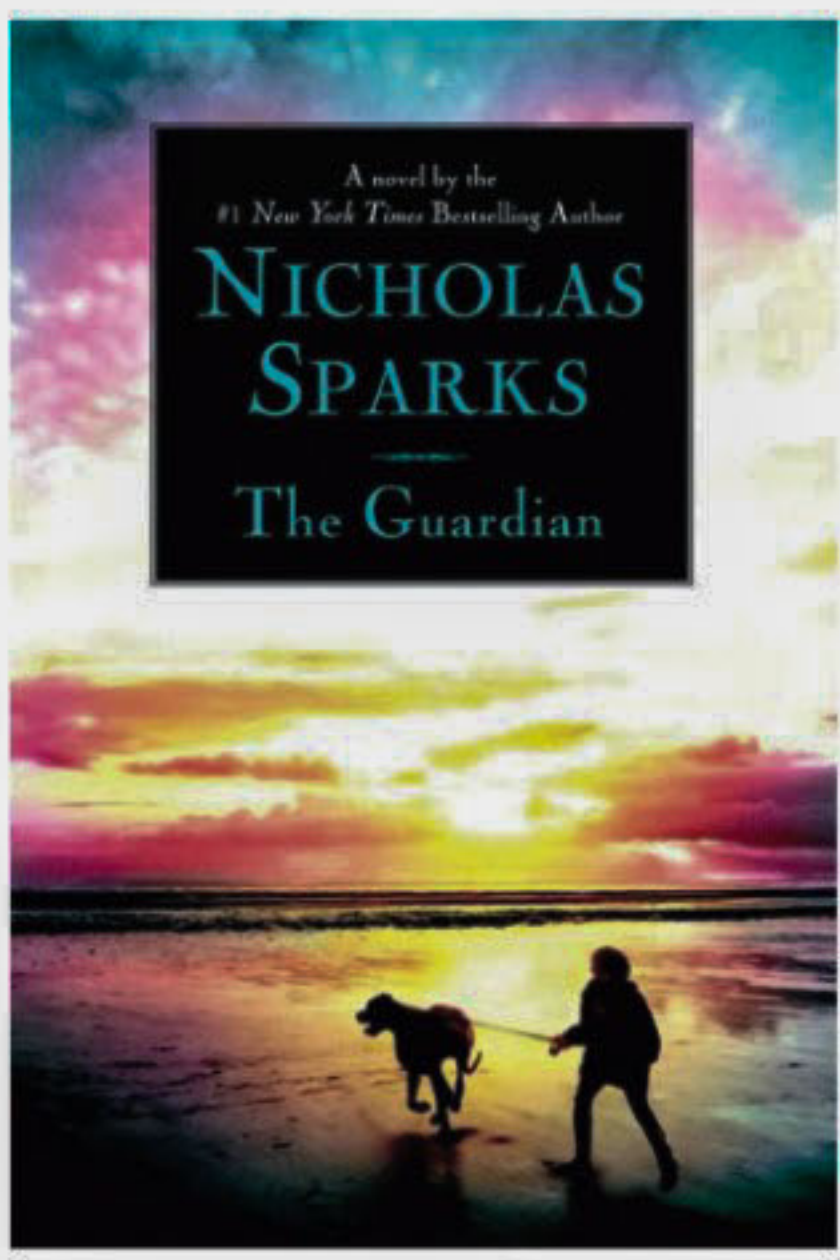
The dangerous paths of love

Tulip Chowdhury enjoys a tale of passion and fear

SPARKS 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.

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.

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 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.

Julie starts putting some distance 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.

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

calls her from an unidentified phone 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.

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.

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

BINOD 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 Dingulo where he has deliberated on his long as well as told and untold stories of his eventful life.

Born in Chittagong to Kamini Kumar Chowdhury and Bama Chowdhury, the veteran revolutionary Binod Bihari Chowdhury started his academic life at Rangamat 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

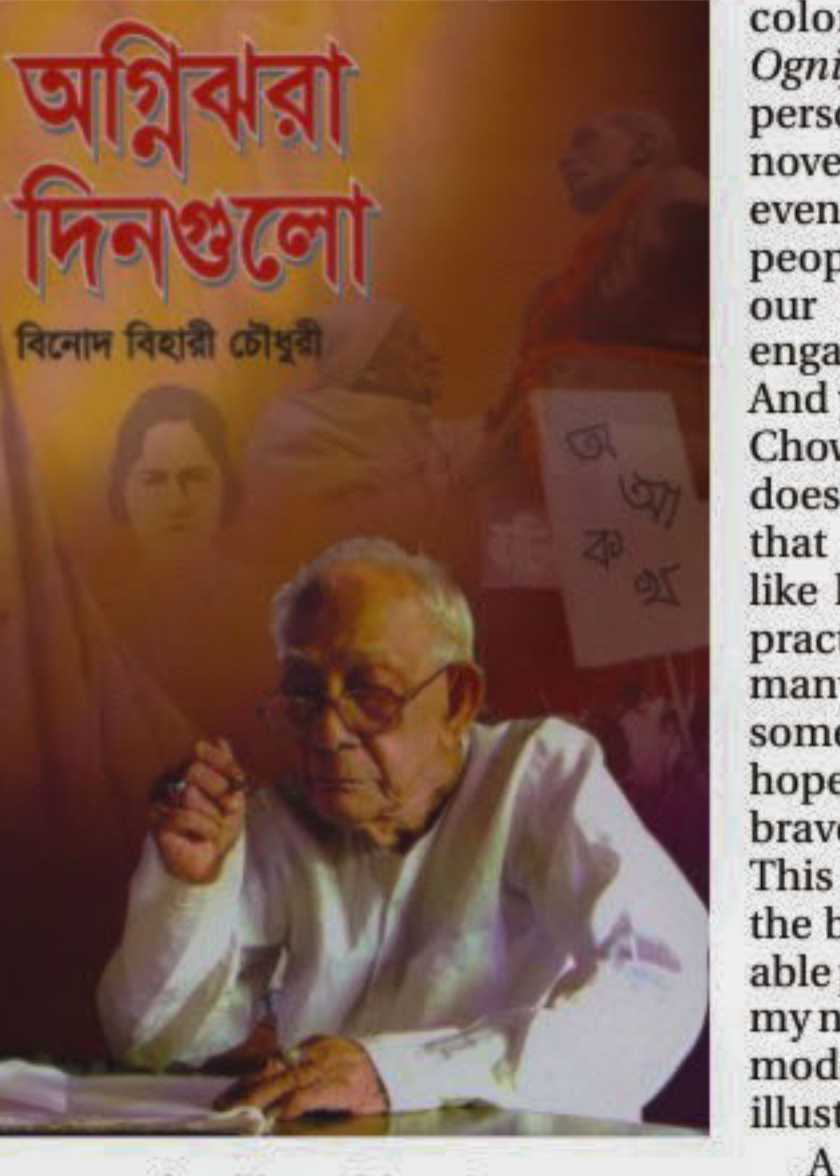
University of Kolkata were to provide him with the opportunity of pursuing higher studies. He did his MA in English in 1939 and graduated in law subsequently. These are the facts that are revealed in this recently published book.

But more than that the book, in fact, delineates the simplified stories of the different phases in the life of the veteran politico-cultural personality. The chapters include 'Amar Priyo Gram' (My 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), 'Bangabandhu Hotyar Shorhojontro O Amar Kotha'

(Bangabandhu Murder Conspiracy and My Statement) are the episodes that Binod Bihari Chowdhury has enjoyed dictating to Tapatil 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, Tarkeswar Dastidar, Modhushudon Datta and Sankrishna 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 Prokashon, 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.

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