

INTERVIEW

Observing 1952 in a New Ambience

Serajul Islam Choudhury reflects on the essence of the Language Movement

Serajul Islam Choudhury, Professor Emeritus of Dhaka University, is among the most powerful and probably the most widely read voice of dissent in the country. Author of nearly eighty books, the extent of his scholarship on history and politics of this sub-continent is extensive. His views have swept over the fields of literature (both Bengali and English), history, social science and in the departments of Arts and Humanities. His works beyond the ivory tower have influenced and inspired generations of political activists. Recently, *Akram Hosen Mamun* on behalf of The Daily Star spoke to him about his thoughts on the language movement of '52, liberation war and the present prospects for a better society. What follows are excerpts from the conversation.

Akram Hosen Mamun: The nation's journey from 1952 to 1971 was a period of immense political turmoil and transition. How do you evaluate the struggles of that period and how can those movements give us hope for a better society?

Serajul Islam Choudhury: The major characteristic of the language movement of 1952 is its secularism, which was unprecedented compared to any other movement. It was a great advance from the of two-nation theory founded on religion based nationalism. Also important was the revolt against the system of internal colonialism developed by Pakistanis. It was our first uprising against the state which culminated in the birth of a new state in '71.

AHM: TDS: Was this an anti-capitalist movement or cultural resistance?

SIC: Before going to that I want to consider the extent to which the movement was anti-capitalist. The struggle of the ordinary people, a majority of whom were uneducated, was intrinsically anti-capitalist. The reason why they became engaged in the language movement was that they didn't know any other language than Bangla. And they were not going to let go of it.

On the other hand, the aspiration of the middle-class and, for that matter, the ruling class was different. Was it against capitalism? I don't think it was. If the Pakistanis, for example, had not tried to impose Urdu as the state language, there would, presumably, not be a language movement. The reasons are: we, more or less, took the dominance of English for granted because we, the middle class, knew the language. In that circumstance, if Urdu became the state language, the middle class's knowledge of English would have become useless and they'd be made redundant in the resulting reformation. Hence, the fight of the middle class was against Urdu, and not against capitalism. An assertion of some facts can be further proof of this argument: Bangla was one of the two state languages before 1971. After that, it was made the only state language. Notwithstanding this phenomenon, Bangla has never had the status that the masses wanted it to have. The fact that we, the middle class, accepted English unquestioningly suggests that we accepted the fundamental ideologies of a capitalist economy.

A similar example can be found a little further back in history: the anti-colonial struggle against the British was not an anti-capitalist struggle. Congress or the League did not take any position against the unfettered exploitation of the prevailing economic system. Rather, what they wanted was a transfer of power. The transfer of power into their hands meant that they could also get hold of the capital.

Similarly, the Pakistani rulers wanted a capitalist form of development and our conflict with them did not arise from that. The army, bureaucracy and business were already dominated by the Panjabis and other west Pakistanis when the question of state language arose. The middle class of our country realised that they lacked the capacity to compete with the Pakistani bourgeoisie with the burden of an additional linguistic hegemony. Analysing



the state language movement, we can conclude that the struggle of the masses was intrinsically against economic disparity. Their aspiration was to build a democratic state without exploitation.

Now, language is a crucial factor in building a democratic state. It transcends the distinctions of class. If we could establish the practice of Bangla in every sphere of life, the class distinction would have been reduced to some extent. We failed. And, after the war, power was transferred to a group of people believing in the same ideologies. As a consequence, the anticipated social transformation or revolution did not happen and the question of language remained. Take, for instance, our system of education: the three strands not only remained after '71 but also considerably deepened after it. Now we have more English medium schools, private universities and madrasas than we had before '71. As the class cleavage deepened, the aspiring middle class, which is also the ruling class, accepted the

dominance of English as a part of their celebration of capitalist ideologies. They also got immense material and intellectual power from it. The intellectual power derives from their use of language.

In building the new state, one of the major challenges for us was to establish our mother tongue in education, bureaucracy, higher courts and other spheres of our lives. We, however, didn't take the challenge. We failed to implement Bangla in higher education, not enough books have been written, and translations are not available.

On the whole, the nationalism of the common people was (and always is) substantially different from the nationalism of the ruling class. As I have already mentioned, the common people aspired to make a more egalitarian state without linguistic barriers.

AHM: It is understandable that a resistance to this crisis must have been present in the works of contemporary literature.

SIC: The body of critical essays, articles and dissertations on politics and economics has significantly increased in recent years. It is a new development. These critical writings have substantially contributed to creating an awareness that the nationalism of bourgeoisie and that of the common people are inherently different from each other.

In the works of [pure] literature, on the other hand, the issues were virtually absent with a few exceptions. An instructive phenomenon in literature is the growing lack of interest among writers for short stories. Most of the successful short stories (i.e. Maupassant, Rabindranath) shock and disturb the reader. Now, in order to explain why the impressive current of Bangla short stories is dying, we need to look at two defining factors: a) short novels or novellas are taking the place of short stories; b) writers are unwilling to devote their time and energy to short stories as an art form that demands philosophical depth and a quality to shock or disturb the reader within the

confines of a brief space.

It suggests that the writers have become alienated from the issues that could be the subject of short stories. A large body of popular novels usually short and entertaining is the resultant of the writers' alienation from the social concerns. We, the readers, on the other hand, are preferring entertainment to disturbances or shocks.

AHM: We had some brilliant and powerful short story writers in Bangla. For example: Jyoti Prakash Dutta, Akhtaruzzaman Elias, Hasan Azizul Haque, Shawkat Ali and others. It seems that writers of the same vein are not emerging.

SIC: As I have already mentioned, the writers as well as the readers have become disjointed fragments of society. As a consequence, the kind of literary works that raise uncomfortable questions would not sell much.

AHM: What are the prospects for rekindling the hopes and aspirations that led common people to organise remarkable movements (i.e. state language movement, liberation war) for a better society in the past?

SIC: Our state is bureaucratic and capitalist in principle. Secular and anti-capitalist movements are being organized around the world now. The recent advancement of the Middle Eastern states is remarkable in this regard. Inspiring movements are also being organized in Europe, Latin America and even in the United States.

I believe the patriotic and democratic people who believe in social transformation, equality of rights and opportunities, decentralization of power and the rightful representation of people have the responsibility to organise movements against the inherently evil economic system to bring about positive changes in our society. The movement will not be a success if it ignores culture. It should aim to transform the culture as well as the politics of our country.

NON-FICTION

An Oscar Night

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

Oscar Night is always big in my life. As soon as the nominations are announced, usually in January, Rumi, my wife and I scramble to movie theatres to see as many movies as possible before Oscar Night, usually mid-March. Since the days in Dhaka University when Jack Nicholson won the Best Actor award for *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, we have been Oscar-addicts. We not only try to see all the pictures nominated both before and after Oscar Night, but also follow the careers of the actors and actresses who catch our fancy. And this dedication we now also see in our children!

This year the film *The King's Speech* received twelve Oscar nominations, including Best Picture and Best Actor, and as soon as the nominations were announced Rumi and I felt ecstatic. We saw the movie in early December and were completely moved by it. I strongly felt that the film should garner nominations for all the major categories. So when our judgment was validated, it gave us great satisfaction. Others that are also nominated include *True Grit*, *Inception*, *Black Swan* and *Rabbit Hole*. We decided early on after reading the reviews that we needed to see the last two before the Oscars were awarded on February 27th. One reason was that not only were these two nominated in multiple categories, but most importantly in the Best Actress category: Natalie Portman for *Black Swan* and Nicole Kidman for *Rabbit Hole*.

For us living in the Boston area, going to a

movie theatre is one of the many competing pastimes that vie for our time. Because of our busy schedule, we can only go to movie theatre during weekends. Unfortunately, the weekend is often crammed with other necessary and recreational events to attend to, such as going to the bank, grocery shopping, jogging, cultural events, and of course dinner parties. And if all these are not enough, Rumi and I spend a considerable amount of time to stay in touch with our children (who live independently), extended family, and parents and aunts living in Bangladesh. I mention all this because we find that Saturday nights are the only time we can slip out and head for the movie theatre.

Two Saturdays ago, on a cold wintry night, we headed for the movie theatres to see our two movies. It was already past 9 o'clock when we reached the Randolph Showtime Cinema. This megaplex has 16 theatres under one roof, and we were sure we'd be able to find one of the two movies playing. We were foolish not to check the Internet for listing and show times. When we entered the theatre we discovered that the next showing of *Black Swan* was an hour away. Since we did not want to wait for an hour to see *Black Swan*, we considered our next options, i.e., either see something else or go to another cineplex. Since all the others either did not appeal to us or we had already seen them, we decided to try the Braintree AMC Theaters located ten miles away. Again, these days a tech-savvy person would check the listing on the cell phone, but Rumi's Blackberry had low battery and we decided to



just drive on. We were sure we'd be able to catch *Rabbit Hole* at Braintree, because Braintree was more cosmopolitan than Randolph and would have a more diverse fare than the latter. I need to mention that *Rabbit Hole* is an Australian film.

To cut the story short, Braintree was not showing *Rabbit Hole* either, and as at Randolph, *Black Swan* was at 10:30. Reluctantly we decided to call it a night and head for home.

But we decided to try again the following Saturday, and this time we checked the Events Calendar on the Internet. Luckily for us, we found that *Rabbit Hole* was at Hoyt's Cinema in Sharon. The theatre was located close to our house, and we headed out for the 9:05 show. But as happens often, we were a little behind,

and dinner and other chores took a little longer than we had planned and it was 8:45 before we finally pulled out of the driveway. I had a premonition that we would be at least ten minutes late, even if we took the expressway, and ran into no traffic. Nonetheless, we decided that it was worth a try, and if we were lucky the trailers that precede the feature film would take ten to fifteen minutes and we would not miss much. When we reached the theatre it was already 9:10 and I tried to cheer up Rumi by telling her that we would miss only 5 minutes of trailers and not the movie.

We checked the ticket counter and asked them if the movie had already started. This being a small suburban movie theatre was not very busy, and the girl who was attending the concession stand was also doubling as the ticket counter agent. She called the "projector man" on the walkie-talkie and after checking with him reassured us that the movie had not started yet. Another gentleman who was standing next to her behind the counter also seconded that and informed us that it takes at least ten minutes to finish the trailers. We felt relieved and after buying the tickets headed for Theatre No. 3. We reached the gate, but when we looked into the theatre we saw not a single soul inside, and the screen was dark. We thought that we had come to the wrong theatre and after checking the signage we determined that we were at the right place. But it was already past 9:15 and theatre #3 was empty and there was pin drop silence. We were wondering if the showing was cancelled and came out to check with the manager. We

saw the girl who sold us the tickets and, she guessed our puzzlement, said reassuringly, "Don't worry, the movie will start in a minute. Since we had not sold a single ticket for the movie before you guys came, the projectionist had not started the movie." She said it in such a calm tone that we didn't know how to react to the news that we were going to be the only two humans in the theatre to watch *Rabbit Hole*. If it had been a horror movie, I am not sure if we'd have turned back and gone home rather than watch gore and blood scene after scene by ourselves, but we knew *Rabbit Hole* was not in that genre. It was a movie about a couple trying to cope with the loss of their four year old child. So, we knew that while there might be a few scenes where the couple shout at each other, there were no murders involved.

So, for the first time in our lives, we were at a movie theatre with rows and rows of empty seats, and just each other to keep company when the first trailer and advertisement started. We looked at each other, and decided that it wasn't such a bad thing after all. Valentine's Day was only a day away, and here we were, a middle-aged couple, sitting in the centre of an otherwise completely empty theatre watching a "night show" with only each other for company. I wonder how many people ever are privileged to have such a showing. An Oscar Night indeed for us! Needless to say, the movie was an added treat and an exquisite one at that!!

Dr. Abdullah Shibli lives and works in Boston, USA.

POETRY

Let There Be Light

A F M YEAHYEA CHOUDHURY

Let the candle glow soft
In your benign hand ---
While I dream of the dews
Dropping from the night's eyes
Into the heart of dawn.

Let the gentle stream flow
From the blossom of the meadow ---
Into the virgin green field,
With breeze so cute and mild
Merrymaking in wind and mind.

Let the rainbow come out
In the sky from the spressed cloud.
Let the cloud be melting
With the shining silver lining.

Let rays of the sun enlighten the moon,
Let hope, aspiration and imagination
Transcend with heights of the Himalayan.

Let there be will and might,
Let there be light.

Composed at Cambridge University
22 November, 1998

Commonwealth Writers' Prize Shortlist Revealed

The Commonwealth Writers' Prize, internationally recognised for its role in celebrating ground-breaking works from both new and established authors, has unveiled a mix of established and undiscovered stars for the South Asia and Europe regional shortlist for the 2011 Prize, says a press release.

The Commonwealth Writers' Prize, supported by the Macquarie Group Foundation and now in its 25th year, has selected both household names, including Andrea Levy, and the future literacy icons of tomorrow for the shortlists for Best Book and Best First Book awards. The winners from South Asia and Europe will go on to compete against writers from across the Commonwealth at the Commonwealth Writers' Prize's final programme to be held at the Sydney Writers' Festival from the 16th to the 22nd May.

The shortlisted writers for South Asia and Europe Best Book are:

- Lyrics Alley* by Leila Abouleila (UK)
- The Betrayal* by Helen Dunmore (UK)
- The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* by David Mitchell (UK)
- The Long Song* by Andrea Levy (UK)

Sex and Stravinsky by Barbara Trapido (UK)

Union Atlantic by Adam Haslett (UK)

The shortlisted writers for South Asia and Europe Best First Book are:

- Serious Men* by Manu Joseph (India)
 - Saraswati Park* by Anjali Joseph (India)
 - The House with the Blue Shutters* by Lisa Hilton (UK)
 - Children of the Sun* by Max Shaefer (UK)
 - Grace Williams Says it Loud* by Emma Henderson (UK)
 - Sabra Zoo* by Mischa Hiller (UK)
- For the last 25 years the Commonwealth Writers' Prize has played a key role in unearthing international literary stars, bringing compelling stories of human experience to a wider audience. Winners of this year's Commonwealth Writers' Prize will follow in the footsteps of some of the biggest female names in fiction, including Zadie Smith, who won the Best First Book award in 2001 for her book *White Teeth*.

The regional winners of the Best Book and First Book prizes will be announced on the 3rd March, with the final programme commencing on the 16th May at the Sydney Writers' Festival in

Australia. This will bring together the finalists from the four different regions of the Commonwealth, and the two overall winners will be announced on the 21st May.

Commonwealth Foundation Director, Dr. Mark Collins, said: "The Commonwealth Writers' Prize aims to reward the best of Commonwealth fiction written in English and underlines our commitment to promoting cultural exchange and diversity. This year the range of subjects, the breadth of genres and the diversity of writers will bring the very best of Commonwealth literature to new audiences. The support of the Macquarie Group Foundation has seen the Prize gain in international standing and expand its reach. This year we're delighted to be holding our final award programme in Sydney, the home of Macquarie, at Sydney Writers' Festival."

David Clarke, Chairman of the Macquarie Group Foundation, the main supporter of the Prize, added:

"The Macquarie Group Foundation's continuing support of the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in its 25th year is the cornerstone of Macquarie's arts philanthropy. The Prize plays

a valuable role in recognising and rewarding diverse literary talents and, in so doing, connects global communities."

Commenting on the shortlist for Best Book, Muneeza Shamsie, South Asia and Europe Regional Chair, said:

"There were some really strong contenders from the Europe and South Asia region for the best book. The shortlist reflects novels with a geographical diversity and historical sweep, portraying with immense sympathy individuals caught up in great events from sixteenth century Japan to twentieth century Sudan, from nineteenth century Jamaica to the present day. In diverse ways these novels depict the struggles of humanity amid the growth and decline of civilizations."

Commenting on the shortlist for Best First Book, Muneeza Shamsie added:

"The entries were very diverse and the shortlist was chosen only after a spirited debate. These writers have taken a familiar genre and shaken it up so as to provide new moral insights."