

REFLECTIONS

Dictionaries lost to time

NAZMA YEASMEEN HAQUE

As I embark on narrating the tale of a dictionary, a mixed feeling gathers up in me. It is a useful and precious book but little known to most of us. In an old book that was first given approval by the authorities way back in 1958. The copy that I possess was published in January 1980, which was its twenty-fourth edition. In terms of time, it is undoubtedly an old book and the saying, 'Old is gold', is apt testimony to its merits in a most comprehensive way. And this characterisation makes it not only a book but much more than a book. I am, of course, talking about Ashu Tosh Dev's --- or commonly known as AT Dev's -- *Students' Favourite Dictionary* which is from English to Bengali and then back to English. Hardly any dictionary provides us with two categories of meanings from word entries. Dictionaries that have done so, say in Bangladesh, have definitely followed the precedent although there might not be any acknowledgement thereof.

Our book markets have an abundance of dictionaries from various publishers --- Oxford, Chambers, Penguin, Longman, Bangla Academy et al --- that come in different sizes, shapes and colours. Added to this nowadays is the look-alike dictionary of OUP that people often buy either by mistake or on finding that it is somewhat cheaper than the others. I do appreciate such amazing ingenuity in some very skilled people engaged in this specialized job. How I wish they would do the same for Webster's huge table dictionary, one that we possessed in America but could not bring back home because of its sheer volume! In the midst of this subtle competition that goes on in the market, AT Dev's Dictionary is nowhere to be found, for obvious reasons. Then again, varieties of dictionaries do not necessarily mean that our students or we ourselves have been using them more and more. Had it been so, there would not have been a constant decline in learning a language, be it Bengali or English at all levels. Nor would there have been a seemingly less noticeable interest among students in using one. However much we hear English around us these days, in terms of its quality and standard it is not at all encouraging. In fact, what we hear in Bangladesh in the name of English may be called Banglish as it is a curious mixture of sub-standard Bengali and some pidgin English only.

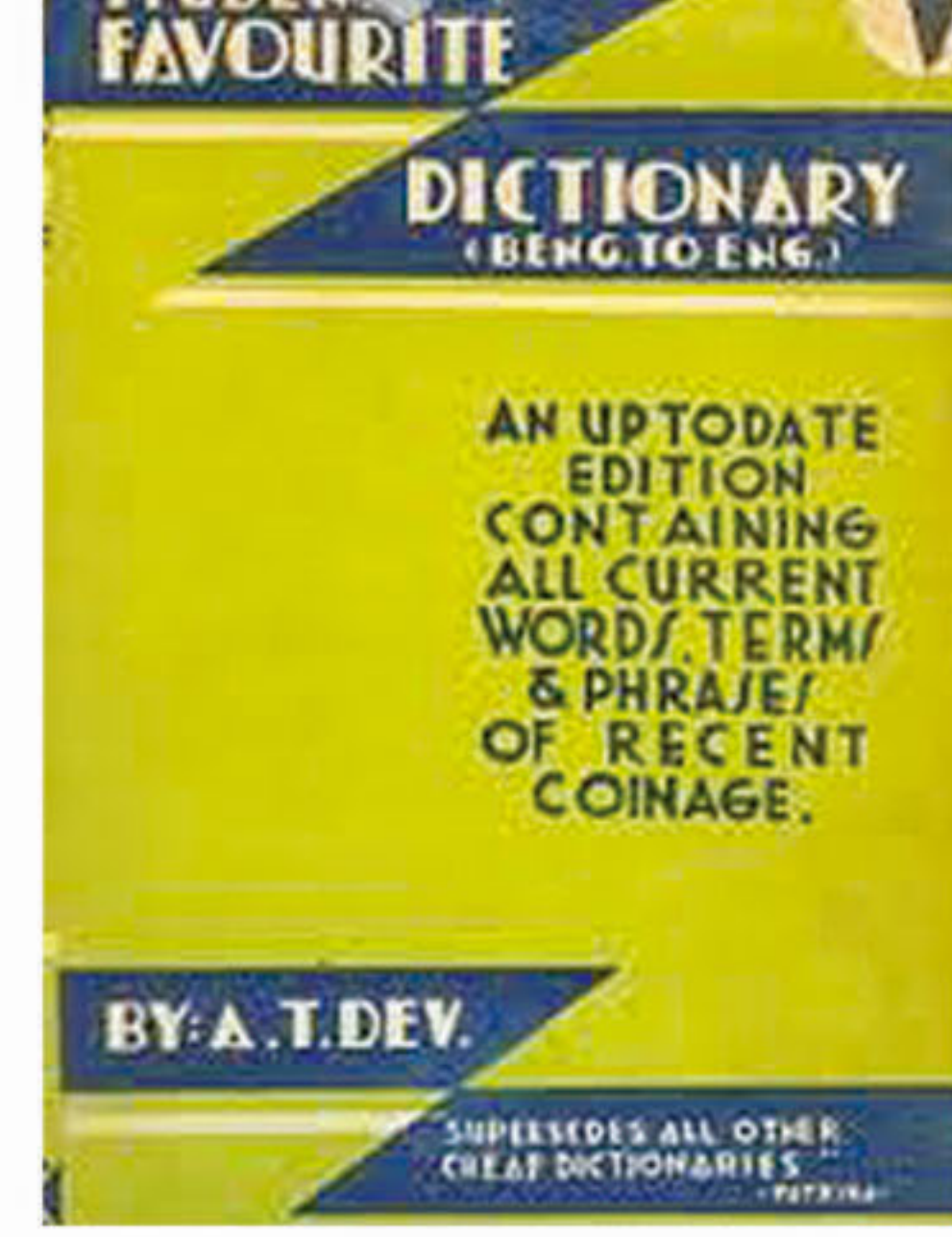
A dictionary is a tool to learn a language; and in the case of mastering a second

language, it is all the more important. As educators we feel that youngsters should be trained to use a dictionary from an early stage of schooling long before they tend to develop an apathy towards it or are too lazy to look it up. We all need to use a dictionary at some point or the other, especially when in doubt. Its usefulness is indisputable. "No one can ever himself to be so erudite that he can do without a dictionary", says Rhodri Jones. An interesting way of looking at the uses of a dictionary lies in the fact that it sets matters right when someone discovers that he has been spelling or pronouncing or has known the meaning of a word, an idiom or any other expression in a certain way for ages only to find that that is not correct. A few examples: we commonly hear of the word 'alphabets' and know it for sure as correct.

Only a dictionary tells us that it is wrong. The word 'twilight' is used always in a negative and also in a morbid sense. AT Dev's dictionary draws our attention to its full meaning: 'a faint light before sunrise and after sunset.' Therefore, if it is before sunrise, it cannot be taken entirely in the negative sense. It is its customary use in society that has ascribed only one meaning to it while the other has gone into oblivion. It is the same with 'dinner' which we, by custom, have associated with a meal in the evening only. That is wrong. I recall the children of my class at a school in Kent, England. They would bring their 'dinner money' to be paid to their Form Teacher for a week's school dinner they would have at school in the middle of the day. Use and disuse can bring about much transformation in the lexicon of a language. Many other examples can be cited in this connection. Spellings of words like 'accommodation' oftentimes is seen spelt with one 'c' or one 'm' or at least create confusion, however momentary that might be. Spellings of many other words are confusing, oftentimes leading to some hilarity. In this regard, a witty remark by the celebrated comedian Bhanu Bandopadhyaya is worth mentioning. He says that although it is possible for the word 'pillar' to be spelt with one l, nevertheless, two l's will surely make the pillar stronger. Talking about the charm of AT Dev's dictionary, one who uses it would definitely say that it is *sui generis*. It is a pleasant coincidence that it is called 'favourite' but it does not bring out its full import when associated only with the word 'students'.

It is much more than that since students and mature people both are in a sense

learners and remain so throughout their lives. Therefore, it is essential to all regardless of educational qualifications and age, varying only in their respective purposes of using it. There were times when young and adults alike used it, cherished a copy of it for keeping it handy and went for revised editions in spite of the availability of other dictionaries. The merits of Dev's dictionary were obvious to them. They felt satisfied by using it, learned much and correctly, which they were to retain all their lives and more so apply them meaningfully. Since long the scenario of learning or learning habits at all levels has undergone great changes at the cost of quality and compromising with sub-standard English,



concomitantly reducing the use of a dictionary. Meanwhile, AT Dev's has gone into oblivion.

There are as many as thirty-three appendices in this dictionary, a few of which are common to most other good, standard dictionaries. But what distinguishes Dev's from the others are a number of its special features. Its huge entry of words and phrases from Greek, Latin, French and other languages is almost exhaustive and their explanations in refined Bengali along with English is absolutely excellent. There is a beautiful addition in the appendix which is like reading classical and mythological stories and characters unusual in a regular dictionary. This appendix is called *A Concise Classical and Mythological Dictionary*. Indeed it is a

dictionary within a dictionary. We often forget or confuse the diminutive forms of some common words and their meanings, such as 'thimble' from thumb 'asterisk' from star, 'molecule' from mole. Wonder of wonders, a petty poet is called a 'poetaster'. Having gone through Dev's, one feels confident about using the word, however long it has been in disuse. The appendix on diminutives of Christian names of both males and females frequently spotted in literature makes an interesting read that reminds a reader of characters in the classics. Another appendix on proverbs contains a wealth of knowledge as it helps one brush up one's lessons learnt in younger days in school and college. Simultaneous entries in English and Bengali not only help retrieve things from one's recesses of memory but also make one learn many things new to be added to one's repertoire of knowledge and information. One discovers proverbs that one never knew of, let alone use. And, on top of this, one can get one's incorrect use of proverbs that one has been using for a long time, of course unwittingly, corrected by reading this particular appendix. The appendix on quotations from great minds is no less fascinating, useful for reference, and thought-provoking. One can spend hours together on deciphering, finding inner meanings, as one can keep on expanding the sayings in their fullness.

A few quotations are mentioned here for the interested readers to ponder on. "If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him", says Voltaire. An Old Epitaph reads, "What I give, I have; what I spent, I had; what I kept, I lost." Fowler says, "The best teachers of humanity are the lives of great men." Dev quotes Bruyere, who says, "The sweetest of all sounds is that of the voice of the woman we love."

He even includes one quotation from the Holy Quran: "Haste is of the devil." This dictionary is a gold mine of marvellous quotations that add to its substance.

A whole lot of idiomatic commonplace companions are there in an appendix in the form of similes that, however 'commonplace', oftentimes slip out of our minds when it is time to use any.

The list of collective phrases is not to be ignored either. We do often use a dictionary of synonyms when we need to and also come across synonyms and antonyms of some words in a regular dictionary. But what sets this book apart is its incisive analysis of differences between synonymous words showing when in a word is more appropriate

and therefore preferable to another. Other gems in the appendix include a list of words and phrases meant for acquiring general knowledge on terms such as Zionism, Third Force, Quisling, Gestapo and Filibuster, which have so far remained jargon for specialised professional groups only. An inclusion of such words in a segregated list makes it known to any user, especially adults.

In the same way, an appendix on important places, countries and continents of the world is a ready reckoner for any inquiring mind.

AT Dev's is not only full of geographical data but also old names that can be part of competitions on general knowledge for young learners. While this World Gazetteer deals with information on global geography, a parallel appendix deals extensively with historical facts beginning in 10000 BC, recorded as the age of the first cultivation of the earth down to 1969. It contains answers to myriad questions that can be mind-blowing as one goes from one question to another. *Students' Favourite Dictionary* on the one hand is a regular dictionary; on the other, it is colossal in respect of being an invaluable record of History, Geography, English Literature, English Grammar and General Knowledge. It is a chest of treasure where lies an endless reserve of knowledge for human minds to extract from. As if that were not enough to make it a comprehensive guide to human intellect, it is embellished with two last but not least appendices, one on English literature that consists of introducing books, even famous poems and essays along with the names of the writers that one can use in an alphabetical order. Written in about 3,200 lines, the old English epic *Beowulf* is also enlisted as "... perhaps the earliest considerable poem in any modern language." And for the rest, as a reader names it, s/he finds it there. Biographies of illustrious people from a wide range are included in a very special appendix.

A brief research on Dev's dictionary in terms of its content analysis prompts one to recall a few lines from Tagore which in apt paraphrase notes that we have travelled far and wide to see shores of distant lands, but have not spotted a beautiful crystal dewdrop on top of a stalk of paddy that lay so close to our abode. AT Dev's dictionary very justifiably deserves this appreciation and due recognition among circles of enlightened people.

Dr. Nazma Yeasmeen Haque reads, writes, loves music and is founder-Principal, Radiant International School, Dhaka.

ACROSS THE TABLE

With steaming cups of coffee . . .

SHAHRUK RAHMAN

Good afternoon to you, friends from Kolkata. It is good to be here, in this historic city, and an honour to be at the famous Kolkata Book Fair. From our childhood we have heard so much about this city, so many of our parents grew up in this city, or studied here, we feel very familiar here.

Niaz Zaman has already told you about our reading circle, but she didn't mention that she is not only the founder spirit, but also the heart and soul of this group. All of us eagerly wait for the day each month, when we sit with steaming cups of coffee or chocolate - munching buttery croissants - and discuss the book of our choice. We are all passionate readers, but when we know there is a serious discussion to follow, the purpose to the reading certainly becomes stimulating. I find myself quite often using a pencil to underline significant portions, a practice I had left off after I finished my education! While we certainly appreciate writers from the subcontinent, and neighboring Afghanistan *The Kite Runner*, for instance we have read a lot of international writers. You have already seen the list of books we have read these past five years. One rule we try to strictly follow is, we never read pirated books, though they are sold so temptingly cheap, at all the traffic stops!

Here I will briefly touch upon three authors, American, Marilynne Robinson; Chinese-American, Amy Tan; and Hungarian writer, Rozca Hajnoczy who, interestingly, wrote about her three years spent in Shantiniketan!

Gilead was recommended by Marianne Scholes, our American member, and a voracious reader herself, who brought copies of the book for us from the US. It is the story of this preacher, whose father and forefathers were also preachers, and who is writing a letter to his son. It is written in a quiet, calm and beautifully flowing, narrative style, rather like a peaceful stream. Occasionally there is the uneven, rocky edge, when we see action and even drama. It is the story of honest, strong, salt of the earth people, who know their duty, and never flinch from it. The narrative is not without an underpinning of wry humour, which makes for very enjoyable reading. 'Gilead' is the old biblical town, near the Jordan River, suggestive of Jerusalem. The people who lived here were ordinary, everyday folks, who quietly did heroic deeds, when it was expected of them.

Very different was Amy Tan, the Chinese-American author, who has refused to allow a debilitating disease to defeat her. A prolific writer, she writes of a delightful Chinese-American fusion culture. Her characters have both the ancient Chinese wisdom, and no-nonsense American practicality. A Hundred Secret Senses is the story of Kwan and Olivia, half-sisters, almost like ying and yang, which combined make a whole. Kwan, Chinese born, possesses a secret inner mystique, which helps her see things others miss. Her very practical American born sister, Olivia, has made a mess of her life, her marriage has failed and she lives in a state of despair. It is the Chinese wisdom of Kwan, who guides her, and helps her to regain her equilibrium. Kwan takes her on a trip to China, where they

rediscover themselves, and their rich cultural roots. And thus Kwan helps Olivia in a subtle, almost imperceptible way. Olivia's marriage is saved, and she finds the peace which so far had eluded her.

Saving Fish from Drowning is another fascinating work of this author. Here a group of American tourists commence a fateful journey to Burma and China, almost retracing the journey of Buddha. Amy Tan does not hesitate to show the beauty as well as the ugliness of this ancient civilization. The title of the book itself is so delicately subtle: the fishermen do not say they are killing the fish for eating; they are merely 'saving' the fish from drowning!

And lastly, *Fire Of Bengal* by Rozca Hajnoczy, whose carefully maintained, meticulously detailed journal of the three years she spent in Shantiniketan, which, when published, took Hungary by storm, and became an instant best seller.

Gyula Germanus, Hajnoczy's husband, had been invited by Rabindranath Tagore to head the Islamic chair in Shantiniketan. This Hungarian was a brilliant man of many parts, and also an eminent Islamic scholar of the time. He and Rozca spent the years 1929-31 at Shantiniketan, where he 'took his classes outdoors under the open sky'.

Through Hajnoczy's journal we see Shantiniketan as it was at the time in picturesque detail. To a European lady from Budapest, everything was bizarre at first, but when, alas, she boarded the ship to finally leave India, she found her heart becoming numb with sorrow.

In her writings we see our own Bengal in a new light, a fascinating place where the cooks refuse to cut vegetable or meat standing up, for everything must be done through squatting on the floor! Where mosquito nets have to be draped over beds, where loyalty to one's master, no matter what, is taken for granted, where there is the good, the bad and the tragic. We read about the Italian bakery, *Firpo's*, newly opened in Calcutta, which supplies bread to the expat community living in Tagore's Shantiniketan. It is a fascinating journey into history.

The writer has shown us characters which become immortal, the British, the Europeans, the expats and locals. We see and recognize Atunu Ray (Shesher Kabita?), the anglicized Bengali, who is utterly dismayed to find his English wife, Himjhuri, become more Indian than Indians! Gyula and Rozca travel all over India during their vacations, and we see a glimpse of the vast subcontinent, the India of that time, the culture of hospitality, the traditions, the diversity. They travel up to Darjeeling to pay homage to an eminent Hungarian scholar buried there.

Hajnoczy is not overawed by the personality of Tagore; he in turn stretches out his hand to her and makes her sit next to him at the dinner table!

Fire of Bengal, translated into English from Hungarian by Eva Wimmer and David Grant, has been published by The University Press Limited, Dhaka. It is a must read.

Shahruck Rahman, a member of The Reading Circle, delivered this talk in Kolkata recently.

REMINISCENCES

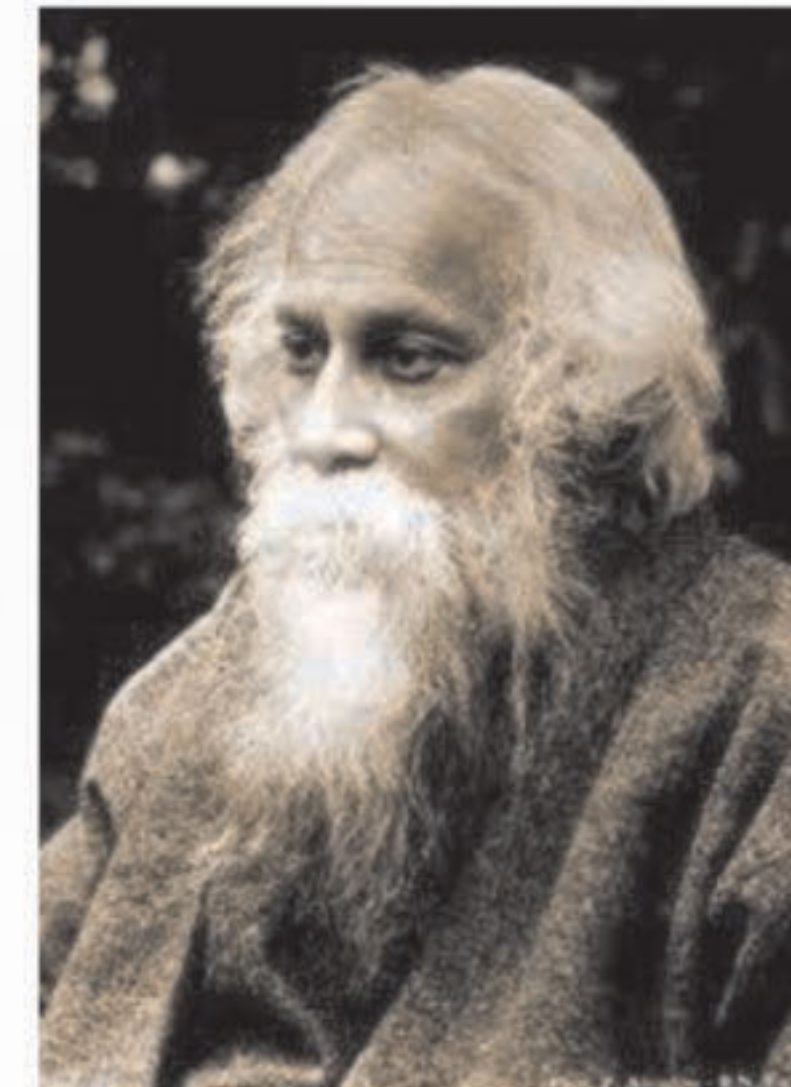
Tagore at Oxford

This article by Shahid Suhrawardy, a scholar and diplomat, first appeared in the Calcutta Municipal Gazette in 1941. Star Literature reproduces it in the interest of its readers. The first part appeared last week.

SHAHID SUHRAWARDY

Whilst I was casting and re-casting the speech I was to make, posturing in the presence of my closet friend in my rooms, two circumstances made my task easier. Firstly, we heard that the Poet had already been invited by Manchester College to come and address a gathering there and that he had consented. So I had only to request him to divide his time between them and us when he came over. Secondly, the Poet's son and daughter-in-law were visiting Oxford and some of us were asked by 'Mullickda' to luncheon to meet them.

'Mullickda' was the doyen of the Indian student community not only in years, but also in material prosperity. He did not live at college or in digs, as all of us did, but in a large boarding-house on Woodstock Road, where, according to report, he was being cruelly rooked. He was the naivest and best of men, exceedingly generous to all of us, paying up our debts and spoiling us with gifts. Nevertheless, his lunches were extremely boring because of that flair of his, which he has retained till this day, of gathering round an abundant table men and women the most incompatible in taste and temperament. He was already promulgating some sort of a philosophic doctrine of his own backed by lavish hospitality and no wonder in that city of large leisures he was drawing to himself people of widely divergent types. ## In spite of the great affection we all, and particularly I, had for him, I accepted his invitation with an inward fear at the prospect of being wedged in, as had happened before, between a lean clergyman from Pusey House bent on saving my soul



and the fast-extinguishing charms of the widow of a defunct professor. Therefore this particular luncheon turned out to be such a delightful surprise. Incongruous people there certainly were present but the grace of Pratima Devi and the spontaneous urbanity of Rathi Babu gently smoothed down all the angles and for a short while we were happily enveloped in the kindly atmosphere of a Bengal home. I shall always be thankful to 'Mullickda' for the opportunity he gave me of knowing these noble persons for whom my affection has since then ever been on the increase. Coupled with the gratitude which I like many others feel towards them for their unchanging kindness and goodness is my great admiration for that fine and rare talent for decorative art on the stage which makes Pratima Devi unique among our artists.

On arriving at Paddington station I took a taxi to Chelsea where the Poet and his suite were putting up in a big house. I was introduced into a large-sized room where I first saw the Poet. He was sitting on a divan and along the walls there were many chairs occupied by men and women, Indian, British and continental, who sat in rapt silence, as in a prayer-hall. In one corner of the room an Englishwoman was modeling the Poet's head in clay whilst in another a fierce young man, a Pole perhaps, was sketching, as I saw from a corner of my eye, the fine folds of his robe. The windows were wide-open on to the Embankment and I do not now remember if incense was burning in that room, but if it was not, it ought to have been because the atmosphere was so charged with awe and admiration. My visit was formal as the Oxford programme had already been fixed upon by Rathi Babu. Disconcerted as I felt at the collusive silence of the place, I was a little relieved at the thought that the invitation I had brought need not, by being communicated in words, strike a harsh note in that stillness. At that time I thought that the Poet's immobility and his closed eyes were due to his posing for the artists in the room, but since I have understood better for he possessed the rare quality of being able to withdraw within himself at will and relapse without effort into the statuesque. That capacity for complete aloofness in the midst of contacts, that sudden communion with the inner life in the intervals of spoken words, that faculty of abstracting oneself from one's surroundings, he shared with the prophets and the visionaries. Such men one may come to know very well and yet never be familiar with.

...courtesy Mahboob Alam, Former Ambassador. (More Next Week)