

The sounds of silence

Raana Haider captures pristine beauty in silent nature

"The deep silence of this immense forest is what first strikes the unwary visitor who comes prepared to be intimidated by the world's largest natural mangrove forest tract. Instead one is mesmerized by its unbelievable tranquility" are the opening words in the moveable feast that is Enayetullah Khan's book, *The Bangladesh Sundarbans*. Elsewhere, he writes in lyrical language: "In the sheer elemental wilderness characteristic of the Sundarbans, it is not difficult to imagine that there is something mystical in the deep and ancient silence that encompasses the land. The silence resides like a great echo that haunts every rustle of a leaf and every snap of a twig under the unwary tourist's foot. Whether forager, tourist, or hunter armed with rifles, intruders in the forest experience a humbling awe in this silence that punctuates the dangers of the forest."

Deeply imprinted in my memory of the Sundarbans is the powerful presence of silence. I heard the sounds of silence and experienced splendid isolation and all the while reminding myself - that this too is Bangladesh! The seemingly never-ending expanse of water and forests is a sight to behold. The nothingness of terrain - for the next tract of land beyond the Bay of Bengal and beyond the Indian Ocean is the Antarctic continent - a sobering thought indeed. Within these boundaries of silence, the words of the Swiss philosopher Max Picard posed a century ago came to mind: 'Nothing has changed the nature of man so much as the loss of silence.'

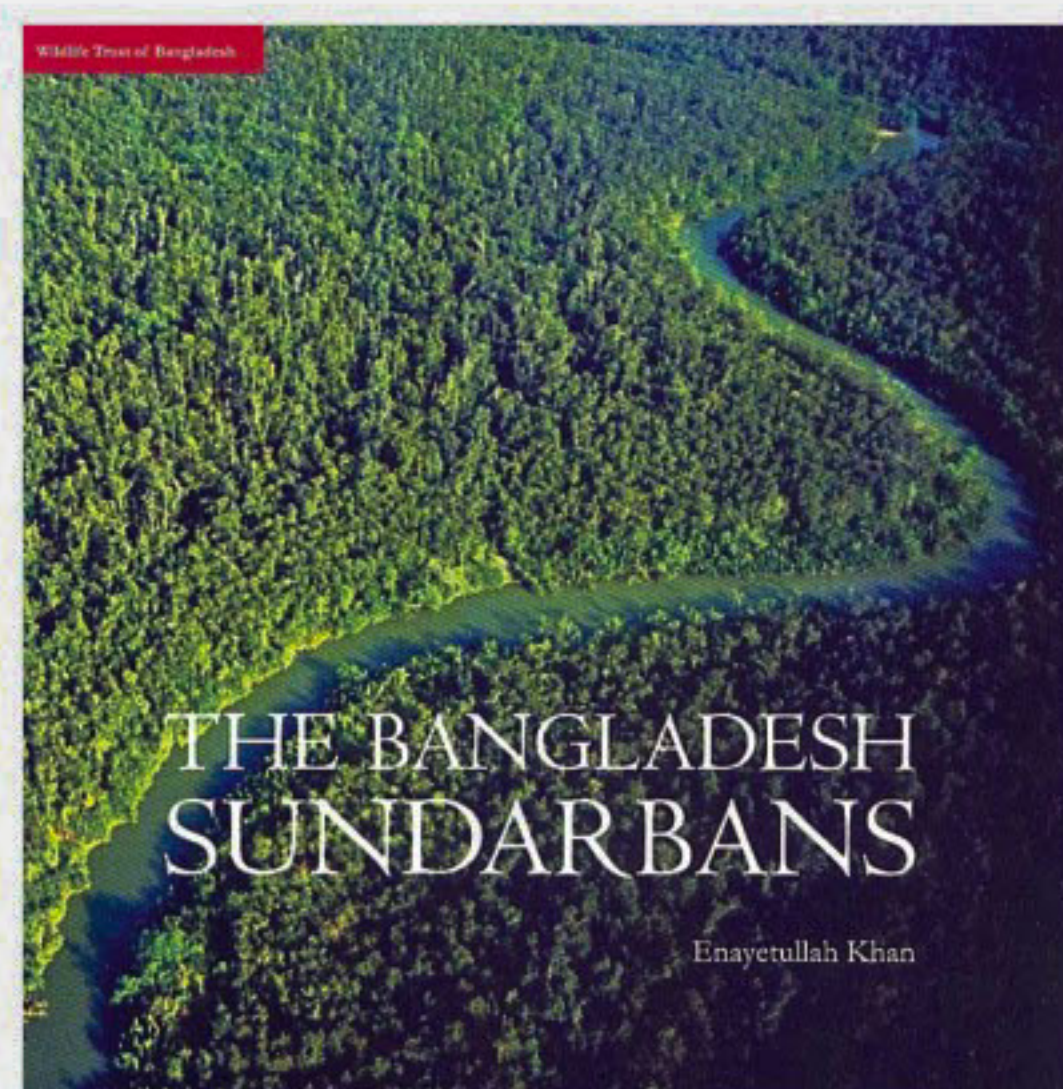
And just when one becomes placid, the volatile nature of Nature springs a surprise. Khan observes: "The rainy season is the noisiest time of the year for the Sundarbans, for this is when the tranquility of the forest is broken by the sound of millions of tiny splashes that chorus through the land, as the rain beats down on the waters and thick green foliage of the mangroves...Thunder and lightning rend the air, coming in quick successions as if each were trying to outdo the other in an ancient ritualistic dance through the skies the dance more ritualistic than the forest itself...In the aftermath of the storm, a long frog dares to croak and a few lonely crickets signal the perseverance of life in the Sundarbans; then as the clouds recede, the blood-red setting sun appears and silence dominates once more."

It is not only the language of words that speaks of the surrounding silence. A double page visual spread (pgs. 28-29) by Gertrud & Helmut Denzau speaks of lush greenery, a blue sky and white puffs of clouds reflected in the translucent river - all blending into the lost horizon. The label to this ethereal photograph is 'Where silence becomes a beauty of the Sundarbans.' The entire book is replete with photographs whose magnificent visuals form the sensual canvas that so enhances the creatively crafted book. As one reads *The Bangladesh Sundarbans*, slowly an accompanying thrill sets in while turning the page - which photograph will now prompt the 'wow' response? The unforgettable beauty of the Sundarbans is captured by the Denzau on pg. 144 in an aerial view of the silvery waterways contrasting with the thick dark green covered forest. As for the aerial pictorial book cover shot, it is one of mesmerizing 'unreal' reality the Sundarbans forest so dense in the sunlight that it appears as a carpet of moss through which meanders an s-shaped river.

Such photographs belie the naked eye. Kudos is due to the many photographers whose frames adorn the book. Md.Abdul Aziz of the Wildlife Trust of Bangladesh (WTB) has (pg. 25) captured the calm creek, sunlit overhanging branches a picture of serenity yet juxtaposed it with pneumatophores (needle-like roots that spike out of the muddy flats)

and constitute the lungs of the mangrove plants. The photograph speaks of the Sundarbans serenity that is punctuated with elements of harshness. Animals and birds are frozen in time for our delight. Monirul Khan's shot of the Spotted Deer (pg. 10) captures six of them in pose. The Brown-winged Kingfisher (pg. 39) by Sayam U. Chowdhury is a full-page master portrait. And I could go on.

Most of us have never caught a glimpse of the 'stripes in the grass.' A consolation prize is the powerful portrait by Gertrud and Helmut Denzau (pg. 3) of the regal and fearless king of the Sundarbans. Framed in a backdrop maze of twigs, branches and leaves is a hauntingly magnificent visual of the Royal Bengal Tiger, "the top predator and...the umbrella species for the Sundarbans Reserve Forest." The conservation guidelines 'The Bangladesh Tiger Action Plan (BTAP) (2009-2017) outlines the structured approach to long-term conservation of tigers in Bangladesh. The tiger and its principal prey the spotted deer are threatened by poachers, smugglers



The Bangladesh Sundarbans
Enayetullah Khan
Wildlife Trust of Bangladesh

and natural resource collectors which include fishermen, wood collectors, honey collectors and golpata (palm leaf) collectors. In the delicate eco-system balance, Man and Beast battle for survival. According to BTAP reports, "up to three tigers are killed each year by human-tiger conflicts. On the other hand, an average of 20 to 30 people are killed each year...This human-tiger conflict creates negative attitudes in local communities towards, tigers, making conservation of tigers and SRF difficult."

I need to dispel any notion that *The Bangladesh Sundarbans* is some romanticized visual documentation. Hard facts and figures feature throughout as do maps and graphs. A Foreword by Muhammad Yunus, Nobel Peace Prize Winner 2006, graces the book. The counter page is a unique water colour by Bangladesh master painter Qamrul Hassan (1921-1988) of the Bengal Tiger (1977). Accorded recognition as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1997, the Sundarbans Forest Reserve with its huge national biodiversity is a natural ecological barrier against cyclonic impact and tidal surges. "During the last century, 17 disastrous cyclones struck the area along the Sundarbans. But due to the vast expanse of the Sundarbans forest, those storms could not cause much damage to the coastal habitations." Its deep reach is evident from the information that "The

northern periphery of the Sundarbans is about 50-60 km. away from the sea face of the Bay of Bengal." A reference to Sundarbans was made by Walter Hamilton in his pioneering work a geographical dictionary which appeared in the East India Gazetteer in 1815. In the late eighteenth century, the Sundarbans included areas of present-day Kolkata.

Noteworthy is the fact that "The Sundarbans mangrove forest occupies 4.2 percent of the total area of Bangladesh and takes up a staggering 44 percent of the total forest cover in the country...Often described as 'rainforests by the sea', the mangroves are estimated to cover an area of 22 million hectares." Imbalances within the natural habitat have contributed to the shrinking of the "population of the forest and a consequent thinning of the forest."

On its topography, we are told: "The Sundarbans is a deltaic swamp formed by...millions of metric tons of sediments by the river systems weaving the Sundarbans Reserve Forest...the Sundarbans comprises an extensive flat, coastal and deltaic land formed by the confluence of three mighty rivers: the Ganges, the Brahmaputra and the Meghna...Nearly 450 rivers of various sizes occupy about 30 percent of the Sundarbans...The freshwater flow in these rivers decreases during the dry season when there is a massive incursion of saline water...The soil is a deep alluvium silt of clay loam, rich in nutrients, but unsuitable for cultivation and human settlement..." Yet "about four million people who live nearby derive part of their subsistence extracting resources...Forest officials claim that some 50,000 people from around the neighbouring localities and districts enter the forest everyday for their livelihood."

Over-harvesting of fishery resources has reached dangerous levels. "40,000-70,000 fishing boats operating in the SRGF for fishing...huge quantity of non-target aquatic species is being destroyed by both permitted and non-permitted extraction of fishery resources in the waters of Sundarbans...About 80 percent of the shrimp fry sold in the country is collected from the rivers of the Sundarbans and the adjacent sea." While a moored fishing boat depicts a picture of serenity, the fisherman ekes out a living in precarious conditions. Sundarbans dwellers have faith in Banibibi, other deities and spirits that offer protection from the harsh elements and predators.

For things created by God
For the Sundarbans God created the Royal
Bengal Tiger
Whose eye
Keeps the world in awe.
For the singer God created
Her voice.
For the poet
His words.
For Bangladesh
The Sundarbans.
What happens to the singer
Who loses her voice?
What happens to the poet who loses his words?
Bangladesh take care
Of the Sundarbans.

The British poet laureate Ted Hughes wrote the poem during his visit to the Sundarbans on 22 November, 1989. It appears in Enayetullah Khan's book - a heartfelt homage to the Sundarbans. It would be wise to heed the clarion call.

RAANA HAIDER IS A TRAVEL WRITER AND CRITIC.

Dreams of a better world

M. Abdul Hai sees light in poetry's tunnel

Ambiguity is a typical feature of modern poetry. It is so because readers always find it difficult to understand the state of mind of a poet that was really at work while writing a poem. A poem usually appears different to different readers. It also depends on their age, attitude and mentality. What interests you today may not do so tomorrow. The way you interpret a poem today may appear way different tomorrow.

Beebortoner Kobi Bolchhi needs to be taken in an unconventional way. Because Mohammad Shamsul Haque Shams, the aeronautical engineer turned poet, has always tried in his poem to present his thoughts and ideas, removing all coatings of confusion and ambiguity. He has remained meticulous in selecting words. Foreign words, as in English and Arabic, have been used with unusual ease, and readers rather find it interesting to read them. The poet, keeping his target readers in mind, has used his poetic skill and wisdom to make his poetic expressions easy to understand.

Difficulty in apprehending a line or a word seriously dampens the pleasure of reading a thing. The poet has been conscious all through, and that is what makes his poems so interesting to read. Once you embark on a journey through his books, you will find that your rapt attention is established right away. There is something of magic in his poems and you will not feel like leaving the book without coming to the last line, to the last page of it.

The poet has dealt with a wide variety of subjects with uncanny ease. His scholarly abilities can best be realised and appreciated only through serious reading, and once you come to the end of the book, you will feel that you have been elated, you have become more knowledgeable. You will be left mesmerised. You surely will come across quite a few logical presentations --- religious, social and political --- which will leave you thinking for many days. They will seem to be new ideas and you will start thinking again about your own concepts about life and the world. Religious thoughts are surely mind-boggling. You will feel like scrutinizing the entire gamut of your religious understanding.

Optimism is a pivotal element that presents itself through every page of the book. You will never miss the silent music sung in celebration of life and living. The poems will help you take a different and yet a positive approach to life, and thus help you nurture optimism far deep in your heart.

Bingsho Shotabdi Porikroma is a fantastic poem. It is a sarcastic exposition of the so called modern age. One must not leave the book without a complete apprehension of the philosophy that the poet propagates. The poems will surely help readers develop a kind of spiritual enlightenment once they give a serious reading. The title which appears at the top of this review tells the readers that the poet is the spokesman of the positive changes he envisions. This guiding principle helps him appear as an ameliorant. Every poem in this book has an undercurrent of hope. He shows light at the other end of the tunnel.

He emphasises a nurturing of moral values which, he affirms, are the only antibodies to purge our world, to make it free of man-made cancer.

The problems which are discussed in this book have both local and global dimensions. The man-made problems, typical of this modern age, have been depicted with disapproval. The poet is very critical of obscenities and immoralities which are taking hold of our society in the name of modernism. Here the poet makes it clear that modernism will never succeed in bringing peace unless it rejects immoralities and injustice.

The poet does not stop by painting a dismal picture of the earth we live in; he also prescribes a way out of it. He helps us dream, of a better world.

M. ABDUL HAI IS PRINCIPAL, ABC INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL, NARAYANGANJ.



Beebortoner Kobi Bolchhi.
Md. Shamsul Haque Shams.
Amir Prokashon

REVIEW ARTICLE

Indians against democracy

PANKAJ MISHRA

Growing up in India in the 1970s and 80s, I often heard people in upper-caste middle class circles say that parliamentary democracy was ill-suited to the country. Recoiling from populist politicians who pandered to the poor, many Indians solemnly invoked the example of Singapore's leader Lee Kuan Yew. Here was an Oxbridge-educated and suitably enlightened autocrat, who suffered no nonsense about democracy, and, furthermore, believed firmly in the efficacy of publicly caning even minor breakers of the law. Devising his wise policies with the help of experts and technocrats, he simply imposed them on the population. Lee Kuan Yew's success in transforming a city-state into a major economic power was apparent to all: clean, shiny, efficient, and prosperous Singapore, the very antithesis of corrupt and squalor-prone India.

Such yearnings for technocratic utopia may seem to have little in common with the middle class protests against "corruption" that recently gained much attention before abruptly losing steam at the end of the year. Led by Anna Hazarean army veteran described in the foreign press as a "simple man in a Gandhian cap" when he went on a hunger strike last summer the movement was presented by sections of the media in both India and the West as a long overdue political awakening of the middle class, even as India's "second freedom struggle." With his unambiguous denunciations of venality in public life, Hazare seemed to have alerted tens of millions of otherwise apolitical Indians to the possibilities of civil society, mass mobilization, and grass-roots activism.

And yet over the past few weeks the movement has dramatically collapsed, with its support dwindling and the key reforms it supported stalled by Indian politicians, who are determined not to cede their legislative authority to someone they see as an interloper. As he gained prominence, Hazare's articulate spokespersons had trouble

shielding his own less appealing views from public scrutiny. It turns out, for example, that the so-called "Gandhian" methods that he relied on to create a "model village" in his native central Indian town included flogging and beating; he also advocated hanging for corrupt politicians. And then there was his barely disguised Hindu chauvinism; he was ready, he claimed, to go to war with Pakistan in order to maintain the Muslim-majority valley of Kashmir as an "integral" part of India.

Questions are now being raised about how Indian television networks portrayed the movement: whether, as India's leading scholarly journal, *Economic and Political Weekly (EPW)* asked recently, middle class reporters providing a "saturation" of mostly adulatory coverage of Hazare to an essentially middle class audience exaggerated his influence and impact, converting "a protest into a 'movement,' a few cities and a village into 'the nation.'"

The international image of an inexorably "rising" India is largely due to these Indian beneficiaries of global capitalism. As Amartya Sen points out, "since the fortunate group includes not only business leaders and the professional classes, but also the bulk of the country's intellectuals, the story of unusual national advancement gets, directly or indirectly, much aired making an alleged reality out of what is at best a very partial story."

The current Indian government has been marred by a series of corruption scandals, particularly one involving its auctioning of the mobile phone spectrum, which resulted in the loss of an astounding \$39 billion to the national exchequer. And yet, by failing to elaborate what he meant by "corruption," Hazare left many important questions unanswered. For instance, is corruption really a malignant tumor in India's political and economic system, one that can be excised with some effort, or, is corruption, in many ways, the system itself? As Katherine Boo points out in her new book *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, a chronicle of lives in a Mumbai slum, "in the West, and among some

in the Indian elite, this word, corruption, had purely negative connotations; it was seen as blocking India's modern, global ambitions." But few of these critics of corruption acknowledge that, as Boo writes, "among powerful Indians, the distribution of opportunity was typically an insider trade." This was demonstrated most recently by a series of taped phone conversations, made public in late 2010 by the news magazine *Outlook*, between a corporate lobbyist and some of India's most famous businessmen, journalists, and politicians.

Keeping the definition of corruption deliberately vague, and speaking of it in mostly moral and sentimental terms, Hazare's campaign acquired some support from the urban poor, even as he worked to put the democratic system at the mercy of a few self-appointed guardians of morality. Hazare never focused on the distress resulting from income inequality, which has doubled in the last two decades, or on the gross abuses of corporate as well as state power: the dispossession, for instance, of the rural poor by mining companies, or human rights abuses by Indian security forces in Muslim-majority Kashmir. There was more clarity to be had about the aims of Hazare's movement from its affluent supporters, which included glamorous figures from Bollywood, the media, and India's iconic companies. Many of them call for an end to the state's subsidies for the poor and low-caste Indians. These "rising" Indians see social welfare programs as wasteful, and endangering the apparently smooth working of the free market, even though, as Amartya Sen recently observed, they "don't question things such as subsidy on diesel for rich people...Whenever something is thought of to help poor, hungry people, some bring out the fiscal hat and say, 'My God, this is irresponsible.'"

In part, such responses reflect the misgivings that have emerged as India's extraordinarily ambitious experiment in mass democracy has collided with its equally bold experiment in free-market capitalism. The complaints against democracy I heard

growing up had already become more strident in the 1980s and 1990s, when many previously suppressed and voiceless Indians began to challenge the supremacy of upper-caste politicians, and the "unwashed" masses began to throw support behind their own leaders. Rustic politicians with alarming manners such as Uttar Pradesh's Dalit "Queen" Mayawati and Laloo Prasad Yadav of Bihar who embodied, in nervous middle class imaginations, the "Caligulan barbarity" of India, as Salman Rushdie put it, portraying a politician based on Yadav in his novel *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*.

In the 2000s, many middle class hopes and expectations came to be invested in Manmohan Singh, prime minister since 2004. Though he belonged to the National Congress party, he seemed to embody the superior wisdom of the technocrats; educated at Oxford, he had worked as a World Bank and IMF economist, and had never been elected to the Indian parliament. Yet under Singh growth in India has remained wildly uneven and deeply compromised by corporate influence on political processes. A U.S. diplomatic cable released this year by Wikileaks shows a senior Hindu nationalist politician admitting that virtually all economic growth of recent years has been concentrated in the four southern states, two western states (Gujarat and Maharashtra) and "within 100km of Delhi." In another cable about Pranab Mukherjee, the finance minister being groomed to be India's next PM, Hillary Clinton is revealingly blunt: "To which industrial or business groups is Mukherjee beholden?"

During Singh's reign as prime minister, India has also witnessed a strong backlash against globalization among the poor. The most striking instance is the militant Communist movement representing landless peasants and indigenous forest peoples in Central India. These are Indians fighting their dispossession by mining companies that are backed by the Indian government. Early last year, India's Supreme Court censured the government for creating an informal militia against Communist militants. Claiming that

"the poor are being pushed to the wall," the court blamed increasing violence in the country on "predatory forms of capitalism, supported by the state."

Among the middle class Indians convinced that "India Shining" (in the election slogan of the BJP) is on the verge of becoming a superpower, these recent setbacks have been met with stunned disbelief, followed by rage against the most visible target: a corrupt, social-welfarist state. Not surprisingly, the demand raised by Anna Hazare's middle class protesters was mind-numbingly simple: political corruption must be eradicated from India in order to make the country more business friendly and speed up its tryst with greatness. Initially, Hazare's message benefited greatly from a rightward shift by India's corporate-owned dailies and 24-hour news channels, where pundits spoke excitedly of the politicization of previously apathetic businessmen and salary earners, hailing the rise of civil society against a venal and inept government. But when it came to concrete legislative action, the absence of broad support for this authoritarian-minded movement became clear.

Shrinking into irrelevance, Hazare's movement still offers an important lesson: that the much-vaunted civil society really is an open space in which the Moral Majority and Tea Party, Gaza's Hamas, Egypt's Salafis, and India's RSS can flourish just as well as such progressive movements as Occupy Wall Street and the Arab liberals who many assumed were the source of last year's uprisings. Civil society can host an insurrection of the masses, as in Tahrir Square, and also stage, as in India or Thailand, a revolt of the elites. As for the idea that middle classes in developing countries ensure the spread of democracy, it seems just as persuasive as the communist teleology that made revolution by working classes in developed countries look inevitable (abridged).

PANKAJ MISHRA IS A SCHOLAR, WRITER AND CRITIC.