

Two reviews from Syed Badrul Ahsan

Rainbows out of the past...

Mahboob Alam, after all the years he spent in promoting Bangladesh's diplomacy abroad, could have lapsed into quiet superannuation. Or he could have followed in the footsteps of some of his colleagues in government who, after retirement, opted for a second life as columnists or television talk show guests. Alam chose to do neither. And one is happy that he made a different sort of choice, that of exploring the many unknown facets of history. You could well argue that in Alam there is a historian whose preoccupation happens to be a study of the history behind the curtain, history that has often gone into the making of history as we know it.

That approach is what you spot in large measure in *Shaista Khan-er Shesh Ichchha O Onyano*. The human aspects of history, as they shaped men and events, are the theme which is at work in this extremely appreciable collection. Seeing that the writing of history is by and large a series of exercises in pomposity --- Winston Churchill once famously said he would be the one to write history --- this work is an instance of how scholars of history can keep themselves away from succumbing to self-importance and truly focus on the task at hand. Alam has done the job well, through bringing into his intellectual orbit a diversity of subjects one did not think merited any significance. Take the leading story here, that relating to Shaista Khan's last wish. There are plenty of individuals who may be acquainted with the Mughal governor's place in history. But where details pertaining to his stay in Bengal are concerned, not everyone might have the information he needs at his fingertips. So, how about some basic information about Shaista Khan? Mahboob Alam gives it to us straight.

Shaista Khan served as subedar in Bengal for altogether twenty five years, a time that spread out over two phases. The first phase covered the period 1663-1677. He returned as subedar in 1679 and continued to hold the position till 1688. A major reason why Shaista Khan's period as governor of Bengal has become an indelible part of history has to do with the manner and modalities of his governance of the province. Of course, when he was first sent out to these parts, the understanding might have been that



Shaista Khan-er Shesh Ichchha O
Onyano
Mahboob Alam
Subarna

he was on his way to a hardship post, not a very good prospect for one whose abilities ought to have been utilized in the thick of the action. And that spot was not Bengal. And yet Shaista Khan turned his ordeal into a stupendous achievement. He kept the Moghs and Portuguese at bay. It was in his time that Dhaka took on a new dimension. In his twenty five years of rule, Dhaka remained the capital of the province. The city expanded in enormity, one might add. The city extended fourteen miles from north to south and ten miles from east to west. As many as fifty two markets and fifty three roads constituted the core of Dhaka city.

Alam notes that at the age of eight, Shaista Khan took voluntary retirement and chose to prepare a will he thought his family could do with after his passing. A glance at the will, says Alam, shows that Shaista Khan's property extended all the way from Multan (in today's Pakistan) to Murshidabad (now in India's West Bengal). A more enlightening, not to say intriguing section in the book comes in *Babu-Ingreji Aar Shahebi-Bangla*. The 19th century, Alam reminds us, might have been an era of revival or even renaissance in India. On the lighter, more amusing side, it was also a time when Bengalis as well as

colonial Britons engaged in often asinine behaviour when it came to learning and applying each other's language in everyday life. There are the tales that could leave you laughing quietly, if not exactly rolling on the floor. Alam cites an instance from the *Sangbad Probhakar* newspaper. Bengalis, keen to show off their 'increasing' mastery of English, saw little of the embarrassing in bringing in English terms and phrases even as they pretended to speak in Bengali. Terms such as last night, morning, danger, recover and life's hope were liberally used. Snobbery was at work.

Mahboob Alam pushes a caveat toward you. As he tells the story, the Bengali's tendency to mangle language, as in a bad combination of English and Bengali terms in speaking was not new in that era of British rule. Which could perhaps explain why today Bengali is under such a bad threat from local users of English. For these people, pretension is all. They push Bengali into mutilation when they consciously bring English into its use. But Bengali is not the only prey to be shot down. Observe the contents, besides everything else, of a letter a 'native boy' wrote to the *Englishman* newspaper on the issue of a reduction of his salary:

...I am a poor native boy rite butiful English and rite good sirkulars for Mateland Sahib ...very cheap, and gives one rupees eight annas per diem, but now a man say he makes better English, and put it all rong and gives me one rupe...

Mahboob Alam takes care to inform readers that this young man was in possession of other gifts as well. Observe again:

I make poetry and country Korruspondanse.

Obviously, Alam's research is what comes across as impressive. And nowhere is this more visible than in the article, *Teen Shahityik-er Chakri-Kahini*. The niche occupied by Bankimchandra Chatterjee, Nabinchandra Sen and Dwijendral Roy in Bengali literature and aesthetics has regularly been remarked upon as a significant point of reference for enthusiasts and scholars of Bengali heritage. But how much of their inner anguish, of the demoralisation they were often pushed into in their careers as loyal servants of the British

Empire are we aware of? That great men often have sad stories behind them, or in their souls, is a truth Mahboob Alam reinforces once again through recounting the various ways in which these three historical figures in Bengali history tried to earn a decent living, in the process trying to stay away from the humiliation their colonial masters were quite capable of inflicting on them. All three of them were deputy magistrates, which in so many words means none could climb the ladder to being a full-fledged magistrate. The poet Nabinchandra Sen served as a deputy magistrate in such places as Bengal, Bihar and Orissa between 1868 and 1904. His exhilaration, on the day he retired, was intense. He felt hugely cheerful and indeed pranced back home. On the way, he glanced at the sky, to tell God of his gratitude to Him over the fact that He had made it possible for him to retire. "Let me be in peace for the rest of my life", he appeals to the Creator. D.L. Roy, unlike Bankim and Nabinchandra, was a trifle more emotional and found it hard to come to terms with the repeated transfer orders being served on him. His run-ins with the lieutenant governor of Bengal, Sir Charles Elliot, only worsened matters for him. Roy served the government for twenty seven years and then went into voluntary retirement. Three months later he was dead.

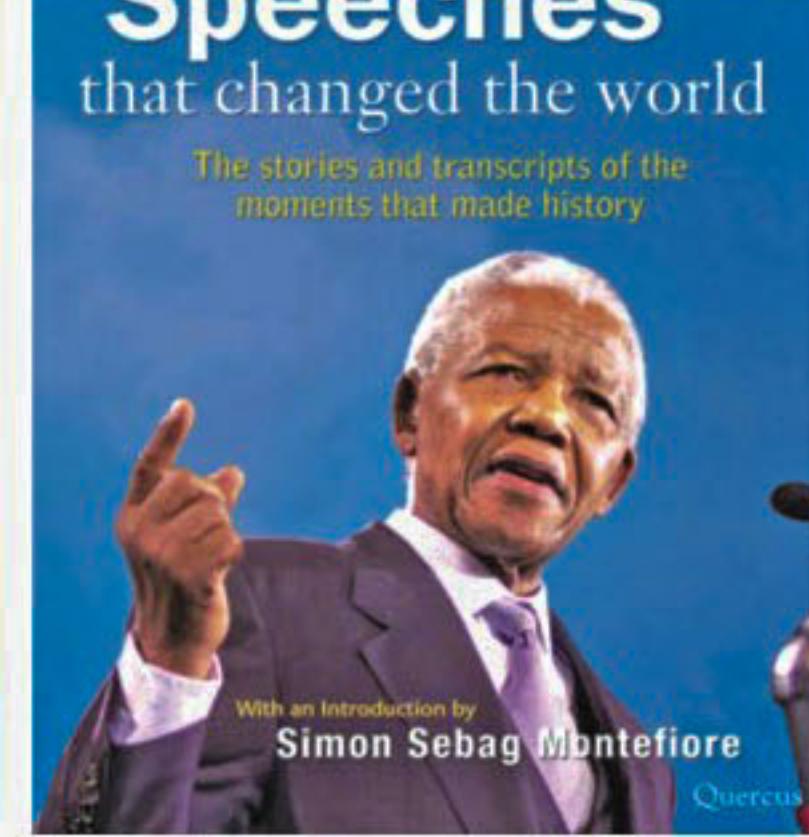
It is a large repertory of tales and characters Mahboob Alam covers in the work. Suniti Devi's marriage to the raja of Cooch Bihar and her journey to London is more than a recapitulation of 19th century Indian royalty. It is a journey back into a culture of aristocratic grandeur and opulence.

Mirza Shaikh Ihteshamuddin once again steps into our understanding of history. And when you come to the well-researched sketches of Digambari Devi, Deenomoyee, Durga Moni and Sharada Sundari, you know you are in for sheer pleasure which comes on the back of the pathos as also deep attachment to life these women went through.

It is here a splendid assemblage of men and women who once formed the pattern of life's rainbow in this land. Mahboob Alam rekindles that past, to remind us in subtle ways of how much the present owes to that lost phase in time.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN IS EXECUTIVE EDITOR, THE DAILY STAR.

...Words that redefined history



Speeches That Changed The World
Introduction by Simon Sebag Montefiore
Quercus, London

dynamic figure on the broad canvas of history, galvanised Americans through his inaugural address in January 1961. 'Ask not what your country can do for you', he declaimed, 'but ask what you can do for your country.' It is a speech much quoted by JFK fans around the world and yet it somehow loses its brilliance once there is mention of Abraham Lincoln. The Civil War-era American president was clearly a natural when it came to oratory. The concluding words in his first inaugural address ('With malice toward none, with charity for all . . .') were a pointer to what was to be. And, true enough, it was with the Gettysburg address in November 1863 that Lincoln demonstrated the heights he could scale. 'Four score and seven years ago', he said with quiet insistence, 'our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.'

Great speeches come with a flavour of the literary; and Lincoln put literature in plenty into his speeches.

Much a similar tenor was noted in Winston Churchill in his 13 May 1940 address in the House of Commons --- 'I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat.' Words flowed, like a stream, from the wartime British leader. In August of the same year, it was again an interplay of words that fired the patriotism of the nation when Churchill spoke of the sacrifices being made in the war against Nazism, 'Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few.' Oratory takes the collective imagination to new heights, as Jawaharlal Nehru demonstrated through his 'tryst with destiny' speech in the opening moments of a free India in 1947 ('At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom'). Blood was being spilled in the aftermath of partition, but that reality did not deter India's first prime minister from lighting the path to hope for his people. Contrast these sentiments with those that Eamon de Valera voices in April 1966 on the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising. His is an elegy, dedicated to the patriots he fought with once, all of whom were to perish in what for Ireland was an epic struggle for self-determination. In De Valera's words, 'they were all good men, fully alive to their responsibilities, and it was only the firmest conviction, the fullest faith and love of country that prompted their action.'

Speeches is fundamentally a journey through political experience straddling the globe. If there are the lofty perorations that find a place here, there are too the manifest lies that do not find an escape route. And thus, more than a year before he would get tangled in his venality, Richard Nixon tells Americans in April 1973 that 'there can be no whitewash at the White House.' It was, in truth, a contaminated world that Nixon created, and lived in. Morality did not matter to him, but it did for Vaclav Havel, who tells the people of

Czechoslovakia in 1990, 'We live in a contaminated moral environment.' That takes you back to the moral superiority that General George S. Patton personified in his times. His speech, wherein he vows, 'I am personally going to shoot that paper-hanging sonofabitch Hitler', is one of the items in this anthology. The same holds true for Nelson Mandela, who defiantly tells the court trying him in apartheid-driven South Africa in 1964, 'I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities.'

And so the caravan of history moves on. Along the way, Charles de Gaulle finds his own place in it. As France falls to Nazism, he takes flight to London, from where he sounds the clarion call that would rejuvenate his dispirited country: 'France has lost a battle. But France has not lost the war!' Thoughts of war then give way to ruminations on peace, as in this placidity of a statement from Mother Teresa in 1979: 'Love begins at home, and it is not how much we do, but how much love we put in the action that we do.'

It is a moving kaleidoscope of the ages you have here. For sometime, you go beyond the mediocre, to recall a world once epitomised by sublimity, larger-than-life individuals. Remember Oliver Cromwell? As he dismisses the Rump Parliament in 1653, he rails against the lawmakers: 'It is high time for me to put an end to your sitting in this place, which you have dishonoured by your contempt of all virtue, and defiled by your practice of every vice . . .' His voice rises to a crescendo, as he sends the legislators packing, 'Take away that shining bauble there, and lock up the doors. In the name of God, go!'

SYED BADRUL AHSAN IS EXECUTIVE EDITOR, THE DAILY STAR.

ESSAY

Reviewing the review page

Nazma Yeasmeen Haque goes into a spirited dissection of content

To review something is an intellectual pursuit which presupposes the idea that there is a complete work, be it a book, a film, a play, radio, TV or any other programme that is to be viewed again. Thus reviewing something is set in the context of an already expressed opinion or viewpoint of someone who produces the work. This brings the reviewer face to face with the writer. Reviewing definitely is a job that involves a critical process of thinking that need not necessarily be for the purpose of expressing disagreement or disapproval unless and until the book in question entails it. For example, the recently published book, *Dead Reckoning: Memories of The 1971 Bangladesh War* by Sarmila Bose, caused much furore among sensible people both at home and abroad, for obvious reasons.

This is the big risk that an author encounters in writing a book based on an historical fact yet intentionally made to suit one's whims and prejudices. This creates a situation where the reviewer is in an advantageous position to criticize the work justifiably. However, reviewing books on any genre enjoins measured responsibilities on the reviewer so that certain norms or principles are adhered to in order to make it an academic exercise. Therefore, doing justice to a book becomes a task of paramount importance. The fact that a reviewer is playing the role of a judge on a particular book, s/he must exercise her/his judgements very carefully to make them not only a balanced affair but are also completely pertinent to the book.

Although there always is scope for expressing one's opinion and personal comments in a review, the exercise neither allows unnecessary deviations from the subject matter that the book deals with nor will it allow all praise to be showered, making it "unputdownable" --- as this word more often than not appears in various syntactical ways in the Books Review page of this newspaper. In fact, this is one easy but not an elevated kind of thought applied to reviewing a book. Going back to the basic principles of reviewing a book, those that constitute a matrix within which to operate, reviewing entails reading a book thoroughly to make a reliable introduction of it; getting to know the plot and the theme to be presented to readers in a confident way as the second authority on the book next to the writer, albeit doing a different kind of job within a given purview; reflecting on the characters; style of writing applied by the writer; discovering the "...audience aimed at and intention behind the work...", and of course, one's own comments along with reasons for putting forth these thoughts linked as they are to the subject matter. It may be added here that it is preferable to write a review in a rather concise manner as much as possible, keeping an eye on the salient features unless required otherwise.

Against this backdrop, one can reasonably focus on the book review page that made its debut five years ago in this newspaper and has been going on uninterrupted since then. Earlier, a review or two would appear in an unsystematic way that never got any prominence. This page once a week covers three to four reviews that certainly make it an attractive addition to the daily, particularly coming out on a less busy day to which one normally may look forward. Conversely, one may be quite put off if there is not the expected quality in terms of a variety of books, variety of reviewers and styles of writing. Compared to the frequency at which the page appears and the number of reviews that it needs to fill in the space, the number of reviewers seems scanty. Only a few names appear every now and then and since one cannot vary one's style of writing without putting much labour into it, more often than not many write-ups sound monotonous, however different the books might be. Therefore, one may not be wrong in surmising that in order to counter or at least curtail it, it is oftentimes seen that the editor of the page himself writes the maximum number of reviews which certainly brighten up the page as we breathe fresh air in terms of his choice of books some of which have been written by African writers, others are recent publications, yet others are on the less than usual experience of life and work.

My own observation makes me feel as if we are seeing a waterfall cascading sparkling pearl beads down into the stream. A reader naturally savours such a quality in a book review. An acute sense of analysis coupled with antecedents and facts that are concomitant make those reviews intellectually vibrant. Some other reviewers write very well too. But in contrast, some others produce reviews that are just run-of-the-mill. Many contain a mere narration of the story, particularly of books that are rather ordinary novels. However, while retelling the story, although it is needed, one should not tire readers out by doing it at length.

Quoting the author is a normal procedure that is included in a review. As Samuel Johnson said once, 'Quotation is the highest compliment you can pay to an author.' Nevertheless, when overused, it mars the quality of a review.

Choosing almost regularly 'best sellers' is not always the best policy when it comes to reviewing. In such cases, it is only the person reviewing it who derives much pleasure out of seeing it published. The word 'best' is much debatable these days when there is a constant depreciation of the real worth of things, as any judicious person would know. Moreover, a competent reviewer would anchor herself or himself to the contents of a book while navigating its various aspects, manifesting an ability to not only grasp the subject matter but also to be a critic to be reckoned with. Thus the writer and the critic can be on a par with each other in terms of their endeavours as both of them are dealing with the same book.

As a reviewer, one has to apply a critical approach in making an objective evaluation, obviously with an open mind. Book reviews are an art that calls for much care and certainly tenacity. The snippets on the books, in the form of 'New Books' or 'At A Glance', are like some trinkets which, however limited in space, enhance the look of the page. However, two things rather intrigue me. First, why is the page called Books Review rather than Book Review or Book Reviews? Second, why do the e-mail addresses of some reviewers, apparently unsolicited, go with their writing?

It was one experience when we did not come across book reviews in a daily newspaper. It is quite another when we see them every week. Now that we are used to it, we appreciate it and look forward to it. And of course, to a quality page. Traversing somewhat a bumpy path, the Books Review page has come a long way, which is most commendable. It promises to be a further journey forward as there cannot be any full stop to its continual refinement. As has been said, the sky is the limit.

DR. NAZMA YEASMEEN HAQUE IS AN EDUCATIONIST, CRITIC AND MUSIC ENTHUSIAST.