

Journeys of a renaissance man

Syed Badrul Ahsan finds a scholar's life edifying

Khan Sarwar Murshid's has consistently been a voice of reason in our part of the world. And, of course, reason has underpinned the many layers of intellect in this country, to a point where those who have exercised the intellectual throughout their lives have ended up giving shape to a national ethos. Murshid has, therefore, been part of an era where the identity of a people, the definition of a society, has at more than one crossroads come from him and those who have been part of his proud generation.

And the background to that story is to be had in this excellent and comprehensive examination of the life and career of an individual who has been a teacher, a diplomat, a cultural activist and, in a sublime way, a complete Bengali nationalist. That last bit about nationalism needs to be underscored by a caveat, though, in any assessment of Murshid's transformational role in the shaping of Bengali politico-historical perspectives. His patriotism, as Serajul Islam Choudhury would have us know, was not limited to an expression of sentiments but broadened out into an arena where he made himself a leading player on a canvas that was destined to get wider with the passage of time. Choudhury cites a poignant example of the strong and sophisticated views Murshid held dear in defence of his nationalistic principles.

When an editorial condemning the proponents of university autonomy appeared in the *Pakistan Observer*, Murshid was quick to inform Choudhury that the write-up had been written by none other than his English department colleague Syed Sajjad Hossain. And, of course, a rebuttal was necessary. Choudhury was asked to write the rebuttal to the editorial, not as a letter but as an editorial in itself. For his part, Murshid would make the necessary arrangements for the item to appear in print. The writing done, Murshid and Choudhury set off with it to a spot which Choudhury discovered was the home of the young lawyer Kamal Hossain. It was an interesting assemblage of individuals present there as the two men made their way in. Kamal Hossain, Hameeda Hossain, Dr. Nurul Islam, Rehman Sobhan and Salma Sobhan were there. The most prominent presence, however, was that of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Presently the group was joined by Tajuddin Ahmed.

The editorial was printed in full in the *Ittefaq* a couple of days later. Murshid's determination not to let an offensive write-up go unchallenged had worked out well. In a bigger sense, though, Murshid's career remains the story of a man who has relentlessly and endlessly stayed away from compromising on the values he believed were an integral part of living. His journal *New Values*, which had a pretty long run from 1949, when it was founded, until 1965, when it out of circulation, was symbolic of the principles Murshid has always believed should bring out the best in life and thought. That *New Values* was a refreshingly different proposition, that it carefully stayed away from conforming to the spurious 'Pakistani nationalism' espoused by many at the time was noted by the schoolboy in Serajul Islam Choudhury. There was richness in the journal. And richness, or call it an affluence of aesthetics, has been part of Murshid's career. His use of English and Bengali --- in pronunciation, intonation and the like --- has been impeccable. You could call it fastidiousness, of the sort that Murshid would apply in the selection of articles coming in for his journal and in what he wrote himself. And as he went through that enormity of experience, he found it necessary to remain self-effacing in his search for scholarly splendour. It is a trait Mohammad Anisur Rahman spots cheerfully in Murshid. At Harvard and during the War of Liberation and later, Murshid was forever a man of commitment. Rahman loved the sessions of Tagore music at Murshid's residence.

It is, when everything has been said, a rounded character which subsists in Khan Sarwar Murshid, in that very literary sense of the meaning. Mofidul Haque and others point to the depth of involvement in literature Murshid has always epitomised. His classroom lectures were more than enumerations of Shakespeare or English literature as a whole. They

were, in a very remarkable way, careful explorations into the world of the reflective mind. And the mind, again, has been for Murshid that broad landscape which is home to an entire panorama of ideas straddling the various regions of human interest. Kabir Chowdhury informs us that Murshid is more than a literary man. He is at home with works relating to an entire range of music and art in the West. On his shelves have rested the biographies of such shapers of art as Da Vinci, Botticelli, Van Gogh and Goya. Murshid's links with music have been intense, as Chowdhury would know. And why not? At Murshid's home, Kabir Chowdhury has had the sheer pleasure of imbibing the music of Beethoven, Mozart, Schubert and others.

As a modern man, Murshid has been acutely conscious of the importance of heritage. And in upholding heritage, he has not flinched in the face of the ferocity let loose by such machines as the Ayub Khan dictatorship in Pakistan. The observance of Rabindranath Tagore's birth centenary in 1961 remains proof of the courage leading Bengali intellectual lights brought into a reassertion of national culture. These were the men and women who would, in plain and direct manner, defy the regime, to have it know that secular Bengali culture could not be subsumed to the muddy waters of a so-called Pakistani culture. Murshid was in the forefront of that barricade of courage. To him the politically partisan was of little consequence. But that politics is a powerful calling geared to the welfare of a collective mass of people is a core belief he never abandoned even as he travelled all across the

valleys and plains of the literary imagination. Which is a potent reason why he had no second thoughts as he plunged into the War of Liberation in 1971. The academic, he seemed to be suggesting, had no business inhabiting an ivory tower; he needed to be a symbol of active resistance to the enemy. And since it was Bengali self-esteem which had come under attack, it was the moral responsibility of all Bengalis across the spectrum to make the forces of anti-history run for their lives.

In the way Andre Malraux and Charles de Gaulle put up resistance against the Nazis and their local collaborators in the 1940s. And Malraux understood, in 1971, the travails Bengalis were going through. He asked to be allowed to lead a brigade of freedom fighters in the war against Pakistan, for to him as it was to others there was hardly any difference in the brutality of the Nazis and that of the Pakistan state. Malraux was Bangladesh's hero, as he had been France's hero. And it was this heroic man Khan Sarwar Murshid welcomed to Bangladesh in

1973. At Rajshahi University, Murshid notes, the Frenchman --- philosopher, writer, soldier, aesthete --- threw a question at his audience, at the world in general: where is the point in going to the moon if we persist in self-destruction?

Can Sheikh Mujibur Rahman give shape to a new nation-state? The question goes from Murshid to Malraux. The aging scholar's response is sharp, rapier-like, crisp: 'Sure, if you educated people, intellectuals, do not kill him.' And then comes a missile: 'You are a cynical lot. Don't kill him like one of those tribes which kill their leaders and eat their flesh.'

Anisuzzaman has, if you will, the last word on Khan Sarwar Murshid. The man for whom values have always had meaning is an individual whose links with art, with society, with politics both at the national and international levels have had the quality of the intrinsic; a man who has felt the world passionately in his soul. Murshid was deeply troubled by the murder of Patrice Lumumba, was convinced that Moise Tshombe had a hand in the ill deed and drafted a telegram to be sent collectively by Bengali academics to the United Nations in protest. Nothing came of the telegram, for one of those academics was not quite sure that Tshombe had been involved in the killing. If no unanimity could accompany the protest, if no courage could come into censuring a crime, there would hardly be any point in sending off a missive of indignation to the world body. Murshid tore up the draft telegram.

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Revisiting the lost alleys

Nazma Yeasmeen Haque is charmed by one man's memories

Hasnat Abdul Hye needs no introduction to the literary world of Bangladesh. His is a household name that has kept readers spellbound for nearly four decades. His versatility in every genre of literature is remarkable, perhaps with the only exception of poetry that very interestingly and speaking figuratively has been compensated for by the way he used to be addressed by the then finance minister Saifur Rahman as 'Kobi', meaning a poet. This bit of information comes from a TV interview of the author. *All Those Yesterdays* is an autobiographical account of the writer's youth that straddles eleven years of the prime of his life. Unusually long narratives, crowds of people, a plethora of events and places all characterise the subject matter of the book to make it a full-fledged real-life story of the author. Minute details that are dealt with meticulously give evidence to the authenticity of facts along with the author's acute power of observation --- the eye of a seasoned anthropologist where nothing goes amiss. Since Hye has produced the stories mostly from his memory rather than taking help from the usual entries in a regularly kept diary --- a practice that he did only for a short duration while in America --- they tell readers about his amazing ability to record things in his memory to be produced vividly much later.

Since his memory did not fail him, his language that is breezy and expressions that are refreshing bring back the past in a vibrant way. While reading, particularly the part on Dacca, one feels as if one is reliving those days once again in the twenty-first century. So lively are his portrayals! From among the three loci that act as the background of his time in youth, one feels a much stronger affinity to the part that dwells on Dacca compared to the two others. Of course, there may not be the same sort of reaction from a reader either from America or Europe. However, the lifeline and buoyancy that one perceives from grasping the series of episodes admittedly are universal in their appeal. The factor that is overriding in sustaining the interest of a reader is the writer's sparkling humour and hilarity that encompasses the book from beginning to end. The pages are replete with brilliantly crafted humour that is unique to his writing. It ultimately becomes his own special brand.

A reader often is surprised at having encountered such instances in places where he would least expect it. If one has to judge the qualities of this autobiography that make it a fascinating read, the answer will precisely be that it is steeped in wit; and, secondly, it is the warmth and care with which the author has portrayed all the characters, be they his classmates, batch mates, contemporaries, teachers and his family, people here and abroad, high and ordinary, little known or familiar. Characters like Naju, Karim Chacha and Moizuddin Mia who were part of his life at Salimullah Muslim Hall come alive through his penmanship in much the same way as his description of any other person. This attitude exemplifies his genuine involvement with every phase of his life in its full ambience.

All Those Yesterdays contains a big spectrum of data covering general information. For example, the author clarifies the commonly held notion as to why the University of Dacca is called 'Oxford of the East' by narrating the origin of it; the evolution of student politics in the university; the celebrated amtala; details on teachers; Modhu's Canteen and its prestigious status as 'an institution by itself'; female students and their demeanour as time passes; the first observance of Rag Day at the university --- a tumultuous occasion that made it to the front page of the *Statesman* of Calcutta and innumerable others. There is no dearth of food for

reminiscing on the past --- national events of great historical significance; Prof. A.G. Stock who was head of the Department of English immediately before Prof. Turner wrote her 'Memoirs of the Dacca University Days' that the author highly appreciates as an absorbing read "whether for the fine English she used or the keen observation she made".

The Danish town planner De Leuran's water fountain at the Tejgaon crossroads; a Greek mausoleum adjacent to Burdwan House that was "built in honour of a prominent Greek who died in Dacca" with inscriptions in Greek on it; Buddhadev Basu's memoirs *Amar Chhelebel*, which portrays his early life spent at Purana Paltan; the growth of the USIS library vis-à-vis the well-run British Council library and their 'quiet competition' in attracting more members --- all of these take the reader down memory lane through evoking profound nostalgia. This book is really rich in not only the personal but also in a documentation of social, historical, national and international political events. The beauty lies in its storytelling way which brings all such descriptions very close to one's heart. One cannot but marvel at the writer's boundless spirit and energy in preserving an archive in his memory.

Strangely enough, the same characteristics that make this book appealing, more often than not weigh down heavily on a reader's mind, straining it because of its massive content and an all-pervasiveness in detailing

everything that the writer comes across. At times it becomes overwhelming and then one feels as if one cannot see the woods because of the trees. Exhaustion sets in only for energy to be renewed gradually by the whirlwind of humour and wit that comprise the lifeline of the book. The tip of the author's iceberg of witty comments is palpable right from the beginning when he describes the speed of the train that brought him to Dacca at elephant-like speed. A much jovial word in Bengali, 'gajendragamon', is used; next his comment that Bengali is taught in his college in English gives rise to uproarious laughter. And then it goes on and on. To cite one example from his days in America that is most comical is his comment on his teacher at the University of Washington, Prof McKarfi's explanation of his 'X' factor in his macroeconomic class, with reference to Lana Turner and Marilyn Monroe, is thoroughly enjoyable when the author says, "... as if they were well-known economists." Thus the book as a

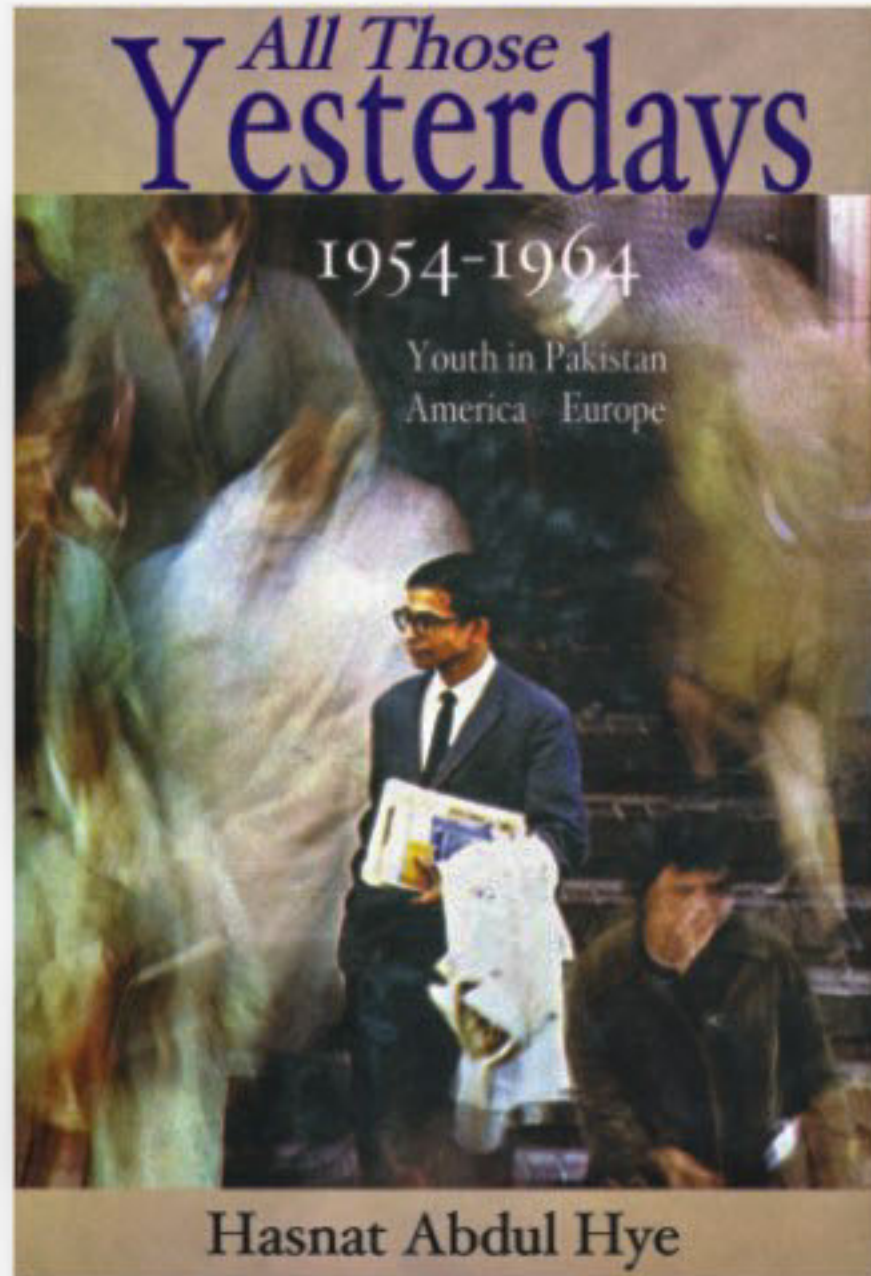
whole becomes animated with a variety of humour where each one stands out on its own merit and in its own right. A reader sets out on a journey into the world of endless wit. Meanwhile, the reader's interest and energy are renewed, making her/him move on. And this exactly is the writer's very own 'X' factor!

The panoramic beauty of the narratives is, however, often marred perhaps due to oversight --- such as the surnames of the celebrated singers of the 60s, Satinath Mukhopaddhaya and Shyamol Mitra. For both of them it is 'Bandopaddhaya'! The name of the first film in East Pakistan appears as *Mukh O Manush* at one place!

Buddhadev Basu's name is written in two different ways. A glaring mistake appears in one of the first few pages of the book where Bhashani's name is printed as Maulana Abdul *Huq* Khan Bhashani. More attention and care were needed in proof reading. However, the author's tendency of using less common words is commendable that shows his preference for synonyms.

Students who were contemporaries of the author at the University of Dacca will certainly appreciate the episodes and ruminate over them. To students of present-day Dhaka University, it will all appear as fairy tales.

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All Those Yesterdays
1954-1964
Hasnat Abdul Hye
Adorn Publication

Where the world comes to die ...

Farida Shaikh goes looking for Varanasi

It is of course as a fiction writer that Chetan Bhagat has gained this immense popularity. He decided to quit his job as an investment banker to follow his passion, writing, which to him was more important than monetary or professional success. In May 2010 he was enlisted in Time magazine's list of 100 most influential people. In the same year Malalai Joya was also enlisted. She was a fierce critic of the NATO war in Afghanistan. She was admonished for her views by Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who was enlisted in the 2005 list of influential persons.

Revolution 2020 is the writer's fifth book. UNV Motion Picture has acquired the rights to this work. Earlier the movie, *3 Idiots*, was based on the writer's debut novel, *Five Points Someone*, which chronicles the importance of success. *The New York Times* called Bhagat 'the biggest selling English language novelist in India's history.'

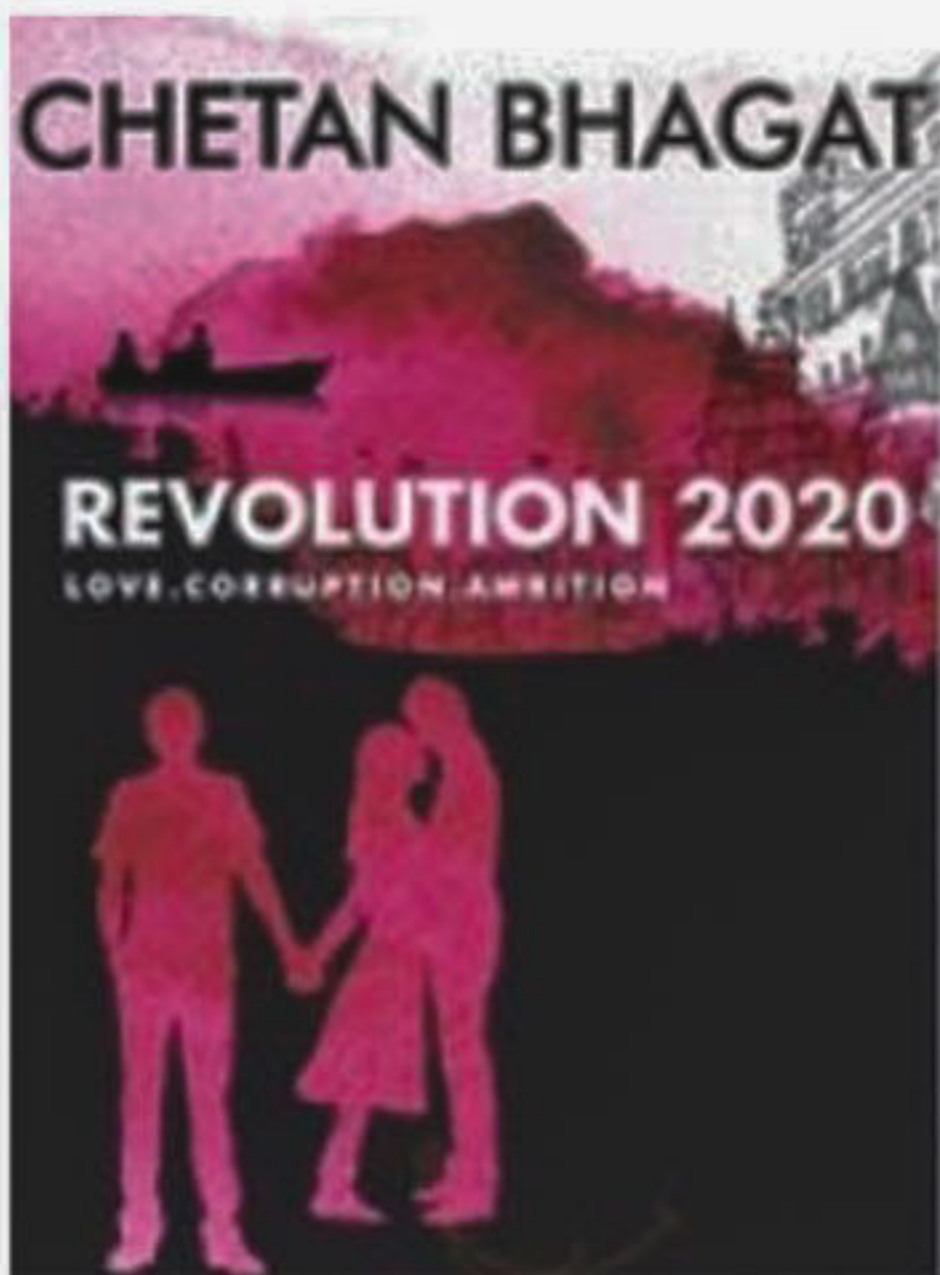
Bhagat writes on youth and development issues. *Revolution 2020* is set in the Indian city of Varanasi '... where the world comes to die...' and the holy river where people go either for cremation of the dead or to cleanse themselves of all evils. It is about corruption, by persons afflicted with this social disease, who are injecting it into the education system, affecting the ethics and morality of the youth who are the future generation of the country. The story is about the private technical college set up on farm land, 10 kilometers away, on the Lucknow road.

Education in modern times is a commercial enterprise with much emphasis on marketing and promotional gimmick for its growth and survival, like any business. Traditional roles have been modified to fit operations of trusts as non-profit units. The registrar of the company is to be bribed for incorporation of the trust without any delay. The inspector from UGC would have to be given a packet of money for college inspection. A private college required government university affiliation. About six copies of 40 pages with signatures have to be submitted to

complete the approval process. '... Every aspect of running a private college involved bribing someone...' When the professor of mechanical engineering (a woman) observes during a meeting that the HR managers of 'reputed companies' want 'personal payout' for hiring college graduates, she is asked to shut up and not to dwell on HR matters.

Bhagat is a motivational speaker, and many motivational dialogues are found in the narration of events. '... when someone refers to your weak spot, even indirectly it hurts... you will go into the exam center super confident, promise? ... I want you to feel that you can get whatever you want in life. Because I know you can... believe (that) you have already made it.'

The protagonist is a poor student who wants to be '... a rich man.' His father wants him to become an engineer. He cannot get through the entrance exam to engineering college, even the second time, so he never makes it to college but he does set up and manage a college. He makes money, has a house and Mercedes to his name. His engineer friend, a trainee news reporter, gets fired to 'silence the truth... There is politics in organization... (and one)... has to learn to fit in.' His friend is a rebel '... He doesn't want to fit in. He wants to change journalism. Give it some teeth'. He starts his own newspaper.



Revolution 2020
Love Corruption Ambition
Chetan Bhagat,
Rupa Publication

information to the point of crazy confusion.' And all day to day human activities emerge out of some form of motivation and inspiration. As in Hindu prayer, *aarti* is a ritual. It also signifies deep attachment to all life's events, happenings and occurrences, connected to, may be through devotion, '... may you live a thousand years ...' Or one's carnal desire is to be satiated by 'ordering a call girl...

who looks decent... who won't attract too much attention in a college campus...'

Reading *Revolution 2020*, (I picked up the book from the mobile book man, at the traffic signal, a photo copy version) I searched for the same writer's title in the book shops. I could not find any. Quite excitedly, from the mobile book man I picked up three other Bhagat titles! But then it occurred to me: was I becoming a part of the illegal business--- book piracy? I consoled myself, for at the end of it all, business is illegal. It is only a matter of degree!

Seen more as a voice of a generation, Bhagat opens up the question of ethics and morals in the corporate world that includes the modern educational system. Bhagat very categorically questions the standard set for a successful man (not a successful person though.) Is the standard for success a shifting scale or a fixed one? Aravind Adiga's *White Tiger* is about the secret success of a man. The successful entrepreneur found that bribery to the police was essential for running his business. To start the business, the future entrepreneur has to kill his employer and steal his money. He rationalizes his action within an economy that is totally dependent upon a servant class, and corruption is 'like the lubricant for the new found technology.'

Under many circumstances ambition and passion are found to be related. However, the accelerated pace of commercialization in many aspects of modern life leaves many grey areas for the young generation. Do family backgrounds impinge upon individuals interacting within a common commercial framework?

The title of the book projects an ideal where '... A society, where truth, justice and equality are respected more than power...' Such is our most progressive society.

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