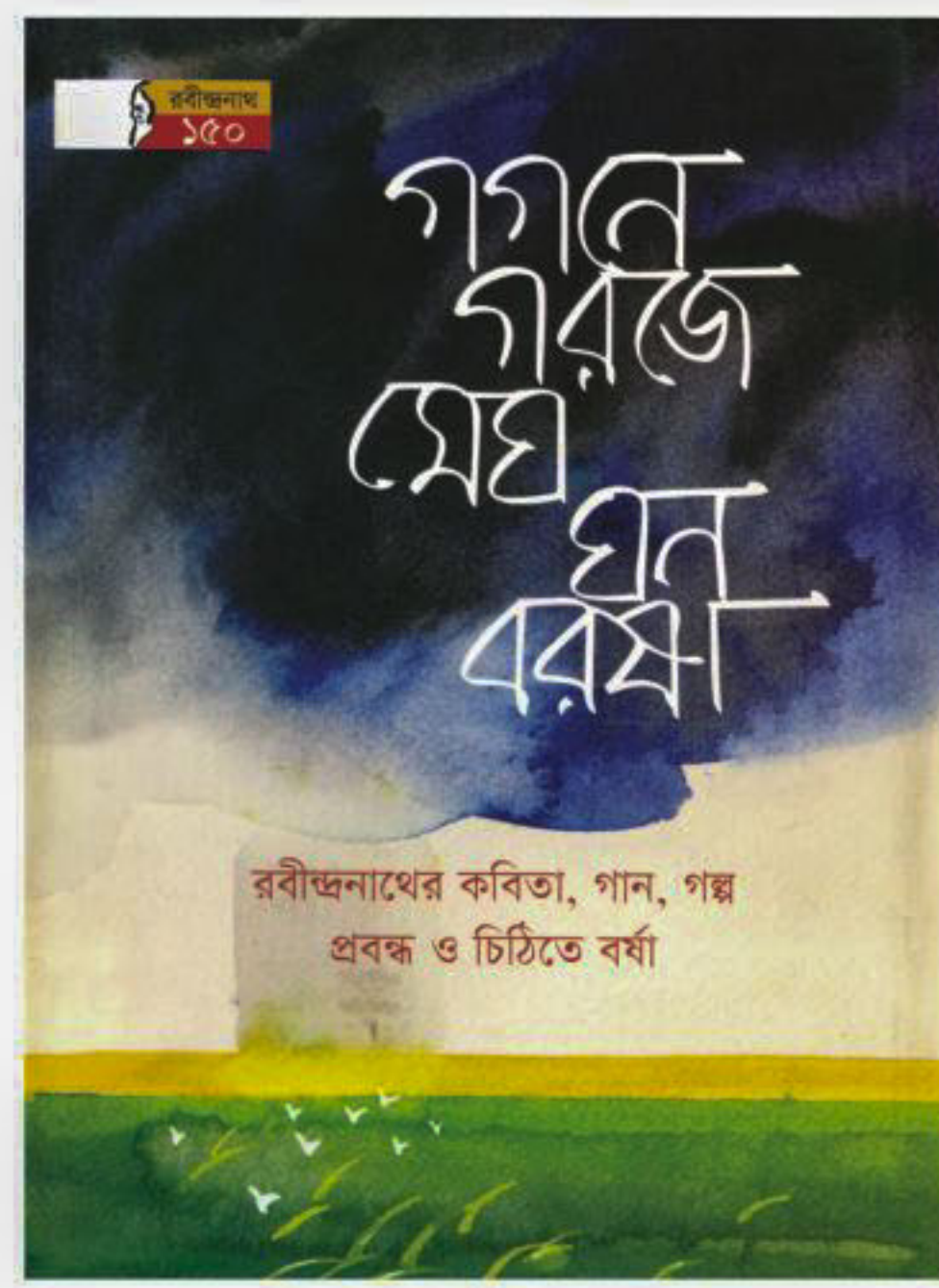


BOOK REPORT

Nazma Yeasmeen Haque observes the monsoon come alive in Tagore

Although I have been in possession of this enchanting book, *Gogone Goroje Megh Ghono Borsha*, for a fairly long period of time, by the time I started going through it, there came as if by sheer coincidence the season of 'Borsha', our monsoon which as usual is both gorgeous and harrowing at one and the same time. Thus happened a union of nature and my mental preparedness to read the book that became so close to my heart. This book sings to you, recites to you, it tells you stories, narrates essays and reads letters to you. The wholeness of Tagore's writings against the backdrop of the monsoon -- his most favourite season is near complete in this work compiled by Muhammad Habibur Rahman. It is enriched further with a preface written by him in a marvellously scholarly way. It is a treatise. One cannot expect to find each and every write-up of Tagore on the same theme to be included in one book, for obvious reasons, and, therefore, a sampling is done to represent Tagore's feelings, thoughts and messages through careful research. It is not only his erudition and love for rich literary work that are so well-known but also the fact that in the preface, Rahman emerges as a consummate musicologist, which is some discovery to cheer ourselves up. This analysis of ragas of classical songs, their suitability in different parts of a whole day also in terms of the cycle of seasons, particularly the monsoon, and Rahman's comment that some of Tagore's songs on 'Borsha' appeal more when unaccompanied by musical instruments are all corroborated by an elaborate discussion throughout the preface. For example, Rahman asks if there is any need for any kind of accompaniment, including one to mark the beat of the song, "Emono diney tare bola jae"? It stirs the fine sensibilities of any lover of Tagore songs, particularly in the rainy season, that consumes one's being. The preface is furthermore embellished by a quotation from an Australian professor of geography, BLC Johnson, from his book, *Bangladesh*, which depicts a comprehensive picture of the monsoon in this deltaic land. A little paraphrasing of the quotation tells us that in order to fully describe the impact of the rainy season such as this, facts and data would not be as much sufficient as would be the letters that Tagore penned sixty years ago. Johnson also added that all such compositions on the climate of this region evoke memories that make one feel nostalgic. The fact that Johnson, in

spite of being involved in a subject as systematic as geography, preferred to rely more on Tagore's writings brings out the significance and, therefore, validity of such a work in a profoundly literary-cum-scientific way. In other words, to Johnson, Tagore's writings are more convincing than the data normally used for such a study. Such is the beauty and relevance of Tagore's writings in various genres, weaving a tapestry of wet monsoon that touches one's heart, that it fills one with inexplicable joy, pain and ecstasy and, of course, like Tagore, keeps one aware of the misery of others. Although all six seasons have their fair share in the poetry and songs of Tagore, yet his fascination for the beauty, passion, bustle and fury of the monsoon emerges supreme in a creative way. Would it be wrong, then, to surmise that Tagore is addicted to the monsoon, his most favourite season? The book under review bears testimony to this fact which Tagore manifests in his poetry, songs, short stories, essays and letters, all centering around the monsoon. One wonders if exactly this kind of compilation on other seasons is possible given the fact that there are songs and poetry on them as well. Justice Rahman has done a splendid job of collating all such writings under one cover. Thus Tagore's most favourite season reaches its ascendancy as the queen of seasons. One of his utterances has it that if votes were counted in the ambience of ragas, then certainly the monsoon would be the winner as it has ragas such as Megh, Mollar, Desh and many others that are many more in number than those occupied even by the spring, which most probably seems to be his second love. The preface of this book is a treasury of information much of which was hitherto unknown to most of us. Facts such as the nearly twenty-two to twenty-three hundred songs that Tagore has written, of which only seven percent are given over to the monsoon; the celebrated song on the month of Sravana, "Shaono gogone ghor ghanoghota", that Tagore wrote at the age of fifteen and which was published in the magazine *Bharoti* in 1284 (Bengali year) is his first song on the rainy season; his last song on the same season, "Sraboner baridhara bohichhe biramhara", was written in 1347 (Bengali year) only eleven months before his death are all food for thought. Tagore's songs on the monsoon are endless. Next is his abundance of poetry that accom-



Gogone Goroje Megh Ghono Borsha
Compiled by Muhammad Habibur Rahman
Prothoma Prokashon

modates juvenile psychology and also caters to the emotional state of a sensitive mind. The rainbow's magical charms are exuded in each and every line. A sampling of the poetry shows an interesting assortment of the highly lyrical, humorous and also satirical in the selections. Justice Rahman has demonstrated the ingenuity of a researcher. 'Meghdut' is an overwhelming eulogy to the great epic poet Kalidasa in which Tagore re-tells of the pain of separation between the lover and his beloved as an embodiment of the great divide existing between any two suffering souls. In fact, there are two poems as well as two essays with the same title, 'Meghdut' perhaps for accentuating the monsoon which is the central theme of the book. The poem 'Shonar Tori' is practically the signature tune of the book with its first line, 'Gogone Goroje Megh Ghono Barosha' as the title that sums up all about monsoon by highlighting it. Some of the poems are sung as songs that touch an expectant heart for the rain to fill by drenching with showers, bringing vibrancy within. Nature is soaked and readied for germination, in the same way that a lover of 'Barsha' re-creates her or his inner feelings,

thoughts and dreams. Tagore's letters and essays are no less than the songs and poetry that are included in this selection. Rahman has done a great job in making us familiar with these, thus opening up a new vista for our enlightenment and recreation. Each of the letters that is included, although each narrates the characteristics, is distinct in its own focus. This probably is the rationale behind the selection that has added variety to the compilation of letters. As one goes through them, one perceives it. For instance, in the second letter, a colossus-like Tagore sounds absolutely mischievous imagining the predicament of people from the aristocratic families running out of their mansions in the middle of the night in whatever clothing they were in, the moment a big jolt shakes the earth. He finds his imagination extremely hilarious and enjoys it thoroughly in all the simplicity of a child. In the third letter, Tagore presents himself as a complete family man, particularly as a father. The fifth letter describes the high velocity of cyclone associated with rain and thunder that has the poet experience real life drama and turn into a person witnessing the harsh realities of life. Instantly he dispels the myth of recollecting one's lover's (here, a woman) face in such inclement weather as poets so long have chanted. He rather comes to the realization that in such a situation, when dust or particles of gravel invade one's eyes, one's own safety comes first. From such a discovery and confession of Tagore, male lovers may learn a lesson --- not to be pretentious in language while expressing love! Being forthright is being genuine. Another letter exposes the oppression and torment of a heavy monsoon wherein Tagore describes graphically the untold sufferings of people, animals, reptiles, insects and the environment that are all devastated. He sounds pessimistic and in a tone of frustration asserts that we human beings are a vanquished species at the hands of rulers, religious scriptures and also nature itself, in this case, the turbulent monsoon. Although Tagore was in anguish and pain seeing the travails of people around him, nevertheless it did not deter him from his creativity as he would sublimate it oftentimes as a joke cracked by nature with which we have a relationship between a grandparent and a grandchild. In a letter written to his relative, Hemendrabala Devi, the advice that he

gives her on learning English is most practical and appropriate even for today's learners. Here he sounds like a school counsellor. The last letter addressed to the same person, coincidentally the last entry in this book, has reference to the early chair that Victoria Ocampo gave him to be used on his journey by sea, a fact he fondly mentions as the only memento that remains a witness to his meeting with her. Rahman's selection of Tagore's essays crowns his endeavour in this compilation. To this reviewer, it is the ultimate as far as an all-encompassing portrayal of the rainy season is concerned. In terms of profundity in all shades of the term, it is superb. Each essay is a song -- a beautifully melodious song. One feels like reading them over and over again. Among them, the essay 'Asharh' captivates one the most as it elucidates the characteristics of the monsoon in a variegated way that otherwise would have remained inconceivable to us. A number of assertions such as: with the monsoon we human beings have an unconditional relationship; we do not get ourselves involved in any practical transactions with it as we do with other seasons; the monsoon in a very special way belongs to the poets; the monsoon is a season for leisure and many others herald the adorability of this season. Tagore misses 'Borsha' in its heavy downpour as he had experienced it in his childhood and wonders if the rainy season has paid more attention to its 'economy' these days! Once again, generous thanks to the learned compiler who has breathed new life into this work on a single theme. In comparison with the abundance and depths of messages that the songs, poetry, essays and letters contain on the monsoon, the short stories seem rather pale. They do not create an ambience as does the former. However, having considered the extent of the undertaking, one cannot but conclude that Justice Rahman has produced an outstanding work that is bound to gladden the hearts of monsoon lovers, of course, by not being oblivious to its adverse effects, as Tagore reminds us. As the nimbus in the vast canvas of the sky brings forth graceful showers of rain, we pray that it cleanses us. Let us all sing songs of the monsoon in unison with Tagore to renew our life, to revive the spirit behind life.

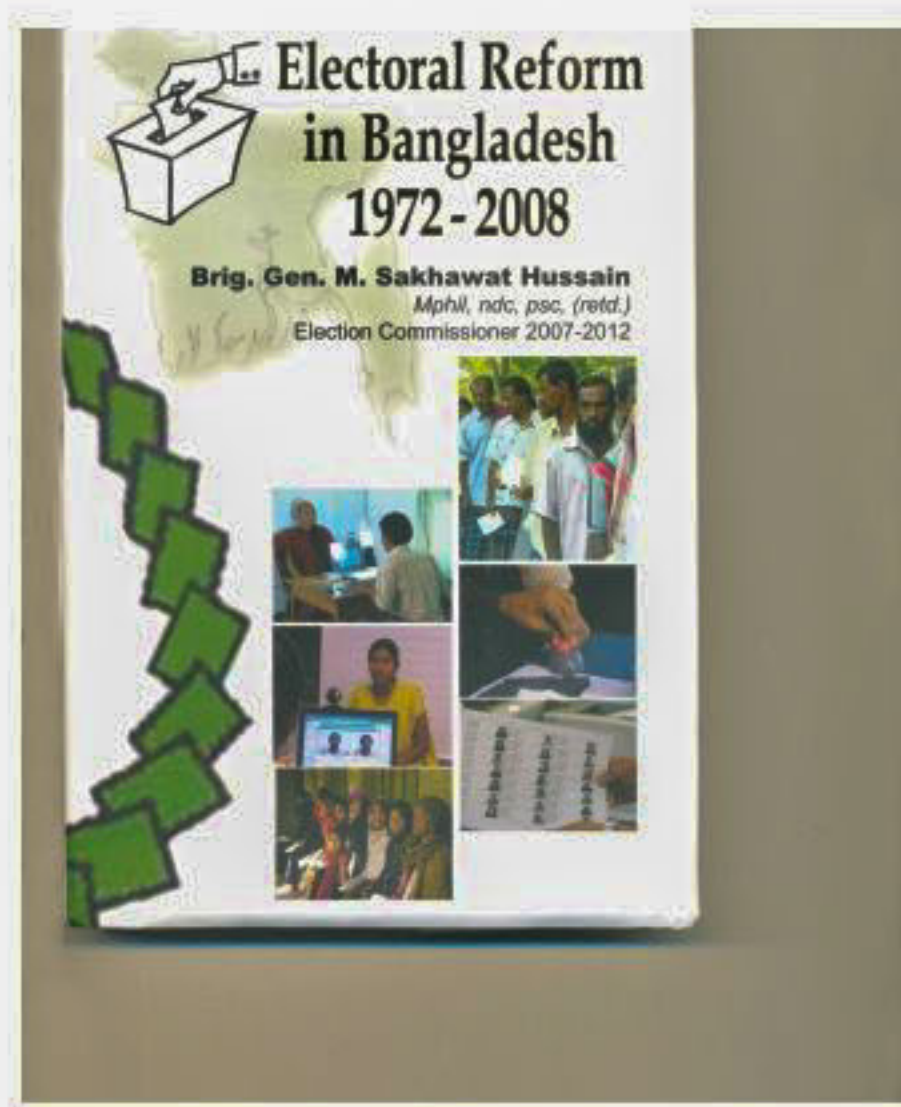
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ESSAY

Siachen, where 'brave' men struggle

Farida Shaikh analyses a pointless conflict

On April 7, 2012 nearly 124 soldiers and 11 civilians were buried alive in an avalanche. It was a huge tragedy that affected troops of 6 Northern Light Infantry, battalion stationed in Gayari area, Skardu, at an altitude of over 4,000 meters the highest battlefield in the world, where Pakistani and Indian troops are entrenched against each other. It was reported that the Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) teams took readings at 26 different points and identified eight sites for further search. Rescue operations for the soldiers buried alive continues, while Pakistan and India are expected to hold discussions on the Siachen glacier row on June 11 and 12, to demilitarize the world's highest battleground. India and Pakistan are fighting on an uninhabited snow-clad mountainous, no-man's land, Siachen, 20,000 feet above sea level. The sounds from the old debate made way for two seminars on Siachen organized at the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) and Kuch Khaas in Pakistan. The climate affairs advisor for the government said that scientific studies revealed that the eastern glaciers were melting more rapidly than glaciers in western regions. Average temperatures in the northern areas have increased by 0.76 Celsius, causing an increase in the frequency of heat waves that adversely affect the environment in the region. The Siachen glacier is under stress from factors such as global warming, black carbon and human military interventions. The advisor declared that it would be in the interest of both nations to withdraw forces from Siachen. According to legal experts, Siachen is a political issue and is tied to the delineation of the Line of Control (LoC). Pakistan and India initiated talks on the Siachen issue many times in the past, but these kept failing when it was time to draft an agreement, mostly on account of conflicts over the language and contents of the agreement. The expert suggestion was that political and legal experts on both sides must first talk and frame an applicable bilateral agreement for withdrawing forces from the area. The SDPI Water and Energy Advisor and an expert on glaciers said that the rise in temperatures on the Siachen glacier is the direct result of large scale military interventions from both sides. He said soldiers on the glacier have used chemicals to melt and cut through



the glacial ice to construct bunkers, camps, helipads and airfields. He rejected the notion that global warming was melting the glacier and cited a NASA report, *Advancing Glaciers and Positive Mass Anomaly in the Karakoram-Himalaya*, which states that more than 65 percent of glaciers in the Karakoram Range are growing. An army officer shared his experiences at Siachen, saying that despite weather and health issues, the soldiers' morale is always high and they are always committed to their mission. "The real enemy is not the person sitting across the LoC, but the weather, which envelops a person from every side," the officer said. He narrated that soldiers could not communicate with their families from the Siachen sector for many months and were often unable to even bathe for two months at a time. Besides the freezing temperature, he said, frustration was at an all-time high due to the isolation and often caused scuffles among the soldiers. He noted that they often talked with their Indian counterparts at the Siachen sector on duty and even exchanged dishes and gifts on some occasions. "But you don't know how and when things change..." On 13 April the Siachen conflict between Pakistan and India entered its 18th year. Ershad Mahmud's book, *Siachen Dispute: Background, Current Situation and Future Prospects*, analyzes the causes of the failure of fourteen rounds of negotiations on Siachen held at the summit and secretary levels. In June 1989, both

sides announced an agreement according to which Pakistan and India were to re-deploy their forces to their 1971 positions, as envisaged in the Simla Agreement. However, Indian officials denied the existence of any agreement after the joint announcement in Islamabad. Thus, on the implementation of the 1989 agreement, Pakistan linked the Siachen dispute with the Kashmir issue in the last round of talks, giving the issue an entirely new perspective. India demands that Pakistan accept the ground realities i.e. Indian position on the land. Further, the study contends that Pakistan's losses are very low, about 10 percent of Indian losses. This is because Pakistani forces are on significantly lower positions, just 32 km (at the most) away from the main road. Most of their bunkers are outside the glacier. The Pakistan army engineering corps has built quite a good road network in the area. This has enabled the army to replace its helicopter and porter system with army trucks, which in turn has resulted in a significant reduction in terms of financial and human costs. India is paying a high cost economically, about Rs 10 billion per year. A comparison shows that what India spends in a day, Pakistan spends during the whole month. The conflict has resulted in thousands of casualties, caused by the harsh terrain and adverse climate conditions, which by far is more than by bullets or shells. Both sides regularly exchange heavy artillery and machine-gun fire, and maintain brigade-level deployments of 3,000 to 4,000 troops. *Heights of Madness: One Woman's Journey in Pursuit of a Secret War*. 'At that height, rifles jammed and he used a bayonet and grenades to overcome the enemy.' The book was formally released by a former Indian defense minister, in Delhi on November 15, 2003, in the presence of Jaswant Singh, who was banished from the BJP for his book *Jinnah, India, Partition & Independence*. This was the first book on Siachen by a woman journalist, Myra MacDonald. She was Reuters chief in New Delhi and had been to both the Indian and the Pakistan-controlled sides of this highest battlefield on earth. She found that on both sides, troops lived in isolated outposts where their common enemy was the thin air and the extreme cold. The devastating calamity on account of the thin air is nakedly narrated in Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air*, a personal account of

the 1997 disaster on Mt. Everest. There was, and is, no point in the conflict of Siachen, which costs India Rs. 3 crores a day and where most casualties occur on account of the weather. With minimal editing, in simple, straightforward and highly readable prose, the writer allowed the actors to speak for themselves in this extraordinary story. Through interviews she gave a detailed picture of the lives of the jawans during their tours of duty on Siachen, which left them emaciated, sun-blackened and often frostbitten or psychologically disturbed. Siachen made one believe in ghosts and men left a bed empty for any visiting spirits of soldiers who had died there. Siachen means 'the place of roses', after the wild Sia roses that grow below the snout of the glacier. Prior to partition in 1947 this 'magnificent and terrible terrain' was hardly known. In 1949 a meeting was held in Karachi to draw up a ceasefire line between the Indian and Pakistani forces. However, at the end of the meeting, its status was left undefined. No one imagined that it could ever be a 'flashpoint.' Then, in the 1970s, the Pakistanis began what an Indian brigadier called "cartographic aggression" they started allowing foreign climbers to explore the mountains in the area. This activity made both India and Pakistan

suspicious of each other. Both sides embarked on a patrolling exercise suspecting one another of intending to occupy the glacier and the neighbouring Saltoro range. India's first expedition to Siachen in 1978 also scaled the 24,631 feet Taram Kangri peak. MacDonald tracked down the Sherpa, who had scaled the glacier and the adjacent peak without modern equipment, on that expedition. The Siachen conflict began in 1984, the same year as Operation Blue Star, Indira Gandhi's assassination, the anti-Sikh riots and the Bhopal gas disaster. Ladakhi scouts and men of the 4th battalion of the Kumaon Regiment occupied a pass above Siachen in the blizzards of April. According to MacDonald, the aim of India's Operation Meghdoot was to put on a show of force, stake a claim to Siachen and withdraw before the winter. To the Pakistanis, such an unambiguous plan was inconceivable. Convinced that India must be aiming at something bigger, they reacted and the conflict escalated. Bana Singh won India's highest bravery award for an audacious attack on a Pakistani outpost at 21,000 feet in 1987. The book provides details on this act of valour. On her visits to Siachen, the writer found that the altitude made her unable to think or to take coherent notes. She rashly urged helicopter pilots to fly on, even in dangerous weather. Perhaps the effect of altitude was one of the reasons she found that even Indian soldiers' memories of the same events differ while Pakistani and Indian accounts of the same battles were irreconcilable. Discreetly, MacDonald made no attempt to reconcile the differences. Each individual is given his say. On both sides, she found a similar regimental spirit and a similar commitment to keep every inch of territory. However, the Pakistan army to her seemed much richer, its standards of living in the conflict zone higher. Its PR machine bombarded her with information, using power point presentations and scale models that showed the entire region as 'Siachen' and made the frontline seem much longer than it did in India. MacDonald was able to visit Siachen when there was a ceasefire in place. But nature, she reminded us, has declared no such ceasefire. She clearly believed that peace initiatives needed to allow troops down once and for all from those heights of madness.

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