

FORGOTTEN HISTORY

The Testimony of Sixty

How and why it was prepared in 1971

ULIAN FRANCIS

October 21 marks the 41st anniversary of the publication of the "Testimony of Sixty", a collection of eye-witness accounts of the tragic situation in Bengal (East and West) at that time.

One of the eye-witness accounts was made by the well known Gandhian leader, Narayan Desai. Now, nearly 90 years old, he is in Dhaka to receive the 'Friends of Liberation War Honour' from the President and Prime Minister of Bangladesh for the work he undertook in 1971. He organized teams of Indian volunteers from the Gandhi Vidyapeeth, Vedchhi, Gujarat and from the Gandhi Smarak Nidhi and these volunteers worked tirelessly in the refugee camps assisted by Oxfam-UK's financial support. The Liberation War Museum, at Segun Bagicha, is according a reception in his honour at 4 p.m. on October 21. In the 'Testimony of Sixty', Narayan Desai's statement, collected in September 1971, reads as follows:

"Like an octopus, the problem is clutching the situation from a number of directions. When approaching a refugee camp the problem that stares at you is that of accommodation. Twenty-three persons living in a tent measuring 12 feet by 9 feet. Sixteen living on a raised 8 feet square platform of bamboo chips, avoiding direct contact with knee-deep water. This is the rule rather than the exception. Going a little closer, you see a number of other problems. Thousands of women with just half a piece of cloth to wrap their bodies, thousands of children slowly succumbing to malnutrition, millions dreading the advent of winter winds along with pneumonia. Moving right among them you realize the more subtle problems: 9 million pairs of hands remaining idle result in frustration: every story of atrocity across the border-thousands of women molested, almost half a million killed-bring with it bitterness, anger and contempt."

As I am the only person, currently living and working in Bangladesh, who was personally involved, in 1971, with the collection of many of these eye-witness accounts, I thought that your readers would be interested to learn how and why Oxfam-UK decided, in 1971, to publish this document.

In 1971, I was a young man 26 years of age and I had the responsibility of coordinating the relief efforts of Oxfam-UK which was assisting approximately 6 lac Bangladeshi refugees in many camps in the border areas of Tripura, Meghalaya, Assam, Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Siliguri, West Dinajpur, Barasat, Bongaon. As we were unsure how long the tragic situation would last, at any one time, we were always planning 6 months ahead, and in September 1971 we were assessing the future cost of assisting the refugees through the winter which, in many areas, would be severe. We needed regular and large sums of money each month.

This campaign, Oxfam's biggest ever relief operation after Biafra, and before Kampuchea, meant

that Oxfam's fundraising effort and publicity had to be second to none, better than others. To raise funds for a crisis which appeared to be never-ending needed a sustained fundraising strategy using advertisements which would both inform but also shock people into giving. As the winter of 1971 approached, and with it the need for blankets and warm clothing, Oxfam ran campaigns to "Take a Blanket Off Your Bed" and "Buy a new sweater for Christmas and Throw Your Old Ones to Oxfam". The British Post Office, at the time, charged nothing for sending blankets and warm clothing by parcel postage if addressed to Oxfam and the Royal Air Force air-freighted the blankets to Kolkata.

For those of us who have forgotten or are too young to remember, there were an estimated 10 million Bangladeshis existing in about 900 refugee camps. The logistics of feeding and caring for such a large number of people even now, after so many years, are difficult to comprehend. How was it done? It was done through the heroism of so many, and these men and women never sought fame or credit but insisted that they were just doing what had to be done.

It was difficult to keep the crisis on the front pages of the world's newspapers. The news of the genocide of March 25 put it on the front pages, and with the outbreak of cholera in May and June, the humanitarian crisis was front page news once more. Again, when the camps got flooded that year, it was front page news. By September 1971, the British newspapers had headlines of "Carry on dying", "Can the refugees ever go home?" and "Pakistani famine is worse than Biafra." However, Oxfam, at its Oxford based Head Office, decided that it must find a way to shock the world's leaders to an even greater extent, to make them open their eyes and wake up. In a surprisingly short space of time eye-witness accounts of the tragedy were collected and published as "The Testimony of Sixty on the Crisis in Bengal". This carried statements and articles written by famous persons such as Mother Teresa and Senator Edward Kennedy and well-known journalists such as John Pilger, Nicolas Tomalin, Clare Hollingworth and Martin Woollacott.

I personally collected many of the statements from people in Kolkata and I remember one day sending a telex to Oxfam full of statements which took 75 minutes to send over the wires! Copies of "The Testimony of Sixty" were handed over to many heads of government and its publication coincided with the opening of that year's General Assembly of the United Nations where it was distributed to all ambassadors to the UN. The day before the official publication date, October 21, 1971, the British Post Office assisted Oxfam with telephone directories from all over the UK to pile up 49 million names on the pavement outside an OXFAM shop which was situated at 49, Parliament Street, London. Nine million represented the number of Bangladeshi refugees at that time in India and the other 40 million names represented the number of people displaced inside (then) East Pakistan who were

facing extreme hunger.

It is interesting to record that although the USA was firmly supporting Pakistan in 1971, Senator Edward Kennedy, who had visited both East Pakistan and West Bengal in August 1971, brought "The Testimony of Sixty" to the attention of the US Senate and it was published in full on October 28, 1971, in the 'Congressional Record', only one week after it was published by Oxfam in the UK. Introducing the "Testimony of Sixty" to the United States Senate, the 'Congressional Record' states the following:

"Mr. Kennedy: "Mr. President, the crisis in East Bengal is a story of human misery on a scale unequalled in modern times. It is a story of systematic terror and military repression, of indiscriminate killing and the killing and dislocation of millions of civilians. It is a story of death and disease, of too little food and water, of fetid refugee camps without hope and a countryside stalked by famine.

And throughout it all the world has barely murmured a word.

Perhaps this is because we are conditioned in the world we have created to accept such suffering and injustice. To many the plight of the Bengali people is just another link in the chain of war-ravaged populations stretching around the world in recent years.

But perhaps, Mr. President, the public is silent because it does not know.

To bring the facts more forcibly to the public's attention, the noted British charity, OXFAM, has recently published an impressive brochure entitled "The Testimony of 60 on the Crisis in Bengal." No one who reads this document can remain unmoved or uninformed at the plight of the Bengali people.

To share this eloquent statement with Members of the Senate, I ask unanimous consent that it be printed at this point in the RECORD.

There being no objection, the testimony was ordered to be printed in the RECORD as follows:"

It is important to place on record that, although the US government supported Pakistan at that time, there was a huge outpouring of generosity and concern by the American people who put the fledgling Oxfam-America clearly on the map at the time. In addition, over half a million dollars of donated American medicines were sent to Oxfam for use in the refugee camps, and later, after Liberation, in Bangladesh.

In 2007, the Liberation War Museum brought out an English facsimile edition so that more people could learn more about the history of how this nation was formed and the pain and suffering that was involved, and on December 16, 2009, The Daily Prothom Alo published a Bangla facsimile edition which has reached many more readers.

This, then, is the story of how this historical document was prepared and why it was prepared.

JULIAN FRANCIS, WHO WAS OXFAM'S 'SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE' IN KOLKATA IN 1971, ALSO RECEIVED THE 'FRIENDS OF LIBERATION WAR HONOUR' IN MARCH 2012.

LITERARY NEWS

Gantha honours writers...

JACKIE KABIR

Gantha, a non-formal organization of female writers writing both in English and Bangla, held a reception to honour two of its very own writers, Selina Hossain and Saleha Choudhury. Selina Hossain was awarded the Shuroma Choudhury memorial award, worth ten lakh rupees, in Kolkata this year, while Saleha Chowdhury received the Bangla Academy Probashi Lekhok Puroskar, worth fifty thousand taka.

Among numerous other awards, Selina Hossain got the Bangla Academy Prize in 1980, Ekushey Padak in 2009, Ram Krishna Joydoyal Harmony award in 2006, the last being a renowned prize in South East Asia. Bishwa Bharati University has honoured her with a D.Lit degree. Besides Dhaka University, her books are taught in different courses at Rabindra Bharati University, Jadavpur University and Assam University.

Saleha Choudhury has written about 60 books. She is a translator, short story writer and poet. She has been living in the United Kingdom for the past forty years. Among the awards coming her way have been the Ananna Puroskar and Bangladesh Lekhika Shongho Puroskar, an award from the Writers' Foundation. Her poetry earned her the Merit award and runners-up award in the UK.

The Gantha event took place at the Prothom Alo conference hall on 1 October. One of the members of the organization, Nurun Akhter, read from *Gayatri Shondha*. The author noted that it was a trilogy compiled in one book and described events from 1947 till 1975. Another member, Monica Chakrabarti, discussed *Thabija's Father*, a novel by Saleha Chowdhury, where the writer tells the tale of the gold widows of Nigeria.

Among others Papree Rahman and Anwara Azad discussed Selina Hossain and Saleha Choudhury's lives and works. Eminent scholar Maleka Begum, Farida Majid, Dil Monowara Monu, Jharna Rahman, Juman Nashit, Farha Diba and Jackie Kabir were present at the occasion.



POETRY

Singing of silence, whisperingly...

MALEKA PARVEEN

Silence is all, engulfing us gradually;
Then, sometimes, I feel like shouting
At the topmost pitch of voice to know
If that special someone is there on the
Other side, meek and mute and hidden;
Or to get back the itching echo to myself,
For assuring I'm still alive here hopefully...

There's no jingling, no ringing
Nothing of tinkling or any clinking
I could breathe the sole silence
That's sick, steely and stifling...

A silent sigh thus escapes her unnoticed
And vanishes into the horizon up there.
A pearl-drop rolls down her pale cheek
And evaporates before she could realise...

Silence is there for you to ponder
On things you don't feel at home with;
Silence is there for me to wonder
At what's really going on beneath...

Silence is there for her to rethink
The decision she has hastily made;
Silence is there for him to shrink
From the dull desire under a shade.

MALEKA PARVEEN IS A BANGLADESH DIPLOMAT AT PRESENT POSTED IN EUROPE.

My scarlet ogle

SHOKHORE ANTONY ROZARIO

My Lady,
I am exhausted
Battered by waves of the Far East blues,
Trodden down by the unveiled Tsunami
That resides to tranquil the Beethoven lyrics.
I crawl down on mother earth, whilst I
Breathe the floating air that rocks the Himalayas.
I am a mere lone delight
Implore you to accompany me along this azure dusk.

My Lady,
I do not dare to dream, for my
Inward retina bear stains of corrosion,
My cheek grins as embedded seed,
A Sahara in its prime evolution;
Life seldom spoke, whilst the
Wait of tomb's day terror my ferocity.
I am scorched petal,
Implore you to lark me on your profuse locks.

Trust me My Lady
I pray not for your barricaded kiss
That desires every lad in the valley;
I long not for a touch of your skyline beauty
Which dances the rain dew to harmony.
Someday when I no more implore,
You will sweep your tears and must know---
All I wished you is to aid my dropping
Tears and question me of the mystery of my Scarlet Ogle.

DR. RASHID ASKARI WRITES FICTION AND COLUMNS, AND TEACHES ENGLISH LITERATURE AT KUSHTIA ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY, BANGLADESH. EMAIL: RASHIDASKARI65@YAHOO.COM

SHOKHORE ANTONY ROZARIO IS A YOUNG POET.

TRIBUTE

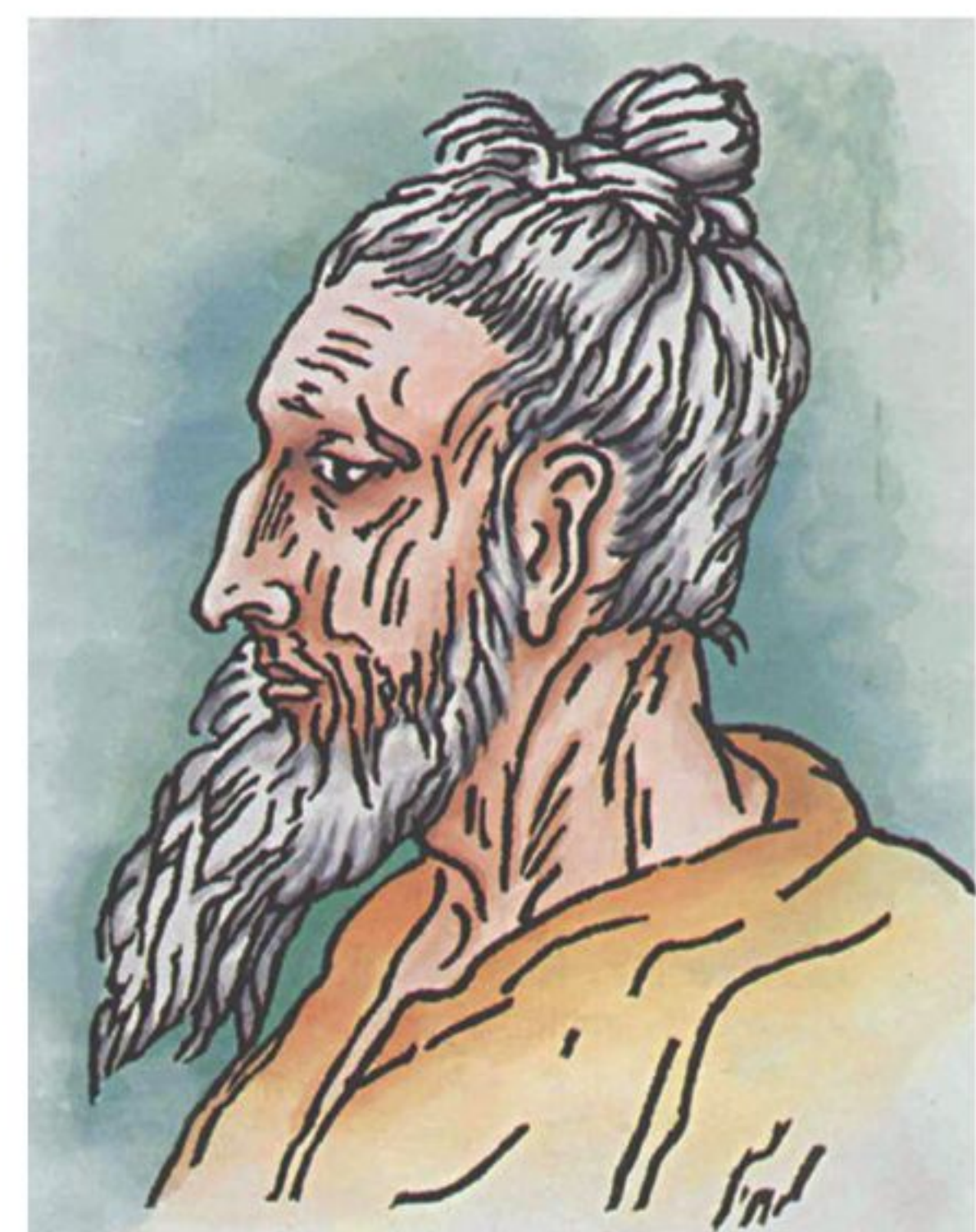
The musical messiah and our sweetest songs

RASHID ASKARI

The star attraction of Lalon's Mazaar (shrine) at Cheuria is the holding of the Lalon festivals twice a year on Dol-purnima in the month of Falgun (February-March) and thence on his death anniversary in October. During the festivals, the Lalon akhda (monastery) is thronged with thousands of bauls and devotees from home and abroad. They flock together and observe the festivals amid day-long and night-long renderings of Lalon songs. That does not necessarily mean that the off-festival times are devoid of the rendition of songs. As a matter of fact, hardly a day passes when the bauls, either in twos and threes or in larger numbers do not sit round somewhere at the shrine premises, and go on singing and playing music on the local instruments like ektara (a one-stringed musical instrument and khol (hand drum). They feel heartened when visitors listen to them with overwhelming fascination. Lately the festivals have assumed huge proportions and are being held amid tight security.

I had been a regular visitor to the Lalon mazaar since early nineties when I joined the Islamic University as a lecturer in English. Leaving behind the 'sound and fury' of the capital, I took refuge in the cool lap of a country town, Kushtia. I heaved a sigh of relief for being 'far from the madding crowd'. Although there was little distraction in this small town, I preferred it primarily because of my fascination for this greatest baul of Bengal-- Fakir Lalon Shah (1774-1890). I was one of the regular akhda-goers during the festivals. We used to have bumpy rides on the man-propelled wooden vehicles, locally called van. My van-mates and I would sit on the van and swing our heads to the rhythms of the songs either sung by the van-puller or floating up from the mazaar as we approached it. In fact, the whole town assumed a festive mood and a feeling of joy and merriment among the people became evident during the festivals.

It is said that Lalon Fakir had composed about ten thousand songs of which only two to three thousand are traceable while others are consigned to oblivion or are living in the memory of his numerous followers. But



quantity does not matter in regard to Lalon songs. What really matters is quality. The haunting melodies of his songs capture people's hearts and help realize the error of your ways. These are 'our sweetest songs that tell of saddest thought'. From everyone's taste in the country the songs suit almost all tastes around the world.

There are, of course, subtle differences between Lalon songs sung by the genuine bauls of the Akhda School, and those sung on stage by the professional singers with orchestra. The differences lie in pronunciation, intonation, articulation and projection of the words and sounds of the song. Playing the ektara, the bauls render Lalon songs with spontaneous fluctuations of pitch. The sweet melodies of the songs in tune with the ektara or dotara make us dance with joy. The bauls are musical by nature, and hence their songs make us musical. The beautiful melody and the arcane

message of the songs leave us with an ecstatic pleasure. I grab every opportunity to visit the central place of baul music, and enjoy the amazingly beautiful songs of Fakir Lalon. I am afraid I may sound dogmatic chiefly to the connoisseurs of music who may disagree with me over my plain views on baul songs. Given the hair-splitting judgmental process of song composition and tune-setting, they may sure dwarf my emotion as sheer nonsense.

But there it is. I know I cannot help it. As one of the teeming Bengali folks, my heart is swayed by the magnificent songs of the baul king. The stunningly beautiful lyrics and melodies like baris pashe arshi nagar (the glass-town by home) or jaat gaelo jaat gaelo bole (saying caste is lost) or pare loye jao amaey (take me to the shore) have been the eternal source of our spiritual pleasure. Fatigued and sick of the monotony of the humdrum life and chagrined in the heartless concrete jungle, we may sigh with relief, maybe momentarily, and feel lost in ecstasies, if we sit by the shabby and unkempt bauls, and listen to their melodies. We cannot say we are doing trash.

Lalon Fakir is our musical messiah who carries tremendous relevance in our times. His importance as a minstrel can be viewed in the local and global context in the present social and cultural ambience, when the whole human situation is fast deteriorating, hatred rules the roost, and culture suffers at the hands of intolerance, sectarianism, fundamentalism, orthodoxy and fanaticism. A new generation of scholars, writers, and readers has started appraising Lalon's songs with much interest and greater understanding. The true spirit of the songs can help us stand against the long shadow of ignorance, superstition and dogmatism and lead people of various creeds, ideas, and dogmas to peace and happiness in this age of social unrest, political hostility, cultural aggression and religious intolerance. UNESCO has rightly considered our baul songs as one of the 'Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.'