

MUSINGS

Lost . . . and found

NAHID KHAN

It is that time of year when this city has a pleasant ambiance with winter's cool touch, marigold's vibrant colours, bhapa peetha's sweet flavor, ideas of planning a vacation perhaps, all that gives a sense of recreation to the city dweller's mind. It's mostly school holidays, parents are not running around taking their children to schools or any tuition for that matter. Just a little break for catching their breath seems like a very well sought after time once in a year. It is also a time to pause in the madness of maneuvering, from domestic political activity to world trade matters. Even mother nature also stays calm --- flood, storm, heat --- everything puts up an untold hold as if just to invite me to embrace my long lost love. With such a gentle cool breeze in the dry seasons that brings a bit of dust which all can do without, makes very little difference in indulging in a nice livelihood. Victory Day, New Years Day celebrations and various cultural and sporting programs stretch to the preparations for the Ekushey Boi Mela, a season of festivity that includes everyone unconstrained by any chauvinism. The chants and chimes call upon me to come home. And I can't stay away but fly in to look for my long lost treasure.

I follow the fragrance in the air, wipe off the dust and a magical time appears so vividly that it makes itself self-same and timeless. But I cannot quite touch or feel it like a mirror image. There is the little alley which ends in a wall over which we would never go to the other side in those magical days when there was no need to worry about any worldly things. That broken wall stood there, protecting us from any mishap, and our parents stayed home performing idle

afternoon chores with ultra assurances that we were absolutely as safe as guarded by angels, playing on the streets. So we did, played every sort of game on the street. There was not a single vehicle to spoil the fun, no intruder to frighten us, no attraction inside like electronic evils to overpower the pleasure of blissful play under the open sky with the cheerful winds. This time of the year the favourite was badminton and there weren't enough rackets, so we shared, everyone took a turn. The children who owned a couple of rackets never thought of being snooty because the real fun was playing with others. We played until we were called in late in the afternoon as if life was all about spending time with friends. The twilight tranquility reminds me that we were called in as it was time for evening refreshment and study. Baanti always had to go first, then Shompa and Shanta, when one by one everyone went inside. Shilpi, Shibli, Silvi, Annie, Pappu, Baby, then my best friend Shima would helplessly utter, "Nahid, I wish the sun would never set", forgetting that it sets only to rise again soon.

We came home looking forward to playing again the following day. It will have to be doomsday not to play again the next day. TV only started at 6pm and the allowance for shows was very limited. Not every household had a television set, so the only choice was to sit at the desk and do the homework, quite reluctantly of course. In those days children didn't feel severely the need for perseverance, that was the parents' job. Children's task was just being children. Could I ever find those days again? Would anyone please give me those games back? Can you at least tell me where or how to look for my long lost childhood friends? I remember the names, but would I recognize the faces?



On my winter visits everywhere I go, I look for the play and the playmates. But nobody plays in the suburban alleys anymore. It's a city of very busy people, you hear, smell, feel and do the buzz like a busy bee as it's very contagious. Anyone who comes to this city catches it very quickly, the extraordinary busy syndrome. Of course, when asked I can't really account for anything but I truly have been busy. I have to take my little girl to singing lessons, disappear for four hours or so doing absolutely nothing. But I truly had been very busy. As soon as my car enters the alley, also a no-thorough road, to the teacher's house,

there will be a chirping crowd, 'Please don't bring the car any further, please don't spoil our game.' A quite astounding feature of that plea is a group of boys of various ages playing badminton. My heart leans a little. I ask the driver to stop then and there. We can always walk a few yards!

It happened a few more days, with the children every day becoming a bit more possessive about their rights over the alley to play badminton. I took the surrender side but rebelled one day, said straight to one of the boys, 'Give me a racket. I want to play too'. Even more astounding was the fact that the

boys began tying with each other over who would play with me. Then it was decided everyone would take turns. Of course I never had to give away my turn, they took me as a playmate instantly. From then on the afternoons have truly become very busy not for nothing but for pleasant memories. As soon as I got off the car, someone from a sixth floor roof would call out, 'Hello, aunty'. Another from a balcony, 'How are you, aunty? One would jump down from the wall right in front of me, telling me excitedly, 'Aunty, today I am playing first'. But the problem was that almost every day the shuttle cork would get lost as a result of some ambitious hit inside a neighbor's boundary walls. One would fetch a long stick and try to reach the shuttle cork from the high window sill and I would almost cry out, 'No Baanti, no, you will fall down! Come down at once!' The mother in me gets worried about the boy. Of course this Baanti is a different Baanti. That was just my made up name. I couldn't learn their names, so put all my friends' names onto those beautiful faces. The boy would come down with a grin from ear to ear, 'Look, I didn't fall down, I climb up the wall all the time'. I had a grin too and that was such a relief.

The day before I left the city, I bought them a boxful of shuttle corks to say goodbye. They had looks of disbelief and could only say, 'Will you be coming next winter, aunty? Please do'. When I returned abroad, which is now my home, one of the boys wrote to me, 'The badminton game was over when you were gone'. It brought the tears streaming down my cheeks. I really wish the game wouldn't stop. I don't want to lose what I have found again.

NAHID KHAN IS AN ACADEMIC AND TEACHES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA.

JAIPUR LITFEST

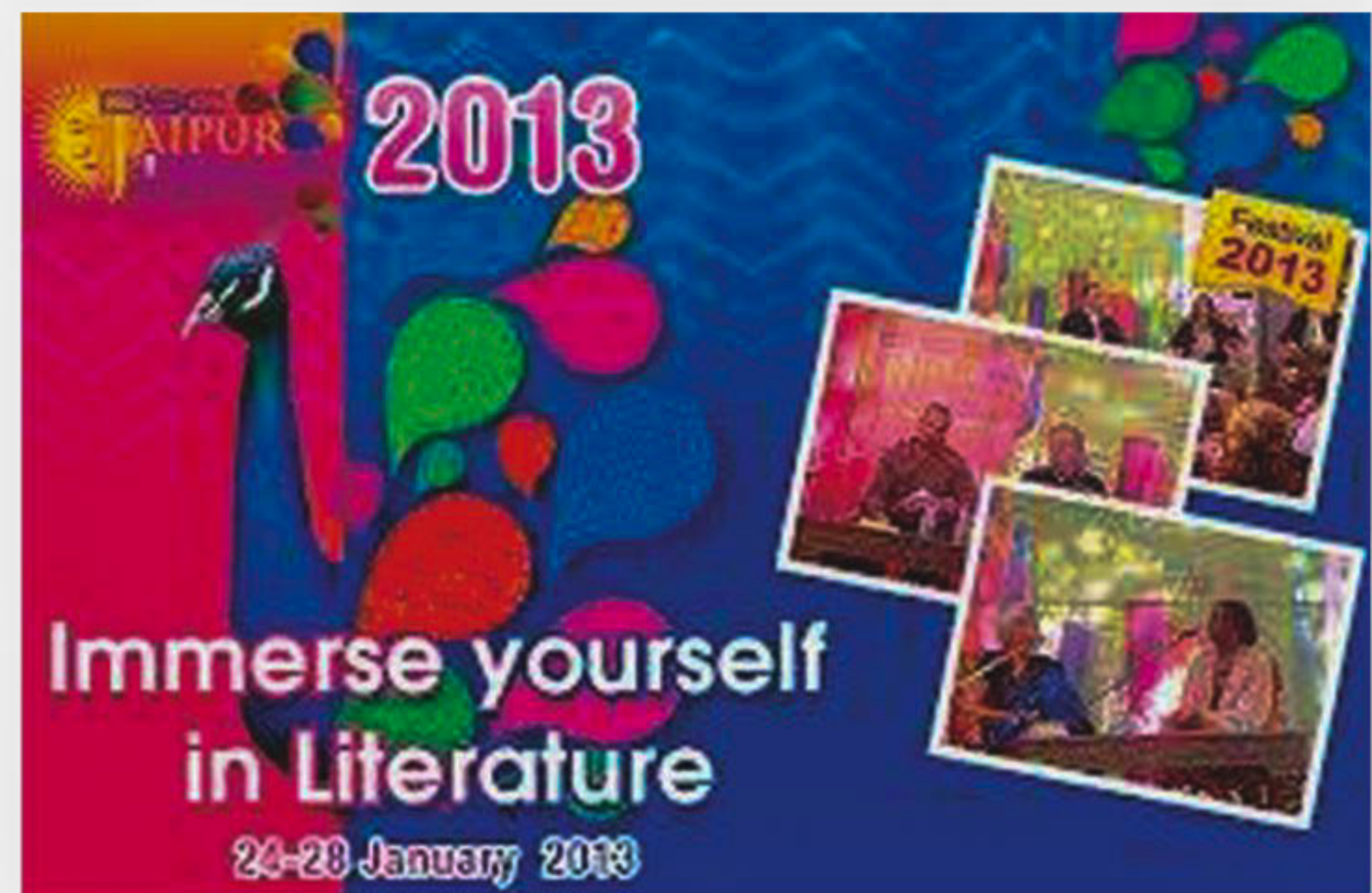
Of snobbery and miffed Rajputs

ASHIM CHOUDHURY

The most heartening aspect of the just-concluded Jaipur Literature festival was, perhaps, the surging crowds there. And it included not just the well-heeled literati from Delhi and even far off Mumbai but also ordinary folks from the Pink City and beyond. The JLF has now become an intrinsic part of Jaipur's cultural fabric, perhaps the city's most awaited annual event. The crowds testified to that and so did the massive police bandobast. And what's an event without its share of controversies? If last year it was Salman Rushdie this year's man of the festival was our very own Bangali Ashish Nandy. When I saw him rush past I had no clue he was just returning from a police station! It was only later that my local friend from Jaipur informed me that he was all over the news for his 'anti-dalit' comment.

The next day, entering the festival gates, I saw this quickly crafted paper placard that activists were pushing at the eager TV cameras 'KaunhaiNundisochitnigandi'. What many people did not report was that Nandy had overnight become a darling of the 'general caste' Rajputs in Jaipur. "He has only said what we have been saying for a long time....The Meenas are the new rulers of Jaipur now," said Tej Singh, a local Rajput. Nandy's claim to fame was actually an innocuous statement which tried to say that the SC-ST people were as corrupt as the upper castes but they did not cover their tracks as well. Soon we had Mayawati hitching her wagon to the festival! The JLF has become a star.

In the two days that I was there, 26 and 27 January, I found myself virtually running from one event to another, not all of it entirely literary. But it was truly enriching, not just the depth of the discussions but



also the wide sweep. Two people caught my fancy. Shoma Chaudhury (no relation of mine) who spoke on land acquisition and Richard someone, an internationally acclaimed 'star' who spoke on what money can't buy (even your soul, he said). The session on Bollywood film scripting moderated by Munni Kabir was also very engaging, particularly for ordinary film goers. Ironically it was conducted in English. William Dalrymple I found a trifle too loud and expansive for an author. One couldn't be at four places at the same time. So, obviously I missed a lot, but not the jab at Suhel Seth made by John Elliot describing him as a TV performer. The audience sniggered.

Talking of Seth, one couldn't miss a certain snobbery and elitism in several of

the participants as well as the programming. The 'paid' participants strutted about Diggi Palace, the venue, as though they owned it. There was a perceptible disdain for the desi folks who had overrun the festival. Many firangs showed little respect for the No Smoking rule within the festival premises. So, to be equal, I also lighted up in front of a tall bald gora. A fellow Bong prompted, 'Pulish oke dhorbena...toke dhorbe' (the cops won't catch him...they'll catch you). Luckily no one caught me. There were Indians too who were smoking, but they were puffing clandestinely. It was at one such hideout that I borrowed a light from an elderly gentleman. He turned out to be a Hindi poet. Together we lamented the poor share of Hindi programming at the festival. "It's

less than ten percent..." he said. "I'll mention this to Sanjay Roy," I bragged of my familiarity with the festival organiser.

At the authors' lounge I met an old neglected man. He was grateful someone was talking to him. The humble man too turned out to be a poet, alas a Hindi poet! He was grateful that I put my arms around him and had a photo clicked. Ram Swarup Mundra pulled out a copy of his just released book of poems 'dhwani' and gifted me a copy. Shamelessly, I did not even ask him for the price. Neither did I give him a copy of my own novel 'The Sergeant's Son'. The high point of my visit was when Pavan Varma, who I gifted a copy of my book, insisted on paying for it. "Writers should insist on people buying their books," he chided. I wish someone told that to my neighbours who have stopped recognizing me because they haven't got their free copies.

Meanwhile, I am told that the future of the JLF (sounds like JKLF!) is under threat. "The Meenas will not let it happen...dekhlena!" says Tej Singh. Can't trust a Rajput saying that, though. The latter, erstwhile rulers of Rajasthan, are miffed with the Meenas, for they have cornered virtually all top police and other sarkari departments in the state and beyond. The way they hijacked the festival has bad portents for literature and the culture of free speech. Last time it was the hardline mullahs. Interestingly, this time round Muslims went about distributing free copies of the Quran just outside the festival gates. How times change! Move over, Rushdie...It's time for Nandy!

ASHIM CHOUDHURY IS A DELHI-BASED WRITER. HIS NOVEL, 'THE SERGEANT'S SON' (RUPA) WAS RECENTLY REVIEWED IN THE DAILY STAR.

BOOK REPORT

Nazrul unfettered

A discussion on Unfettered, the English translation of Kazi Nazrul Islam's Bandhohara, was held at Indira Gandhi Cultural Center on 16 February. Prof Rafiqul Islam, Prof Fakrul Alam, Prof Firdous Azim, Prof Razia Sultana Khan and former ambassador Mahbubul Alam talked about various aspects of the book.

The English translation, edited by Prof Niaz Zaman, has been done by a team of The Reading Circle (TRC) comprising Tanveerul Haque, Asfa Hussain, Shirin Hasanat Islam, Ayesha Kabir, Jackie Kabir, Saeeda Khan, Shahrukh Rahman and Niaz Zaman. Published by Nymphaea, the book is sponsored by Standard Chartered Bank.

All the speakers congratulated the TRC members on undertaking the critical task of translating the work, which depicts Nazrul's early life as a soldier with the 49th Bengal Regiment in the First World War. Prof Islam said that it was an important novel as it was one of the first works to use 'Promito Bangla'. An early work by Kazi Nazrul Islam, the novel is written in the form of eighteen letters.

Prof Firdous Azim, an eminent scholar in gender studies, said that the novel was of

interest to her because it was written in the 1920s, a period similar to the phase Bangladesh is passing through today. She thanked Prof Niaz Zaman for doing a commendable job of editing and bringing so many different writings into one form. There are few other fictions in the epistolary form, 'Strir Potro' and 'Pamela' being two deserving mention. Azim said she saw Kazi Nazrul Islam in the role of the artist as a young man in Unfettered.

In his remarks, Prof Fakrul Alam analyzed the novel as being Kazi Nazrul Islam's self portrait, where the poet depicts himself as a rebel trying to break free of the influence of Tagore. Nazrul had deep knowledge of Hinduism and was multilingual as he used Urdu and Persian in his writing. Prof Alam added that he found Byron's influence in Nazrul Islam's writing.

Prof Razia Sultana Khan said the work was a novel of triangular love, a good friendship between three men. Since the book was written during the First World War, she had expected it to be about war and killings but was happy to discover that it was a novel



about love and relationships. As a reader she felt the same emotions of anger, sadness and joy as did the characters in the work.

Writer and former diplomat Mahbubul Alam threw light on the only regiment comprising Bengalis in colonial times. The regiment was known as the Bangla Paltan.

Today's Bangladesh army, he stated, might be regarded as a continuation of that paltan.

Shahrukh Rahman thanked the IGCC for making it possible for The Reading Circle to organise the program at its premises.

(REPORTING BY JACKIE KABIR).

POETRY

The Famous Fortune-Telling Dog

TOM WARNER

The famous dog they say has powers to see into the future

lives in a bamboo hut above the misty tree line on yonder.

Those who seek to meet the sacred dog must go alone.

Your pilgrimage will of course be long and steep; six days

hacking at vines and wafting flies in the jungle heat, loamy nights asleep under drips from glossyleaves.

Most pilgrims lose their way or give up and double back, but should you make it to that door fashioned from reeds

you must unlace your boots, pull off your clammy socks and roll the bottoms of your trousers up before you enter in.

His Most Magnificent Nose will by now be expecting you.

Inside, you will find Him seated on a simple wooden stool,

attended to by silent monks with beards and purple robes who carry biscuits and water for Him to lap from silver bowls.

Projected on the ceiling overhead is the five-day weather for your local area (long-range forecasts are printed on request).

Be sure to take to Him these things: something colourful to chew (a ball or perhaps a rubber chicken), the knuckle bone of a beast

and the ears from a pig. These things will please Him well.

Lay out your offerings on the ground before the famous dog,

then bow and ask Him what your future holds, at which, if you possess an honest heart, He will tell you all He sees in whines and high-pitched yawns even those solemn monks, with their shaved heads and collection tins, cannot translate.

TOM WARNER, A BRITISH POET, WILL BE CONDUCTING A WORKSHOP WITH THE LITERARY CIRCLE BRINE PICKLES IN DHAKA IN EARLY MARCH.