

HISTORY

Chittagong's tryst with Tagore culture

UDAY SANKAR DAS

"Chittagong is the land of Poet Alaol, Chittagong is the land of Abdul Karim Shahittya Bisharad. It therefore is not surprising that the courageous and devoted people of Chittagong will celebrate the birth centenary of the greatest Bengali poet in the grandest manner possible, defying all odds and threats", said Professor Momtazuddin Ahmed, noted theatre personality, playwright, director and actor.

There was a tinge of pride when the reputed social scientist and present vice-chancellor of Premier University, Professor Dr Anupam Sen said, "Chittagong has been the pioneer in the practice and promotion of Tagore culture in this part of Bengal."

Dr Sanjida Khatun, one of the greatest proponents of Tagore culture in Bangladesh, agreed. "Chittagong always had a very rich cultural tradition", she noted.

One can therefore easily see that Chittagong has had a tryst with Tagore and his music for a very long time, and even during his lifetime Tagore's music had been firmly rooted there. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the practice and teaching of Tagore's songs were confined to the very small but influential Brammho community (the religious community to which Tagore belonged) in Chittagong under the patronage of Annada Charan Khastagir, the father-in-law of Jatra Mohon Sen, a revered leader of Chittagong.

This practice soon spread to the Hindu families there which happened mainly due to the contacts and communication Tagore and/or his family had with them. Prominent among these families were those of Kobi Nabin Chandra Sen, Jamini Kanta Sen, Rai Bahadur Sarachchandra Das, Kedar Nath Dasgupta, Purna Chandra Sen and Braja Kumar Sen.

The practice became widespread with the formation of a noted music institution, Arya Sangeet, one of the citadels of classical music in then East Bengal. The arrival of the music maestro Surendra Lal Das made Arya Sangeet the envy of many in the music world, and the practice of pure form of music, including Tagore's songs, became more popular with Rabindranath's birth anniversary being observed there on a regular basis.

An illustrious son of Chittagong, Mahbubul Alam Chowdhury, who penned the first poem after student demonstrators demanding Bangla to be a state language were gunned down on the streets of Dhaka on 21 February, 1952, wrote in his memoirs "Smriti-r Sandhane" (In Search of Memory) that it was in 1944 that the first ever Rabindra Jayanti (Tagore's birth anniversary celebration) was held in a grand manner in the city of Chittagong. The venue for the two-day celebration was the auditorium of St. Placid's School in Patharghata. The driving forces behind this initiative were Chittagong's District Judge Shaibal Gupta and his wife Ashoka Gupta. Tagore's dance drama "Shyama" was staged on the second day, with Pratima Chowdhury performing in the title role, wrote Mahbubul Alam Chowdhury.

Soon, another music institution was formed in Chittagong when Gangapada Acharya, his brother Sripada Acharya, Shourindra Lal Dasgupta (Chulu Babu) and Chhunil Sen came away from Arya Sangeet. They along with Shib Shankar Mitra established Sangeet Parishad which became another reputed institution imparting the teaching of pure form of music.

Not long thereafter, Nani Mitra and Anil Mitra formed

Prachcho Chanda Geetika, and these three music institutions regularly observed Tagore's birth anniversary.

But Udayan Sangha in Pathergata went a step or two further and observed the day differently. It used to observe the day in two sessions - the morning session being mainly the domain of children, and the evening session for prominent artistes of Chittagong and guest artistes from Dhaka.

Dr Sanjida Khatun, the present head of the pioneering music institution of the country Chhayanaut, clearly remembers the first time she came to Chittagong to participate in a Rabindra Jayanti.

"It was 1957 when my daughter was hardly four months old. We were put up in the house of Mr Sarat Kanungo, a great patron of culture, who used to have a number of Alsatian dogs. I had my daughter in my lap, and just when my turn came, I handed over my daughter to somebody, before going on to the stage".

"Chittagong always had a great tradition and rich cultural heritage; unfortunately I have not been able to learn much about it", lamented Dr Sanjida Khatun.

Apart from Dr Sanjida Khatun, other noted singers, like her sister Fahmida Khatun, Kalim Sharafi, Maleka Azim and Atiqul Islam, used to come to Chittagong to participate in Udayan Sangha's Rabindra Jayanti.

The local artistes who had made their mark in Rabindra Sangeet in the 1950s and 1960s include Bilquis Nasiruddin, Hari Prasanna Pal, Ashok Sen, Rafiqul Islam, Mohammed Nasiruddin, Snehomoy Rakshit, Nirmal Mitra, Shikha Rani Das, Razia Shahid and Chamon Afroz Kamal.

Dr Sen thinks that the cultural arena of Chittagong was enriched and vastly improved in the 1950s and 1960s by the patronage it received from people in the legal profession and also from prominent educationists. As examples, Dr Sen named Advocates Krishna Prasad Nandy and Chitta Ranjan Das, and Professor Jogesh Chandra Shingha, Professor Abul Fazal and Abdus Sobhan Khan Chowdhury, who was the Principal of Government College of Commerce.

"They took the practice and promotion of Tagore culture to a much higher level".

"The people of Chittagong were fortunate to have such stalwarts in their midst who could discuss various aspects of Tagore's thoughts and philosophy so eloquently that the audience would listen to them in pin-drop silence, in sheer amazement", noted Dr Sen.

But the real feather in the cap for Chittagong's tryst with Tagore culture came in 1961, the year of the Nobel laureate's birth centenary, when defying all threats from the then Pakistan government, which described Tagore as an Indian



Abul Fazal



Muhammad Shahidullah

Professor Momtazuddin Ahmed, who at that time was a teacher in Government College of Commerce, Chittagong, said, "A huge pandal was erected in the compound of St. Placid's School, Patharghata, and thousands of people thronged the arena every day for seven days where three dance-dramas and three plays were staged apart from seminars and discussions".

The stage was named after one of Tagore's famous poems "Sonar Tori" and the entrance gate was called "Shyamoli".

Prominent among those who came from Dhaka to participate in the seminars were Dr Mohammad Shahidullah, Professor Ahmed Sharif, Professor Mofazzal Haider Chowdhury and Dr Nilima Ibrahim", remembers Professor Ahmed.

The three top music institutions, Arya Sangeet, Sangeet Parishad and Prachcho Chanda Geetika staged the three dance-dramas Chitragada, Shyama and Tasher Desh respectively.

Udayan Sangha and Shishu Mela jointly produced the inaugural day's play "Rabindranath-er Chelebel" (The Childhood of Tagore), where yours truly enacted the role of Satyaprasad, a nephew of Tagore of the same age. The directorial team consisted of Advocate Chitta Ranjan Das, Sadeque Nabi and Debu Chowdhury, a comedy actor of fame in those days.

Muktodhara Group was entrusted with staging Tagore's play "Mukhtodhara", directed by Dr Kamal A Khan. Professor Momtazuddin Ahmed played the role of Botu, and the wonderful performance of Mrs Moni Imam in the role of Awmbaa Paagli was remembered for a very long time.

The seven-day celebration, the like of which was never before seen in Chittagong, was rounded off with the bard's play "Shesh Rokhkh", which was presented by Jagriti and directed by another noted theatre personality of Chittagong, Mahbub Hasan.

The seminars and discussions held during the 7-day celebration were equally impressive and enlightening.

Professor Jogesh Chandra Shingha dealt with the spiritual thoughts in Tagore's poems. Prof. Shingha said Tagore raised himself above all hard-heartedness and in his poems one could find that he had been inspired as much by the

teachings of the Upanishad as he was by Sufi'ism.

Dr Mohammad Shahidullah, while dwelling on the depth of Tagore's writings, said that the poet's creations had left a great legacy for the future generation. In the opinion of many cultural personalities, this pronouncement gave a clear direction for the cultural movement that was to follow.

Professor Abul Fazal very strongly expressed his feeling that no great poet could just be tagged as 'national poet'. By describing Rabindranath as India's national poet and Iqbal as Pakistan's, Abul Fazal said, one does not make them one iota greater than what they really are; rather it demeans them.

He said that in 'Asrar-e Khuda', which is considered to be the best writing of Iqbal, there is no mention of Pakistan or that state's ideology. Similarly, Tagore in his 'Song Offerings' which fetched him the Nobel prize for literature, does not heap any praise on India.

"The great poets have reached such stature because they have been able to cross the boundaries of country, nation and state", said Abul Fazal.

To those who were opposing the practice of Tagore's music in then East Pakistan, Abul Fazal boldly declared, "Our reverence is not to India's national poet, it is to a great poet of this world, Tagore was one such poet".

In the words of Professor Momtazuddin Ahmed, "The courage and devotion showed by the cultural activists of Chittagong gave an impetus to others in then East Pakistan and similar programmes, albeit on smaller scales, were held in Sylhet, Rajshahi and other places".

Even after the centenary celebrations, the practice and teachings of Tagore's music continued with a new vigour in Chittagong in the various renowned music institutions.

Added to that, "Shishu Mela", a children's group based in Patharghata, used to observe Rabindra Jayanti every year, with only children performing "Pujarini" one year and 'Juta Abishkaar' in another. Shishu Mela was greatly patronised by Advocate Chitta Ranjan Das and his wife Putul Rani Das.

As regards the children's observance of Rabindra Jayanti and his relationship with Chitta Ranjan Das and his sons and daughters, Mahbubul Alam Chowdhury in his memoirs "Smriti-r Sandhane" also wrote, "Shila Momen, Sharmila Bandopadhyay were my daughter Munni's (Safina Ahmed) childhood friends. In the '60s, they used to observe Phela Baishakh, Rabindra Jayanti, Nazrul Jayanti and other cultural events. They used to sing, dance, recite, and play the tabla and other instruments, not taking much help from the elders. At that time, the deputy commissioner of Chittagong was noted poet Abu Zafar Obaidullah Khan and the chairman of Chittagong Development Authority was Khan Shamsur Rahman. They used to come to the rehearsals to encourage the children".

It is therefore quite evident that in Chittagong, in the words of Dr Anupam Sen, "With the patronage and support of the intelligentsia and the united effort of the cultural activists, the practice of Tagore culture was taken to a new height, which also continued after the liberation of Bangladesh".

As Professor Abul Fazal noted, "We have all been enlightened by the rays emanating from Rabi".

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THE BUTTERFLY'S BURDEN

Books: the path to pure pleasure

RUMMANA CHOWDHURY

As I was driving to work on a bright and sunny morning through the streets of downtown Toronto, the roads felt unusually empty, perhaps because it was the long weekend and people had already left for cottages or other out-of-town weekend vacations. As I read the names on the signboards of various downtown restaurants, I thought to myself, if my friend Jolly were here, she might have teased my excessive interest of food, accusing me that my intake of food was at an all-time high because I happened to be fasting for the month of Ramadan. Of course, I would have vehemently protested, insisting that when one has fasted for over 43 years as I have, temptations of food did not enter the mind.

All at once this food place on Spadina Avenue caught my attention, "Fresh and Wild" and below it, a catchphrase, "Life is too short not to eat well." Then the punch line, "Be fresh, be wild." I do not know about others, but to a food lover with some sense of aesthetic beauty, this sign board would be enough to induce one to go in and sample their food. And to the eternal poet and lover, freshness and wildness are a potent combination that could reach and spread its fragrant clouds in multidimensional ways to the primeval caves of physical and spiritual contentment.

A library of countless books flashed in my inward eye. If your mind is fertile enough, you can go wild on a planet where fresh reading material is constantly surrounding you. You could immerse yourself in unimaginable, multifarious ways, entering and absorbing yourself in various new literary worlds, contemplation and contentment.

Happiness, merriment, pleasure, endless joy, whatever you want to call it, this world of black and white letters in any imaginable shape or form can take you to a new world of priceless tales. Be it fact or fiction, short or long, poetry or prose, books can consume your soul from beginning to end, for just about anyone and everyone. In any piece of literature, be it the figment of one's imagination or equations of reality, some readers want surprises, while others cannot stand the suspense and they read the end first. But everyone is a victim to a good plot.

I remember those days at ViquearNisa Noon School when stories and novels would be passed from hand to hand and we could not finish a book fast enough. Barbara Cartland, Harold Robbins, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, The Dana Girls, Nancy Drew mysteries, One-Thousand-And-One-Arabian-Nights, and so many others. The latest books of DoshshuBonhur or DoshshuMohon, purchased by the more affluent students the day it came out in the market, would be read the same day, and then would be passed on to the less affluent but equally keen readers. The value of having money and to be able to spare that excess cash on books seemed like an insurmountable mountain I could only fantasize climbing! Then later in Holy Cross College and Dhaka University, the same cycle of passing on the best seller books continued. PremendraMitra, Shankar, Niharjan Gupta, Achinta Kumar, Rumi, Tolstoy, Plato, Dickens --- anything and everything opened up new worlds for us.

Reading, the very process of it, and its ultimate impact knows no bounds. There's the therapeutic reading that

one does before going to bed to help one unwind before entering the land of dreams. There is braille reading for people who lack sight but still have imagination and vision, there are talking books, tapes and videos for people who are hard of hearing, there are magnified letter books and tablets for people who are visually impaired, and in this modern age, an iPhone or Kindle. There are, as well, people who voluntarily miss out on this reading world and enter the world of movies, cd's, or live theater instead to derive equivalent pleasure.

My daughter Fariah, a second year PhD student, and I, share anything we read with one another. As I was growing up, I remember that my parents always encouraged my siblings and me to read. Everything from hardcover, to paperback, magazines and journals were read many times by the people who occupied or passed through our household. There was always a book or magazine on my reading table when I reached home from school. Either Shakespeare's complete works, Gitanjali, Shanchoyita, Mao Tse-tung, Wordsworth, Gibran - with a bookmark from my father waiting just for me, pointing to a particular passage that I should draw my attention to. Novels by Sharat Chandra, Buddhadev Basu, Bimal Mitra, put there by Ma. I remember her reading, "Begum" every week, a leading lady's magazine at the time, or crying every time she read Ananta Pipasa, a weekly serial. When my daughters were mere babies, I remember turning on the Bengali rhymes tape "TonaTuni" when I put them to sleep in their cribs so that they could appreciate the art of story telling from a young age. Until the time they could read by themselves, I would read from a new book to them every night.

There are many people who read with a distinctive purpose.

And others, who read for pleasure but end up finding a purpose. One day my friend Chapola lent me the book "The Kite Runner" by Khaled Hosseini, and said, "Read it, and immediately you will ask yourself, what can I do for Afghanistan?" This struck a chord in me. Another time, Fariah suggested that I read "A Fine Balance" by Rohinton Mistry. When I had finally finished the marvellous novel, she asked, "Mommy, now what can we do for India?" Emotions are evoked and kindled when you read certain books. As you contemplate the chaotic state of affairs in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Gaza, Sierra Leone, and read about these countries in detail, you feel helpless, inspired, empowered and emotional. So much so that you want to reach out in any way you can.

Then there are those books which teach you to Cross Boundaries, others which teach you to Explore Territory, while still others give you lessons in gliding over Life's Thin Ice safely and cautiously. Books teach you to be cautious investors in life, like people investing in Savings Bonds and G.I.C.s. There are other books from which you learn the lessons of taking higher risks in life. You either hit the jackpot or lose it all. Just like different natured people walking through the different phases of life's eternal mysteries, books teach them the rules of caution and not to take high risks and lose everything the next moment. In other words, books ultimately teach us about life in multifarious, unique ways.

RUMMANA CHOWDHURY WRITES FROM TORONTO, CANADA.



NON-FICTION

Gender in international relations

TAZRAN ALAM

Feminist security studies offer a corrective to the realist assumptions of International Relations (IR). Although many scholars have questioned the effectiveness of including a feminist analysis in IR, this paper aims to illustrate the intrinsic value of feminism and gender in security studies. This paper will use a gendered lens to critique realist assumptions to demonstrate that a feminist approach to IR will provide a more holistic understanding of security. Feminist security studies enhance the security by broadening the scope of IR. First, using a gendered lens provides a tool to deconstruct the epistemological inequalities in the study of International Relations. Secondly, incorporating a feminist approach to IR helps deconstruct the realist assumptions of state as the central actor by including a human security perspective in the study of IR. Lastly, realists are specifically concerned with war and peace and fails to address the security implications during the in between phase. A feminist approach to IR thus provides a more holistic understanding of security in recognizes the in between phase of war and peace to demonstrates the gendered violence which occurs.

Feminist epistemology: standpoint theory

Feminist Epistemology is an epistemology concerned with the ways gender influences concepts of knowledge and its practices of inquiry and justification. The very notion of Feminist Epistemology is for the purpose of providing recognition of the traditional disregard for women's experiences and their contribution to culture and knowledge, and the belief that the unique positions of women in society have inherent value for knowledge contribution.

Scholars such as Abigail Brooks have echoed the voice of other feminist scholars such as Sandra Harding in suggesting the significance of Feminist Standpoint Epistemology in IR to develop itself and bring forth other unrepresented perspectives such as third world, as well as African American feminist perspectives. Brooks, along with Hudson recognize the importance of epistemology. Hudson suggests that IR collapses femininity or masculinity into the term 'human,' which conceals the gendered underpinnings of security practices. The term 'human' is presented as though it were gender-neutral, but in practice, it expresses only masculine ideals. The gender dimension is then overlooked and the analysis provides only a partial understanding of security issues. Feminist Standpoint Epistemology suggests women, combined with their capacity for double consciousness, are granted a kind of 'epistemological privilege' from which new and critical research questions arise (Brooks 2006, 69). Thus incorporating feminist approaches in IR, specifically emphasizing a Feminist standpoint perspective, will arguably develop the study of IR since women's subordinate status in society will provide useful in the broadening of security studies.

State-centric realist assumption

A realist national security enforces conformity to values that are often maledefined. Incorporating a gendered lens in security studies will help overcome the limitations of realism. Realism recognizes the state as central actors in IR, however fails to recognize that individuals require protection from the powers of the state. Hudson recognizes the importance of intersectionality in IR and suggests a critical feminist perspective to overcome the dichotomy between universalism and cultural relativism by connecting individual experiences in a particular location to wider regional and global structures. Since women are seen as a category of identity, security studies needs to integrate gender as a unit of analysis to refrain from creating silences which ultimately reinforce the dominance of masculinist universalisms. In security studies, people should

also be recognized as the object of security since gender-based security threats are often inseparable from other threats.

The state centric perspective is not inclusive since it does not recognize the security threats of women. Contrary to realist assumptions of security, although states are important in security, the individual also faces numerous threats from the state. Human security complements state security by providing a more comprehensive emphasis on the well being of individuals below the state level.

Realist focus on war and peace

The war/peace dichotomy, that is defined in realist assumptions, limits the study of various forms of violence that occur in between periods of conflict. Since women's concerns, as victims of human rights violence, are not integrated to realist concerns on security, which thereby extends the notion that human security is essentially masculine. Realists are only concerned with security threats at the state level, during war and peace.

The realist focus on war and peace neglects to take into account the politics of everyday violence. The narrow focus on war and state-based violence fails to include the everyday violences that exist since the everyday does not fall into the categorical time frames of 'war' nor 'peace'. Thus, the violences inherent to times of peace, against women are overlooked in the study of war.

Material violence is experienced differently depending on where individuals are situated in society. Through material acts of violence, discourses of gender are given physical form. The prisoners in Abu Ghraib were forced to do acts which were intended to humiliate the prisoners and undermine their masculinity and reinforce the power relation which privilege masculinity over femininity. A gendered analysis of violence in between the war/peace dichotomy is relevant because, as suggested by Sjoberg, many scholars have developed statistical evidence that domestic gender equality is an independently significant variable in predicting which states refrain from wars. The study of IR and security thus would benefit from using a gendered lens since the treatment of a state's female population is associated with the probability of a states going to war.

Many feminist scholars have questioned the relevance of incorporating feminism and gender into International Relations. This paper used a gendered lens to critique realist assumptions to demonstrate that a feminist approach to IR will provide a more holistic understanding of security.

Feminist scholarship has attempted to deconstruct the realist assumptions in IR by incorporating a gendered lens in the analysis of security. Although many scholars remain unconvinced that a feminist approach will be beneficial to the study of IR, Feminist scholars continue to demonstrate the various limitations in realist assumptions that can be overcome by incorporating feminist approaches in security studies. Gender as the unit of analysis in security, will promote integration across various levels and dimensions. To avoid recreating andgressing incomplete understandings of security, scholars must recognize the complex and equivocal roles attributed to women and men in security analysis. Including women as a category of identity but not integrating gender as unit of analysis, creates silences in the study of IR and ultimately reinforces the dominance of existing masculinist universalisms. Realism as a dominant intellectual framework for IR, would benefit by broadening the scope and integrating feminist perspectives to further security studies and theoretical progress.

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