

NON-FICTION

When I met Moidul, but knew not

SHAHID ALAM

THE other day I was casually going through a page of a Bengali newspaper when I chanced upon a news item entitled, “Moidul no more” (my translation), accompanied by a colour photograph of a man. I gave a fleeting glance at the picture, and for some reason, instead of skipping the obituary news, I started reading it. And, that kept me going until I reached the end of the news item, and, after having gone through the first two lines, I took a long and close look at the picture. The news began with the disclosure of the identity of one of the group of regular participants at a coffee table mentioned in Manna Dey’s immortal nostalgic ode to *adda*, that distinctive attribute of the generic Bengalis, something that is far better felt and experienced, rather than described. The song, one of my own all-time favourites in any language, is, of course, “Coffee Houser shei addata....”

The first time I looked, really looked, at the picture, I thought the face looked vaguely familiar. Once I had read the real name of the fictional Moidul, I went back to the picture. There was no mistaking the face. It was him! Nur Ahmed! The Moidul in Dey’s Coffee House! The years rolled back in my memory. From 2014 back to...1978. The place: Chittagong. The occasion: the 4th national badminton championships. I had joined as a Lecturer in the Department of Public Administration, Dhaka University, on 1 January 1976. No sooner than I had taken up the position, bigwigs of the university thought me qualified to become a member of the Dhaka University Sports Board and of the Cricket Committee (well, all right, I did participate in some sports while a student of my alma mater, and even won team championships in cricket on multiple occasions). In late 1977, I was informed that I had been made manager of the Dhaka University badminton team to participate in the 4th national championships to be held in January-February of the following year. I chuckled inside. I had never participated in any kind of badminton tournament till then, and had only occasionally played the sport. But I could not refuse the offer, not without disappointing the senior faculty members who were in the Sports Board. Besides, I really looked forward to the novel experience of managing a sports team, especially one that was representing Dhaka University.

We landed in Chittagong, four male and two female players making up our team. The opening ceremony over, I got to meet a number of officials of the organizing committee, Bangladesh badminton federation members, some of the umpires, and officials and players of a few other teams. I met a man who was wearing multiple hats --- that of a federation member (he was its joint secretary), organizing committee member, and an umpire. He was soft spoken, when he spoke at all, and seemed reluctant to say more than a few words at a time. A disconcerting “yes” or “no” to questions that required more than the monosyllable could be off-putting, but I suspected that he was not much of a conversationalist. Not, at least, with those who were new acquaintances or complete strangers.

NOTES

Kolkata Book Fair



SUJAYENDRA DAS

THE Kolkata Book Fair 2014 drew to an end a few days ago. In the fourteen days of the fair, there were around twenty lac visitors to the fair ground. People from different walks of life and of different disciplines all thronged the Milan Mela, the fairground based in the eastern hub of the city, opposite Science city.

About Kolkata Book Fair 2014:

This year’s Kolkata Book Fair was inaugurated on January 28, 2014 by the chief minister of the state, Ms Mamata Banerjee, and opened to the public from January 29, 2014, ending on February 9, 2014. This year there were around 500 stalls set up in different zones of the Milan Mela. The focal theme was on Peru, a prominent Latin American country to talk about. One prominent Nobel Laureate from Latin Literature, Jorge Mario Pedro Vargas Llosa, visited the fair ground. Apart from him, there were also visits by Indian authors and also by writers from neighbouring Bangladesh. Besides the Peru stall, the stalls of the US, British Council and Bangladesh were also present, thus giving immense joy to the vast numbers of book lovers of the city.

Involvement of visitors:

The visitors to the 38th Kolkata Book Fair seemed not to be so motivated about books. But exceptions were definitely there. What was mostly noticeable in this year’s book fair was that a convergence of too many snack vendors badly spoiled the academic atmosphere of the book fair. Most of the visitors were found to have been visiting snack bars apart from book stalls. The apathy towards books depends totally upon familial ambience. It is a pity to note that senior members of families hardly have any urge to motivate the younger members towards developing reading habits. Among the prominent books launched during this year’s fair were *Lowland* by Jhumpa Lahiri, *Sanjib Sera 101* by Sanjib Chatterjee, Sanjib Chatterjee on Swami Vivekananda, Last One Hundred Collected short stories in Bengali, books by Ruskin Bond, and collected works of Jibananda Das by publishers from Dhaka.

The Milan Mela ground, opposite Science City Auditorium, is quite far from the main hubs of the city. Kolkata transport has now become the main bottleneck; hence it is difficult for quite a good number of people of the city as well as its the suburbs and the rural belt to visit the book fair. That is why turnout this year has not been up to expectations. For aged persons there is no proper place to relax. Along with elderly, the avid readers find it difficult to move within the short space available.

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I had a few conversations going with him, but not for any long duration. My principal interest in him was because he was an umpire or line judge. And those officials’ calls, especially those that were palpably wrong, could, and often did, have a decisive impact on the outcome of a match. For my players’ sake, I desperately hoped that he was a fair, and, therefore, good umpire. As it turned out, Nur Ahmed was quite a good umpire/line judge. I do not recall, even after all these years, of him making more than the occasional mistake.

Those days he wore a thinnish moustache above rather full lips. He was shortish, somewhat stocky, and wore a thick head of oily black hair. The photograph in the newspaper showed a man without the moustache, slightly gaunter, with unmistakable signs of aging etched on his face, still with a fair head of hair, but clearly Nur Ahmed as I remembered him. I believe he wrote a badminton-related piece for the souvenir, but I did not go beyond the first few lines. I did not know then, and not until his obituary news revealed it to me, that he was also involved in sports journalism. Neither did I know then that he was both a football and a badminton player who had competed at high levels for a good length of time. Actually, I had forgotten him almost as soon as the championships had ended with a belated prize-giving ceremony several hours after midnight, leaving us only a couple of hours of shuteye before boarding the bus that was to carry us back to Dhaka.

And, thereby hangs a tale that I will not reveal in detail. And I only got to know the better part of it once the tournament progressed. In those days, two clubs, Dhaka Badminton and Metropolitan Badminton, were bitter rivals on the badminton court. As I found out, the rivalry had a real nasty edge to it. Metropolitan was participating in the championship, but Dhaka Badminton stayed away from it. In fact, some of Dhaka Badminton’s premier players, including the top female, were part of the Dhaka University team. But so were a couple of Metropolitans, who would have loved to have represented their club, but had no choice but to come out for Dhaka University, of which they were students. Without going into the murky details, I will just state that, primarily because of that unhealthy rivalry, the prize-giving ceremony was delayed by several hours. In fact, I was caught right in the middle as the rivalry was played out, subtly as well as quite openly, around the Dhaka University team. In the event, Dhaka University’s Rummana Ahmed won the triple crown (incidentally she, and her women’s double partner were my students in the Public Administration department).

As I stated, Nur Ahmed never even for a single moment crossed my mind once the championships had ended. Until a chance reading hove him into my view after his death. But, for me, he will now remain in my mind forever as the real-life image of Manna Dey’s Moidul. The badminton episode will soon recede to distant memory after having made its brief comeback. Funny how “Moidul” followed, within a few months, the singer to the great beyond.

PROF. SHAHID ALAM IS AN ACTOR, CRITIC AND FORMER DIPLOMAT

POETRY

Midnight Aria

ANON N.

Ah, that sudden laughter in quiet night
One eternal moment
On its fringe
Completeness etches a seamless lyric
Of an obscure dream
There we hold each other’s feelings

As I listen, it is not I who invents
The adagio of a sacred verse
Drowning in the sea of your eyes
Boundless as desires

But the triumphant muse
Whose quill dips in your heart
To revel in the sparkle of words
Creating a world of elegant flow
Where we remain captive in the smile
Of an unfinished story

Let me love
The simplicity of that cascading sound!

Twilight Song

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

In twilight’s silences, she waltzes into the room
In tiptoe, almost
Shall we step out, there where the sky zooms past?
And so we hold hands, move out of the brilliance
And into the folds of sensuous grey

You are beautiful, I whisper into her fragrance
As the shades of a dying day play with the salt
And pepper of her hair.
She stares, mischief playing in those monsoon eyes,
And laughs as she places a hennaed foot on the table

Civilisations rush by, footfalls of the long gone are
Heard in the loud silences of lost time. She speaks
Of Anna Akhmatova and Rumi. What if we had never met?
At what crossroads of the past did we not meet?
We raise the questions and don’t ask for answers

Touch me here, she points to the back of her neck.
I do better, letting the lips do what the hands should.
Dusk closes around us, ecstasy sweeps into her closed eyes,
As my explorer lips find an inn in the nape of her neck

On the table, the hennaed foot misses brushing against
The glasses of iced coffee. Beethoven plays in the wind

HERITAGE

Rāmamālā Library Manuscript project --- the need

BENJAMIN FLEMING

THE Rāmamālā Library, located in Comilla and supported by the Mahesh Trust, contains two small rooms of paper and palm-leaf manuscriptsin Sanskrit and Bangla. This extensive collection contains a wealth of written and illustrated materials preserving the cultural heritage and history of Bangladesh. At present, however, the manuscripts are exposed to direct sunlight, insects and rats, and some have been damaged by water from its leaking roof. Many have been wrapped in old newspapers since the 1930s, harmful to them. Even scholars recognizing the importance of the collection do not know what exactly is contained within the thousands of dust-laden manuscripts piled upon the shelves.

With the aim of conserving the library and its manuscripts, a team of Bengali and foreign scholars recently inaugurated the Rāmamālā Library Project. This international project involves scholars from the Bangla Academy, University of Pennsylvania, University of Chicago and University of Toronto. The project is centered, however, in Comilla. It aims to preserve the library itself, working together with the library staff, local officials, students and scholars, as well as with local workforce (carpenters, etc.). We have no intention of removing manuscripts from the library; we have been working, rather, to protect the manuscripts and make improvements to their environment. Our efforts began on January 16, but ten days later we were ordered to stop by the Bangladesh government. We have since met with the Secretary of Culture, Ranjit Kumar Biswas, and he was positive of our efforts, but we still await the government’s official “nod” before work resumes. This article is intended to clarify the project’s objectives as well as give the background about the history and condition of this important collection.

The Rāmamālā Library Project is a small pilot project sponsored by the British Library’s Endangered Archive Programme, with additional support from the University of Pennsylvania’s Department of Religious Studies and the Schoenberg Center for Manuscript Studies. The core team consists of myself, Saymon Zakaria, Thibaut d’Hubert and Ayesha Irani. I am a Visiting Scholar in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, where I serve as cataloguer of Indic manuscripts at the Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts. Saymon Zakaria from the Bangla Academy is a well-known folklorist and writer from Bangladesh. We have begun working together in Comilla and started to arrange repairs, examine and inventory manuscripts. We organized a workshop with Prof. Dulal Bhaumik of Dhaka University, who trained students from Dhaka University and the Rāmamālā hostel to help. Prof. d’Hubert from the University of Chicago and Prof. Irani from the University of Toronto will travel to Bangladesh later this year, if the project is allowed to continue.

Manuscripts in the Rāmamālā Library were collected in the early twentieth century by the founder of the Mahesh Charitable Trust, Maheścandra Bhattācārya, and its founding librarian, Śrī Rāsmohan Cakravartī. Many of the manuscripts were donated by local families who gave up their household libraries on the eve of the British colonial period for the sake of preserving them. The known contents of the library include works of literature, poetics, philosophy, grammar, medicine, astrology and theatre. Despite early efforts by various scholars, the full scope of the collection remains unknown. Our project will fix this. No manuscript will ever leave the library and we will improve their current condition through reinforced shelving, curtains to reduce direct sunlight, and protection from

LITERARY TRADITIONS

English in Malaysia and Singapore

MOHAMMAD A. QUAYUM

IT is possible that some of the writers who were born in the Malayan territory that now constitutes Malaysia chose to stay back in Singapore after the political separation between the two countries, or later moved to Singapore and other countries, because of the stiff policies on language and literature. Would Catherine Lim or Suchen Christine Lim have made Singapore their home if the hierarchic policies and privileging norms in matters of language and literature had not been adopted? I believe there is no clear answer to such a question, although there is room for conjecture that things might have been otherwise if Malaysia had adopted a more inclusive and accommodating spirit in its definition of national literature. I recently took the opportunity of asking both Catherine Lim and Suchen Christine Lim as to why we should not consider them as Malaysian writers in the same way as we continue to view Shirley Lim as a Malaysian writer in spite of her emigration to and subsequent citizenship in the US, or as critics see Bharati Mukherjee as an Indian writer despite her domicile in the US. Suchen Christine Lim responded with considerable ambiguity, suggesting that she belonged to both (Malaysia and Singapore) and was grateful to both, because “one gave [her] life, the other gave [her] an upbringing.” Catherine Lim’s response, however, was a more resounding “no.” I asked her that since she was born and educated in Malaysia and since she wrote about her childhood memories in Malaysia, wouldn’t it be appropriate to consider her a Malaysian writer? Her reply was:

I find it difficult to consider myself a ‘Malaysian writer’ rather than a ‘Singaporean writer,’ simply because I suppose my sense of being a Singaporean is so strong, Singapore being the country I have adopted, grown to love very much and will always be committed to.

One is left to wonder if the status of English and English writing in the country has anything to do with Catherine Lim’s such strong attachments for Singapore and a concomitant apathy towards the country that gave her life and provided shelter and protection for the first twenty eight years.

The rigidity in the language policy and the exclusionary view of national literature has also contributed to the relative lack of dedicated new-generation writers in the language. Earlier I pointed out how the English literary scene in Malaysia is still very much dominated by the first- or second-generation writers, who were born before the inception of Malaysia. This is because those who were born in the emancipated, postcolonial Malaysia were influenced by the Language Act of 1967 in one way or another. As a result, they were either not adequately exposed to the language or they saw the futility of pursuing it as a literary medium. The language enactment, and



water and crumbling ceilings, which have already damaged a number of manuscripts. Even in our first days of work, we succeeded in protecting some of the most endangered materials by removing them from newspaper, disentangling piles, and wrapping manuscripts in cotton. If allowed to continue, we will fully assess their condition and the care needed for their continued survival. The grant from the Endangered Archive Programme supports this assessment and lays the groundwork for future funding. In order to do this we need to create a complete inventory of contents and provide a small sample of digitized manuscripts (about 3% of the collection) to help promote their significance.

Too many archives and libraries have been lost to weather, disasters and the ravages of time. Conservation is critical to prevent further damage. I have recently visited the manuscript section of the Dhaka University Library and seen the positive results of a sustained conservation effort. My hope is that we could one day have a similar set-up at the Rāmamālā Library. Digital preservation is also promising, since it allows for multiple copies to be kept in different places—in a manner more protected from the elements than print or microfilm. Dhaka University Library’s microfilm of part of the Rāmamālā collection, for instance, is unreadable due to deterioration. We will create a small sample of digitized manuscripts from Rāmamālā, and copies would be held by the Mahesh Charitable Trust and other institutions of Bangladesh, as well as by the British Library and the University of Pennsylvania. All images would be placed under a Creative Commons License agreement (similar to Wikipedia images) that gives the Mahesh Charitable Trust full copyright jurisdiction over the images. Other institutions would promote the collection through their own publicly-accessible digital archives. The Creative Commons License agreement also ensures that the Mahesh Charitable Trust and Rāmamālā Library would be credited in every digital manuscript preserved, promoting the Library and the Trust. Digitization will draw international attention to the collection and to the rich cultural and intellectual heritage of Bangladesh.

It is urgent to begin the initial steps to preserve these unique works. We seek only the well-being of the Rāmamālā Library and its manuscripts. We hope that the Government of Bangladesh and Ministry of Culture will see fit to allow us to continue our efforts to help preserve, maintain and promote one of Bangladesh’s premier collections of manuscripts, which lay fast-rotting on the shelves. Many works will be lost entirely within a few years if nothing is done.

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its amendment in 1971 to further bolster the position of Bahasa Malaysia, resulted in minimal support for the teaching of English and to English activities; English literature especially suffered both at the school and tertiary levels. Before the language enactment, English was widely used in schools and offices, but after the enactment, English as a medium of education was slowly phased out from the National schools and Government administration was run absolutely in the Malay language. Although English remained as an academic subject in schools, passing it was not a strict requirement to enter university, and whatever English was taught was also on a functional basis, without any inclusion of literary texts in the curriculum or emphasis on the creative and imaginative potential of the language. Literature was also deemphasised at the university level as most of the English departments specialised in the teaching of language only, with little or no attention to literature and literary texts.

All these factors amounted to an indifferent environment for the emergence of new writers in the language. Absence of literature or literary texts in the school curriculum would have limited the exposure of students to English language writers and the potential to exercise their own creative faculties in the language. In fact, Malaysia still doesn’t have English medium schools where local students could enrol freely without permission from the Ministry of Education, and in spite of some changes in the English curriculum in schools (literature was reintroduced as a component of the English syllabus in 1999), the situation is still not conducive to producing writers in the language in any significant way. The handful of younger generation writers that we see practising the craft developed their love for writing in English either because of the individual family environment they grew up in, in which English was possibly still a favoured language and somehow used for daily interaction and expression, or more probably because they have benefited from the changed policy of sending students to English speaking countries for their higher education during the Mahathir era (1981-2003). This is certainly true for most of the younger or third generation writers of the English language mentioned in this article, such as Karim Raslan, Farish Noor, Dina Zaman, Rani Manicka and Tash Aw (the last two currently residing in the UK).

The language act also had an adverse effect on the English publication industry and it severely restricted the possibility of publishing works in English, especially by new writers. Publication in a money-driven society is invariably linked to readership; fewer readers mean little or no interest from publishers. Publication still remains a major barrier for writers, although the interest in English and English activities has picked up considerably in the last twenty or so years.

(TO BE CONTINUED)