



Ahmad Rafique with fellow Language Movement veterans

A PURIST'S STRUGGLE

A maverick cultural activist and language movement veteran Ahmad Rafique is well known for his brilliant research and literary works. His first book of poetry was Nirbasita Nayak (1966) and prose work Shilpa Sangskriti Jiban (1958). One of his famous research works is Deshbibhag: Fire Dekha. He ran a tri-monthly magazine, Nagarik from 1963 to 1971. On the occasion of his 86th birthday today, Emran Mahfuz of The Daily Star talks to him about his passion for his mother tongue.

The Daily Star: What kind of political ideology drove you to participate in the Language Movement?

AR: My participation in the Language Movement was not an isolated incident. While I was involved in politics, I studied and wrote literature simultaneously. Before partition, I spent about a decade in Narail of Jessore, starting from 1937 till 1947. Later, while studying in the Harganga College of Munshiganj, from 1947 to 1948, I spent most of my time studying Marxist theories and literature. I had been actively involved in progressive left politics since 1949. Naturally, it was inevitable that I would participate in the Language Movement of 1952. I had been involved

involved in student politics.

TDS: What was the context for your first book of poetry *Nirbasita Nayak*?

AR: I spent my childhood in a village. Later, I came to Dhaka. The colours of nature in rural life were imprinted on my mind. And there was a feeling of loneliness. Compared to the environment of the city, the simplicity of rural life seemed more attractive to many of us. Romanticism may also have played a role. In such a context I wrote the poems of *Nirbasita Nayak*. I wrote the poems in the late fifties and early sixties.

TDS: You said in one of your poem, "I came from darkness / Maybe I'll

these events?

AR: I have witnessed more or less three different regimes and known the horrors of communal politics. I have seen conservatism and narrowness of mind. I have seen how religious bigotry dominated logic. Everything that was decent in the human spirit was in decline while violence was on the rise.

I have seen the foreign rulers dividing our land and the transfer of power in August 1947. In my view, it was a tragedy which was evident in the misery of the refugees.

After the partition, there was no sign of good governance in the then East Pakistan. The students and youth of that time protested the mal-governance of the rulers. Our discontent with the government was manifested in the Language Movement of 1952. I realised at that time that the language movement was not only a nationalist movement but also a democratic and secular movement. The nationalist values of that movement gradually spread across the country in the 1960s. The mass uprising of 1969 is a testimony to it.

Then began the War of Liberation. We achieved victory at the expense of millions of lives. But building the country after liberation was not easy. Political division and anarchy did not let us build an inclusive society. We failed to establish good governance. The fruits of liberation remained elusive to the lower section of society. They have not got the taste of independence. We need to fight again in order to build a better society.

TDS: You have discovered a new horizon of Rabindranath Tagore's life and literature. How much do you think you have been able to know him?

AR: I tried to discover new dimensions of Tagore's life as well as determine the relevance of his works in independent Bangladesh. I also tried to solve some of the debates centring this literary giant's life. The diversity and depth of Tagore's life and creation is like that of an ocean. There were signs of self-contradiction in his life. It is hard to understand him looking through only one magnifying glass. How can I claim that I have completely understood such a literary genius in one lifetime?

TDS: To what extent can literature influence people's perception?

AR: I believe that poets and writers have some social obligations. They have an important role to play in building a society based on humanitarian values. Different branches of literature such as poetry, songs, essays, etc., can work as tools in the movements for social change.

TDS: How would you evaluate the role of intellectuals and the political parties of this time?

AR: It is unfortunate that our eminent intellectuals and other professionals are now divided along two political lines. We can understand this division simply by reading newspaper statements and articles.

Naturally, it has become impossible for our intellectuals to reach consensus on any issue. It is not at all acceptable. A divided nation is bound to be a weak nation. Our intellectuals don't have any influence on the general public. What we expect from our intellectuals is that they should play a neutral and creative role for the sake of our national interest; we don't expect them to be sycophants.

The same applies to the political parties. This is not a good sign for the nation.

TDS: Distortion of Bangla language is now prevalent in our society. In this context, what do you think is the future of Bangla language? You have said once that we need another language movement....

AR: Yes, we are observing this in our day-to-day life. Distortion of Bangla language is prevalent on private television channels and radio. Distortion of spelling and pronunciation is pervasive. Attempts to justify the distortion of language in the name of regionalism is also widespread. It is also unacceptable that educated people should talk in a language which is half Bangla and half English. That's why humorists called this type of language 'Banglish.' This trend is disgraceful for the nation, which reflects our sense of low self-esteem and inferiority complex. To prevent this from happening, we need to feel proud of our language and nationality. Apart from that, we need to raise awareness about correct spelling and pronunciation of our language.

Besides, the use of English language is widespread in the higher court and higher educational institutions, whereas it is written specifically in the constitution that "the state language of the republic is Bangla." The Bangla version schools are lagging behind while the English medium schools dominate. In this situation the future of Bangla is very dark. Without a collective movement there is no way to remove such colonial influence.

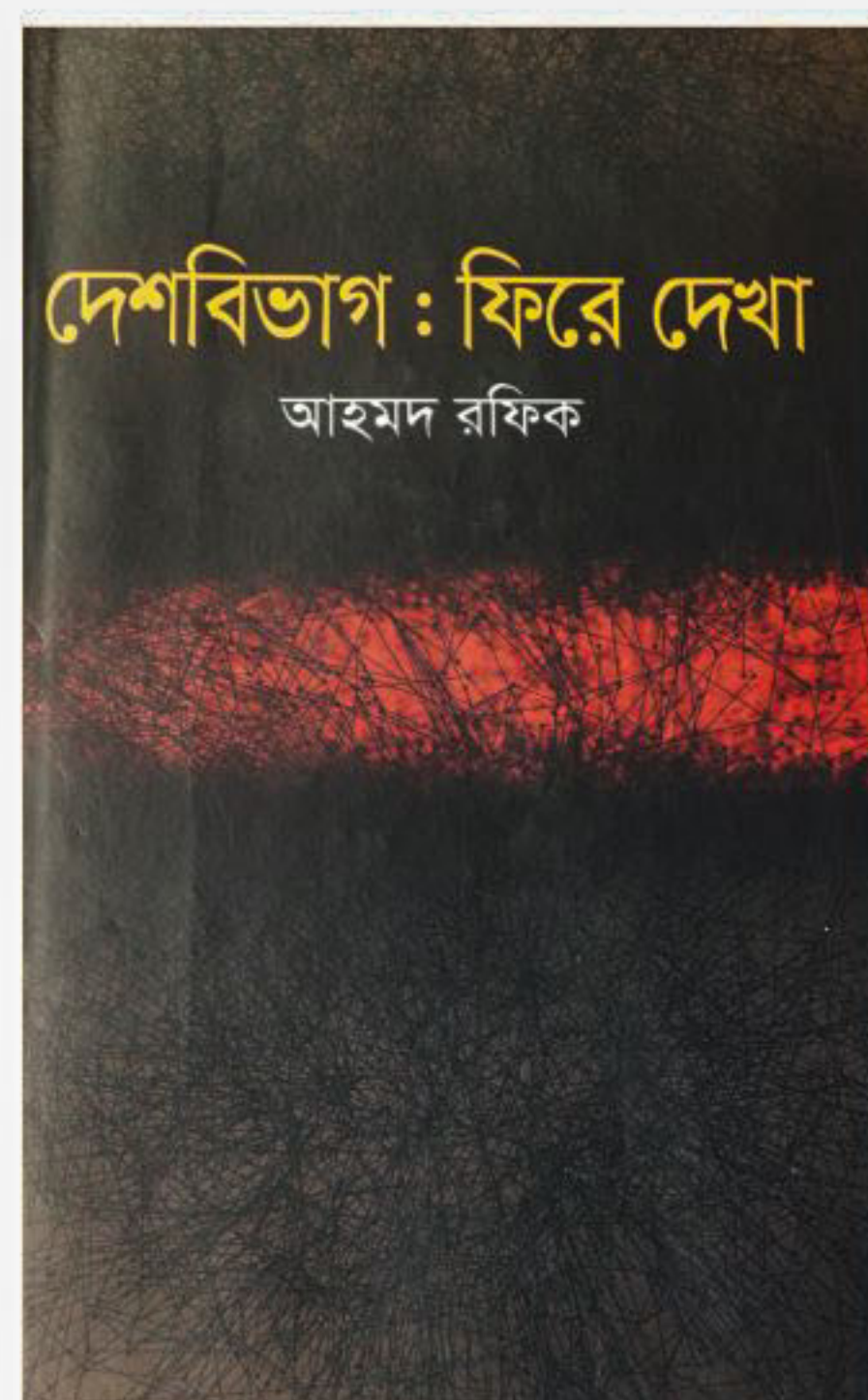
Translated from Bangla by Naznin Tithi of The Daily Star



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

The Rabindra exponent founded Rabindrakendro Trust in 1989 and served as its chairman. He has been involved with various social and cultural organisations. He is a fellow of Bangla Academy and life long member of Asiatic Society of Bangladesh.

This eminent litterateur has been honoured with several prestigious prizes : The Bangla Academy Award (1979), Alakta Sahitya Purushkar (1992), Ekushey Padak (1995), Rabindratattacharya (1997) and Rabindrapadak (2013).



in this movement from the beginning till the end.

TDS: Tell us about the beginnings of your calling as a writer?

AR: Books were my best friends. I was more interested in reading literature than chatting with friends or playing. I mostly liked the writings of Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam. Nazrul's *Agnibeena*, the translation of Omar Khayyam's *Rubaiyat*, Tagore's *Shesher Kabita* were amongst my favourite books. Khayyam had become one of my favourite poets. The basic perception and queries about life, death and creation in *Rubaiyat* were imprinted on my mind forever. I started writing poetry and essay at that time. At the same time, I got

go back to darkness in silence." What did you mean by "darkness" here?

AR: This darkness is not at all similar to the darkness that Jibonananda talked about in his poetry; rather it means the mystery of the origin of life, from where we started our journey as humans. And we will go back to that unknown, mysterious darkness. We could not yet solve the mystery of life and death. In my poetry darkness was used just as a symbol.

TDS: You have witnessed many momentous events including Partition, Language Movement and Liberation War. Would you like to share with us your thoughts about