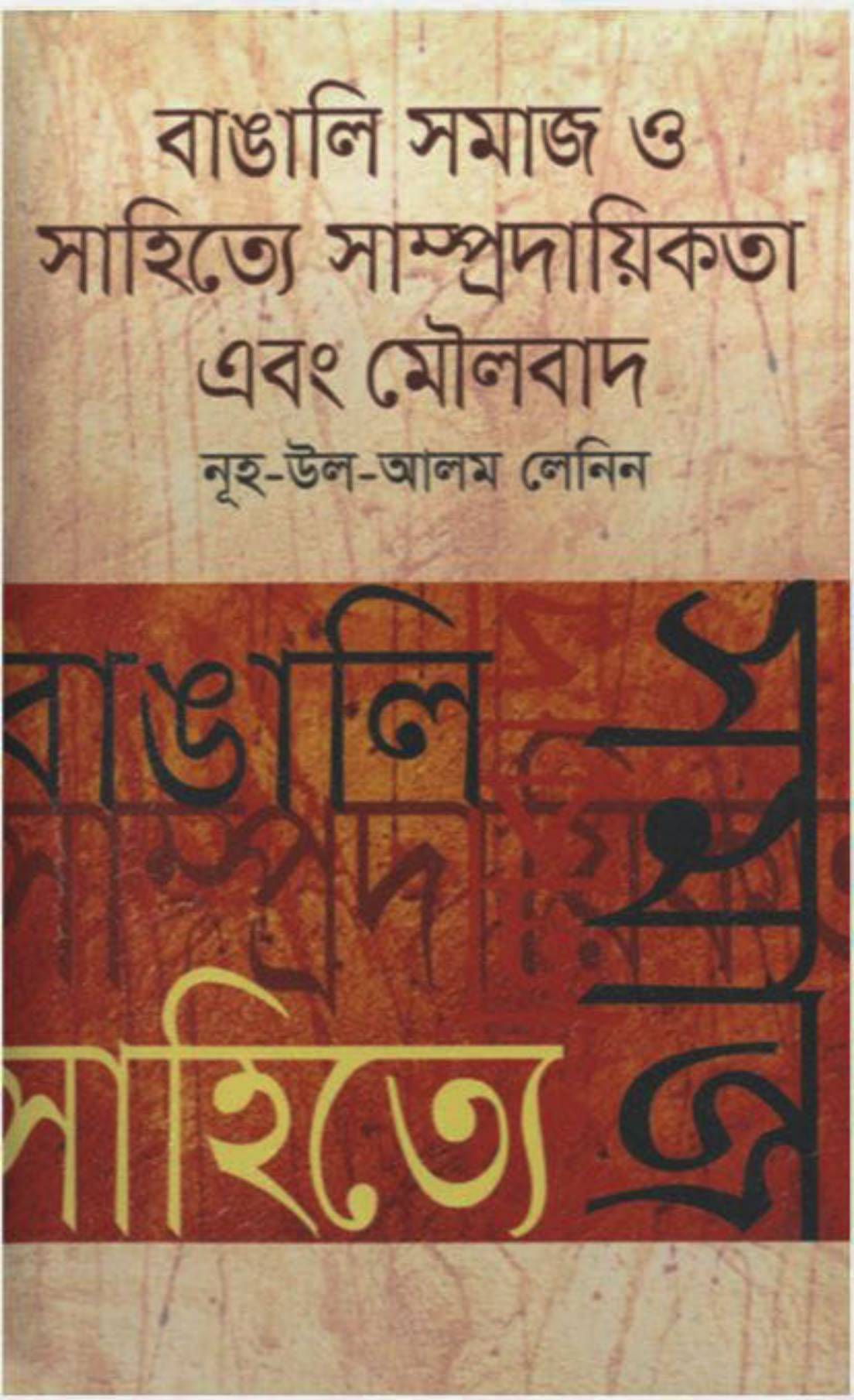


A LOOK AT COMMUNALISM AND FUNDAMENTALISM IN SOCIETY

AUTHOR : DR. NOOH-UL ALAM LENIN

Pages: 368. Published by Bangla Academy, Dhaka, Price: Taka 450/- (now available 2nd print: Taka 300/-)

REVIEWED BY MUHAMMAD ZAMIR



COMMUNALISM and Fundamentalism in Bengali Society and Literature"- (Bangali Somaj O Sahitye Sampradayikota ebong Moulbad)- by Dr. Nooh-ul Alam Lenin, The author, a Member of the Presidium, the Bangladesh Awami League, has been involved with research and publication pertaining to the War of Liberation and the evolution of culture and civilization in deltaic Bengal for some time. He has been involved in this regard in the establishment of the Bikrampur Museum, the Liberation War Museum and the "Gyanpith" Research Center. He was also part of the team that drafted this political party's election manifesto before the elections in 2001, 2008 and 2014.

This book emerged from the original research he had to carry out while completing his Ph.D thesis at the Jahangirnagar University. In his own words, it was done in the 'afternoon' of his life, nearly four decades after having left his regular formal education career. This has made the book that much more special.

He points out quite correctly that communalism and fundamentalism have always been two important facets of social history and have in their own way influenced the evolution of culture and civilization. He also acknowledges that their role, at

different times, have affected the understanding of rituals and also impacted on social dynamics. This in turn has resulted in conflict, disputes and even war when different sides have tried to gain prominence over their rivals in matters of statecraft or governance.

It is against this backdrop that the author has suggested that it is important that we try to identify how communalism and fundamentalism left their mark within the paradigm of historical evolution of literature, culture and metaphysical thought in Bengal.

In this context the author points out the need to efface the twin curses of communalism and fundamentalism from the Bengali ethos. Measures required to efface these evil abominations are particularly required at this point of time-given the unfortunate rise, once again, of sectarianism and the challenges that this is creating for our desired secular way of life.

The book has been divided into six sections and also has a concluding chapter.

The first and the second sections have an analysis of the emergence and the evolution of communalism and fundamentalism within the religious landscape of Bengal. The third section evaluates how the presence of these two elements influenced Bengali literature, literary pursuit in ancient Bengal and also during the medieval period. The fourth

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section reviews the dynamics of communalism and fundamentalism as they impacted on Bengali literature between 1801 and 1947. Within this matrix, he also points out the debatable and contentious role played by the colonial British administration in trying to divide the different sections of the community through their uneven and controversial support for different religious

groups.

The fifth section dispassionately examines the role these two factors played in determining the evolution of thought processes in Bengal between 1947 and 2000. The sixth section reviews the gradual growth of secularism due to the War of Liberation and its role in creating a less communal and fundamentalist society within the Bengali parameter in independent Bangladesh. In the concluding section, the author expresses his hope that a careful and holistic study is required by the readers to understand the significant role that can be played by a secular society in the transformation of Bangladesh and in successfully meeting the needs of its citizens. This would encourage respect for the belief of others and also reduce the possibilities that arise from clash of culture.

This work needs to be read carefully, particularly the areas that detail the influence of communalism on distinguished litterateurs in the Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries in India in general and particularly in Bengal.

If possible, the Bangla Academy should take the step of translating it to English for a wider audience.

The reviewer is former Ambassador, Distinguished Fellow, Bangla Academy, Dhaka.

A Deathless Life: Tagore and the "Daughters of Jorasanko"

AUTHOR: ARUNA CHAKRAVARTI

REVIEWED BY NEEMAN SOBHAN

ARUNA Chakravarti has done it again! After the success of "Jorasanko," her impeccably researched, intimately detailed fictional account of the inner life of the Tagore household in the early years of the Bengal Renaissance (1859-1902), she has just published the even more engrossing sequel, "Daughters of Jorasanko", which takes up the story where it left off, and completes the tale, ending at a vital moment of closure for Tagore lovers.

As we reluctantly come to the end of this second book, it is 1941 and a great poetic spirit leaves both his bodily abode and his home in Kolkata. There can be no spoilers or surprise in this, since we know the date and circumstances of the poet's passing, being well-documented historical facts. But such is the magic of Aruna Chakravarti's writing, transmuting history into throbbing reality, that by the end of this exquisitely imagined historical novel, we are so emotionally entrenched in the life of Tagore and his family that despite our foreknowledge of the outcome of the story, we experience the suspense and finality of the moment, as if we were right there, standing with Nandita, Tagore's grand-daughter, on a rain-washed, moonlit verandah, awaiting confirmation of our intimations of a loved one's transition to the beyond.

The proof of an accomplished writer is that she sends the reader, who is barely finishing the last lines, reeling back to the beginning, wanting to re-read it, reliving the entirety of the whole life, not just of a great man, but a house teeming with characters and events.

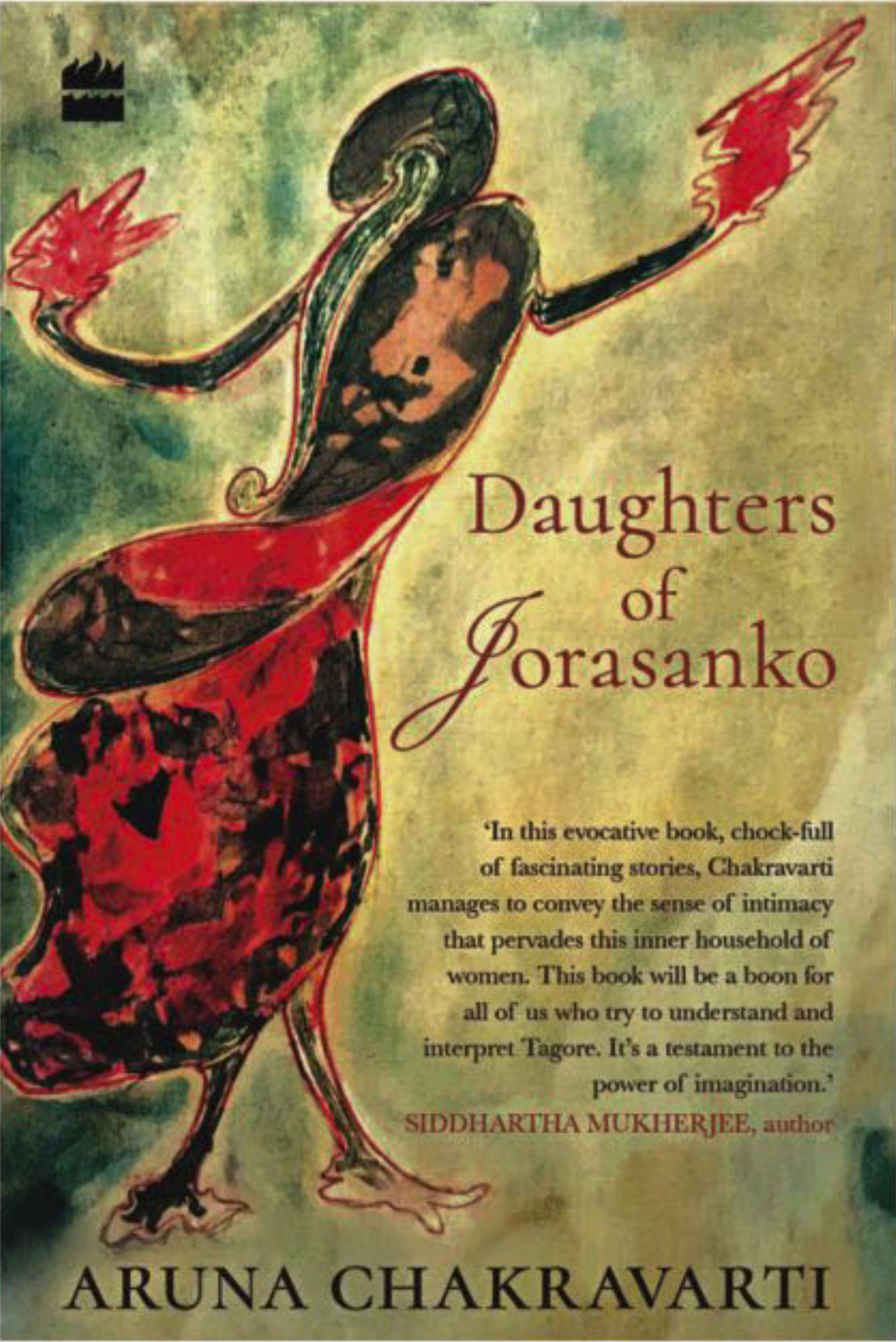
As stated in the beginning, and according to Aruna Chakravarti herself in her Author's note, "Daughters of Jorasanko" is a sequel to her earlier novel. But even though each book can stand on its own, I feel, they are really volumes one and two, of the same story. It's not essential to read them in sequence, but it is, I feel, imperative to read both books to understand more deeply not only a particularly vibrant epoch of Bengal's history, but also of some lesser known facts about Tagore, the man and the poet.

"Jorasanko" had concentrated on the initial years of both the founding of the Tagore family, and Tagore's career, with emphasis on three important women in his life: his two sisters-in-law, the dynamic Jnanadanandini and his muse Kadambari, and his supportive wife Mrinalini. But "Jorasanko" ended abruptly with Mrinalini's death, and the entire story of Tagore's life still remained to be told.

Thus, the "Daughters of Jorasanko" is an essential read, picking up the narrative where a bereaved Tagore is left to bring up his children as a single parent. The stories of the difficult life of his three daughters Beli, Rani and Meera and two sons Sami and Rathi, while dark, ironically throw light on the human side of Tagore, the less than perfect father.

We meet not only many other women of Jorasanko, important in his life and to the establishing of Shantiniketan, like his daughter-in-law, Protima, but also those female characters not connected to Jorasanko but to Tagore, influencing and inspiring the poet, such as the precocious Ranu Adhikari and the Argentinian, Victoria Ocampo

What makes this sequel even more compelling is the fact that now we are witnesses to the most important years of Tagore's literary journey, both in the figurative sense, and as we accompany him on some actual voyages across the ocean. We are with him as he reads the telegram informing him of his being awarded the Nobel, and we live through the aftermath of his negative reaction to the sudden public jubilation. We are in his head and privy to his uneasy thoughts and written communications, when



he is struggling to understand and forgive his daughter Beli's assaulter, or trying to bridge the resultant rift with her.

Chakravarti splices and spices the narrative with excerpts from his private letters, official communications, speeches and poetic compositions, but in such balanced measure and with such a delicate hand that it never obstructs, rather helps the flow of fiction.

It's the same with the use of fragmented and multiple points-of-view: jumping from the perspective of one character in one section, to that of another in the next, does not jar but helps the narrative transit neatly from one historical event to another. Chakravarti deftly uses her female characters as vehicles to explore various periods in Tagore's life, or the political and social history of Bengal. Some of the notable women we encountered previously in "Jorasanko," like Swarnakumari, Tagore's gifted literary sister, or Jnanadanandini, the wife of Tagore's brother (the first Indian to be an officer in the British civil service), who initiated the modernization of Bengali women by her own example, are represented in the present volume by their daughters: Sarla and Bibi, respectively. Through Sarla, we meet Swami Vivekananda at a personal level, along with important figures of the epoch, charged with the spirit of awakening and of Indian independence. Bibi gives us a window into Tagore's involvement in the protest movement against the division of Bengal in 1905, the Rakhi Utsav.

Chakravarti's deployment of language is controlled and consistently graceful, with painterly descriptions of surroundings and seasons. These along with her astute and insightful observations of emotional and psychological complexities, make the story immediate, and add resonance, depth and credibility to characters and events.

Among the many flashes of literary brilliance, two instances glow in my mind. The first is the section about Tagore dealing with the demise of one of his daughters by escaping by train to Shantiniketan, without seeing her lifeless face one last time, leading him that very night to compose the song "Aaj jyotsna raate sobai geche boney" (On this moonlit night all have gone to the woods/in a sweet wind drunk on the

wine of spring./ But I'll not go with them – no, not I/ I'll sit within these walls in my own corner/ a quiet corner of my lonely self.) In this luminous section, Chakravarti's prose makes us quietly witness this poetic transmutation of human grief into sublime poetry.

The other instance is the poignant section right at the end, when Tagore lay dying in one part of the divided Jorasanko, and in the other part his nephew Abanindra is making a farewell round through his recently sold family home, on the eve of giving it up to the new owner. Chakravarti's vision of the pain and beauty of desolation and loss, the wrench of memories and "the sense of a world slipping away" is masterly. The evocation in this last chapter, of the illusory past and of Abanindra trying to recall some verses of his dying uncle's deathless poetry, captures the essence of Jorasanko--the historic house and Chakravarti's two shimmering books.

Abanindranath Tagore is humming his Robi kaka's song: *Dinguli mor shonar khanchai*. At one point he halts, forgetting the next verse:

"What came after that? If he remembered rightly it was a series of questions. The lines came to him as he sang:

Can so much anguish be in vain?/Are they not birds' but shadows?/ Did nothing stream across the sky?/ My rainbow-coloured days?"

At the end of the book, we too, ask ourselves: perhaps, the fleeting physical world exists more truly in imagining, remembering and recreating it?

Chakravarti's vision of the pain and beauty of desolation and loss, the wrench of memories and "the

About the Author:
Aruna Chakravarti is a well-known academic, writer and translator. She was also the principal of Janki Devi Memorial College, University of Delhi, for ten years. The *Inheritors*, her first novel, was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers Prize 2004. She has also translated Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyays Srikanta and Sunil Gangopadhyays *Those Days* and *First Light*. She is the recipient of several prestigious awards, among them the Vaitalik Award, the Sahitya Akademi Award and the Sarat Puraskar.

About the Reviewer:
Neeman Sobhan is an Italy based Bangladeshi writer, poet & columnist. She teaches at the University of Rome, La Sapienza.

Among her published works are: a collection of her columns 'An Abiding City: Ruminations from Rome' (UIPL); an anthology of short stories 'Piazza Bangladesh' (Bengal Publications) and recently, a collection of poems, 'Calligraphy of Wet Leaves' (Bengal Lights).

She is presently working on her first novel, 'The Ninety-nine Names for Being'.

OMNI BOOKS

derelict

BY KAZI FAZLUR REHMAN (AUTHOR)

Derelict is fascinating story of Sudhir Sebastian Rosario, a "native" Christian who was born in the village of Kanakpur, Noakhali but who goes to High School in Pahartali, where his father works for the Bengal Assam Railway. Treated affectionately by his father's scholarly "Anglo-Indian" boss, Mr. Fernandes, he falls in love with his daughter Dora. Set against the backdrop of the crumbling of the British Indian Empire and the upheavals of the Second World War, this is a tragic story of a failed romance. The novel portrays vividly the life of Bengali Catholics in rural Bangladesh, the life of Eurasians in Chittagong, and the emotional devastation faced by these communities in the wake of the partition of India. As Sudir remarks ruefully, "Empire has crumbled and my community has been left behind as flotsam." Derelict forms compelling reading not only as an aborted love story but also because of the glimpses it provides of empire's children.

Old but New: New but Old

BY MAHBUBUR RAHMAN(EDITOR)

BUILDINGS and monuments are the products of accumulated wisdom expressed through the language of space and form. They symbolize a particular civilization, a significant development, or a historic incident, and become significant in our cultural and national life. In addition to architectural, aesthetic, historic, and iconic values, they possess emotional value as the symbol of our cultural identity, and hence form the heritage. Architecture is a vivid expression in material form of a society's social, economic, technological and cultural achievements at any point of time in history and in a particular geographic area. In absence of adequate historical sources and writings, it is a common denominator between generations of people, a major means of communication with the tradition and heritage of a nation. A civilized people or society must know about its origin and roots in the local, regional and in world contexts to be able to understand and appreciate his being and to charter his course into the future.

SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW

RABINDRANATH TAGORE

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