

# KARAGARER ROJNAMCHA: A Jail Diary with a Difference

AHMED AHSANUZZAMAN

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's entire life bears testimony to his lasting love and passion for Bangladesh and Bengalis. His grand metamorphosis from his parents' 'Khoka' to the Father of the Nation is a telling illustration of the kind of man he is, exceptional in the extent of his sacrifice; a truly people's leader; Bangabandhu, the Friend of Bengal!

Mujib's Aushamapta Atmajiboni (Unfinished Memoirs), published in 2012, narrates in a leisurely pace how he became instrumental in Pakistan politics. Reading Karagarer Rojnamcha ("Diary in Jail") published by Bangla Academy this last March alongside Atmajiboni, one recognizes right away that both are works by the same hand. The effortless, conversational pitch of the narrative will attract readers of both works immediately.

Bangabandhu passed almost one-fifth of his life in jail because of autocratic Pakistani rule. His view of jail is that of an insider who knew it as his "home away from home" for years. The dramatic beginning of Rojnamcha immediately sets the tone of the book: life in prison is altogether a different kind of existence from home life: "Those who have not been to the jail, those who have not experienced life in jail, do not know what jail is."

Rojnamcha has three major sections, the first of which provides a comprehensive account of jail customs and conventions. With amazing wit, Mujib offers us the jail shabdakosh (prison dictionary). In jail, prisoners are known by the dophas, the specific jobs, they perform. Hence the writer dophas, the writer department, which accommodates educated convicts, assigned secretarial jobs involving writing letters and keeping accounts. There is also saitaner kal (Satan's mills). In these mills, blankets are made for prisoners. It is called thus because those who work there are so draped in white, soft fibrous substances that they look devilish! The section ends with a fairly long account of one Ludu Mia whose story reveals the extent to which the villainy of society turn an innocent person like him into a criminal.

The second section collects diary entries written between 2 June, 1966, and 22 June 1967. 1966 of course, was a tumultuous year as far as the history of Bangladesh is concerned. Bengalis were agitating then for the 6-point demands announced by Bangabandhu while the provincial governor

Monayem Khan was attempting to foil the movement. The diary entries reveal a tense Bangabandhu immersed in his thoughts about East Bengal and concerned over the wholesale arrests and detention of his compatriots, some of whom were mere boys. He scans the newspapers but is not surprised to find any coverage of the hartal in them. The press published a government note, but it was the same old unbelievable government line about police opening fire to protect them. That the same note mentions ten deaths make Mujib shiver in fear as he reads it because it is easy for him to see that the actual number of deaths would be much higher.

In the diary, Bangabandhu is extremely critical of leaders like Maolana Bhasani, so adept at sudden disappearances because of "political illnesses." Mujib questions Bhasani's integrity since he had kept mum when



government atrocities had reached their peak; then a group of pro-Bhasani "progressive (!)" activists had even given grist to the mill of government propaganda by calling the Awami League movement "secessionist."

Sheikh Mujib also has a go at Bengali opportunists who are ready to sell their country for petty personal gains. He notes: Bangladesh is so fertile that while "golden crops grow here" so do "weeds and parasitical plants." And he is aware of the Bengali trait of parasitism, sheer and unmotivated jealousy. He finds in the unity of the crows he sees in and around the prison a striking contrast to human treachery. He even finds their unity inspirational: "Occasionally the crows will come in hundreds to protest in unison. In my heart I appreciated their united resistance."

The undated pages of Karagarer Rojnamcha, written sometime in 1968, comprise the final section of Rojnamcha. The short editorial note to the section informs readers that Mujib had been arrested at the jail gate in the early hours of 18 January, 1968 on charges of treason framed in connection with his involvement with the so-called Agartala conspiracy, and that he was then confined in the officers' mess in Kurmitola. The narrative in this section is devoid of the humor one finds elsewhere in the book. This was because he had not met his family for months and was being denied access to any reading material or his party mates anymore; earlier, he would even enjoy seeing them pass him by inside prison every now and then. However, in Kurmitola cantonment he was being made to live absolutely alone. He would come out of solitary confinement only in the evening for walks when he would be escorted by two armed soldiers. Bangabandhu curses his fate at this time because he is unable to speak in Bangla, while living in his beloved East Bengal!

Rojnamcha reveals Mujib's simplicity, amiability and hospitality and concern for others. His attire reveals how quintessentially Bengali he is in his dress as well as his personality: he is seen there in his lungi, jama and genji (263). At times Mujib even plays the chef; on one occasion he is seen cooking what he feels is a hotchpotch dish. His fellow prisoners who get to taste it, however, say, "Not bad at all!" We also see him send and receive flowers on Pohela Baishakh. Even in prison, on 17 March, detained party leaders do not waste the opportunity to celebrate his birth anniversary. The city Awami League even sends him a big cake then. His wife and children join him as well and there is quite a party for him—in jail!

Karagarer Rojnamcha shows us Mujib juxtaposing his public self with his private one in prison. Alone inside the cell he thinks about his ailing parents, wife and children. He does not consent to his elder daughter's marriage proposal—"she is studying, let her study, pass the IA and BA. Then we will see to it." He inquires about his children's education and younger daughter as a concerned father would. Prison life is hard for him as we see when he records his encounter with his 3 year old younger son, Russell, who had hardly seen his father, and who

initially in jail visits would want him to accompany them home. Sadly, Mujib writes on his birthday in 1967, "Russell too has begun to realize what is happening; now he does not want to take me home". One also notices the deep love Mujib has for his wife, Begum Fazilatunnesa Mujib. He feels completely indebted to her, for it is she who takes care of the family in his absence; in addition, she gives him the support he needs to stand by his people. Mujib also feels he does not have to worry overmuch about his family because she is keeping their home in order.

In her perceptive and insightful introduction, his eldest child Sheikh Hasina retells the amazing story of the twice-found manuscripts. On both occasions—the first soon after the liberation war and the second on 12 June, 1981, when Bangabandhu's house on Road 32, Dhanmandi in Dhaka was handed over to the survivors of the August 15, 1975 massacre—she went to their house and discovered the manuscripts, which also included the exercise books of Atmajiboni. She informs readers that the title Bangabandhu himself selected for Rojnamcha was Thala Bati Kambal/Jelkhanar Sambal (A plate, a bowl and a piece of blanket/are the only things one gets when in prison). She points out that Karagarer Rojnamcha records the splendid, unselfish sacrifices of the Father of the Nation for which we now have an independent Bangladesh where can live with dignity. She pays rich tributes to her mother, a far-sighted woman who had inspired her husband to write when in prison. She had sent the khatas to jails and made sure that the manuscripts were collected as soon as he walked out of them. One can imagine the tears she holds back as she concludes her Preface "Over and again Ma comes to my mind" (16).

Karagarer Rojnamcha is surely a significant addition to the genre of prison literature as well as the history of Bangladesh. Against the background of his life in prison Bangabandhu has unveiled the emergence of a nation with remarkable ease. It is a sort of an epic of a nation and its hero struggling and facing immense odds to give it birth.

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# Still Young at Heart and Eloquent

BY TS MARIN

At 80, which he reached on May 19, Hasnat Abdul Hye can look back, and certainly feel a sense of pride, accomplishment, and joy for a productive life, where he has not only been a leading bureaucrat of the country, but also a prolific author of distinction.

Abdul Hye was born in 19th May, 1937 in what was then Calcutta. He studied Economics at Dhaka University and the University of Washington and London School of Economics. Later, he studied Development Studies at Cambridge University.

He taught Economics at Dhaka University for a couple of years before joining the Civil Service of Pakistan in 1965. He retired as a full Secretary of the Bangladesh government in 2000.

Of his many achievements, Bangla Academy Award for short stories in 1978, and Ekushey Padak in 1995 for his contribution in Bengali Literature are surely the two major ones.

As a litterateur, Hasnat Abdul Hye has ventured in various genres—novel, short story, travelogue, essays, memoirs, and has received praise for his work in most of these genres. As an author as well as a professional, versatility is a gift that he has been able to make good use of. In the themes, plots, and characters of his novels and short stories, this feature is most noteworthy. From bureaucrats to day laborers to noted intellectuals, he has shown great inventiveness in peopling his fictional universe.

All Those Yesterdays, the second volume of his memoir, gives a very readable account of his encounters and responses to people, places, and events as he went through life. A knack for observation, reflection, erudition and wit and an immense appetite for reading and gaining new experience have made him a distinguished writer of the country.

Some of Hye's notable works include *Shuprobhat*, *Bhalobasha* (Good morning, Love), *Sultan, Yuvraaj* (The Crown Prince), *Shantaru O Jalkanya* (The Swimmer And The Mermaid), *Novera*, *Indur Dour* (Rat Race), *Baishakhe Virginia Woolf* (Virginia Woolf In The Summer), *Xanadu - A Journey*, *Shaah Diner America* (America In Seven Days), *Palli Unnayan* (Rural Development).

Although Hye has not written any biography nor autobiography, biographical elements are quite apparent in many of his works. In *Mahapurush*, the protagonist - Syed Belal is a bureaucrat, just like the author himself. The entire plot of this novel revolves around an honest civil servant and his futile battles against society as well as its pre-existing system/s. On the other hand, Hasnat Abdul Hye himself makes cameo appearances as an author in a few novels e.g. *Elkjon Aaraj Ali* (One Aaraj Ali), *Sultan* (The King), *Novera*.

In short, Hasnat Abdul Hye has had a remarkable career with over 70 published works in both Bengali and English, and a lifetime of memories in the civil service, real life adventures, and stories to narrate. Still young at heart and eloquent with that, his readers and fans will surely hope for many more birthdays to look forward to and books to savor.

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Hasnat Abdul Hye

# Portraits of Bengali Life in a Bygone Era

SHAHID ALAM

Banga Jiboner Khanda Chitra, Mahabub Alam, Kathaprokash

Light, heavy, or both? History offers the reader a choice among all three, or a combination of them. To the aficionado, going through the works of the German classicist and minor politician Christian Matthias Theodor Mommsen (the second winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature; as the discerning will know, historians too have been honoured with this prize), like his monumental *A History of Rome*, might seem like attaining nirvana. Others might find the less ponderous six-volume *The Second World War* by Winston Churchill (another historian Nobel Laureate, and a major political figure in global history) more refreshing. Still others might choose to give those tomes and their ilk a wide berth, and settle for some comparatively lighter perusal of history and its offerings. Mahabub Alam, a Dhaka University History department alum and former career ambassador of Bangladesh, has written just such a book: *Banga Jiboner Khanda Chitra*.

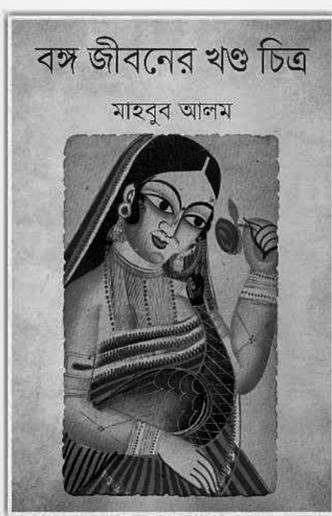
And it is a kind of people's history of Bengal, elucidating the lives of the people of this region of a bygone era. The author declares in the Preface that he has written about the social life of ordinary Bengalis of the vanished era, and has shunned from providing any account of the lives of kings and nobles. Eleven essays make up this slim volume of 120 pages, and they deal with a variety of subjects: mothers-in-law, sweetmeat, pathshala, satire and cartoon, mango, lexicon, Bangla New Year, travel, and fish, predominantly the ilish, almost certainly Alam's ultimate gastronomic delight, considering that he has devoted not one, not two, but three entire essays, wholly or partially, to this particular fish!

So on to the fish stories. The ilish, which the author portrays as having an almost mystical connection to the Bengali palate. Here is a fish that is an ocean-dweller and that swims to sweet water rivers to spawn (much like the salmon). The ilish, or hilsa

in the Anglicized form, seems to have a cousin in the Atlantic Ocean, shad, which tastes distinctly of the sea. If the mango has a mystical, supra-emotional hold on Bengalis (indeed, many in the Indian sub-continent), then fish-and-rice seems to have a functional, existential grip on the people of this region (*macche-bhate* Bangali). Yet, as the author points out, the English consume, on an average per person, 49 pounds of fish a year, the Danes 24 pounds; the Chinese and the Japanese also chow down a hefty amount, but the Bengalis eat just 9 pounds! Still, the fish seems to have an umbilical association with the Bengali. Now, that is a mystical tie!

Alam is mystified at the complete silence, or only a passing reference, to the ilish in the literary output of some of the great Bengali writers: Ishwar Gupta, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Rabindranath Tagore, Jibananda Das, among others. But he is more incensed that the British, who won the Battle of Plassey and who subsequently ruled over the whole of India, could not conquer the ilish. More to the point, they were terrified of its myriad bones, and so stayed away from the devilish ilish, preferring to eat prawns, lobsters, and relatively boneless sea fish. Just imagine the one glowing light in the otherwise dark centuries of colonial rule: the defeat of the mighty English at the hands of the mightier ilish, and yet no appreciation of the fish in the writings of the great literary figures! They too must also have been put off by those hellish ilish bones!

Still on the subject of food, and to the mango. That essay is a veritable homage to that fruit. It is made out to be a repast of the gods, at least to the Bengali palate, as well as to that of many from the sub-continent. Alam gives a painstaking account of the varieties of mango that have flourished in Bengal, many named after the local nobility who patronized them. He finds some truth in the popular lore that the



Nawabs of Bengal ruined themselves by an excessive obsession with everything mango (why, some varieties had to be laid out on the softest of cotton and looked after by a horde of attendants specially recruited for that job!). On another note related to the mango, Alam draws a poignant lesson in Bengal's fortunes: this region lost its independence in the mango grove of Plassey, but a bit over two hundred years later, gained back its independence at Meherpur/Mujibnagar's mango grove of Vaidyanath.

The mother-in-law (of brides) syndrome of yesteryears finds similarities, though on a reduced scale, with that of the Internet Age. Then it was pretty bad for the daughter-in-law --- sometimes very bad. The hostility faced by the new bride from almost the moment she set foot in her husband's premises at the hands of her mother-in-law and sister(s)-in-law was acute. In 1892, a

British Raj court punished a mother-in-law for mistreating her daughter-in-law. That, however, did not stop such routine abuse. The author notes that, like then, the law has not been able to put a halt to daughter-in-law abuse even today. This essay also chronicles the rise of the dowry demand specifically related to Bengali men getting an education in the English curriculum and landing government jobs. This is an instructive piece. The author believes that quarrels over dowry at wedding ceremonies began in that period.

Now, back to food. And the sublime roshogolla. It really has a relatively recent origin as certain religious restrictions in the Hindu religion proscribed certain ways of processing milk. Only when Bengalis were introduced to modern education and gradually moved away from rigid conservatism did the roshogolla make its regal appearance to soothe the Bengali palate. It is a creation during the British Raj, when it also became very popular, though not so much with the British, who had named it "snow-ball." True to a general Bengali penchant for resorting to contention for contention's sake, and throwing unnecessary spanners into works, a number of them disputed, and continues to, that the spongy roshogolla was the brainchild of Nabinchandra Das (the author adorns him with the epithet "Columbus of Roshogolla") of Baghbazaar in 1868. Alam posits this line of thinking. Others have offered other creators, including from other parts of India, and even Portugal. However, cheese by no means is the roshogolla!

The essay on Pathshala is both inspiring and disturbing. While it did not discriminate in terms of colour, religion, or wealth while admitting students, and needs to be applauded even at this distance in time, the bewildering variety of corporeal punishments its teaching faculty meted out to erring students would probably send its perpetrators to the prison for inhumanity.

The list of punishments cited would suit a seasoned practitioner of calisthenics or gymnastics. And one can only conjecture on how many of them suffered long-term or permanent physical damage, not to speak of mental disturbance.

We come to know from one essay that the art of satire and cartoon was learnt in the 1870s by the Bengalis from the famed London periodical *Punch*. The very word "cartoon" was first used in *Punch*. The wit and humour displayed in that periodical were the basis of replication by, first, English expatriates in India, and then by the Indians themselves. The English expatriates first published "Indian Charivari," creating the cartoon "Babu's Progress," which satirized educated Bengalis. Yet, as Alam points out, these Bengalis were the creation of the British Raj. Charivari's motto was a good one: "Less is more." Eventually, the Bengalis themselves took to self-deprecating humour, although, at times, they resorted to vicious mudslinging at each other. On another thoughtful note, Alam comments that several of the anomalies that the Bengali cartoonists had so wittily identified more than a century back continue to plague the society even now.

Bengalis have taken to tourism relatively late, but, irrespective of being Hindu or Muslim, they had gone on religious pilgrimages since olden times. The author closes with a piece on Bengali New Year and the iconic Halkhata. The Halkhata reached the height of its glory during the heydays of the zamindars, and the author believes that it will continue to endure for some time yet in the digital era.

I hope quite a few readers would find it worthwhile to eke out some time and go through *Banga Jiboner Khanda Chitra*. The journey back is quite often entertaining.

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