

## Dhaka Translation Fest Declaration, 2019

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The 2nd Dhaka Translation Fest (DTF) 2019 was held at Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy, Dhaka on Friday 25 October, 2019. The 2-day festival was dedicated to the upcoming birth centenary of the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Renowned historian, scholar, academic and the International Affairs Adviser to the Prime Minister of the Government of Bangladesh, Gowher Rizvi was present at the inauguration ceremony as the chief guest while Bangladeshi writers, poets, translators and critics as in, Syed Manzoorul Islam, Fakrul Alam, Kamal Chowdhury, Gauranga Mohanta, Habibullah Sherjee, Mohammad Samad, Abdullah Al Hasan Chowdhury, Spanish poet Francisco Munoz Soler, Australian historian Andrew Eagle, Indian Sahitya Academy Awardee translators Joya Mitra, writers, academics, Nitai Saha, Debolina Banerjee and many others were present on the occasion. Bangladeshi poet in English and translator Kaiser Haq and Indian translator Shukti Roy were awarded for their outstanding contributions to translation work. It was a privilege for me to say a few words in the inaugural session as DTF adviser. I also had the chance to moderate the first panel discussion titled "Bangabandhu in Translation: Exploring the Grand Narratives of 1971."

The fest was held a few months before the grand celebration of the birth centenary of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, as a part of the "Mujib Year" (2020) envisioned by our honorable Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina. DTF remembered with profound respect the Man behind the Nation and dedicated its threshold for the celebration of the Mujib Year.

The maiden edition of Dhaka Translation Fest held last year (2018) had the motto, "Unite through Translation," and it sought to define a new role of translation as a tool of bringing together human beings by breaking social, political, cultural and linguistic barriers. At the second festival, the Shilpakala Academy premises was buzzing with an impressive line-up of writers, poets, translators, academics, intellectuals, journalists and enthusiasts.



Speakers from home and abroad expressed their opinions about the prospects and problems with translation works. On the whole, the conference gave an intriguing window into the way we can be in touch with a larger literary and cultural community with a shared future in Southeast Asia and beyond. The conference also gave the recipe for the vision of a humanitarian world to live in, which is achievable by, among other things, the unification of cultures and societies through numerous works of translation. And to this end, literatures of the world are in urgent need of robust translation. Eventually, all speakers agreed on the fact that translation can be an ideal vehicle for increasingly crossing national, cultural and linguistic boundaries that can help ease the increasing social unrest, religious intolerance, majority-minority complex and all other ills of the modern world. It was of unanimous opinion that solid efforts should be made to boost social, cultural and literary communications with people across the globe.

There is no denying the fact that language is a complex aspect of our

life and so is translation. Robert Frost was scared of losing the real essence of poetry in translation while Gabriel Garcia Marquez considered the English translation of his novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* better than the original. Translation is an art that has existed since ancient times. But the demands of translation today are different from what they were before. In the early days of translation, people used it mainly for academic purposes. Today, academic translation is just one aspect of translation, and translation for commercial purposes has become very important and translation industry has become a booming industry.

In the new millennium, with the advent of a new era, mankind is on the brink of a new revolution called the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). It has become very high on the global agenda and we must know what it really means and how we should respond to it individually, socially, economically, politically, nationally, regionally and globally. The first Industrial Revolution used steam, the second, electricity to mechanize production and the third used

electronics and information technology to automate the manufacturing processes. Now the fourth one is emerging from the 3rd in the wake of the digital revolution over the last few decades. It could be a fusion of technologies that combines the physical, digital and biological spheres. Compared with the previous ones, the Fourth Industrial Revolution is developing in geometric progression affecting almost every aspect of human life in the society. We have reached such a crossroad that may completely change the way we live, work and connect with each other. The fastest growing connectivity with unprecedented processing power, enormous storage capacity, unlimited access to information and emerging technology breakthroughs in fields of Artificial Intelligence (AI), Robotics, the Internet of Things (IoT), Autonomous Vehicles, 3-D Printing, Nanotechnology, and Quantum Computing are real mind-blowing experiences. We have yet to fully understand how we will deal with such a transformation that humankind never ever experienced before. However, one thing is for sure, the response to the

Fourth Industrial Revolution must be very comprehensive and we need to develop a coordinated approach to it at home and abroad. An effective translation network can play a vital role in this coordination between societies and cultures.

Dhaka Translation Fest 2019 concluded with the declaration that it (DTF) would conduct a campaign for establishing an institute called "International Publication and Translation Institute" (IPTI) with a view to adopting and pursuing a national policy on the translation and publication of our seminal literary works. DTF urges the government to take necessary measures in this regard. However, an attempt has already been made under Bangabandhu's birth centenary celebration implementation framework with the formation of a sub-committee called "International Publication and Translation" which will get all books and speeches by Bangabandhu translated and published internationally. It is a matter of concern that nearly 1500 books have been written and published on Bangabandhu, but we have yet to get a Stanley Wolpert kind of biographer for Bangabandhu and have the biography published by any internationally reputed publisher. Through lack of proper translation and international publication, the academic study of this internationally famous statesman could not have been done as expected. There is a growing realization that world-class writing and translation on Bangabandhu in particular and the millennium-long legacy of Bengali literature and culture in general should be done and internationally published. This cultural consciousness is now at the top of the agenda in this post-colonial age and the establishment of an "International Publication and Translation Institute" may be instrumental in the realization of this consciousness, added Ahsan Iman and Bina Biswas, the festival Directors of Dhaka Translation Fest. DTF therefore, warmly declares for establishing IPTI.

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## REVIEWS

## Recalling Times Past

Curtain Call: English Language Plays in Dhaka 1950-1970, Raza Ali and Niaz Zaman, writers.ink, 2019

REVIEWED BY SHAHID ALAM

Ahh! Yours truly was positively ecstatic as he rapidly flipped through the two hundred-odd pages of *Curtain Call: English Language Plays in Dhaka 1950-1970*, written by the brother-sister duo of Raza Ali and Niaz Zaman. The content and timeframe of the book are easily identified from the title, and I was caught up in the heady nostalgia of a bygone Dhaka that, I dare say, will not return. But, ohh! Yours truly was positively mortified at not finding the names of St. Joseph's High School and the Pleeverites socio-cultural organization that existed during that timeframe and carried out activities similar to the ones covered extensively, and with as much care as circumstances have allowed, in the book. We will briefly return to this issue later on. Now to take stock of the rich fare served up by Ali and Zaman.

"In the early 1950's English plays were staged sporadically in Dhaka, mainly by students of Dhaka University (then spelled Dacca University)," the authors begin. "Among these plays were *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*. At the time, though, few women were willing to act on the stage. However, women who did not wish to perform on stage participated in the radio plays which were regularly broadcast from Radio Pakistan, Dhaka." In the context of the period, particularly the 1950s, these women were intrepid souls, coming from a certain social and educational background, and they were pathfinders for the increasing number of women who followed in their footsteps in both English and Bangla dramas.

The authors introduce us to the success of a popular drama group, "The Drama Circle," which had debuted in 1951-52, and staged Bangla plays, as the symbol that persuaded a noted theater personality of that era, Professor Matin, to form the drama group, the Amateurs, for the purpose of staging English plays. This group was active from 1958 to 1962. The members were relatively small in number because "the genre necessitated proper pronunciation and

elocution." Even after the number of women actors had increased modestly over the years, there were still not enough of them. The major English-language plays required more women performers than were willing to join the Amateurs.

The problem was taken care of by the group inviting expatriate American women (and there were quite a few in Dhaka during the 1950-1970 period) to act in plays that were mostly American. The group's first venture, though, was quintessentially British, William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, no less --- and was directed by Prof. Matin with the assistance of the British Council's Mr. Barnett. And it was staged "in the open air, under a clump of trees alongside the southern wall" of the British Council building. In those days the British Council was in a green setting, something that could only be enjoyed by those who lived in those times, and not in these, with the venerable building now, unfortunately out of necessity, barricaded by an electronic steel fortress. Incidentally, the role of Portia was played by Jahanara Imam, the author of *Ekatarrer Din Guli*, while several of the male cast members ended up as high civil servants.

The Amateurs, among other plays, also staged John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* at the Engineers Institute. Ali and Zaman, after having stated that the play was directed by Mr. Ingram of the USIS (now known as American Cultural Center), later identify Mr. Ivan Hall, Director of the USIS, as the director. Hopefully, someone could correct this discrepancy. In Ali and Zaman's estimation, "Perhaps the most successful play of the Amateurs was *Arsenic and Old Lace*," which was staged at the USIS auditorium on Topkhana Road in 1961. Their last play was probably *The Pleasure of His Company*. By 1962, most of its members had joined the higher Civil Service and gone on training or been posted outside Dhaka, while the parents of other members stopped their sons

from acting on grounds of rehearsals taking up an inordinate amount of their time. This should provide a good picture of the society from which the English theater activists of those days came from. They almost invariably came from at least comfortable middle and upper middle class backgrounds, had an English medium schooling base and were generally good enough students to get into the elite profession of those days: the higher civil service. Others went abroad for higher education or ended up in other respectable professions.

The end of the Amateurs did not signal the end of the

latter, who could have had an acting career in the US had she not opted for the habit, imparting the nuances of acting, especially the conventions of Elizabethan and Greek dramas. Zaman narrates a light-hearted moment while acting the title role of *King Lear*, essentially highlighting the stark severity of stage acting, where there is no place to hide from gaffes committed or imposed upon. The authors believe that the Thespians' production of *Electra* was one of the "most resounding successes in the late sixties," in which their younger sister Ghazala Ali played the title role, while another sister, Durdana Ali, was part of the Chorus. Regarding the later story of the flourishing English plays by Holy Cross, the authors inform: "After 1972, with the college switching to Bangla medium, English theatricals at Holy Cross College came to an end."

With the Amateurs fading away, a short-lived organization named Students Drama Society came into being in 1961. It managed to stage *A Memory of Two Mondays* at the USIS auditorium, and, then, apparently because of some internal problems and external imperatives, died within a year of its emergence. Significantly, most of its actors left to join the newly-formed group called the Prometheans. And, as notably, "At that time, the USIS actively supported theatrical efforts in English in Dhaka." As already narrated, many of the actors in *A Memory of Two Mondays* decided to set up the new group. The name was suggested by Raza Ali. Its first venture was the American play, *The Rainmaker*.

The productions of the Prometheans might be called the high noon of English-language Theater in Dhaka. *The Rainmaker* included Raza, Niaz, Durdana and Ghazala's brother Asghar. The group's productions comprised, among others, as part of Shakespeare's quarter centenary celebration in 1964, the Bard's *The Winter's Tale*, Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*, *She Stoops to Conquer* (Raza Ali's last performance as a Promethean),

*Come on Jeeves*, and *The Misanthrope*.

The group was ready to stage *Twelfth Night*, but the launching of operation Searchlight by the Pakistan army on the night of 25 March 1971 nullified that venture for good. And, then, with the emergence of Bangladesh as a sovereign, independent country, and the profusion of Bangla plays on offer, the heydays of the English-language theater in Dhaka were numbered.

One of the pleasing aspects of *Curtain Call* is the number of essays related to the theater, its ambience, the performers, directors, the British Council, the help of the expatriate community in Dhaka, Alauddin Zahir Chinku, a gifted actor who sadly was killed in 1971, and Shakespeare in schools. There are gaps in information in some of them, but they are a valuable addition to the knowledge of a vibrant past in theater activity in Dhaka. However, there are omissions. St. Joseph's High School staged American and English plays at the Engineers Institute, its batch of 1967 formed the socio-cultural organization called the Pleeverites, with female graduates from Holy Cross and Viharunnessa High Schools making up the group. Among other activities, it staged English-language plays at The British Council auditorium in the late 1960s, until 1971 brought about its dissolution. Yours truly acted in several of the St. Joseph's and Pleeverites productions, with Brother William Sheehan (my mentor, and one who, incidentally, later left the priesthood to get married) directing the school plays with much skill and sensitivity. *Curtain Call: English Language Plays in Dhaka 1950-1970* is an engrossing book, a wealth of information for those who were born after 1970, and a refreshing nostalgia for those who lived those days and were fortunate to watch at least some of the performances.

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staging of English-language plays in Dhaka. Holy Cross College had its drama group, The Thespians, and they staged English-language plays fairly regularly, with its students playing both the male and female roles. Niaz Zaman was one of the frontline performers in some of them. Sophocles' *Antigone*, and Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, *King Lear*, and *The Taming of the Shrew* were some of its notable productions. Significantly, senior faculty Sister Francelia and Sister Joseph Mary directed many of the plays, with the