

POETRY

In My Mother's Village, I Pluck a Mango

TAPTI SEN

From the tree I've climbed only once
Years ago, at the height of childhood
innocence
I scraped and bruised my way to the top
Monsoon soaking my skin
To survey this timeworn town
Of rusty tin huts and clay
I listened to the storm-created symphony
on the roof
Nature's old-fashioned xylophone
And as the storm grew heavy,
The roof began to dent—
I wondered if it would live to see winter.

Now, standing under the tree,
I clasp the mango like a prayer
Feeling its weight in my palm
A wait of 20,000 years
I think of the marigolds
My cousin would plait in my hair
As my mother served khichuri on
Freshly plucked banana leaves
We weren't allowed to touch until
everyone sat down.
The mango is yellow,
bordering on brown
It's warm in my hands and if I

Hold it to my ears I can almost
Hear a heartbeat that sounds like
The pounding of brick and clay I hear in
the
Distance as tin is torn down, demolition
replacing the homes that existed here
Long before Bangladesh did.
My sandals scuff on a pile of
Night-blooming jasmine blown away
From the tree next to the lake where
I once caught a fish: it caressed my legs
while showering and I leaned down to
grab hold
thinking it was entangled seaweed
Now I kneel to grab a handful of flowers
That overflow from my hands except for
one.
My mother gently strokes the walls of
the worn-down temple where once, we
worshipped
And celebrated and sang but now cobwebs
Weave through the doorway and
when she turns to ask if I'm ready to go
I want to tell her, no, 10 minutes isn't
enough to
Take in the 20,000 years my ancestors have
Lived here and learn to shoulder that
burden
In a foreign land but I say yes.
As we drive by paddy fields and fallen trees
I carefully peel the skin and bite into the
mango
And feel the nectar, sweet on my tongue.

Born and raised in Dhaka, Tapti is currently a senior at Milton Academy in Massachusetts, USA. She has been writing poetry for 10 years and has had her work recognized by the American Scholastic Art and Writing Awards.



Mother's Sari

DILRUBA Z. ARA

A backstreet, wet at nightfall — a silk sari unfurled.
Iridescent black. Autumn leaves —
Splashes of gold under streetlights. Rain in Lund
Is the same as in a Dhaka backstreet.
But the street is different, empty, and enchanting.
It recites gentle poetry of a mother's sari, of dazzling parties.
Patterns. Thread, needles, sequins — a girl's head
Bent over an embroidery frame.
The street, under my heavy shoes.
Rain spurs down — muddles glitters, the feel of silk.
Memories gather, cold, hard as tarmac.

The sari holds promises only for male offspring.
Waterworks and rain on my face, poetry made prose.
There is a tunnel at a stone's throw, past the sari's loose end.
Dark and hollow. In my ears — *The Isle of the Dead*.
A young soul whistles past. Quick as an arrow.

Dilruba Z. Ara is an internationally acclaimed Swedish-Bangladeshi writer, novelist, translator, artist and educator. She lives and works in Lund, Sweden, and writes from there. To know more about her, visit www.dilrubazara.com

A. K. Fazlul Huq's English Prose

FAKRUL ALAM

In "Gandhi and Nehru: The Uses of English," an essay written by Sunil Khilnani from the 2010 collection of essays edited by Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, *A Concise History of Indian Literature in English*, we are told about how the two leading figures of Indian independence not only used the English language to write back against empire, but played important roles in "the long, uneasy and interminable task of making English an Indian language." Khilnani notes that though the duo were not "professional writers," they had found "ways" to make an "alien language of rule... intimate, fluent and cantankerous."

know him as Abul Kashem Fazlul Huq.

Bengal Today consists of four pieces: "Why I Resigned," a 47 page work identified in the book as "a statement" delivered "before the Bengal Legislative Assembly on July 5, 1943"; "Bengal Today" another 14 page "statement," also presented "before the February Legislative Assembly," on February 27, 1944; "Efficiency," offered in the same premise but undated in the book and is 10 pages long; and "Abolition of Permanent Settlement," a six page extract from what must have been another speech delivered in the same place offering "two alternative schemes regarding the question of the abolition of permanent settlement." It too is undated. I should point out that *Bengal Today* was printed from Barisal in 1977; the "Initiative" to do so was apparently taken by Mr. Enayet Karim, then Principal of Fazlul Huq College, an institution set up by the great man himself for his district in 1940.

Mr. Karim chooses to call the collection in his note prefacing the book as a "series of spirited letters" and a reprint of Fazlul Haq's "famous book, *Bengal Today*." I am sure he is right in describing the book thus, although after discussing the background and content of the work in brief, I would like to concentrate additionally on its literary merits. Indeed, I would like to present to contemporary Bangladeshi readers a Bangladeshi orator and statesman who was a very skilled writer of English prose. Huq wields the language for speech-making and letter writing in the manner of distinguished English parliamentarians such as Edmund Burke.

But first some contextualizing. As readers can find out in abundant detail online in the informative as well as analytical doctoral dissertation, "A. K. Fazlul Huq and Bengal Politics Between the Two Partitions (1905-1947)," by Dhananjay Bhattacharjee, originally submitted to the University of North Bengal in 2017, Fazlul Huq was a dominant and hugely popular though at times controversial figure in Bengal politics. He had the distinction of being chosen the first Chief Minister and Leader of the Bengal Legislative Council from 1937 to 1943. Indeed, he had been first elected to it in 1913 and continued for twenty-one years. Finally, he left it to become a member of the Central Legislative Assembly for two years. Many of us will be able to recall that he had moved the Lahore Resolution in 1940 but was expelled

from the Muslim League afterwards. Earlier, he had worked for the partition of Bengal but was then closely involved with the Muslim League for a while. But when the Prime Minister of Bengal, he was the leader of the Krishak Praja Party, which championed the cause of the peasants and tenants of the region. Nevertheless, he would be made to resign by the then British Governor of Bengal, Sir John Arthur Herbert. One further contextualizing detail: Huq's dismissal came as the Bengal famine was devastating the countryside and claiming the lives of countless people in the province.

"Why I Resigned" is a dignified, eloquent and reasoned explanation of the circumstances that compelled Fazlul Huq to leave office; it is also tonally indignant and bitter. What he intends to do in this long "statement," he says at the outset, is to make clear to the members of the Assembly and no doubt his constituency at large, the "circumstances" that made him sign a "previously drafted and typed document," meant to be his "letter of resignation as Chief Minister." Huq clearly felt that he had to give "the public a fairly accurate idea of the manner" in which he had been forced out. With irony and sarcasm, but with abundant detail and passion, Huq then patiently builds up his case against the colonial despot Herbert had turned out to be.

How was Huq forced to resign? In the rhetorically intense and long third paragraph of the piece he uses anaphora—the repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of successive clauses that is a staple of oratory—skillfully. The phrase "It is the policy" starts five of the eight sentences of this paragraph to emphasize that Sir Herbert had been cruel, tyrannical and quite devious in using high-ranking bureaucrats who were supposed to be under the jurisdiction of the Chief Minister against him. Herbert apparently also brought false charges against Huq. Moreover, he adopted heartless policies that would not only hound Huq out of office but also trigger a chain of disasters that led to a famine. Huq points out that Herbert had prioritized the British war effort, scanting the misery of the people of Bengal. With biting irony, he makes Herbert and "his fellow actors" guilty of staging "a Constitutional Drama" that should have led their overseers in London have the Governor "long ago recalled to milder climes, to spend his talents on less pretentious avocations

than the Governorship of the Premier Province of India."

Paragraph by paragraph, Huq builds up his case against the perfidious Herbert. Huq points out how Herbert exploited his differences with the Muslim League and with Jinnah, despite the support he enjoyed of "no less than 137 members of the Legislative Assembly," taking advantage too of his supporter Sarat Chandra Bose's imprisonment and the backing of Huq's archrival Khawza Nazimuddin. These were to him all manifestations of the "divide and rule" formula the British used repeatedly to rule India. Huq describes bitterly how "the steel frame of the Imperial service...made a mockery of the authority" of leaders who exercised "autonomy" on behalf of their province. He details the devious tactics used by the British to divert rice away from Bengalis for the imperial army's war effort, even at the cost of initiating a famine that was wreaking havoc in Bengal.

Halfway through his statement, Huq quotes from letters he wrote as the Chief Minister protesting the British ruler's actions and attempts to malign him as someone who had been a truant in office. It is thus that he declares with scathing irony: "After all even busy Governors absent themselves from town on private business." As he phrases it with a rhetorical question as he climaxes his argument, what option did he have except resigning in the face of the continuous machinations of the British governor? After all, "Who can deny that the conclusion is irresistible that there was design and conspiracy of a sordid character" all through?

Huq indicts the Governor for committing "an outrage on the Constitution" and ends prophetically with an adage attributed to, among others, Plutarch: "The mills of God grind slowly but they grind exceeding small; and sooner perhaps than Sir John Herbert or the supporters of the Ministers may think, Nemesis will overtake those who [like Nazimuddin] had rushed to office not to serve the people but to enjoy the sweets of power emoluments" (46). A final forewarning concludes his statement: "Someday sooner or later, they will be humbled to dust even as tyrants and oppressors of humanity have met their doom in the chequered history of mankind"! Clearly, Huq is not merely attuned to the classical tradition of oratory and rhetoric, but also capable of phrasing prophetic-seeming pronouncements because of his

mastery of the English language and a whole rhetorical tradition.

The second "statement" reproduced is the one that lends this collection of four presentations in the Bengal legislature its title. *Bengal Today* arraigns the government that replaced Huq's one after his forced resignation. In it, Huq attacks Khawza Nazimuddin and his Muslim League cabinet members in addition to their British overseers; evidently, things had gone from bad to worse with them at the helms. As Huq encapsulates the situation, "the more we contemplate it, the more we are driven to the darkness of blank despair." Sarcasically, he insists on listings the two "achievements" of the Muslim League ministry and its backers: the famine and "the halter of half a dozen unforeseen taxes round the hapless people of Bengal." Huq certainly has the language to sensationalize the situation created by "a Budget, whose figures in cold print, creep through the marrow of our bones till we stand aghast at the national calamity with which we are faced." He laces his presentation with abundant imagery; for example, by emphasizing the "pruning knife" of censorship with which any protests against the government are "mysteriously muzzled." Huq perhaps is alluding to the appellation given to him by his people in mocking the prowess of the present Bengal government thus: "The roar of the lions used to make thrones tremble, but most of the present lions only know how to crouch beneath the throne and wag their tails in approbation of government policy."

I will skip the last two pieces of *Bengal Today*, but I hope I have said enough to present before readers our Sher-e-Bangla as a master of oratory and English prose. He is in this like Gandhi and Nehru, two leaders of the Indian subcontinent who had wielded the English language skillfully to write back against the British empire as anti-imperial campaigns in undivided India gathered momentum. Certainly, those of us teaching the English language and English literature should make use of Fazlul Huq's works to show how a Bangladeshi had, to quote Sunil Khilnani on Gandhi and Nehru's prose again, made an "alien language of rule... intimate, fluent and cantankerous." Huq certainly deserves a distinctive place in the history of Bangladeshi writing in English.

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But Gandhi and Nehru were not the only major political figures of subcontinental politics to have utilized the English language for writing, oratory and political discourse in ways that make them exceptional and highly competent users of the English language as well as men who wielded it persuasively for anti-colonial politics and polemics. A surprise rediscovery for me in this pandemic month was the photocopied volume, *Bengal Today*, gifted to me by Professor Sharifuddin Ahmed in June 2005. It is a volume I had (unpardonably) allowed to gather dust all these years. It consists of three pieces authored by the man widely known as "Sher-e-Bangla" for his aggressive championing of Bengali causes during British colonial rule in the first half of the twentieth century. He is identified in the recall and credit pages of the book as "A. K. Fazlul Huq"; most of us of course