

Bangabandhu and Bangladesh’s Landscapes

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Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was rooted in the land and loved Bangladesh’s natural features. He wanted them to be as they were—green, open spaces full of water bodies and flora and fauna. That was one of the reasons why he would speak up for its people and demand that they could breathe amidst the beauty and bountiful of its landscapes freely. That is why too why while honoring him, we can also try to learn from his writings and do what we can—each and every one of us—to preserve the beauty of our country, and mend it where it has been marred, attempting to do our best to restore it to the way it was when he wrote about it whenever he put his thoughts to paper—even his prison notebooks.

Consider as a beginning instance of his love of Bangladesh’s landscapes the young Mujib’s trip to Ajmer after he had gone to Delhi to attend a convention of the all-Indian Muslim League in 1946. In this quite desert-like landscape, one of the highlights of his Ajmer trip is a visit to Anar Sagar. He had been to the neighboring Targarh mountains previously but has not anything much to say about it. Why then is he attracted to the lake, spending an entire paragraph describing an “entire evening” he spent there, along with his other companions? Isn’t there a lesson in this for us to keep our environment as beautiful as they were and as he found them to be? To quote the relevant passage of *The Unfinished Memoirs* (2012), “We are people from a riverine place and love our waterbodies. How can I explain how difficult it was for us to leave this lake in a land otherwise a desert?” (UM, 60).

After partition, Bangabandhu, disillusioned in no time like other most other Bangalees who had opted for the division of India under the banner of the Muslim League, became actively involved in claiming political autonomy for Bangladeshis and their freedom from the clutches of feudal-minded, domineering Muslim League politicians. While campaigning with others to raise Bangladeshi consciousness against them, we find Bangabandhu on a boat with his companions, probably on the Meghna, listening to songs by some prominent singers accompanying them such as Abbasuddin Ahmed. Bangabandhu is simply enthralled by his singing in that riverscape. As Bangabandhu records his reaction to the scene created by the great singer’s rendering of *bhatiali* songs then: “... it seemed to me that the gently lapping waves were entranced by his singing” (119). Clearly, the songs sung in such a setting had created a corresponding breeze in Bangabandhu’s consciousness. Had he been listening to Abbasuddin sing, “O Dheu Kele re” (The waves keep playing) or “Padmar Dehu Re” (The waves of the Padma)?

Bangabandhu loved Bangladesh’s water bodies and the breeze that drifted across them. Confined in prison on and

off but at times seemingly endlessly hours and days in the next few years, they were among the things he yearned for in confinement. Then, too, he would “peep” out of his cell window “to catch a glimpse of a moonlit night or the stars in the sky” (175).

Out of prison, Bangabandhu plunged into organizational work for the East Pakistan Awami League. In doing so, he had to go to Karachi to meet Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy. Looking at the desert environs of what was then Pakistan’s capital city, Bangabandhu reads his feeling of alienation by that time from the country he had once striven for. Spontaneously, the man who is the chief architect of our independence, and who was ready to sacrifice everything for this cause in his lifetime, reflects on the scene before him thus: “We were born in a country that was green everywhere; wherever one looked in Bengal one saw a sea of green. How could we ever get to like the pitiless sandscape? ... We were born into a world that abounded in beauty; we loved whatever was beautiful” (214).

In *The Unfinished Memoirs*, Bangabandhu mentions that in the extended period of detention he had spent in Dhaka Central Jail between 1949 and 1952 he had taken advantage of the time he was given to go outside his cell during the day to cultivate the garden he had created there. But it is in his notebooks of the period he spent in jail in the 1950s and the 1960s, now preserved in print as *Prison Diaries*, we find extended accounts of his gardening in the days spent in confinement. By reading them we get to see Bangabandhu not only feeling rooted in Bangladesh’s landscapes and inspired by them, but also as someone who felt like nurturing them to make them even more beautiful.

In the second note book collected in *Prison Diaries* (2018), for example, we find him surrounded in his tiny cell by 93 other cells. Undaunted, he decides to make good use of the one advantage it had over the others—“some open space in front of it.” Seeing some plants and trees flourishing in that space, he concludes that he can do his bit to improve the prison landscape even more by planting “flowers and fruit-bearing trees” in it



(PD, 90). And we see him do just that in a few subsequent entries. But he is also sensitive to the fauna as well as the flora in this little bit of Bangladesh that he feels is open to him and can inspire him even amidst the walls of the prison. He thus yearns to glimpse once again the “two yellow birds” he would feel stirred by day after day when in 1958-59 he had spent 16 months continuously in prison (95). He thinks now that they were not there “because they had become upset at me for not being there then” (ibid)!



In the last of Bangabandhu’s books published based on his prison experiences and the note books he kept during confinement in the eleven years or so he was in prison, New China (2021), we find too Bangabandhu’s love of nature, as when he goes to Sun Yat-Sen’s tomb, or when he is able to sail in a boat in a lake in the resort town of Hangzhou.

Bangabandhu’s moment of joy in a place where he is either forced to stay in solitary confinement inside his cell, or walk outside in the open but guarded spaces for some time of the day, comes when he is gardening. As he says in his 23 June, 1966 entry, he loves then the sight of “green grass...swaying to the rhythm of the wind. It looks so lovely” (113)! But of course, there are weeds he has to pull out, “just like our country where we have parasites bent on destroying real patriots and striving to do so” (ibid). In other words, care must be taken to allow nature to bloom but also protect it from harm. Though there are crows attacking the little birds, there is a rooster around



to protect them; nature, after all, is essentially benign though it may have its share of weeds and cantankerous crows. Rough “human beings often betray their friends” but “animals are never unfaithful” (ibid).

In his next entry of 24 June, 1966 Bangabandhu reveals his delight in the beauty of the prison open spaces after the monsoonal rains surely because they remind him of how his land is always revived by changes in the weather. He records the fragrance of the Kamini flowers that he smells in these prison days, prison trees that had become even greener after the showers, and the prison field that has become so “full of green grass”. He sees them all and writes in his prison notebook delightedly afterwards: “I saw them to my heart’s fill. They seemed to have taken on a new and even more beautiful look” (115).

What must be done, he implies in an entry in notebook three, is strive for freedom and ensure it for all inhabitants of the animal kingdom as much as possible. In Bangabandhu’s words, “a bird doesn’t want to remain in a cage even if it is a gilded one. Even animals dislike being

made to spend life in captivity. And how can we humans think of enduring such a life” (190)?

In Note book four, Bangabandhu, in prison for two years by now, deeply disturbed by Pakistani machinations outside the prison and unable to sleep at night in such an environment, finds relief only in the strolls he can take in his “flower garden in the morning” that enable him to lessen the “agony” he had experienced the previous night. This is because “the morning breeze sweeps away all the sorrow from my mind” and “two yellow birds” show up, as they had done some months back (229). Nature heals better than anything else and thus must be valued and nurtured! In solitary confinement by this time, Bangabandhu finds companionship and solace only in “the trees, the yellow birds, the swallows” and even the crows in his “lonely corner” (230).

Undoubtedly, the bleakest of the notebooks is the one Bangabandhu kept when interned in Dhaka cantonment on false charges in the Agartola conspiracy case. Denied even the open space he had previously, he feels mentally choked. Only his will power, and eventually the movement launched to release him, were able to give him hope and let him breathe freely. Fortunately, he was able to return to the open spaces of Bangladesh he loved so much and wanted to see flourish so dedicatedly afterwards.

In the last of Bangabandhu’s books published based on his prison experiences and the note books he kept during confinement in the eleven years or so he was in prison, *New China* (2021), we find too Bangabandhu’s love of nature, as when he goes to Sun Yat-Sen’s tomb, or when he is able to sail in a boat in a lake in the resort town of Hangzhou. He is particularly moved by his trip to the lake and the experience of rowing a boat on it. When his interpreter is amazed by his boating skills, Bangabandhu explains to him how as a man from a deltaic country he had become skilled at rowing. He also communicates to readers his joy at the sight of an island in the middle of the lake. But what is most telling for us now is what he says in concluding his account of the visit: “But we have hearts made of stone. We seem to relate best to lonely prisons and their rock-hard walls” (107).

Among the lessons we can learn from Bangabandhu’s life and times as recorded in his writings and speeches, then, is his absolute delight in Bangladesh’s landscapes and his conviction that we can be at our best amidst nature’s bounty. He was all for development but he surely would not have been impressed by the desecration of the environment in the name of progress. He must have had a green thumb and a very developed ecological consciousness and would have detested the walls and imprisonment of people in cities, the toxic air and the dirt and debris strewn everywhere nowadays in the name of development. As we read him a century after his birth and close to fifty years of his death anniversary, let us learn from him the importance of valuing our environment and doing what we can for our water bodies, flora and fauna as we move forward as a nation.

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Rokte Anka Bhor

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The narration depicts how Pakistani troops take Sheikh Mujibur Rahman prisoner. From House Number 32 Begum Mujib takes shelter in the house next door. Amidst the ruthless and mindless killings, Bangladeshi soldiers, police, EPR, Ansar, and students build resistance.

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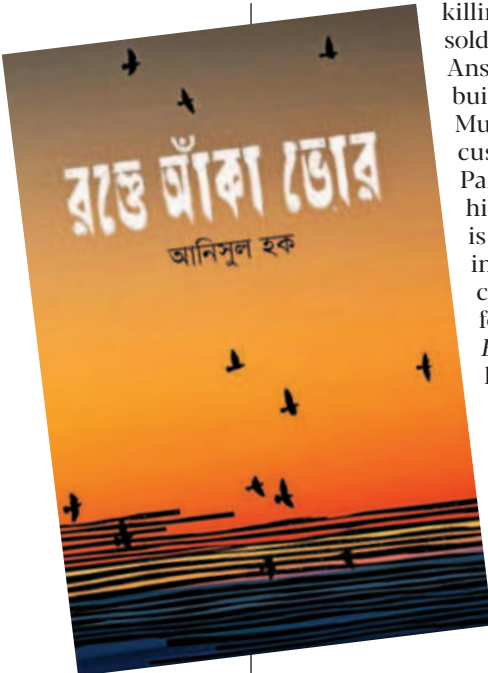
Rokte Anka Bhor begins by depicting the events of the night of 25th March of 1971 and ends with Bangabandhu’s return home on 10th January 1972. Anisul Hoque has not merely recorded a series of historical events. History can become monotonous, but *Rokte Anka Bhor* becomes personal and meaningful through moving narration and fragments of history.

Poet, writer, playwright, and journalist Anisul Hoque’s novel *Rakte Anka Bhor* was published after five more books in the series. Comprising 127 chapters and 584 pages, the book is certainly more voluminous than most novels we see around these days. But then this novel churns out the fragmentary history of our Liberation War. Beginning on March 25, the storyline follows the journey of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The author has assembled innumerable characters from history. Apart from Bangabandhu himself, there are the members of Bangabandhu’s family, neighbors, housemaids, the four leaders, Awami League leaders, journalists,

university teachers, Pakistani army officers, military rulers, and their staff, Indira Gandhi, Indian army, and civilian officials who assisted us, the US President and his advisers, policy makers from China and a few other international circles, Bangladeshi military officials, freedom fighters on the ground, great Biranganas, and representatives from all walks of life.

Can a novel tell the story of a whole life? Some certainly can, and *Rokte Anka Bhor* is certainly one of them. Yet, at the beginning of the novel, Anisul Hoque humbly brings up his limitation. He writes, “1971” is such a big event that even if you write a million pages, not a single diagram of its full form can be fully erected.” However, epics never capture all the events of such magnitude—they focus on the key events, the protagonist. *Rokte Anka Bhor* certainly does that focusing in the great leader, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

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killings, Bangladeshi soldiers, police, EPR, Ansar, and students build resistance. Sheikh Mujib is taken into custody in a West Pakistani jail, and his death sentence is being prepared in a secret military court. MuktiBahini is formed. *Rokte Anka Bhor* is not cold history; it is more like that familiar journey that all Bangladeshis know of.

Here we also learn of many of the lesser known stories. We know of Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmad in history, but Tajuddin, the father of Rimi, Simi, or Sohel, Tajuddin, the shadow of Mujib Bhai, has mostly remained behind the scenes! Indian Prime Minister Indira Priyadarshini Gandhi is a very important

character in this novel. Her compassionate demeanor and the keen political foresight are subtly brought about by the author. At the same time, the abominable behaviour of the characters in the Pakistani political arena has also come to light.

Another interesting thing to note here is that the author has brought the fairytale characters of Bengma and Bengmi. They live in a banyan tree of Dhaka University. The author has revealed a lot of historical information through the Bengma and Bengmi dialogue. Their presence has given the novel a connection to the Bengali culture and authenticity.

According to Hoque, that dream of liberation is fulfilled on 10th January, 1972, when Mujib returned to the independent country from the enemy prison. The light of dawn finally shines on a blood-soaked country.

A must-read novel, *Rokte Anka Bhor* is like a journey backward, probing and knowing where and how this country was born.

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