

FROM THE EDITOR

RESISTING SIMPLISTIC INTERPRETATION—BANGLADESH

The name of this country—Bangladesh—is evidence of the powerful hold of language. Bangla—the linguistic glue that binds its peoples, that distinguishes them from others who don't speak the same language though they share the religion of Islam, the tongue that crafts an intimacy with those across the border in India who speak the same language but may not share the religion. Bangla cuts across religious lines to reach deep into a shared culture and amalgamated tradition—Muslim and Hindu, intertwined, entangled—and multiple identities. The majority of Bangladeshis—in the homeland and in the diaspora—would agree that they refuse to have their complex identities forcibly simplified and made to conform to narrowly constructed expectations. The narrator of Tehmima Anam's novel *A Golden Age* voices defiantly the anger that led to the birth of this country from the stranglehold of (West) Pakistan: "Ever since '48, the Pakistani authorities had ruled the eastern wing of the country like a colony. First they tried to force everyone to speak Urdu instead of Bengali. They took the jute money from Bengal and spent it on factories in Karachi and Islamabad.... [W]hat sense did it make to have a country in two halves, poised on either side of India like a pair of horns?" Anam's male protagonist, the young and revolutionary Sohail, embodies the spirit that engendered Bangladesh: "Sohail loved Bengal. He may have inherited his mother's love of Urdu poetry, but it was nothing to the love he had for all things Bengali: the swimming mud of the delta; the translucent, bony river fish; the shocking green palette of the paddy, and the open aching blue of the sky over flat land." Language and physical landscape collapse into one another. Bengali, Bangla, Bangladesh.

Jalal Alamgir's opening political essay sets the stage for our appreciating the unique melding of cultures and traditions in Bangladesh and the fierce independence of its people. This Muslim-majority country in its most recent democratic election (in December, 2008) asserted its desire for a national ethos free from the influences of both the west and Islam. The popular election of the left-of-center Awami League party indicates a rejection of Islamization and the economic pressures of western globalization. When the nation was born in 1971, in a wrenching and bloody disengagement from the Pakistani powers in the west—on the other side of the landmass of India—it was freeing itself from the status of a subordinated and disenfranchised sibling, in effect shaking loose from a second colonization, the first one having ended with the

departure of the British in 1947. In the years between 1947 and 1971, East Pakistan chafed under the neglect and active disenfranchisement by West Pakistan of its economic development and other crucial infrastructures. Since 1971, it has had to contend with ongoing political turmoil, challenging natural disasters, and the not unproblematic NGO-ization of its economic and socio-cultural landscape. Though Bangladesh's Muhammad Yunus was honored with the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006 for his work on micro-credit and the economic empowerment of women, his approach has also invited critique by some scholars, such as Lamia Karim, who see it as exploiting women in the service of enhancing capitalist interests. The presence of NGOs and aid by western organizations has had mixed results, the most notable of the catastrophes being the seeping of arsenic into the tubewells that were put in place in the 1980s to provide drinking water for 97% of the rural population.

The pieces in this special issue of *Catamaran* reveal a people who can provide a valuable and rich perspective on pressing issues like globalization and the coexistence of diverse cultures. Like the national poet Kazi Nazrul Islam, whose relevance to our times the human rights scholar Winston Langley emphasizes in the introduction to his full length study of the poet, Bangladeshis in the homeland and the diaspora can tell us more than a thing or two about the dangers of rigid identity politics and narrowly constructed national character. In the essay "Hip Hop Bauls: Secularism Remix," Chaumtoli Huq and Farhad Mazar remind us of the tremendous importance of baul songs (an eclectic mix of music with spiritualism) in counteracting the manufactured opposition between fundamentalism and secularism. Sharbari Ahmed's novel excerpt pulls together all the things that matter to her: "The music of the 40s (big band), the movies of the era, both Indian and Hollywood, and my Bengali roots." One hears the same yearning for multiple allegiances in Monoswita Saha's fictionalized memoir. The desire for complex identities at both the personal and national level informs Elora Halim Chowdhury's story and Nazli Kibria's essay on watching herself watching her son on a visit to Bangladesh. Bristi Chowdhury's striking black-and-white photographs spark our imagination for the worlds that lie beyond their frames.

Bangladesh is not just a labor-sending country to West Asia/ the Middle East; it is not a land of annual floods; it is not the site of an economic experiment, nor is it the guinea pig of well meaning NGOs. Its energy and its vision for the future lie in its capacity to straddle the seemingly disparate worlds of Bengali language and culture, Islam, secularism, religiosity, industrial development, and ecological replenishment.

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