

National Struggle from a Postcolonial Literary Perspective: *Nuruldiner Sarajiban*

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ABSTRACT

Leela Gandhi refers to Ranajit Guha's opinion that Indian nationalism "achieves its entitlement through the systematic mobilization, regulation, disciplining and harnessing of subaltern energy, that nationalism integrates the randomly distributed energies of miscellaneous popular movements" (*Dominance* 144, qtd. in Gandhi 111). Syed Shamsul Haq (1935-2016), a literary stalwart of Bangladesh, has always been conscious of the contribution of the common rural people of Bangladesh to the nationalist cause. The mobilization of the peasants against British rule, as dramatized in Haq's verse play *Nuruldiner Sarajiban* (1992), is one such movement, the systematic accumulation of which Guha terms as "subaltern" energy that culminates in anti-colonial nationalism in Bangladesh. Haq recreates the history of the Mughalhaat peasant insurgency of 1783 in Rangpur in his play in the 1990s, a specific juncture in the history of independent Bangladesh that requires the play to act as a clarion call to countrymen to unite against the then dictatorial government headed by Hussain Muhammad Ershad. The play simultaneously operates on two time frames: First, it establishes the position of the subaltern protagonist against the British colonizers that marks the postcolonial stance of the playwright, and then it stands as an inspirational symbol amidst its contemporary political crisis. The paper examines how the verse play illustrates both the colonial propaganda, the two-nation theory of the British colonial rule, and the anti-colonial agenda of the mass peasant movement—ascertaining Nuruldin's position as a public hero, and also as an emissary of freedom and solidarity for all people in Bangladesh against neo-colonialism in a time of post-colony.

KEYWORDS: nationalism, anti-colonial nationalism,
postcolonialism, subaltern, peasant mutiny, two-
nation theory

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I. Introduction

In her introduction to *Colonial & Postcolonial Literature*, Elleke Boehmer refers to symbols of the past from well-known stories that postcolonial writers make use of as part of the postcolonial nationalist preoccupation. She writes:

Nationalist movements have relied on literature, on novelists, singers, and playwrights, to hone rallying symbols of the past and the self through which dignity might be asserted. The well-known image of the oppressed speaking out of silence has meant a willed intervention by colonized people in the fictions and myths that presumed to describe them. (6)

Conversely, it is also evident that many postcolonial novelists, playwrights, singers, and film makers use important illustrious personages of their history in their creative works, the function of which is commonly to emphasize their pride in specific events of mainstream history. There is a marked tendency to glorify the pre-colonial past and the anti-colonial struggle in such writings. Mainstream history focuses on major events in which the changes of dynasty, rulers, kings or emperors feature prominently, while subaltern historiography focuses on the marginalized people's struggle for rights and their participation in the major events of history, which constitutes a perspective often ignored in mainstream history. The present paper intends to analyze the verse play *Nuruldiner Sarajiban* (1982)¹ to show how its author uses the image of Nuruldin from the history of peasant movements in colonial Bengal. As such, Nuruldin, the peasant hero, is treated as a symbol of the nation's past, and is the representation of a figure who has currency in the present nationalist discourse.

Postcolonial literature has so far been an ideal platform for representation of movements, both mainstream and subaltern. Postcolonial Bangladeshi literature, as such, has been a site of various movements against the two phases of colonialism: British and West Pakistani. The last independent Nawab Siraj-ud-Daulah's fall in the Battle of Plassey, the Sepoy Mutiny in 1857, the Peasant Mutinies of 1778-81, 1783 and 1799, 1801-05, 1873-76, the Partition of India in 1947, Language Movement in 1952, Mass Uprising in 1969, the Liberation

¹ The title literally means "the entire life of Nuruldin." The play has not been translated into English, and the quotes that are used in the article are translated by the present author.

War of Bangladesh in 1971, these have all been popular themes in postcolonial Bangladeshi literature. Such rewriting of history is significant for the threefold purpose it serves. First, the plethora of writings of this category vent the emotions of writers regarding these historical episodes and have created a specific mode of Bengali literature, and second, these writings present the glorious past of the nation to contemporary readers with a view to motivate the civilian populace towards nation-building. The third however is more complicated, and its roots are to be found in Partha Chatterjee who writes in “After Subaltern Studies”:

The image of the subaltern rebel so meticulously portrayed by us [the subaltern studies scholars] now seemed like a throwback to the days of the British Raj—a construct that historians of colonial India might find useful but one that would be of little help in understanding the contemporary Indian peasant. (45-46)

He comments that a new framework is needed to redefine the subaltern subject position. Such writings may provide this new framework that may help understand citizenship from the subaltern perspective, and this I identify as the third objective which is so pronounced in the present play.

Syed Shamsul Haq (henceforth, Haq) is a major Bangladeshi playwright who has been preoccupied with the Bengalis’ struggle against colonial oppression. *Nuruldiner Sarajiban*, his second verse play, deals with the peasant insurgency in Rangpur in 1783, when Bangladesh was still part of undivided India. The peasant insurgency was known as Mughalhaat Struggle. The title of the play means “the entire life of Nuruldin,” and this clearly shows the dramatist’s intention of sketching the history of the protagonist. Nuruldin was a peasant leader, and as Haq has always been proud of his own north Bengal identity (he is basically from Rangpur), he has chosen to dramatize Nuruldin’s life, which would be a representation of the subaltern insurgencies in the subcontinent, and at the same time would symbolize the common people’s resistance against all kinds of oppression. The play was widely staged in the theatres of Dhaka during the 1980s and 1990s while Bangladesh underwent a political crisis fomented by a dictatorial government and the attendant lack of democracy. Through this play, Haq exploited the historical episode to encourage his contemporary audience in their struggle against the autocrat.

Borrowing some historical figures and adding some other lively characters with them, Haq re-narrativizes the forgotten episode. In the preface to the piece, he laments that the Bengalis have forgotten the public heroes of their national history, and by resurrecting characters like Nuruldin, the nation may recall the long history of national struggle. He further affirms that the War of Liberation was not an issue detached from the country's colonial history.

Haq is widely celebrated for his passion for the great historical episodes of Bangladesh's emergence as an independent country, and especially the War of Liberation (1971) has repeatedly appeared in his writings. His writings have always exposed his nationalistic zeal. *Nuruldiner Sarajiban* is an important contribution in this regard, as it portrays one of the most important peasant movements against the British colonizers taking place in Rangpur, in the northern part of present day Bangladesh. Haq considers this movement as a significant landmark of the Bengalis' anti-colonial struggle that must function as a reminder for the amnesia-prone and somewhat spiritless Bengali nation that has forgotten its past valour.

II. Method, Materials and Objectives

Postcolonial theoretical approaches accumulated by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffith and Helen Tiffin in *The Empire Writes Back* and in *Post-colonial Studies Reader* have been consulted as references. Bill Ashcroft and others comment that literatures in the countries "affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day" can be termed post-colonial literatures (*Empire* 2). While the hyphenated term indicates historical periodization, the run-together term "postcolonial," to which this paper adheres, emphasizes ideological continuity in Helen Tiffin's understanding:

Processes of artistic and literary decolonisation have involved a radical dis/mantling of European codes and a post-colonial subversion and appropriation of the dominant European discourses. This has frequently been accompanied by the demand for an entirely new or wholly recovered "reality," free of all colonial taint. (95)

The paper maintains that this is what Haq has done in his re-narrativization of history. He reiterates the colonial period in which there was communal solidarity and a glorious peasant leadership, and this was the reality which was often obliterated from history because of the elitist nature of historiography—“colonial elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism”—as argued by Ranjit Guha (*Dominance* 1).

Two scholars of the Subaltern Studies Collective, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1942-) and Ranajit Guha (1923-), have been consulted for further understanding of the marginalized. Spivak considers “men and women among the illiterate peasantry, the tribals, the lowest strata of the urban subproletariat” as margins (78). Nuruldin is a marginalized person who cannot represent himself in that sense, and the middle class educated urban playwright’s artistic representation is a matter of scrutiny. Guha wants to call the peasant “the maker of his own rebellion” to contribute “a consciousness” to him (*Elementary Aspects* 4) because in the colonial historiography of peasant insurgencies “the peasant was denied recognition as a subject of history in his own right even for a project that was all his own” (3). That is why texts of history are consulted, to examine the degree of recognition Nuruldin received for the insurgency he led, and how far the playwright has actually recognized him as his protagonist.

Literary exegesis is the method of the study, and the paper uses references and theoretical evidences that may establish the hypothetical claim that not only is the well-known historical episode employed in constructing a postcolonial nationalist discourse, but also symbols and figures from national history are dramatized in this play to stress its protagonist’s subaltern identity. As such, history is revisited as part of the postcolonial exercise to counter the dominant colonial discourse of the civilizing mission of the colonial enterprise in which, according to Jenny Sharpe, “a western educated, English speaking, indigenous middle class metonymically represented all of India” (100). It is evident that there were two distinctive Indian classes, one being the English educated class and the other the subaltern class consisting of the common mass which was deprived of formal education. The British Raj exploited education as a means of both consent and coercion. The educated Indians became the “mimic men” and dominated the peasants and other uneducated classes. This was part of the British colonizers’ hegemonic appropriation of the class that would serve them. Gramsci calls this class “organic intellectuals” that are part of the dominant class or the rulers. On the other hand, this was a process of othering the mass

of subaltern classes who were not educated, but rather ruled by force with the help of the organic intellectuals. Guha refers to education under British Raj not as a means of its “persuasion” but as “an arm of its coercive apparatus” (*Dominance* 166). He writes:

But there is a great deal of evidence to show that the aim of education, as conceived by the founders of the raj, was far from emancipatory. It was designed to harness the native mind to the new state apparatus as a cheap but indispensable carrier of its administrative burden. (166-67)

“Subaltern,” a key word in the paper borrowed from Gramscian vocabulary, is primarily understood as whoever is outside of the hegemonic class. Thus, the peasants of undivided India are subalterns, while the educated urban Indians, along with their colonial masters, are part of the hegemonic class. The paper intends to show that Haq’s purpose is to create a narrative invoking the subaltern struggle for independence to counter the grand historical narrative, which has, by far, neglected the anti-colonial struggle of the subaltern in Bangladesh. Nuruldin, a peasant leader, has been very scantily mentioned in the history texts published in Bangla, and not mentioned at all in most of the important English texts. The paper will unleash its arguments in two ways. Firstly, evidence will be offered to show that Nuruldin’s position as a peasant leader has been neglected in the mainstream discussions of peasant movements in the Indian subcontinent by prominent historians. Secondly, the play will be analyzed to show how Nuruldin flourishes as a representative subaltern figure against the dominant educated class. In the process, it will also become clear why the author intends to revive his image and how he manages to connect him with postcolonial nationalism.

III. History, the Great Marginalizer

This section of the paper highlights how mainstream history has wiped out the struggle of the subaltern and why the study of the play is important to fill the vacuum. Indian colonial history has been recorded in numerous books, articles, creative writings, films, etc., most of which highlight the major decisions of the British colonizers and consequent anti-colonial struggles of the

educated middle class led by illustrious leaders of international and national repute. This constitutes the mainframe of most grand narratives of resistance to colonial rule. Grassroots people's anti-colonial struggle is inadequately represented, as is the case in most of the history books. In the narrative of the common people's struggle against a local *zamindar*² or a British officer, the dominant oppressor is given most of the space and a leader of the mass people's movement hardly gets any recognition. In most of the history books there are proper names of the oppressors but the names of the peasant leaders or the subaltern leaders have remained unuttered. Guha's comment in this regard is that the historiography of Indian nationalism has long been dominated by two kinds of elitism—the colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism, both of which have excluded the contribution of the subaltern groups. These elitisms have established the idea that "Indian nation and the development of the consciousness—nationalism . . . were exclusively and predominantly elite achievements" ("On" 37).

Famous English historians like G. M. Trevelyan (1876-1962), Frank Stenton (1880-1967), Peter Burke (1937-), and so on, have not considered British colonial history in India as part of British history, as they never recognized India as Britain proper, although as a colony India was Britain's rightful territory. However, many British historians, such as Keay, Trautmann, Wilson, Riddick, and others, have written Indian history in which the British period is a significant episode. Many uprisings against the British rule are mentioned in these books, but unfortunately, the Rangpur uprising is hardly given any attention. *India: A History* (2000) by John Keay is a significant history text, which deals with the history of India in some detail. British East India Company's adventures in India, its revenue policies, leases and contracts are quite elaborately discussed, but it hardly touches upon the peasant insurgencies. It mentions the failure of an "agrarian system founded on excessive exploitation" (Keay 362), the consequence of which is peasant unrests, but the Rangpur peasant uprising is not mentioned at all. *India: Brief History of a Civilization* (2015) by Thomas R. Trautmann is another important book in the field that talks about the landed gentry and peasants to some extent, but not much about peasant insurgencies. The Charles River Editors book, *The British Raj: The History and Legacy of Britain's Imperialism in India and the*

² *Zamindar* is a Persian word meaning "land owner." In India the *zamindars* were part of nobility, who had control over the peasants and collected tax from them.

Indian Subcontinent (2016), mentions the Rangpur peasant uprising in 1783 and dedicates about four sentences to describe that the peasants in Rangpur went so far as to elect their own government and replace the old ruler with a new Nawab, which information is somewhat misleading, or even truncated and lopsided. The East India Company suppressed the uprising and the peasants never succeeded in driving the British away; thus, replacement of the old ruler was not possible in that sense. However, Nuruldin's name is not mentioned in the book. *The Chaos of Empire: The British Raj and the Conquest of India* by Jon Wilson is a remarkable book because it claims to see the British empire not as a "system" or "project" but as a chaotic enterprise. The Bengal famine (1769-70) is poignantly described in this book. Haq refers to the famine in the play in which Nuruldin's father died. On the other hand, the London life at that time described in the book has close affinity to Haq's description of the cravings of the British officers in Rangpur who yearn for that life back home. This book mentions the Rangpur peasant insurgency and Raja Devi Singh (150) but Nuruldin remains unstated. *The History of British India: A Chronology* by John F. Riddick also mentions the peasant uprising in passing. Texts of history written by women who visited India are far more revealing. *India* by Fanny Roper Feudge, who lived in colonial India for years, is a book for more homely readers. Chapter XXII of her book deals with Lord Clive and Hastings and chapter XXIII describes Tipoo Sahib (Tipu Sultan of Mysore), and it is surprising that there is no reference to the year 1783, or to a Bengal or Rangpur uprising, or to Nuruldin within these chapters. This review indicates that Western historians neglected Bengal while discussing colonial history and neglected the peasant leaders more as their attention was on the elite, urban, educated Bengali leaders whose anti-colonial struggles are generally acknowledged.

Books written by Indian authors have also neglected the Rangpur uprising. Jawaharlal Nehru's *The Discovery of India* (first published in 1946) is considered one major indigenous history text on India's independence in which the peasant movements are not given much space. Haq has mentioned the historian Suprakash Roy, who has written quite elaborately on the event in *Bharater Krishak Bidroha o Ganatantrik Sangram*³ (*A History of the Indian*

³ Roy's book was first published in 1966. In this article the latest edition published by Radical Impression is consulted, which is published in 2012.

Peasant-Revolt and Democratic Struggle).⁴ Roy has dedicated a chapter on this which is divided into background, revolution and its aftermath. The first section includes a considerably long background of the cruel revenue farmer, Devi Sinha⁵ who was appointed by Hastings in 1781. Roy mentions that Devi Sinha became familiar with Reza Khan, the then Diwan of Bangla Desh (present day Bangladesh), who helped Sinha get the revenue lease and control of Purnia. Roy gives details of revenue taxes collected in the previous years and new taxes applied by Sinha. This new revenue collector was so cruel that the peasants of Purnia had to leave their households and take shelter in the nearby forest. Hastings sacked Sinha in 1772 but later appointed him Executive of the new provincial revenue board consisting of inexperienced English youths as members. Devi Sinha also formed a dancers' society to entertain the young members of the Board and practically manipulated the revenue of Bengal alone. In the second section Roy describes how Devi Sinha's oppression in Rangpur and Dinajpur in Bangla Desh necessitated the armed revolution in Rangpur. The peasants collectively wrote a complaint to the Collector of Rangpur, but were disheartened by the indifference of the British officer. The peasants had to decide upon armed resistance and declared that they would not pay any revenue and would not remain under the rule of the British or their revenue farmers. The peasants of Rangpur started it and later Dinajpur and Kakina, Fatehpur, Dimla, Kazirhaat and Tapa parganas of Cooch Behar joined the revolution. They unanimously chose a person called Nuruluddin⁶ as their leader and declared him "Nawab." Nuruluddin appointed a person called Daya Shil as his Diwan and circulated a message across the parganas that none would pay revenue to Devi Sinha, but instead, an amount of subscription for the revolution, which was called "Dhing⁷ Kharcha" or "jacquerie expenses" (my translation), was asked for from the peasants. Haq has used the local colloquial version of the names Nuruluddin and Daya Shil.

Roy mentions the name of the British accomplices of Devi Sinha, among whom Hastings was the most powerful. The then Collector of Rangpur, Goodlad, is also mentioned. Goodlad sent a huge army under Lieutenant

⁴ The publication information of the book provides this translation of the title.

⁵ Guha refers to him as Devi Sinha.

⁶ Roy mentions Nuruluddin while Haq has used the local form of the name Nuruldin.

⁷ "Dhing" in Rangpur dialect means revolt or insurgency, but no historian has translated this so far. Guha calls it "Jacquerie" or a communal uprising or revolt (Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India).

MacDonald to control the rebellious peasants. In this connection Roy mentions Mughalhaat, a port where the British had their local headquarters, and Paatgram, where the major gang of the mutineers stayed. Roy also mentions that Daya Shil dies in the fight and Nuruluddin, who was captured in an injured state, dies in a few days. In the third section Roy shows what happened after the revolution. Devi Sinha's cruelty was reported by the East India Company's commissioner, Peterson, but he was acquitted of all charges because of Hastings' favour. The rest of his life Sinha lived as the "Raja" of Nasipur in Murshidabad. Altogether, it seems that Roy's treatment of the Rangpur uprising is a story of Devi Sinha, in which Nuruluddin or Nuruldin's story gets minimal space. However, Roy has provided the dramatist Haq with names of the major characters, as he mentions in the preface. No other Indian or Bangladeshi historian to date has given so much detail of the event.

In *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, Ranajit Guha refers to the revolt against Devi Sinha in 1783 as the beginning of the span of 117 years of historical evidence of revolts in the colonial period. This provides a subaltern parallel to the grand narrative of Sepoy Mutiny in 1857 as the first war of independence. This is also significant in that the insurgency was not against the white colonizer but against the brown one who functions as the decoy of the imperial lord. Guha mentions Rangpur *Dhing* against Devi Sinha in which the protagonists tried petitions, deputations, or other forms of supplication before taking up arms against the oppressors (*Elementary Aspects* 9). Surprisingly, Guha mentions the peasant leader Derjenarain whom his followers called "Nawab" and carried him in a palanquin to protest the tyrant Devi Sinha's dictum that none can pass through his estate in any kind of transport without being beaten by his guards. He has tried to rationalize armed insurgency by the subaltern classes sometimes. For example, in an article titled "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency" he writes:

It would be difficult to cite an uprising on any significant scale that was not in fact preceded either by less militant types of mobilization when other means had been tried and found wanting or by parley among its principals seriously to weigh the pros and cons of any recourse to arms. (45)

Even though Guha's utmost attention to the peasant groups is part of his everlasting interest in subaltern studies, he has neither mentioned Nuruldin nor the Rangpur *Dhing*. It is clearly evident that no historian has shown any genuine interest in the peasant movements and their cause to any detail.

Even R. C. Majumdar (1884-1980), a prominent historian who has written *Bangla Desher Itihash* (meaning "History of Bangla Desh"), *History of Bengal*, *An Advanced History of India*, etc., says nothing about the Rangpur peasant insurrection. Satish Chandra (1922-2017), Bipan Chandra (1928-2014), Ram Sharan Sharma (1919-2011), Ramchandra Guha (1958-), and others have also omitted it. Shekhar Bandopadhyay in his book *Plassey theke Partition o Tarpur (From Plassey to Partition)* mentions the Rangpur insurrection in a small section of his subchapter on peasant and tribal insurrections. He too does not mention Nuruldin.

Historians of independent Bangladesh have mentioned Nuruldin often, though there is not much information about him in the books. M. A. Rahim and others in *Bangladesher Itihas* have not mentioned him in the small section titled "Rangpur Rebellion 1783" (361). M. A. Rahim in *Banglar Musalmander Itihas (History of the Muslims in Bengal)* dedicates a chapter on the rebellion of the subjects against their *zamindars* and Indigo traders in which he mentions that there were several leaders of the peasants and the main leader was called "Nawab" (74), but he does not mention the names of the leaders. K. M. Raisuddin Khan in *Bangladesher Itihas Parikroma* writes that a man called Nuruldin led the Rangpur peasant insurrection. He mentions the places where the peasants fought against the British soldiers. He also mentions that the leader who was called "Nawab" was taken hostage by the soldiers, but he does not clearly mention that Nuruldin was given the title "Nawab." However, Raisuddin also mentions Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's sarcastic remark that Edmund Burke immortalized Devi Sinha through his description of the tyrant's oppression at the British Parliament (Khan 564). *History of Bangladesh* edited by Sirajul Islam has a chapter titled "Peasant Movements and Insurgencies" written by Ratan Lal Chakraborty that describes how the *raiya*s⁸ of Rangpur rejected the revenue settlement and organized the armed uprising against the revenue farmers. Chakraborty mentions Devi Singh⁹ who was

⁸ *Raiyat* is an Arabic word meaning "a herd at pasture" and "subjects" in collective sense. Under the Mughal revenue system a *raiya* was a cultivator, a revenue farmer ("Raiyat").

⁹ A variant of Sinha.

appointed the revenue farmer of Rangpur in 1781. An elaborate discussion on how Devi Sinha's oppression pushed the peasants to gather under Dhirajnarayan,¹⁰ who was given the title "Nawab" (182), is included. According to this historian, Nurul-al-Din replaced Dhirajnarayan perhaps after the demise of the first "Nawab." Several other leaders are mentioned by this author, one of whom is Daya Shil, who is present in Haq's play.

Except for books, there have been a good number of articles published on the peasant uprising and colonial Bengal. For example, Atish Dasgupta writes of *fakir sanniyasi* and peasant movements during the early colonial period in India in three of his articles. He mentions Dirjinarain as the *Nawab*, Baneswar as the elected Dewan and Hari Das as another appointed Dewan during the peasant movement, but Nuruldin is not mentioned.

It has been evident that Nuruldin has been neglected by most historians who either have not mentioned him or have only mentioned him in passing. Devi Sinha, the revenue farmer, is featured in the description of the events. There has been no research on Nuruldin's family history so far. It is similarly the case with most of the peasant and tribal leaders in Indian history. As such, Nuruldin is a representative of the subaltern classes, the leadership of which has had to face the amnesia of biased historical documents. In this regard, the playwright Haq has shown his own postcolonial stance as a Bangladeshi author from Rangpur, the place of Nuruldin's origin, and it is worthwhile to consider how he has paid homage to this peasant leader. Rosalind O'Hanlon writes that the central concern of the Subaltern Studies project has been

the possibility of writing a history which is not only from Europe's "periphery" in its rejection of the neo-colonialist, neo-nationalist and economic Marxist modes of historiography argued to dominate the contemporary field, but which also takes as its focus the dispossessed of that periphery. (189)

The discussion of the text in the following section will show how the playwright has carried out this task of rewriting the history of the peasant rebellion from a peripheral point to situate the subaltern subject at the centre of history.

¹⁰ Guha spells the name as Dherjinarain.

IV. *Nuruldiner Sarajiban*: A Middle Class Urban Intellectual'S Representation of the Subaltern?

The key text that is analyzed in the study is *Nuruldiner Sarajiban*, a verse play included in the anthology titled *Kavyanatyanga Sangraha (Collection of Verse Plays)* by Haq, published by Bidyaprakash Publications. A full retrospect of the peasant movement is drawn from the protagonist's death in which his resurrection gets special attention. The play opens with the idea that Nuruldin cannot die and must come back from his grave to secure the freedom of the nation. The development is cyclical: Nuruldin returns and leads the peasants against the British forces and local compradors. Finally, he returns to the realm of death, leaving a strong message for the audience that the true leaders of the Bengali nation never die and there is hope of regeneration.

Haq has quite realistically dramatized Nuruldin's life. The play seems to indicate that instead of a linear journey, history has a cyclical order, and hence he resurrects dead Nuruldin on the stage. The Red Chorus and the Blue Chorus are introduced to comment on the advancement of events. The Red Chorus follows Nuruldin while the Blue Chorus serves the colonizers. Red represents blood or the bloody oppression of the local revenue farmers and their British masters. On the other hand, blue represents the indigo cultivation forced on the peasants, and also blue blood or aristocracy. The play opens with the Proposition in which the narrator describes the present state of the country and the necessity of Nuruldin's resurrection. New Historicism, which calls for a contextual reading of a play or literary work within its socio-cultural circumstances, may be a productive method of analysis here. The tenets of New Historicism maintain that history as narrative is fictionalized, and on the other hand, that the text's historicity refers to its culturally produced emergence within the state of affairs of its construction and interpretation. Autocracy and military rule in Bangladesh are already mentioned as the play's context that has influenced its production and meaning.

Haq has divided the entire play into fourteen scenes, which are set in two distinct places: the fort's surroundings where the British characters converse, and the fields where the rebel peasants interact. These binary spaces do not physically impact in terms of theatrical representation because Haq has written the play to be staged in any open space. The first scene opens in a field in a chaotic atmosphere in which the Red Chorus asks if Nuruldin's voice is heard

or if there is a call to be united under his leadership. The Blue Chorus tries to dishearten by saying that Nuruldin is dead and he cannot come back. The followers do not believe it even when they see his dead body being carried on the stage. They invoke Nuruldin:

Is he no more? No more?
Is Nuruldin no more?
Then who beats the drum?
Who plays the trumpet?
Now beats the drum, now plays the trumpet, who calls, who?
(Haq 70; scene 1)

Daya Shil confirms that Nuruldin does not exist anymore, but suddenly Nuruldin stands up, throwing the blood tainted cover from his body in the second scene. In the last scene, Nuruldin turns into a corpse again, and the cyclic order of the play is established. Death here comes as an apocalyptic vision of the writer, but at the same time death is conquered by hope of regeneration, as before turning into a corpse Nuruldin says:

I die, but life does not end
If one Nuruldin goes away,
Thousand Nuruldins will come to Bangla.
If this Nuruldin dies
May millions of Nuruldins come
Billion Nuruldins will survive. (Haq 143; scene 14)

Daya Shil's speech "Don't you get scared O humans, don't you fear" is a direct call for people's movement. The Red Chorus is inspired by Nuruldin's resurrection and calls all sects of poor people to be united against the rule of the whites and their native servants.

In the context of the rejection of the European or the neocolonialist historiography as the central object of the subaltern studies project (cf. O'Hanlon's comments in the previous section), this poetic drama can be viewed as the playwright's subaltern historiography, in which he has subverted all forms of mainstream narrative to highlight the position of its peasant hero. While doing this, he has also taken a position against the two-nation theory of

the colonizers, upon which India was divided in 1947. Simultaneously, he has also shown the position of women in India. All these three approaches establish the play's anti-colonial and subaltern perspective. At the same time, the play comments on the class division in England, and how the middle class and lower middle class English officers aspire to go back to England, after collecting enough wealth from India so that they can have a luxurious upper-class life. On the whole, the playwright's approach is that a poor country like Bangladesh is never free of its colonial yoke. Whether foreign or local, colonizers are always exploiting the country and the lower class of the society in order to gain their interest. Finally, he offers a clarion call to his people to raise their voice against their oppressors. The following textual analysis may show how the playwright has utilized Nuruldin's history to achieve his goal.

The play is written as the first step to highlight the "leaders of this soil" (Haq 61) who have been forgotten by the nation, as the dramatist claims in the preface to it in *Kavyanatya Sangraha*. He writes:

After writing this verse play, I hope, we will remember those leaders of this soil whom we have forgotten and we will know that the history of our mass movement is long and great. And above all, the war of independence is not a separate phenomenon. (61)

Haq has acknowledged that historian Suprakash Roy was his source, and has made it evident that he has created many of the characters out of his imagination. Nuruldin, Daya Shil and Goodlad are mentioned by Roy, and Haq has imagined Abbas, Ambia, Thompson and Lisbeth. Abbas is Nuruldin's best friend, Ambia his wife, Thompson the in-charge of the East India Company's fort at Rangpur, and Lisbeth is his wife. Rangpur's dialect has been used in the play, though Haq admits that he has moderated the dialect to some extent to make it intelligible for general readers. He has taken the role of the omniscient narrator. The playwright has not, however, done any thorough research to dig out the intimate life of Nuruldin that he has portrayed. His caricature of Nuruldin's early life with his father and his disturbed conjugality with his wife are completely fictionalized accounts. As such, it can be argued that the middle-class urban playwright has usurped and appropriated the peasant leader's story, although it must be acknowledged that there is apparently no harm done to the leader's image. Undoubtedly, the author has resurrected Nuruldin from the

oblivion of history and his intention is clearly mentioned in the Proposition by the *Sutradhar* or the Narrator:

Nuruldin is remembered
When vultures attack the golden Bengal
Nuruldin is recalled
When my country is invaded by the robe of the compradors
Nuruldin is recalled
When my dreams are stolen
Nuruldin is remembered
When my voice is throttled
I remember Nuruldin
When in my country blood is shed from my body
In history, in every page of it. (Haq 63-64)

The narrator also expresses his wish that Nuruldin will come back and call everyone with his strong hypnotic voice to fight against all ills that pervade the present day Bengal. What strikes the reader is the use of “robe of the compradors” that has a connotative meaning. The completion of the play in November 1982 is significant, for this was a time of maelstroms of political turmoil in “postcolonial” Bangladesh: The father of the nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, had been assassinated in 1975, which was only four years after he had led the nation to a glorious assertion of independence; important leaders who were the key persons of the liberation war of 1971 had been assassinated; martial law was declared in the country; the basic nature of the Constitution had been altered; and finally, the head of the military government, president Ziaur Rahman, was also assassinated in 1981. In March 1982 Hussain Muhammad Ershad took over as the head of the military government. By that time the Jamaat-e-Islami leaders who were banished from the country for their treason during the liberation war were rehabilitated in Bangladesh. By “robe” the playwright may have meant the special attire of those people who usually wear long Panjabi or Kabuli robes. The peasant leader Nuruldin apparently has no connection with the political intricacies of the 1980s Bangladesh, and it is easy to hypothesize that apart from compensating for the long oblivion of the historians who did not do justice to Nuruldin, the playwright’s interest in portraying the peasant leader lies in the very urban

contemporary state politics. The play was staged in the theatres of Dhaka repeatedly when the anti-Ershad movements were at their zenith in the last years of the 1980s. The last lines of the play are very significant in this regard. Abbas, Nuruldin's friend, says: "patience, everyone—have patience in this movement. If it takes one lifetime or many, let it take" (Haq 144; scene 14). This would be a direct message to the audience, who were aware of the suffocating atmosphere under the autocratic government in the country. Unfortunately, newspapers were not free to publish any critique of the government through theatre review, nor are the theatres in Bangladesh conscientious about archiving research materials. Thus, it has been almost impossible to find reviews of the play during the years. The covert reference to the autocrat Hussain Muhammad Ershad can be traced in the setting of the play too. In the fifth scene of the play, Thompson, the officer in charge of the British fort, says that Rangpur is the capital of the venomous cobras. There can be a connotative meaning for the word "capital": it can mean the capital city Dhaka, which is full of malicious villains who can be compared with cobras. On the other hand, it can mean that Rangpur is the headquarters of cobras.¹¹ Interestingly, the autocratic president Ershad was also from Rangpur, and his sole attention was his native district. By "cobra" the writer may have indicated the rebellious peasant, but to the contemporary audience it could equally mean the pitiless autocrat. As such, Rangpur is a significant symbolic presence. It becomes pungent when the district collector Goodlad says that in present-day Bangladesh nobody should forget to be careful at all times. Goodlad does not say "Bengal" or "Bangla Desh," the name for the province of undivided Bengal, but "Bangladesh," and that might have been consciously done by the playwright. This serves as a message to the public who have been facing restrictions on all kinds of expressions by the government.

This is how history has been fictionalized to show that the struggle for freedom continues through generations of Bengalis. The play performs a visionary function for the troubled and frustrated Bengalis who have turned amnesiac about their glorious struggle and of their firebrand leaders. However, the orientalist/colonial perspective is also unmistakably present here. The revenue supervisor Morris says that in this god-forbidden land, snakes and humans are in equal numbers. In reply Goodlad tells him that their characteristics are also the same. Thompson compares natives with dogs:

¹¹ A cobra is a venomous tropical snake.

These black dogs are so lazy that,
Unless there is an earthquake they don't hear anything, and they
don't lift their butts from the ground. (Haq 84; scene 5)

The English officers understand the difference between the educated native servants of Calcutta and the illiterate peasants of Rangpur. Thus the peasants are distinguished by the colonial masters who are more careful of their subjects in Rangpur. They can also distinguish between the revenue farmer Devi Sinha and the peasants. They very clearly know what they want from this colony and who can help them, but they do not trust even the native revenue farmer. Haq gives an account of history here through Goodlad, who says that Devi Sinha is a favourite of Hastings and he works for mutual interest.

Apart from the message to the contemporary Bangladeshi audience, this play is an abiding message for Bengalis of both Bangladesh and West Bengal who were unjustly divided by the British colonizers along the line of religious difference. Haq shows that the essence of the peasant movement is its secular identity: Mecca and Kailsah are equally referred to as refuges for the oppressed soul. Nuruldin says that there is no distinction between Hindu and Muslim; the only difference lies between the rich and the poor, for class is the most important marker of stratification in underdeveloped economies, whether in colonial or postcolonial times. He calls upon his followers:

Abbas—Bhabani—Garibullah—Hare Ram
Who will listen to me?
Who will wake with me?
Majibar—Neyamat—Nurul Islam
Bipin—Ayodhya—Shambhu—Haidar—
Who will awake with me tonight? (Haq 114; scene 8)

This secular nature of the peasant movement is stressed by the educated urban dramatist to remind the audience of the quintessence of Bengali life which has always adhered to a syncretized cultural tradition. Bengalis as a race unto themselves have also rejected the two-nation theory, which was devised by the British colonizers in tandem with stalwarts of the bourgeois nationalist movement in undivided India, and which ultimately led to the partition of India

in 1947. History does not emphasize the secular nature of the subaltern insurgency, although this lies at the heart of the culture in the subcontinent.

One interesting aspect of Haq's dramatization of history is the private domain of the colonizers. In the private domain the British have their own issues: women and inferior officers are treated badly by their superiors. An officer comments that common British fellows like him come to India, which is a humid hell, full of venomous snakes, mosquitoes, and flies, for the lust of money and position. His dreams are quite individualistic, as he dreams of going back to England with wealth and power like a baron; he wants to have a big house, beautiful wife, a secured life for his children. This is a postcolonial playwright's assessment of the colonial deception, clearly stating that he understands what is behind the façade of the colonial mission of enlightenment.

In this private domain the women are regarded as more marginalized, but the white women are better off than the brown women. The native women are referred to as the whites have to have physical contact with them to satiate their sexual urges. Nuruldin's private life with his wife Ambia is presented, as the dramatist claims, through the speculation of the probable (Haq 61). Ambia is a common Bengali woman who wants a share of Nuruldin's fame, and at the same time, wants riches and a good living, which are not Nuruldin's desires. There is a gap in their conjugal life for which Nuruldin is utterly lonely as a man. Lisbeth and Ambia contrast each other; while Lisbeth understands her husband Thompson completely, Ambia cannot fully support her husband mentally. Lisbeth has a long conversation with Goodlad which reveals that she is an uncommon woman. She says that when one day India will be fully occupied by the British, the personal correspondences of the white women who came to India to support their husbands or fiancés will be sought after. These women became the rescuers of the white men, or else the colony would be peopled with brown children and the white men would be doomed to live as dark-skinned natives. Her pride pervades her colonial vision, and through her, Haq completes the Orientalist discourse. She has no confusion about her husband's relation with her, and she extends her full support to her husband's mission in India. She says:

The historian will write,
We, we, the white women in India
We are the base of this empire,

This kingdom is built on our body and soul—
We are behind your fame.
If we did not come to India
The English would turn Mughal
.....
Do not waste your time, rather
Make history by controlling the mutiny
Hit Nuruldin at his core. (Haq 134; scene 11)

On the other hand, Ambia is either completely ignorant or is oblivious of Nuruldin's past, which is very touchingly described by the dramatist. Nuruldin's father died in the field while he carried the plough to till the land, as he lost all his cattle. That was the year of the drought, as is inferred from the text. Nuruldin cannot comply with Ambia when she expresses her wish for an expensive silk saree, a "fire woven saree," according to the play. Nuruldin cannot forget the pathetic death of his father and he says:

Fire, fire
Fire is not in the saree, it is in the stomach.
Fire, fire burns, here, in my belly,
In the stomach of the peasant's offspring.
And he who weaves that fire woven saree
Naked is he, threadbare is he,
Not a thread on his skeletal body. (Haq 128; scene 10)

Being deprived of a psychological and inspirational mate, Nuruldin turns to his male friend, Abbas, who is a constant critic and reminds Nuruldin of his weaknesses. Haq here marginalizes the role of the Bengali wife, though in many other writings the Bengali women have shown courage and selflessness for the cause of freedom. Tagore's writings like *Ghare Baire* and *Chokher Bali* are good examples in this regard. And there are heroic Bengali women like Pritilata Waddedar in the history of anti-British revolution. Haq's depiction of Ambia as a consort of Nuruldin in material terms who is unable to share his ideological issues confirms the position of women as doubly marginalized in the subaltern context. Ambia is an imagined character and it was not necessary to portray her

as a shallow-minded common woman compared with the strong personality of Lisbeth.

Haq has introduced indigo cultivation as a major issue in the play. It does not coincide with factual history. In this part of Bengal indigo cultivation was not massively initiated at that time. As far as history witnesses, before 1788 it was not a great issue in Rangpur. Haq has added this to aggravate the representation of colonial oppression. However, undivided Bengal is significantly present in the play: Mughalhaat, Kazirhaat, Pangsha, Paatgram, Dimla, Cooch Behar, Dinajpur, etc., are places mentioned in the play where Nuruldin had his followers. Common objects found in the region, such as the trumpet made of buffalo horn, bamboo sticks and a local fishing basket trap called “polo,” drums, etc., are used as stage props. An overview of rural Bengal situates the play in its spatio-temporal context.

Reality and imagination have been proportionately blended in the play to communicate a powerful message to the audience. In his last long speech Nuruldin describes his longings:

I wait to see,
The fire of my heart burning in all hearts
All thrones burnt in that fire

.....

The gold of golden Bengal is in Bangladesh. (Haq 139-40; scene 13)

Golden Bengal is a favourite expression of Haq. In many of his writings he has referred to a glorious golden Bengal that existed in the past. This is yet another strand which establishes him as a postcolonial writer. Rabindranath Tagore’s lyric, “আমার সোনার বাংলা, আমি তোমায় ভালোবাসি / Amar shonar Bangla ami tomay bhalobashi” (My golden Bengal, I love you; my translation) which is the national anthem of Bangladesh, has the same overtone of pride in one’s country, its glorious past, the plenitude of natural resources, and concomitant human bonds. However, to what extent the visionary dreams of Nuruldins of postcolonial societies find a place in such anthems is a valid question. It is obviously a matter of lament that none of the subaltern dreams have been realized in the poet’s golden Bengal, as history evinces. The ideological landscape is nonetheless necessary for a final vision of the future, and this lends

an element of visionary idealism to the last scene of the play where Nuruldin turns into a corpse. He finally comments that dust is human existence and as it mixes with dust, new bodies sprout from the same dust. It is indicated that Nuruldin is dead but he has produced many more Nuruldins to lead the nation amidst recurrent crises, from strength to strength.

V. Conclusion

Nuruldiner Sarajiban is significant for two reasons. Primarily, it functions as an allegorical presentation of contemporary Bangladesh. The foreign tyrants and their local compradors in colonial times might as well have been a prefiguring of the tyrannical autocratic government of contemporary (1980s) Bangladesh, against which there was urgency for the public to get united. In this sense, the play had a powerful, although covert, message for contemporary audiences. However, a play cannot be expected to bring revolutionary change in the political scenario of a country. As expected, it could be part of the many efforts to unite people against the autocratic tyrant in Bangladesh of the time of Haq's play. As such, Bangladesh was still a "colony" of tyrannical rule, against which the masses needed to stand up. This would account for the anti-colonial approach that was quite comprehensible for contemporary audiences. The second and equally major aspect is that *Nuruldiner Sarajiban* recalls a glorious historical episode of Bengal that has been generally neglected in mainstream history. The colonial history of northern Bangladesh is revived, and through this the author expresses his emotional connections with his birthplace. By resurrecting a hitherto forgotten subaltern figure like Nuruldin, the play functions both as a treatise on the subaltern hero and as a postcolonial narrative of the peasant uprising. Finally, the play provides a new framework of democratic citizenship through the subaltern protagonist. The play evinces how this subalternity has entered the middle-class living room via authors like Haq who employ the figure of the peasant rebel to understand, question and establish democracy and citizenship against urban autocratic neocolonial power.

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