

Remembering Shahid Suhrawardy

Forgotten Pride of Bengal

By Sunil Bandopadhaya

The Art Advisory Committee for the decoration of the first three buildings of the Unesco headquarters in Paris, which were officially inaugurated in 1958, held its first session from May 16 to 18, 1955. It included Herbert Read, Professor Hassan Shahid Suhrawardy, then Pakistan's ambassador to Spain. Suhrawardy had become a living legend because of his astonishing linguistic attainments and scholarly achievements. He was one of those rare men who broke the barriers of language and custom with ease. Of Iranian descent, the Suhrawardys were settled in Midnapur district of West Bengal. Later they migrated to Calcutta. This family comprised of distinguished scholars, politicians, lawyers and public servants, the likes of Dr. Abdullah Al-Mamun Suhrawardy, who was awarded the first Ph.D from Calcutta University in 1908 for his dissertation on The Sources of Muslim Laws.

Dr. Abdullah studied at Kings College, Cambridge, and travelled widely in France, Germany, Austria, Egypt and Turkey from where he got the title of “Eftekha Urul Milat” (Pride of the Muslim nation). He mastered many Oriental languages and ventured to write a trilingual version of the Upanishads (in collaboration with his friends, like the brilliant scholar-linguist Harinath De of Dhaka and Ernst Theodor Bloch) in 1909.

Shahid Suhrawardy son of Barrister Zahidur Rahman, popularly known as Sir Zahid Suhrawardy, a judge in the Calcutta high court, nephew of Dr. Abdullah Al-Mamun, elder brother of Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, the pre-partition premier of Bengal and former prime minister, of Pakistan was born on 24 October 1890. He graduated with honours in English from Calcutta University in 1908 and left for Oxford the following year with a scholarship to study history and law. When Rabindranath Tagore received the Nobel Prize in 1913, Suhrawardy was in Oxford. He later wrote an article, Tagore At Oxford, in the Calcutta Municipal Gazette (13 September 1941), where he recalled,

“I was introduced into a large size room where I first saw the poet. He was sitting on a divan ... there were many chairs occupied by men and women Indian, British and continental who sat in rapt silence, as if in a prayer hall. In one corner of the room an English lady was modeling the poet's head in clay whilst in another, a fierce man, a Pole perhaps, was sketching, as I saw from a corner of my eye, the fine folds of his robe. The windows were wide open onto the embankment and I do not remember if incense was burning in that room, but if it was not, then it ought to have been because the atmosphere was so charged with awe and admiration”.

Suhrawardy was at Sorbonne, France, during 1910-1911. He graduated from Oxford with honours in history in 1914. Robert Bridges knew him well, D.H. Lawrence referred to him more than once in his letters, and Robert Trevelyan wrote a poem on him. Among his friends and admirers were Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, Probodh Chandra Bagchi, and Dilip Kumar Roy who wrote two articles on him in 1922 and 1965. Suhrawardy met Jawaharlal Nehru while in England and they remained friends for the rest of his life.

In 1914, Suhrawardy went to Russia on a scholarship to study the Slavic languages. He was appointed reader of English language and literature at the Imperial University of St Petersburg and the Women's University in Moscow. He taught English to Alexander Kerensky, Prime Minister of the short lived democracy in 1917 (before Lenin took over) and helped him write his memoirs. In 1918, Suhrawardy staged Rabindranath's Raja at the Moscow Art Theatre, where he worked with Konstantin Stanislavsky. The success of the play promptly gave him the chair of Joint Regisseur. But being a supporter of the Social Revolutionary Party, he fell out with the Bolsheviks. His friends, the actress Germanova and the actor Katchalov, escaped with him to Berlin where the Moscow Kuenstler Theatre dazzled thousands of spectators by its exemplary performances.

Suhrawardy went to Paris from Berlin in 1920 and joined Paris University. He also taught at Prague University. From 1921 to 1928, he became one of the producers, together with the exiles, of the Moscow Art Theatre. The next three years saw him as the theatre expert (art section) of the International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation under the League of Nations in Paris.

All the while, his friends were insistent that he should return to India. He delivered a course of lectures on Mussalman Art in Spain as a special reader in Calcutta University in 1931. Next year he was appointed Bageswari Professor of Fine Arts, department of ancient Indian history and culture in Calcutta University. In the same year, he went on to become the Nizam Professor of Islamic culture and delivered a series of lectures in Viswa Bharati. The years he spent at Calcutta University proved to be the most creative period for Suhrawardy. His lectures were collected in a volume called Prefaces, published by Calcutta University in 1938. This was one of the earliest detailed appreciation by Jamini Roy. Of Mussalman Culture, Suhrawardy's English translation of

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Vassili Vladimirovich Bartold's English translation of famous work in Russian was published in 1934. In 1937, his essays in verse, experiments in language which was not the author's mother tongue, were published. Bridges praised these delicate lyrics.

Suhrawardy served *The Statesman* as its art critic from 1940 to 1947. Lindsay Emerson regarded him "the most accomplished that this journal has ever had". From 1943 to 1947, he was a member of the undivided Bengal's public service commission and after Partition, left India rather reluctantly, to take up a similar post in Karachi where he worked till 1952. He was then appointed a Professor of Oriental Art at Columbia University, USA. Suhrawardy later became involved in the task of assessing the qualifications of members and prospective members of the Pakistan Foreign Service. This was quite appropriate because besides English, he could speak fluently in Russian, French, Italian Spanish and German. Suhrawardy also studied Chinese with Prabodh Chandra's help. In 1948, Suhrawardy translated the poems of Lee Hou-chu from Chinese with the help of the poet Lih Yih-ling.

What was this man like? When he was invited to the birthday party of the Russian pianist Minna Parlemann, he arrived half-an-hour late for dinner. Parlemann pouted her lips and said: "You ought to have been punctual, monsieur. Came the rejoinder: "I beg your pardon mademoiselle. But punctuality is the beginning of materialism."

SOURCE: Bangladesh Forum for Heritage Studies.