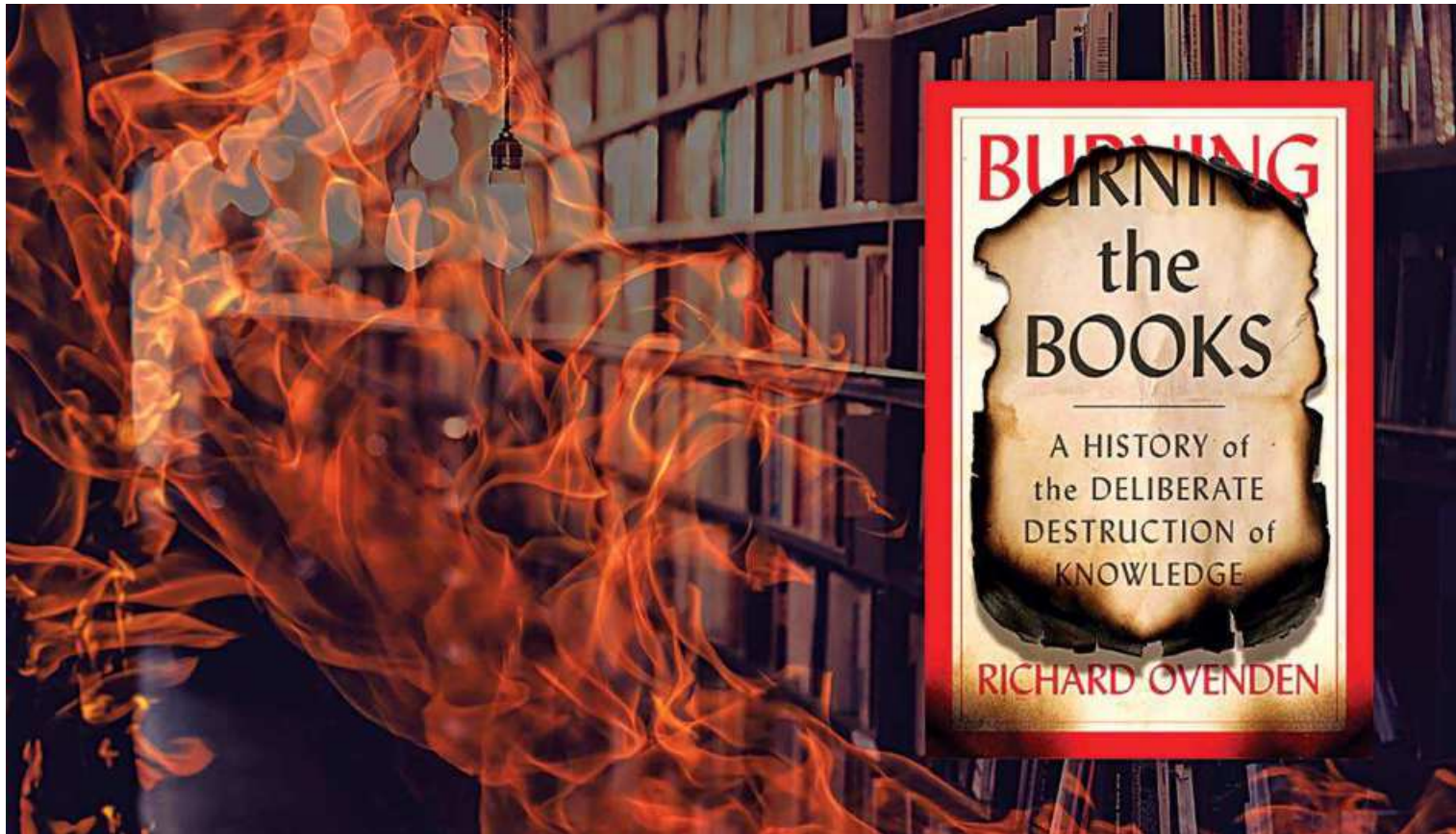


BOOK REVIEW: HISTORY

A HISTORY OF THE DESTRUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE

ISRAR HASAN



COLLAGE: SARAH ANJUM BARI

Humanity has always had an ambivalent relationship with knowledge. While the written word has changed from being recorded on papyrus to tablets, scrolls, ink-ridden bindings to printed books all the way to electronic screens, it has been handled apprehensively by power structures, if only for its impact on societies and individuals. Consequently, book burnings have featured recurrently in the discourses of nation-states and empires: Nazi burnings of texts written by “un-German” authors—homosexuals, socialists, and of course Jewish writers—in Germany are among the most infamous examples. Richard Ovenden’s *Burning the Books: A History of the Deliberate Destruction of Knowledge* (Harvard University Press, 2020) is a vivid catalogue of the destruction of libraries and archives, purges of librarians and intellectuals, self-censorship, and the current threat posed to knowledge by a handful of big data firms.

A librarian at the famed Bodleian Library of Oxford University, Ovenden begins with the famed Library of Alexandria, the story of whose destruction remains shrouded in mystery, and its role in the tug of war between pagan, Christian, and Muslim rules. In striking yet easy prose, he writes of the famous Paper Brigade whose members risked their lives during the Holocaust to save Jewish cultural items from extermination. Another interesting chapter is devoted to the burning of the National Library of Bosnia, whose multicultural staff

fought against the exclusivist Serbian militia intent on destroying what they perceived to be the remnants of Muslim presence in Europe. Countless libraries, mosques, and tombstones were destroyed in this quest to extinguish Muslim heritage from the continent. But being largely Eurocentric in many ways, only one and a half pages are devoted to the burning of the famous Jaffna Library in Sri Lanka and Shia Zaydi libraries in Yemen by Sinhala-Buddhist and Salafi Muslim extremists respectively, who expunged centuries of rich historical traditions of learning and scholarship. Similarly, there are no mentions of book burnings and execution of intellectuals in China, India, or Bangladesh.

What makes the book worth reading and contemplating is the brilliant canopy of stories of known and unknown librarian heroes, their losses and rescues. We learn of Derviş Korkut, a Bosnian Muslim librarian who smuggled an illuminated manuscript called Haggadah out of Sarajevo during World War II, when Jewish documents were being destroyed across Europe.

These anecdotes underline the importance of archives and libraries as vehicles of memory, cultural identity, and reconciliation of history. He argues that archives need to be preserved in order for people to come to terms with themselves and navigate crossroads into their past and the future. For instance, despite being at the threat of destruction, archives played an important role in reconciliation in South Africa after the end of apartheid, when pundits

predicted an all-out civil war. In countries like Iraq devoured by sectarian strife, archivists and librarians can help people understand how current and past rulers played a role in pushing the nation to its brink.

Offering fascinating case studies of Franz Kafka, who wanted his best friend to burn his books, and Sylvia Plath, whose journals and diaries were destroyed by her husband, Ovenden then delves into the contested ideas of self-censorship and legacies of the knowledge of geniuses. An interesting case is highlighted with the story of the great rabble rousing poet, Lord Byron, whose physical excesses in life became the source of gossip and scorn, which encouraged his publishers and friends to take the “ultimate curatorial decision to save his reputation by destroying his memoirs”.

“Preservation should be seen as a service to society, for it underpins integrity, a sense of place and ensures diversity of memory,” Ovenden writes. Encompassing 3,000 years of history from Nineveh to Alexandria to London to Washington DC, Berlin, and Baghdad, Ovenden makes a case for the preservation of knowledge and its intrinsic value in constructing and moulding the history and future of humanity. Yet he expresses his concern over the control of personal data by large tech firms today, and how knowledge is being increasingly atomised in the hands of the few.

Israr Hasan is a contributor.

WORTH A RE-READ

Bangladesh at 49: A Portrait in Books

MURSALIN MOSADDEQUE

It has been almost five decades since Bangladesh became independent. After all these years, it is only natural to ponder over our failures and achievements as a nation. Here are a few books that can help one reflect on the state of our nation today.

The Islamist political fractions made it to the headlines recently with their opposition to sculptures, an act coherent with their open desire for the establishment of Shariah based Islamic laws in the country. This draws our attention to the nature and history of Islamist politics in our country, and its ambivalence with many of our expectations for a secular state. Ali Riaz’s book *Lived Islam and Islamism in Bangladesh* (Prothoma, 2017) shows great analytical prowess in taking a comprehensive look over Islam as a practised religion by millions in the country, the rise of Islamist militancy that led to the Holey Artisan Attack in July 2016, the madrassah education system, and the confrontation of the protesters at Shahbag with Islamist ideologues in 2013.

While it is essential to understand the dynamics of Islam, which is practised by the majority in Bangladesh, it is no less important to pay close attention to the affairs of other ethnic and religious communities.

The marginalisation of the Jumma (Pahari) people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts through encroachment of indigenous land by Bengali settlers and creation of a violent and tumultuous environment in the region has happened with active participation and encouragement of the state apparatus. In Bangladesh’s short history of 49 years, 24 of them have passed without any justice to the abduction of Kalpana Chakma or the other instances of violence. The 75 essays in *Between Ashes and Home: Chittagong Hill Tracts in the Blind Spot of Bangladesh Nationalism* (Drishitipat, 2010), edited by writer and artist Naem Mohaiem, takes a critical look at this failure on our part.

More recently, a video which depicted a woman smoking a cigarette has gone ‘viral’ on Facebook. The reactions that followed on social media and elsewhere testify to the hypocritical double standards our patriarchal society imposes on women. This, of course, is nothing new. *Soti o Sotontro-ra: Bangla Shahitte Nari* (Dibhya Prokash), an anthology edited by Shaheen Akhtar, aims to show the portrayal of women in Bengali literature from the middle ages to the recent times. This is a fascinating project which does not burden the reader with ambiguous and heavy discussions of feminist theory to uncover the grotesqueness of the male gaze. It achieves its goal rather effectively through

careful compilation of literary works throughout the ages.

The great playwright Munir Chowdhury’s play in one act, *Manush* (1947), unflinchingly suggests that our humanity supersedes any other particular notions of identity that we may embrace as Hindus or Muslims. Set in the tragic and blood-soaked backdrop of the communal riots before the Partition of 1947, a Hindu doctor risks his life to aid an ailing Muslim boy when the rioters come knocking on the doors looking for him. When asked who he is at this critical juncture of life and death, he would respond, “*Ami manush*,” (“I am human”).

Soon after the theatrical performance of the play, Munir Chowdhury faced public lynching twice for his bold stance



ILLUSTRATION: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

on social harmony. It seems the seed of communal tension which is at the centre of Munir Chowdhury’s play is still present, evident in the desecration of *mandirs* and Durga Puja *mandaps* every year—which we tolerate as if they were background noise—and the spread of nationalism, parochialism, and intolerance both at home and across the world.

There is a substantial lack of books that can passionately chronicle the historical and cultural narratives that give shape to the idea of Bangladesh as a nation today. These four books are rare exceptions that effortlessly achieve this goal.

The writer is grateful to Gyantaposh Abdur Razzaq Biddapeeth for its rich collection of books and resources that aided the formation of ideas in this article.

Mursalín Mosaddeque grew up in Rangpur, a suburban town in Northern Bengal. He can be reached at mursalínmosaddeque@gmail.com.

Tarashankar’s ‘1971’

EMRAN MAHFUZ



COLLAGE: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

Tarashankar Bandopadhyay 1971 (Daily Star Books, 2015) was initially supposed to be published as two separate novellas, *Shutpar Tapashya* and *Ekti Kalo Meyer Kahini*, both of which would be released together. Being ill at the time, the author announced that the two stories should be compiled and published as one book—among the last verdicts given by the great artist regarding his work. He would pass away soon after.

The book paints a picture of the massacre, political undercurrents, and finally the struggles of rural life, in 1971. After independence, most people became landless in Bangladesh. The working classes could find no work in the villages. And then a devastating famine hit the population, made worse by some of the exploiting upper classes. Set against this backdrop, the first story, “Ekti Kalo

Meyer Kahini”, captures the struggles of hundreds of women caught in the crossfires of the war. The second story, “Shutpar Tapashya”, depicts the secret socio-political activities of West Bengal while, in the background, political structures collapsed with the loss of confidence in Congress’s rule and the Naxalite revolution continued to unfold.

Despite the differences in geographical setting, the two stories share a raw portrayal of the nuances and the loss and suffering of ordinary lives. As in all his works, the novellas are marked by his characteristic short length, simple words, and timeless storytelling.

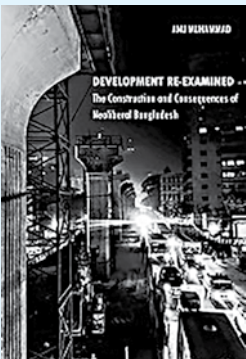
1971 and other Daily Star Books publications are available at 25% discount on Rokomari until December 31, 2020.

THE SHELF

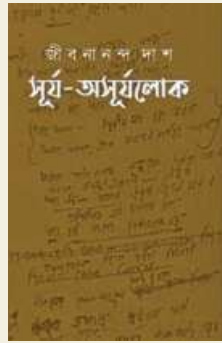
On Bangladesh: A Reading List from 2020

SHAH TAZRIAN ASHRAFI

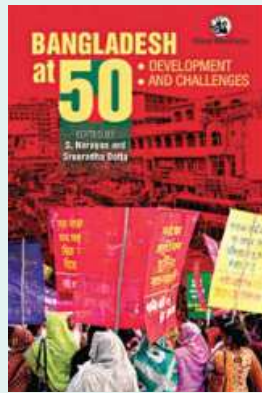
Anthropology, economics, environment, gender, poetry, literature and history populate these books published in 2020, all of which capture the Bangladeshi spirit.



DEVELOPMENT RE-EXAMINED: THE CONSTRUCTION AND CONSEQUENCES OF NEOLIBERAL BANGLADESH
University Press Limited
Anu Muhammad
Non-fiction
How has neoliberalism been shaping Bangladesh’s state policy? What are the implications of a neoliberal model of development for the state? Anu Muhammad attempts to answer these questions through the lenses of global institutions, energy, industrial growth, environment, and workers’ rights. Divided into six parts, the book not only explores the neoliberal nature of the modern Bangladeshi state, but also lays out a blueprint for an alternative way to “visualize a feasible and humane future”.



SHURJO-OSHURJOLOK
Shuchipotro
Edited by Faizul Latif Chowdhury
Poetry
At least 2,000 of Jibanananda Das’s poems have been published over the years, but many have faded into oblivion since his demise. *Shurjo-Oshurjolok* collects 117 of such lost gems.



BANGLADESH AT 50: DEVELOPMENT AND CHALLENGES
Orient Black Swan
Sreeradha Datta and S Narayan
Non-fiction
Bangladesh is one of the Asian countries making great strides in terms of economic development. But how did it reach this stage from its blood-tinged independence in 1971? *Bangladesh at 50* offers a multitude of perspectives on how Bangladesh earned its name as a growing economy and the possible challenges that might beset the country’s social, economic, and political structures. It also provides a glimpse into the dizzying intersection among NGOs, corporations, militancy, environment, and gender.



ONCE MORE INTO THE PAST: Essays personal, public, and literary
Daily Star Books
Fakrul Alam
Non-fiction
Beginning with a childhood spent falling in love with Tagore in the simpler days of secular Old Dhaka and a richly stocked British Council library, Fakrul Alam moves on to strife-ridden days of the liberation war, dissent on the Dhaka University campus, and his experience of working with, and writing about literary greats, from Jibanananda Das, Marx, and Shakespeare to Kaiser Haq, Razia Khan Amin, and more.