

Old world wisdom and venerated scholars

Mustaqim Kazi dives into two priceless works and re-emerges with gems for those who would have them

AL-BIRUNI'S work on the Hindu system of thoughts and practice, Kitab-fi Tahkike Mali Hinde Min Makalatum Makbulatun fil-Akleao Marzulatun (Book on An Accurate Description of All Categories of Hindu Thought, Those Which Are Admissible to Reason As Well As Those Which Are Not), known in short as Tahkik-i-Hind, is as famous a book on the subject as Al-Ghazzali's masterpiece on Islamic ways of life, Qimiya-e-Saadat (Philosopher's Touchstone). The translated versions of these two books have been published, the former by the Bangla Academy and the latter by the Islamic Foundation, both of them government organisations dedicated to preserving and spreading knowledge and culture. The translated versions were published a few years ago and the second edition of Al-Biruni's work and the seventh edition of Al-Ghazzali's are now in circulation, because of their increasing demand.

Shiite Muslim Abu-al-Rayhan Muhammad ibn-Ahmad al-Biruni and Sunni Abu Hamid Muhammad Al-Ghazzali were contemporaries: the former was born in 973 and the latter in 1058, both in Iran. Al-Biruni, known as the most original and profound scholar the Islamic world has produced in the domain of natural science, sojourned in India and was fascinated by the Hindu people and their philosophy. With his certitude about the merits of Islam and an enthusiast in spreading them, why did Al-Biruni think it worthwhile to write a book on Hinduism? The answer could be that it was just a scholar's interest.



Al- Birunir Bharat Totyo
Abu Mahamed Habibullah
Bangla Academy, Dhaka

Shoubhagyer Poroshmoni
(Qimiya-e-Saadat)
Al-Ghazzali
Translation Abdul Khaleque
Islamic Foundation Bangladesh

He desired that the Arab world should know about India. With this purpose in mind, he translated some books on Hindu philosophy and science into Arabic. He acted as a bridge between cultures and civilisations. He spent many years in India during the rule of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni and found, in his time, none other than he was more interested in knowing of the Hindu people.

Al-Biruni found that, in religious thoughts and practices, Hindus were completely different from the Muslims, and that Muslims did not

have those things that Hindus had while Hindus lacked in things Muslims possessed. A queer impression about Hindus comes to mind when one begins to read Al-Biruni's account on them. He mentions that the Hindus, by uttering foreigners' names and wearing their clothes and imitating them, used to scare their children.

The Muslims and the Europeans ruled India and they wrote about India. But Al-Biruni's book on India, the commentators believe, by far, still remains the standard point of reference on the subject. Nirad C. Choudhuri called Tahkik-i-Hind 'completely objective' but complained that the author had to set down some 'hard things' about the Hindu character. Historian Romila Thapar noted that Al-Biruni's "observations on Indian conditions, systems of knowledge, social norms and religion, discussed in his book, the Tahkik-i-Hind, are probably the most incisive made by any visitor to India." Bangla Academy's translation of this book, by Abu Mahamed Habibullah from the original Arabic, is a good and readable one. The Academy and the translator deserve special thanks.

The lapses in proof reading in Abdul Khaleque's Shoubhagyer Poroshmoni, the Bangla version of Al-Ghazzali's Qimiya-e-Saadat, published by Islamic Foundation Bangladesh, will not escape even a common reader's notice, since the lapses are common. These lapses are disturbing. Al-Ghazzali's masterpieces in Bangla are available in shops dealing in Islamic books in the market. But the quality of the

Bangla and their production is so poor that a mere glance at them is pretty upsetting. Here it is advisable that the authors of the Islamic books should improve the quality of their Bangla because the books they write fail to reach the more knowledgeable and avid of readers owing to the quality of their language. The publishers should also be cautious and careful in order to improve the quality of their productions.

To come to the book, the only one published by the Islamic Foundation, it is very big, both in size and content. Ghazzali's interpretation of Islamic ways of life is supported by innumerable quotations from the Holy Quran and traditions of the Prophet Muhammad (SM) and other sources. He also offers his own genuine and original arguments to support his ideas. Qimiya-e-Saadat has four volumes: the first one concentrates on the philosophies of prayer that include invaluable discussions on the nature of man and theology; the second one throws light on such issues involving human behaviour as eating habits, marriage and its morals, act of earning and business ethics, halal food and bare necessities, life in society and seclusion, journey, music, governance, etc.; the third one describes issues pertaining to self-purification; and the fourth illumines matters relating to an individual's salvation that includes penitence, patience and perseverance, fear (in Allah) and hope (of His mercy), tafaqqur (honest thinking), tawaaqul (dependence in Allah), love of Allah, remembrance of death and the

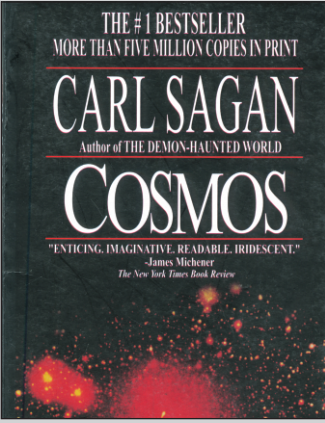
hereafter, etc. Al-Ghazzali spends chapter after chapter discussing these issues and a lot more in this voluminous book (but he often calls it a small book!) in order to enlighten readers theoretically and teach them to achieve and implement those things in practical life.

Al-Ghazzali arrests your mind, when you open his book. Even in translation one can easily comprehend his fiery intellectual power. He goes straight and direct into things and discusses them with absolute certainty. Al-Ghazzali was quite confident about his intellectual ability and authority. He could memorise 300,000 traditions and earned the title 'Huzzat ul-Islam' (Authority of Islam).

Al-Ghazzali should be widely read in our society in an age when gross materialism and decadence have overpowered our spirituality and moral sense of our life. This reviewer, while buying Qimiya-e-Saadat from the showroom of the Islamic Foundation, expected to come across the translated versions of Al-Ghazzali's other masterpieces like Ihya Ulum al-Din, Fathat al-Ulum, Tahfut al-Fasifah, al-Iqtisad fi al-'Iqad. But they were not there. The Islamic Foundation, as also Bangla Academy, can take initiatives to publish these books, including those masterpieces of Al-Farabi. By the way, Al-Farabi and Al-Ghazzali are known as the two most original thinkers Islam has ever produced.

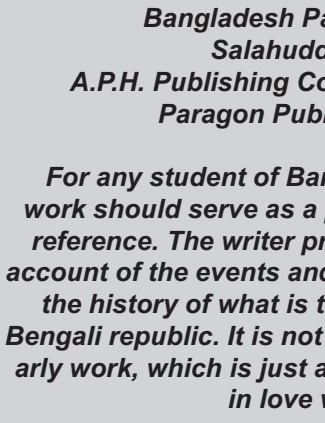
Mustaqim Kazi is a journalist and reviewer of books.

At a glance



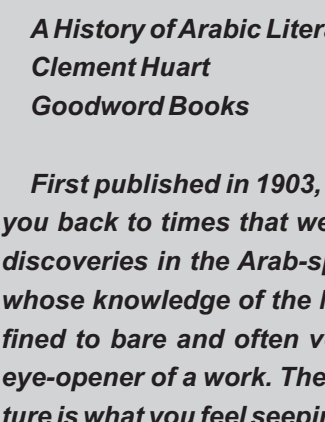
Cosmos
Carl Sagan
Random House

An old book really, but nevertheless a riveting account of what goes on among the stars from an author who explains such intricacies in minute detail. Cosmos gives you an idea of the universe in a way that you can relate to your experience, indeed to all the poetry and music you have made part of your life. Science thus becomes a matter for poetry to handle.



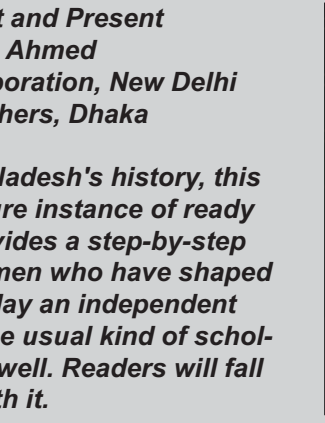
Bangladesh Past and Present
Salahuddin Ahmed
A.P.H. Publishing Corporation, New Delhi
Paragon Publishers, Dhaka

For any student of Bangladesh's history, this work should serve as a pure instance of ready reference. The writer provides a step-by-step account of the events and men who have shaped the history of what is today an independent Bengali republic. It is not the usual kind of scholarly work, which is just as well. Readers will fall in love with it.



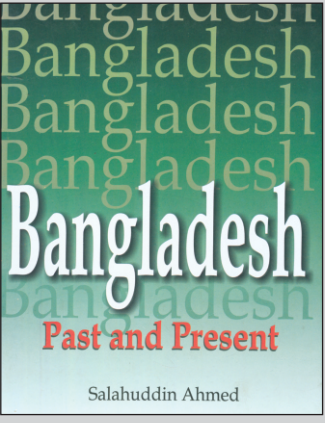
A History of Arabic Literature
Clement Huat
Goodword Books

First published in 1903, Huat's book easily takes you back to times that were symbolic of perennial discoveries in the Arab-speaking world. For those whose knowledge of the Middle East remains confined to bare and often volatile politics, this is an eye-opener of a work. The richness of Arabic literature is what you feel seeping into you.



Bangladesh Past and Present
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The founder of Communist China, despite all the calumny people like Jung Chang have been hurling at him, was a man whose sights on politics were as intense as those on poetry. Here, then, is a small sample of how he related to the poetic world. All the signs of aesthetics are here. The reading ought to be a matter of pure delight.



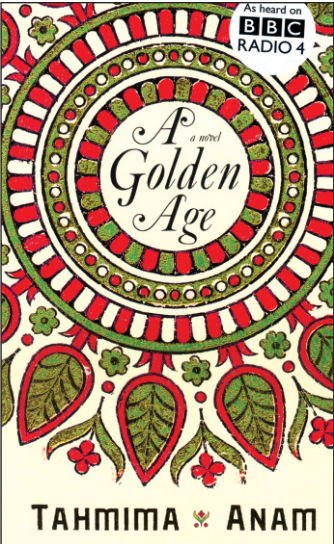
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A harvest of spring 1971

Mahbub Husain Khan reads a fascinating book and is reminded of the agony and the ecstasy of a war waged at high intensity

IT is a rewarding experience to write a review of the first novel authored by the daughter of my friend. Her grandfather was a friend of my father. Despite these family interactions, I have to praise the book, as a neutral reviewer, because it has been written by someone who was born in 1975 and could realistically visualise the horrors of March 1971 and the ecstasy of December 1971.

"The sole country under the sun that is endowed with imperishable interest for alien prince and alien peasant, for lettered and ignorant, wise and fool, rich and poor, bonded and free, the one land all men desire to see and having seen once, by even a glimpse, for the shows of all the rest of the globe combined." Mark Twain wrote this about the Indian subcontinent in 1897, but for all of us it might well have been said about Bangladesh. We ceased to be governed by an alien country and 'alien prince and peasant', because we had become ungovernable by outside authority. Our self-assertion and self-determination were too strong. Under the inspiring leadership of



A Golden Age
Tahir M. Anam
Shahitya Prakash, Dhaka

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, dissent had the sophistication and the resulting force far in excess of what could be mobilised by the opposing alien forces.

This is what Tahmima Anam has brought home to her readers with a mature narrative and linguistic technique. Syed Manzoorul Islam in his review of the book in Prothom Alo says that that the novel starts from 1959 and ends in 1971. Yes, 1959 was a golden age for Manzoorul Islam, Mahfuz Anam and myself --- and particularly for me as I stood first in all the public examinations from 1961 to 1968 and went on to study at Oxford. But the author has only written twelve pages about the period from 1959 to March 1971. This is only to introduce the characters in the novel and acclimatise the non-Bangladeshi readers to the background of the genocide of 1971.

The novel brings back for me memories of 1971 when I was posted at Rajshahi, but did not join my post till June of the year when I had to do so, as a senior colleague of mine had given the address of my hideout (at Charchat on the Indian border) to the Pakistani army officer at Rajshahi. Anam's novel is an unputdownable one. I read all 276 pages of it at one sitting on a Friday evening. Let me quote the last

paragraph of the novel, where Rehana says, "This war that has taken so many sons has spared mine. This age that has burned so many daughters has not burned mine.

I have not let it".

Writing is a process of withdrawing to create another world. Tahmima Anam's style is self-consciously literary. She uses symbolism, a knotty prose and complicated forms of narration not usually employed in political fiction. But political fiction it is. A moral urgency informs everything she writes and endows it with a virtue quite distinct from its literary merits.

Anam's subject is the agony of East Pakistan under Pakistani rule, her theme an institutionalised corruption that leads to personal betrayal. Her great achievement has been to give the world a reckoning of the terrible cost of racism in her country that goes beyond what journalism can relate. For decades, she writes, it is not Bengalis who were brutalised through a denial of human rights to the majority population of Pakistan inhabiting its eastern wing. Indeed, the ruling Punjabi government has dehuman-

ised the minority as well.

The work is a unique novel to be read by those born after 1947 (following independence from the British colonial power) and after 1971 (after the successful war against Pakistan). It is a work that is really the harvest of spring 1971, a golden harvest of nine months of what was truly a golden age.

Mahbub Husain Khan is a former civil servant, literary critic and writes fiction.

A Golden Age, priced at Tk. 300., is available at Shahitya Prakash, Muktijuddho Jadugar, Bangladesh Cooperative Society Ltd., Pathak Shamabesh, Bishwa Bichitra, Omni Books, Etcetera Bangladesh (Pvt.) Ltd., Words n' Pages, Books Express, Jagriti, Hritwik, Srabon Prakashoni, Sagar Publishers, Book View, Zeenat Book Supply Ltd., Rashed Book House, New Books and Stationery, Uttara Book Society, Mowla Brothers, Gyankosh, Batighar, Bishod Bangla, Kathakali and Boipatra.

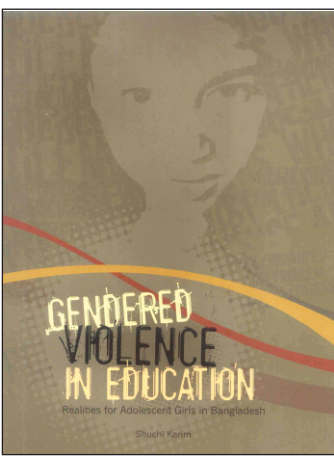
Of gender disparities and dropout rates

Audity Falguni studies a research work that focuses on the difficulties adolescent girls face on their way to school

HASIA Begum and Abdul Aziz got their first daughter married off when she was only in class V. Their second daughter, Shahnaz, was a bright student. When she was in the eighth standard, a distant relative named Azizul sent a marriage proposal, which was then politely turned down by the family. After that Azizul started spreading false rumours about an "affair" between him and Shahnaz. The rumours obviously had a negative impact on the reputation of the girl and her family. With time, his actions became so outrageous that Shahnaz's family got her married off hurriedly to a butcher, a man definitely beneath her in qualification and social status. It also marked the end of the girl's education.

Gendered Violence in Education: Realities for Adolescent Girls in Bangladesh by Shuchi Karim, researcher and teacher in the Women's Studies Department of Dhaka University, addresses the multifarious problems adolescent girls face in our country during their studies at secondary level, problems that often lead to their becoming dropouts at school.

In South Asia and in Bangladesh particularly, there are marked gender disparities in dropout rates at the secondary level of education. Though there has been a considerable bridging of the gender gap in recent years, particularly at the primary level, and female literacy



Gendered Violence in Education
Realities for Adolescent Girls in
Bangladesh
Shuchi Karim
ActionAid Bangladesh

has risen more rapidly than that of men in recent years, very few girls take advantage of secondary, vocational, technical and higher education. The work in question simply projects light on these undressed issues of adolescent girls' education. The study covers 856 respondents from 18 spots in villages, upazilas, cities and districts from six divisions of the country. They include 215 adolescent girls, 198 adolescent boys, 194 parents or guardians, 182 teachers and 67 representatives of civil

society.

The five principal reasons behind an adolescent girl's discontinuing her studies are insecurity-distance-commuting problems, teachers and parents, early marriage, socio-religious problems, violence and failure in studies.

Severe forms of teasing and taunts by boys and men can intimidate many girls, enough for them to be unable to focus on their studies or to be so ashamed that they might want to stop going to school. Around 77.6% of the girls responded that they felt intimidated by men's indecent behavior, with 45.5% thinking it was always better to stop studying instead. Meanwhile, a majority of parents (84.5%) said that they lived in constant fear for their daughters' security on the way to school. The fear revolved around the possibilities of acid attacks, abduction, rape or scandals. Situations like these compel 73.1% of parents to stop their daughters' education half way, as in a society like ours family reputation is more precious than a girl's education.

In response to the question of whether school premises were safe or not, a majority of rural and urban school girls considered their schools to be safe, while semi-urban girls had a mixed response.

As to whether teachers are discriminatory in behaviour towards boys and girls, 12.2% of parents and a considerable number of girls

(28.8%) said that there was some sort of gender discrimination in class. For example, girls in Chittagong complained that their teachers often made such remarks as "What is the use of all these efforts by schools and government to educate girls? They should do what suits them best, which is household work."

When asked whether teachers used language that was humiliating, insulting or discriminatory for a girl, 50.2% girls on average, with a majority from rural and semi-urban areas, reported that teachers did use language humiliating for girls or that reinforced stereotypes. The girls complained that offensive comments by teachers, like "Why are you wearing a nose-pin?" or "Have you come to school so dressed up to impress the boys? I will make the boy kiss your lipstick off your lips" or "Why so beautifully dressed today? Dreaming of marriage all the time?" were shattering for them.

Asked if girls experienced any kind of sexual assault from their teachers, a very small percentage of girls (16.7%) responded that they had experienced "indecent behaviour" or sexual assault from their teachers. They reported teachers touching bodies while explaining a subject; putting their hands on a girl's breasts on the pretext of checking for little illegal chits during exams; school guards staring at different parts of the body, et al,

while 38.1% of them reported knowing "someone else who has had such experience." Almost 32% of parents said they had some kind of knowledge of such incidents. That was quite in contrast to teachers, who reported having only heard of such things happening in other schools. The story thus turns into a matter of "someone else's" which in turn complicates the matter of authenticity.

Long hours of journey in the rural areas to go to school or lack of clean toilets, particularly during the periodical cycles, add to the trauma of adolescent girls. Regarding distance, an adolescent girl from a rural area observed thus, "Sometimes the distance is too big, and not everyone can afford to take a rickshaw or a van. So, many of us have to walk this distance, and because of eve-teasing, or even the fear of it, we cannot stop somewhere to take rest. We become so tired, especially during the summer when the sun is too hot! By the time we reach the school, we are simply drained out!"

The book, with its eye-catching cover design, is worth reading. It is free of cost and copies can be had from ActionAid Bangladesh.

Audity Falguni is associate coordinator, ActionAid Bangladesh.

THIS collection of poems by the Norwegian playwright and poet Henrik Ibsen is unique in the sense that it serves a much more practical purpose than just being a brief stimulation to the finer senses. In fact, this is a document recording the history of the late 19th century. It was not too long ago, but come to think of it: our historical knowledge of that period is quite indistinct. Oh yes, there are many books but somehow we, the general people, never read them because these happen to be the times that were never featured too prominently in the history books. Well, Ibsen gives us poetry and history, but to savour both a little patience is required. These translations by Anisur Rahman certainly contribute to a greater degree of understanding on our part about an era we have not quite been able to put our finger on.

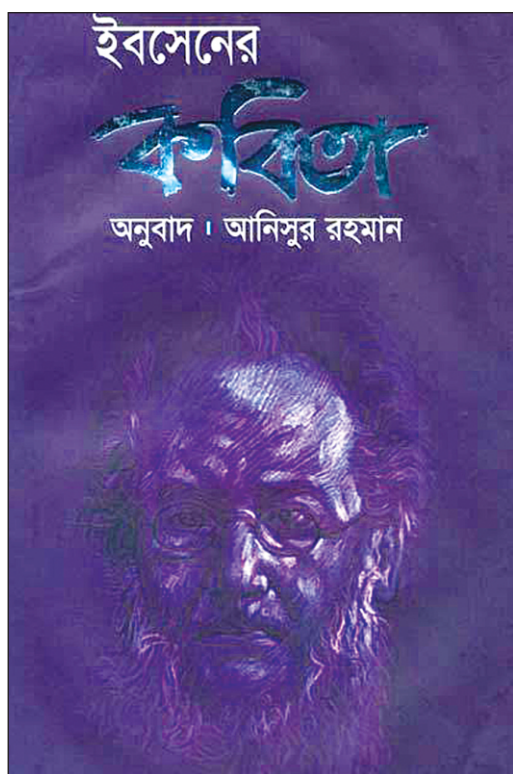
Ibsen wrote in a semi-abstract way, perhaps a style of his age, and to salvage the meaning a little effort is necessary. However, the best feature of the book, the annotations and the small descriptions about the background of the poems, help the reader a good deal.

If this translated work had not been there the common reader would have found the work impermeable. Thankfully, that does not happen and despite an approach which is rather difficult to handle, the poet manages to reach out to the reader.

Time and again, nature has found place in Ibsen's world of thoughts. Along with such realities we have events that lift life a little above the mundane. Ibsen was a poet and like all poets he was never restricted by discipline of thought. Hence, we get a piece that extols his wife and then in another, we see him flying in la la land weaving a Utopia with his lover. But his castles and the balcony by the sea crumble when reality has other plans. Ibsen's poems talk of an era when changes in nature, the lighthouse, the palace and imperial ambitions were significant parts of human society. He thus speaks crisply of invading armies, fleets of foreign navies with colonial objectives and so on.

Anisur Rahman has already established a reputation for himself through his Bangla presentations of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and Ibsen's *The Lady from the Sea*. And in the work under review, he has done a superb job. He has not allowed flippant language to steal Ibsen's sombre and solemn mood and perhaps this is why the collection will appeal to those who are into poetry, not in the superficial sense but out of genuine passion.

Of late, Ibsen's works have been coming on stage and this collection of poems will help people inclined to literary pursuits to understand this great writer. So far, his poems have existed in scattered form and now with this collection, the Norwegian poet will emerge from the



Ibsen-er Kobita
A translation of Ibsen's poetry
Anisur Rahman
Mowla Brothers, Dhaka

obscurity that he has been trapped in for so long in these parts.

We expect more translations from Anisur Rahman, who has already become a modern age Ibsen aficionado. Special mention needs to be made about the cover, which in deep purple maintains the mystique of Ibsen. In fact, it seems to suggest that Ibsen is never too obvious. And, to be frank, if poetry is too straightforward, then how will it manage to pique the senses?

Nayyara Noor is a commentator on movies and a reviewer of books.