

## Politics observed through the prism of history

**Syed Badrul Haque studies a work on Bangladesh's history and likes what he discovers**

IN the annals of political history, Bangladesh stands out uniquely as having lived under three flags in one century. But, quite reasonably, Bangladesh could have escaped the second flag if only the leaders had the vision to realise the political absurdity of holding together the two parts of a country separated by some twelve hundred miles on the basis of religion only. In 1971, when Pakistan split apart and Bangladesh was created, it was clear that the way India had been divided in 1947 was not a fitting solution, as the author of this work remarks in his prefatory notes.

Commenting on the collective efforts of the great Bengali leaders, work that reached a finality through the achievement of Bangladesh, the author would rank their contributions in the following order, 'If the first runner in the relay race of Bengali nationalism under Muslim leadership was Sher-e-Bangla Fazlul Huq, the baton changed hands to Suhrawardy, then to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the last runner who crossed (the) victory line in pegging the flag of a new state on the political map of the world.'

Sifting through the classified official documents of the pre-Partition days, which were not available for a long time, the author places Suhrawardy close to the position held by Jinnah and Nehru. He says, 'On the eve of Partition of India, Suhrawardy, the premier of Bengal, came to the political spotlight of India as the architect of the possible third independent state, the Free State of Bengal, side by side with India and Pakistan with (the) support of Viceroy Lord Mountbatten and Jinnah.' In 1947, the Bengali Muslims under the leadership of Suhrawardy failed to fulfill their dream of becoming the masters of an undi-



**Bangladesh Past and Present**  
Salahuddin Ahmed  
APH Publishing Corporation, Delhi  
Paragon Publishers Dhaka

vided Bengal, but it became true to a large extent in 1971 under the leadership of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Suhrawardy did not achieve his dream of a united Bengal, but his vision, was 'most statesmanlike,' as Nicholas Mansergh mentions in his book, *The Transfer of Power*. History, to be correct, has yet remained rather uncharitable to Suhrawardy where his statesmanship is concerned.

The author has undertaken constructive research on Sher-e-Bangla Fazlul Huq and places his position in Bengal in these words: 'After Sirajuddaulah, the last Nawab of Bengal, lost his throne, Fazlul Huq assumed the role of uncrowned king of Bengal in modern times when he held

the office of... Premier of Bengal.'

The stature of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was symbolised when he, in his magnanimity, granted clemency to 195 Pakistani war criminals. 'There are only a few instances in world history where a surrendered army was shown generosity by an authority which came to power', the author notes.

Analysing the turbulent periods of Ziaur Rahman and Ershad, the author euphemistically comments: 'While Zia was asked to play a legitimate rescue role while the country was plunged into a political upheaval, Ershad seemed snatching away, almost stealing, a new robe of democracy put on by Bangladesh... The stigma of a backdoor entry into the country's political arena by toppling an elected government aside, Ershad's lacklustre management, autocratic and repressive measures and archaic political style were no match for the earlier popularity of Zia and his political party BNP, although notably both men originated from the same military establishment. Ershad, president for nearly nine years, was ousted through popular uprising...'

The emergence of Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina, leaders of the two mainstream political parties, the BNP and the Awami League, marks a watershed in a third world country like Bangladesh. The dynastic lineage no doubt was a good launching pad for their entry into the country's political stage, but they too in their turn proved their political mettle in no uncertain manner.

The book is characterised by the author's unerring eye for the current socio-political spectrum of the nation. He writes: 'A serious deficiency in the development of parliamentary democ-

racy in Bangladesh is that the top agenda of the opposition party is simply to unseat the government without any well-explained issue or policy and would prefer to settle issues on the streets instead on the floor of the parliament'.

The page-turning chapter, 'Changing phases of Bengali nationalism leading to the Bengali Muslim identity', is analytically outstanding. The author in his incisive critique presents the character of Bengali nationalism over a period of a century. Like any other nation in Asia, the author points out, 'the Bengali Muslims are passing through the process of searching for their identity. They are both Bengalis and Muslims.' Interestingly, the author finds some resemblance between the Muslims of Indonesia and those of Bangladesh in their search for a proper identity. He notes, 'Since gaining independence both Indonesia and Bangladesh experimented with secular nationalist ideologies. Due to the global effect of (a) resurgence of Islam, the Muslims of Indonesia and Bangladesh wish to combine their appeal towards their indigenous identity with the common ideology of the world Muslim community.' The comparative substance of Bengali nationalism and Bangladeshi nationalism leads the author to conclude: 'After the evolution of Bangladeshi nationalism, the continuation of Bengali nationalism in the political sense is simply nonexistent.'

Liberation from alien rule, albeit at a great price, was a splendid chapter in the nation's history. Many of the hopes the people pinned to that gain are, however, yet to materialise. The book reflects some desolate aspects of today's society, but there is at the end a speck of hope as the real mean-

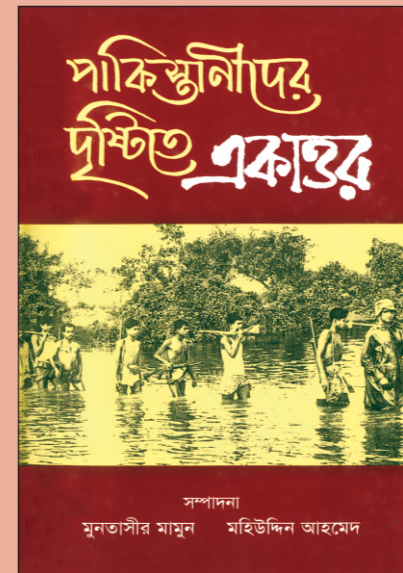
ing of freedom emerges. The supreme tragedy of Bangladesh has been the mutual enmity between two mainstream political parties, the BNP and the Awami League, putting the nation's progress in serious jeopardy. Surely after liberation it was a new dawn, a new script; but whether our leaders could prove themselves equal to the task is a question mark with an asterisk. We are in a kind of time warp. It is time for widespread, sustained and farsighted public dialogue, so we can take a hand in shaping our collective future, the author feels.

The book should be appreciated by scholars who are sensitive to context yet committed to the generalised historical explanations emanating from a case-oriented holistic approach that can better accommodate problems of multiple causation. A book of this genre dovetailing the past and present should squarely help a reader's understanding of the dialectics of the present scenario of Bangladesh in a correct perspective.

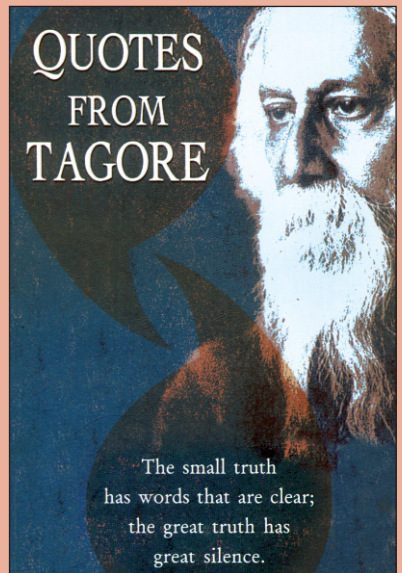
It is a dignified, serious piece of work and the style is engaging. The author narrates political history without giving in to personal emotions or partisanship; he proves himself a master navigator in the choppy socio-political seas that most often characterise our understanding of history, past or present. The portrayal of the political landscape is both compelling and utterly consistent with what we know today. A valuable bibliography containing the names of and references to books and documents are of immense help for further research.

Syed Badrul Haque is former public relations officer to the President of Bangladesh

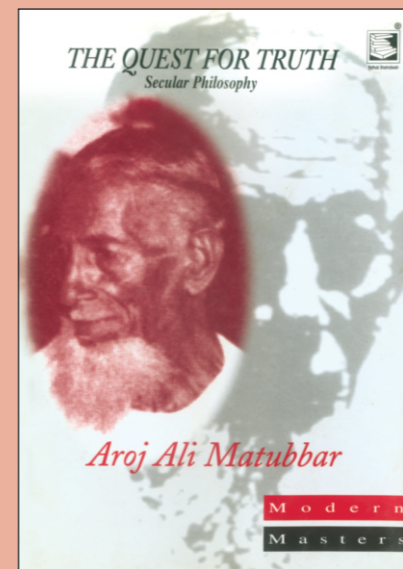
## At a glance



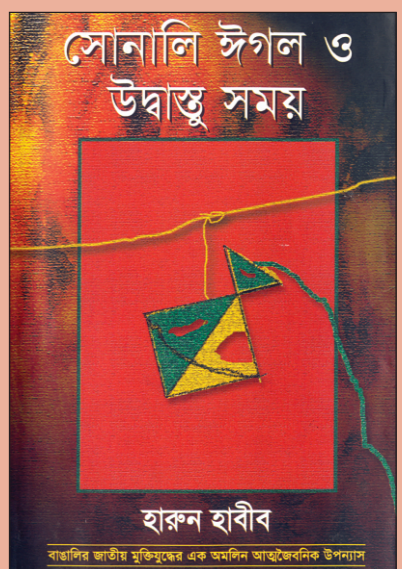
**Pakistani Drishti-te Ekattur**  
Edited by Muntasir Mamun and Mohiuddin Ahmed  
The University Press Limited, Dhaka  
It is an eye-opener of a book from two scholars of the country. Whether their findings happen to reflect an opening of eyes in Pakistan itself, insofar as the Bangladesh war of 1971 and the killing spree resorted to by the Pakistan army are concerned, is what you need to find out. Read here the Pakistani mind, from Benazir Bhutto to Niazi and everyone else in between.



**Quotes from Tagore**  
Rupa, New Delhi  
Anyone on the lookout for ready quotations from the greatest of poets that Bengal has ever produced will relish this small compendium. Tagore's views on matters that concern the individual as well as the society around him are all here, and all rather poignant. Traditional eastern mysticism comes in tandem with modern thoughts and you are content.



**The Quest for Truth**  
Secular Philosophy  
Aroj Ali Matubbar  
Pathak Shamabesh, Dhaka  
Here is what you might call an insight into the mind of a pastoral philosopher. In his lifetime, Matubbar upheld views that were not just liberal, in that conventional sense of the meaning, but were also radical. His thoughts on faith, life and what follows make compelling reading in this work. You will enjoy the thoughts that shoot up from its pages.



**Shonali Igol O Udbastu Shomoy**  
Haroon Habib  
Magnum Opus, Dhaka  
A gripping novel centering around the War of Liberation from a noted journalist whose own exploits in the 1971 independence movement remain remarkable. Haroon Habib traces history and human emotion against a background of a society waging a desperate battle for survival. Into the story come all sorts of men and tales, those we have always known about.

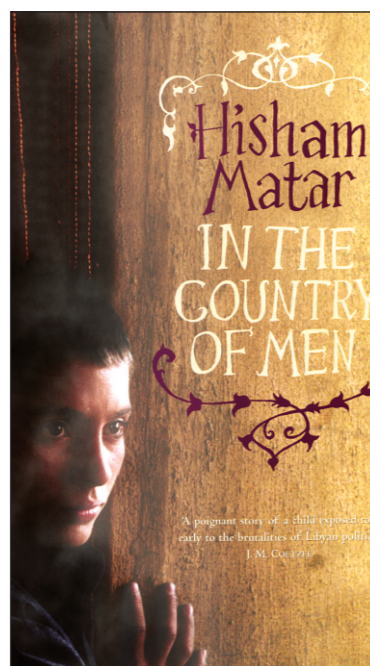
## Of life altering, perplexing experiences

**Karim Waheed reads of a 'revolution' and is disturbed by 'disappearances' and 'kidnappings'**

IT was 1979, and the sun was everywhere. Tripoli lay brilliant and still beneath it... Twenty-four-year-old Suleiman, now living in Cairo, reminisces. Suleiman was nine when he was sent off to Cairo. It was a summer that changed a naïve young boy. He had experienced a jarring chain of events, events that could easily sway anyone's point of view. That particular summer forced Suleiman to grow up overnight. Yet the way he narrates those life altering and perplexing experiences remains unpretentious. It was presumably the way a nine-year-old would look at life, up to that point.

Libyan author Hisham Matar, now living in London, starts off his debut novel *In the Country of Men* with a rather Amitav Ghosh-esque narrative. But move on to the end of page one and things change radically, as Suleiman goes on, 'Baba never found out about Mama's illness; she only fell ill when he was away on business...'

Matar was born in New York and spent his childhood in the US with his Libyan parents while his father was working for the Libyan delegation to the United Nations. When he was three, the family moved back to Tripoli. Due to political persecution



**In the Country of Men**  
Hisham Matar  
Penguin/Viking  
by the Gaddafi government, in 1979 Matar's father was accused of being a reactionary by the Libyan revolutionary regime. He was forced to flee

the country with his family and they lived in exile in Egypt. Matar moved to London in 1986 for higher studies and got a degree in architecture. In 1990, while Matar was still in London, his father was kidnapped in Cairo and has been reported missing ever since. In 1996 the family received two letters with his father's handwriting, stating that he had been kidnapped by the Egyptian secret police, handed over to the Libyan regime and imprisoned in the notorious Abu-Salim prison in Tripoli. Since then there has been no more information about his father's well-being.

Matar began writing poetry and has experimented in theatre. He started working on his debut novel in early 2000. *In the Country of Men* was published in July 2006 and went on to be shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize and the Guardian First Book Award last year. The book has been translated in 14 languages and published in 17 countries.

The overall impression is that the novel zooms in on the madness and witch-hunt that lingered on decades after the 'Revolution' led by the 'Guide' (Muammar Gaddafi) took place. However, with subtlety and deceptively simple prose, Matar brings to light another blazing issue --

the obvious objectification of women in the Arab world. Suleiman's mother refers to the day of her marriage as 'that black day'. She was only 14 and the groom was 23. She was forced into marriage, after being spotted by her brother at a café having cappuccino in 'mixed company'. That 'progressive' poet brother, who went on to marry an all-American girl, saved little sister out to the family. To rattle their 'honour' the 'high council' (as Suleiman's mother calls the men in her family) married her off as soon as possible, something she never got over and turned to substance abuse for temporary solace.

Baba, Suleiman's father, is a more distant figure, often away on business trips, oblivious to what is going on at home. Suleiman soon learns his father is not away on business at all. He is deeply involved in an underground movement voicing protests against the totalitarian Gaddafi regime.

The adults are secretive around Suleiman. The inquisitive kid sort of stumbles upon incidents like his best friend Kareem's father Ustath Rashid being dragged away by 'Revolutionary' men. Rashid's farcical trial becomes a public affair and his lynching is televised. Baba is constantly on

the run and his associates under threat.

In the Country of Men is also a story of betrayal. Adults around Suleiman betray each other, trying to protect their near and dear ones. Neighbour Ustath Jafer (a senior member of the Mokhabarat, trained in Moscow by the KGB) and his gossipy wife Um Masoud, become Mama's best friends overnight. Baba, after being tortured in captivity, discloses information on his associates. Suleiman too often finds himself hurting and verbally abusing his 'once best pal' Kareem. The ultimate betrayal comes as a blow to Suleiman when he is packed off to Egypt. The 'apple of the eye' of his parents, Suleiman lives in a world that he perceives to be a 'solitary confinement' with its perks and is labelled a 'stray dog' by the Libyan authorities.

Matar's way of storytelling is convincing. He keeps a child's memories unharmed, unadulterated. However, the novel seems to fall short towards the end. Matar takes only fifteen pages to go over fifteen years of Suleiman's life in exile.

Karim Waheed is cultural reporter, The Daily Star

## Tales of the hubristic

**Shahan Haq reads about human ego and is left stupefied**

IT is the ego we are talking about here. You might as well make a correction and say that the ego is what we have always been talking about, indeed have been nurturing throughout the course of human civilisation. And proof of that is what comes through in this gripping little book wherein you once more have cause to meet the famous and the illustrious, but this time with a difference though.

And where do you find the difference? It shines through the heavy praise they heap on themselves. Remember Winston Churchill describing his own luminosity by looking at himself as a glow-worm amidst all the worms around him? That is ego for you. In case you were inclined to think, in the old-fashioned way, that the ego is something to be embarrassed about, observe what John Cassavetes has to say about it: 'It's bullshit when people say that ego is a bad trip. It's the only trip. You are who you are because of your ego; without it nothing counts.'

And there you are. As you flip through the pages of this book, you find experience as also the life you have lived through taking on increasingly stranger hues. Your notions of the human personality change when you have the actor Paul Newman tell Edwin Miller, 'You know, you are privileged to have this interview.' You are aghast. How much more horrible can people be, no matter how lightly you may sometimes observe the workings of the hubristic in them? The boxer Muhammad Ali, never one to shy away from self-praise, comes forth with that in-your-face remark: 'When you're as great as I am, it's hard to be humble.' What do you make of that? And what happens to the values, one of them being humility, you have grown up with? Not even the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche could hold himself back from self-adulation. Here is how he does it, in his own words: 'I'm not a man -- I'm dynamite.' You fall back, exhausted, on your sofa or bed or floor or wherever you are. Aren't philosophers expected to be meek and mild?

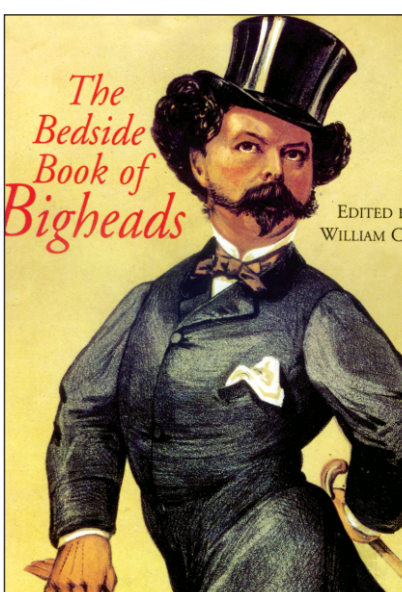
Never mind the answer. Just move on. Listen to what the writer Noel Coward says about his own place in the universal scheme of things: 'I am an enormously talented man, after all it's no use pretending that I am not, and I was bound to succeed.' And Jerry Hall about herself: 'I think if I weren't so beautiful, maybe I'd have some more character,' says she. Yes, she is beautiful all right, but it is beauty not tempered with the self-effacing. But why blame her? Robert Benchley, whose writings you have always loved reading, takes us by surprise by his view of himself: 'It took me fifteen years to discover I had no talent for writing, but I

couldn't give it up because by that time I was already famous.' Maybe that is tongue-in-cheek. But you marvel at the ego just the same. Even Albert Camus had his own contribution to make to the history of the human ego when he noted, 'I conceived at least one great love in my life, of which I was always the object.' Truman Capote is not far behind him. This is how he looks at his enormous talent: 'I'm an alcoholic. I'm a drug addict. I'm homosexual. I'm a genius.' You've got to admit you can't beat that sort of self-assessment.

Pure, unadulterated arrogance is what you collide into when you meet George Bernard Shaw. His hubris was prodigious and legendary. Here is just one instance of it: 'I often quote myself. It adds spice to my conversation.' Remember Charles de Gaulle? Pride was his forte, often for very legitimate reasons. He once said he was, politically, neither on the left nor on the right but above. Here's a little more: 'I respect only those who resist me, but I cannot tolerate them.'

Read on. By the time you are through reading, your head will be in a spin and your emotions in a state of turmoil. Your own ego will have taken a backseat to those of all these people you have been reading about.

Shahan Haq studies comic situations and sometimes writes about them

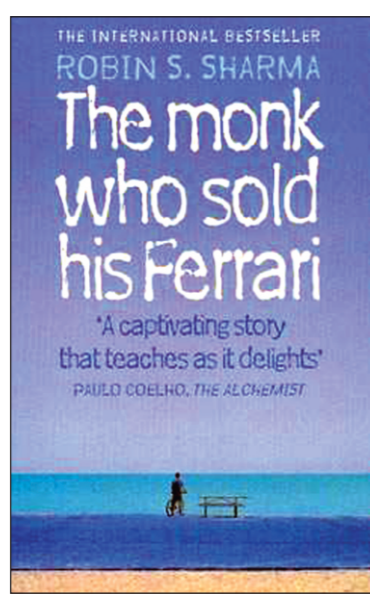


**The Bedside Book of Bigheads**  
Edited by William Cole  
John Murray, London

## Rediscovering life, all in beatific manner

**Anindita Roy reads an unusual book and has mixed feelings about it**

THE book, *The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari*, by Robin Sharma starts with a courtroom scene. The main protagonist, the brilliant, distinguished and sharp trial lawyer Julian Mantle, collapses in the middle of a packed courtroom due to a massive heart attack. Julian Mantle, a graduate from Harvard Law School, is a reputed lawyer who has regularly made the front pages of newspapers and who owns a couple of houses, villas and several cars (one of which is a red Ferrari). His extra curricular activities are late night visits to some of the finest restaurants with well-known beautiful women. All said and done, Julian Mantle comes by all the material things in life one could possibly ask for. The severe heart attack he goes through followed by the time he spends in hospital gives him an opportunity to review his life, indeed his achievements. In other words, he



**The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari**  
Robin Sharma  
HarperCollins

confronts himself, as it were, with a lot of questions. He decides to quit his profession, he sells off all his possessions, more importantly his red Ferrari, and heads for India.

Three years later, Julian returns from his soul-searching trip to India and meets the other protagonist, John, who narrates the story in the book. John and Julian have been students together and have worked together. Julian's arrival after a three-year gap takes John by surprise. The transformation in Julian's look is unthinkable. He appears to be a young, no longer anxious, a vital with spark in the eyes person. Julian shares the secret of his happiness and how he has come by it. In the next eleven chapters of the book he unfolds a fable about fulfilling one's dream and reaching one's destiny. He shares with John ideas of improving life -- personally, professionally and spiritually.

The book in a way comes through as didactic, asking readers in so many words to take charge of their lives through the various methods that Robin Sharma shares with them in eleven chapters. If one is not happy with life, one can change it by accepting absolute personal responsibility. 'The quality of your life is determined by the quality of your thoughts' or 'there is no mistake only lessons. See setbacks as opportunities for personal expansion and spiritual growth' are some examples of the thoughts Julian shares with John. He also emphasises such ideas as 'master your mind' and tells John to find a purpose in life and then 'follow your purpose'. We tend to live either in the past, which we cannot change, or in the future, which is unknown. In the process we tend to forget to enjoy the present moments of life, which can be beautiful. Julian advocates living life selflessly and

enjoying the journey it truly is. Happiness, in the end, lies in the journey and not in the achievement. If we stay focused on our goals, the universe will take care of the rest.

Robin Sharma explains all of this in beautiful language. Probably this is the only quality that draws readers to the book. The rest is nothing new to us who are more familiar with Paulo Coelho. Sharma, an expert on leadership and personal development, tries to give readers some solutions for life's pressing problems. The approach, though, takes on an appearance of superficiality. Depth is somewhat a missing factor in the work. Sometimes it fails to captivate. In the overall sense, however, the book will perhaps appeal to people inclined to dabble in oriental philosophy.

Anindita Roy, who specialises in public health, writes from Germany