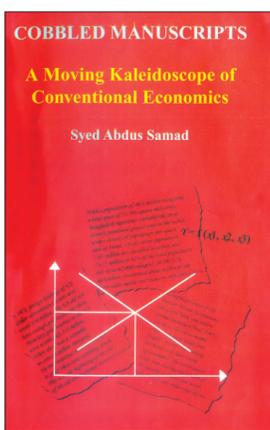


# An extensive journey in political economy

Shahid Alam goes through a detailed work and emerges with his assessment of it

At the very least, the contents of the book under review do justice to its title. One might have justifiable reservations about the range and power of the kaleidoscope, or tempo and buzz of its movement, but one cannot deny that the 488-page book has been cobbled together out of twenty-five articles and five appendices. The articles were written between 1973 and 2003, and have been chronologically presented in the volume, although there was a hiatus of seven years between the penultimate essay, composed in 1996, and the final piece, which was written for a national English-language daily, and is one of the more thought-provoking ones. Fourteen articles were published in various national and international journals, in anthologies, published conference proceedings, and as an occasional paper. Several were presented at conferences or as lecture talk, one was selected from the author's diary, while the rest, including the longest essay (Chapter 12), provide no clue as to their composition purpose, and may be presumed to have been composed at different times (whether as "a graduate student, others as a teacher, professional and researcher") without being able to find their way to publications or conferences. Two essays were co-authored, "Some Issues in Technology Transfer and Technology Policy: Or A Skeptical Note on Appropriate Technology" (Chapter 6), with Sadrel Reza, and "Interdependence and Competitiveness" (Chapter 19), with Godfrey Gunatilleke. The appendices are a collection of the author's speeches in various forums, a report, and a couple of notes.

Syed Abdus Samad has some insightful thoughts in his preface to the volume, and a couple of devilishly wicked disclaimers. If they were not given, a reader would have a field day in lambasting the author for using outdated data, and heterogeneous citation style. But Samad offers this caveat: "One of the articles, the one on real wages in Bangladesh, is definitely outdated in terms of data used.... The articles...do not follow any standard uniform citations/references/footnotes. This is due to the fact that different journals have different requirements." While the author might want to explain it away with his statement that he has "made no alterations to the original texts", there would be many who would have liked to have seen him make the effort to at least have standardised the endnotes to each article. It would not have altered the main texts in any way. He left the texts in their original form because he was unable to find adequate research support to update some that necessitated revision. However, the kernels of wisdom contained in the articles, written in a way to make even a non-specialist in economics at ease in going through them, should interest the reader, and, in



**Cobbled Manuscripts**  
A Moving Kaleidoscope of Conventional Economics  
Syed Abdus Samad  
Ankur Prakashani

the relevant instances, make him or her ponder over some of the intensely interesting aspects of the often palpably pedestrian subject of economics.

For instance, as is discussed more fully in Chapter 11 ("Social Implications of Economic Transformations"), the author states in the preface what should be self-evident, but at times is not: "...for non performance of economic agents or institutions neither the market nor the state/government should be blamed blindly." And, "The state and the market are not natural enemies. A well functioning state can help its markets function and perform a lot better than, say, a banana republic." In Chapter 11, Samad further develops the notion of the essentially symbiotic relationship between the state and the market. The current debate on development and social change, he declares, is not about the respective roles of the market and the state. His personal view, which he acknowledges is open to debate, is that any doubling of social investments may not yield any results unless economic fundamentals have been corrected by the state. While this may be questioned, but only the degree of causation, not the essence, there should be no valid reason for quibbling over this piece of dire warning: that the state can be neutral only at the cost of great social upheavals, turmoil, food riots, violent crimes and mass migration, and that physical, economic, and human infrastructures will not develop without state intervention.

Probably the most discerning of Samad's observations and analysis may be found in his views on the development partners (really, a euphemism for "donors") of Bangladesh. Much of this is encapsulated in "On the Aid Group Meetings" (Chapter 25). His thoughts gain an added dimension of

authority because of his participation at such meetings. He makes it clear that he does not buy into the donors' repeated tiresome trite critique of Bangladesh and its performance in various key sectors of development: slow reforms, procrastination in implementation, lack of transparency and accountability, and malpractices, wastes and inefficiency. Samad's riposte is as interesting as it is instructive of the donors' arrogance and relative lack of sensitivity to Bangladesh's ethos (the essay clearly identifies the European countries as the biggest culprits in this regard; the US, Japan, and Asian Development Bank as the more understanding); "democracy, freedom, human rights, good governance, corruption, gender, liberalization and reforms, implementation, monitoring, etc. are all important and relevant, but there is a place for them, elsewhere, in larger UN or HR fora, for example. The aid group meetings have limited scope, objectives and time. One cannot hope to change the whole world in one such meeting. Larger philosophical, political and sociological issues, which now almost entirely dominate the whole thing, could be learnt at the appropriate places.... It has always baffled me I mean this enthusiasm of the development partners to impart unsolicited knowledge on their captive audience, in remote Paris!" A revealing accompaniment may be found in Chapter 10 ("Changing Roles and Contributions of the Voluntary Sector Agencies Towards National Development Strategies"); donors usually prefer so-called 'monumental' or high visibility projects, and safe, non-controversial, somewhat cosmetic types of programmes. They are usually not interested in programmes like agrarian reforms. Samad was focusing on Bangladesh, and there is enough ground to contest his contention that the donors prefer non-controversial programmes. Experience would suggest otherwise!

However, Chapter 16 ("Foreign Aid: A Sympathetic View"), which contains some proper comments from a cultural relativist standpoint, extends conciliatory advice regarding the development partners: that any reasonable suggestion rendered by a donor, an international agency or a development bank does not become invalid or irrational simply because of its origin. Having said that, the author does not hold back on what the donors should, or should not, be doing: "Development cooperation must...be guided to create structures and functions which are socially, culturally, economically, environmentally, politically and administratively sustainable...." And, significantly, "Aid should not be used as an instrument of subversion of indigenous policies or change of government or for any such overtly unethical objective." This chapter also contains, understandable when considered in the context of the year it

was published, 1993, but still not irrelevant in 2007, this food for thought and appropriate action: "Each sovereign nation is responsible for its own development and should pursue this responsibility on the basis of its own values, institutions and structures and systems.... If a country has curbed some civil rights to give a better economic deal to its people, the costs and benefits of the entire transaction have to be worked out and not simply criticize the rulers for the so called violations of civil rights of its people! There is room for something known in Asian cultures as soft authoritarianism of responsible governance in the long term." Samad almost certainly had Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, and Malaysia in each of their pertinent periods in mind. Similar views may also be found in Chapter 19. "Official Development Assistance (ODA)" (Chapter 8) adds to the author's relativist (in my view, the appropriate position to hold) inclination, with his observation that a question of ideology, culture, politico-economic, legal-judicial system seems to divide the worlds of donors and recipients of ODA.

Other topics, several, by their very nature, open to debate, also emphasize the diversity of the book, if not necessarily the uniformity of their quality. Chapter 1 ("International trade flows/policies") is a rather sketchy account of the pursuit of international trade (the period from 1870 to 1914 he terms the golden age of trade, that from 1914 to 1945, the dark age), Chapter 2 ("The World Monetary System") gives a brief account of the beginning of the end of the old international monetary order, and Chapter 5 ("Real Wages in Bangladesh") is, as the author acknowledges, dated in terms of data used. Chapters 20 ("Redesigning the state profile for social and economic development change: State restructuring for struggle to combat poverty"), 21 ("Theories of Poverty"), and 22 ("The Present Situation in Poverty Research") as a group dwell at length (with some expected overlap of ideas, given the structure of the book) on various aspects of the state of poverty in Bangladesh. Chapter 20 contains this perception of poverty alleviation: "Poverty is caused by the structures of the society, the political economy and the fundamental premises which govern such structures. Poverty occurs not merely because of the inadequacies of a country's resources, but because of a process of systematic repression of human potentials and the resultant deprivations." The author is not satisfied with the hypotheses and state of poverty research coverage, although he does acknowledge the signal contribution of research in bringing forth the notion that poverty is as much a problem of "underdevelopment" as of "development".

In Chapter 12 ("Control and Management of Public Expenditures in Bangladesh"), he brings out some

major problems in acquiring public expenditure data from government sources (and Samad was a senior civil servant!), and suggests that, for government budget control mechanisms to be effective, the budget should cover a period of two to three years. Another gem of an observation may be found in Chapter 9 ("On Urban Management in Asia-Pacific region: An Overview"): "...cities in many developing countries...contribute to human development as much as they seem to constrain it. They bring out the best in human greed." Keeping to the theme of multilateralism, Chapter 13 ("SAARC in the Context of Regional Cooperation") is both a plea and a note of despair (it was written in 1993, but not much has significantly changed since then). Chapter 14 ("Resources, Environment and Sustainable Development of Agriculture in Asia") reinforces a critical issue, one which is becoming even more acute by the day: that environment and development are closely related.

Chapter 6 offers this possibly contentious view, especially the second part: that what is often regarded as 'appropriate technology' is somewhat dubious and nebulous as a concept, and does not have much of an economic relevance. Chapter 15 ("Application of Information Technology (IT) in Decentralized Management") focuses mainly on the application of IT and information policy issues. Chapter 17 ("Asian Economies: Out of Western Shadows, into the New World Order") takes a critical look at globalization: "globalization is...beset with many negative effects and potential dangers for the indigenous people and culture. The attempt to homogenize ideas, cultures, values and institutions under the garb of globalization is one obvious negative externality." But he is not all doom and gloom about this new "order": "Globalization within limits is all right, but should not lead to robotization of peoples and their life styles" (sic; one example from an inordinate number of editorial oversights/errors). If one can see beyond these irritations, and the uneven quality of the articles, then one should discern an absorbing exercise in political economy, of economics with a human face.

Shahid Alam is a writer and Head, Media and Communication Department, Independent University, Bangladesh.

## At a glance

**Yesterday's Melodies Today's Memories**  
Manik Premchand  
Jhama Books, Mumbai

This is a gem of a work for those who have been in love with old songs from Urdu or Hindi Indian movies. It is all about melodies that have come from the singers, about lyrics that have been penned by such illustrious men as Majrooh Sultanpuri.

**Bangla Gaaner Dhara**  
Hajar Bochorer  
Bangla Gaan Mridul Kanti Chakrobarty  
Papyrus, Dhaka

Chakrobarty does creditable work here through taking music enthusiasts in Bangladesh back through the trails set by the Old Masters. In this work you come by not only the songs that you once heard but also the history behind their making. Lalon Shah, Chandidas and Tansen are some of the images you will meet as you go along. Simply unputdownable, as you may discover in your moments of lyrical ecstasy.

**Prodhanmontriter Noi Maash**  
Ataur Rahman Khan  
Nawroze Kitabistan, Dhaka

The writer's contributions to politics in Bangladesh, before and after it became a free country, are remembered for all the right reasons. He was chief minister of East Pakistan in the 1950s, was in anti-Ayub opposition in the 'decade of progress' and then teamed up with Ershad in the 1980s. That last experience left him bitter.

**Collected Poems**  
Syed Khwaja Moinul Hassan  
A Writers Workshop Redbird Book

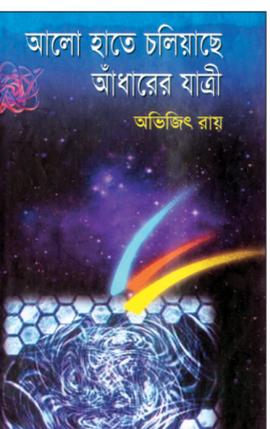
Hassan has been abroad for ages, but his heart has always remained attached to Bangladesh. That is what shoots forth from this rather emotional collection of poetry. He speaks of politics, moves on to pure aesthetics and even has time to dwell on death. It is work that comes naturally to a poet. Hassan has been a poet for as long as anyone can recall. You will note the passion he brings into the themes he covers. There is the incorrigibly romantic in the man, a trait he has held on to defiantly.

# Heavenly travellers on their course

Scientific realities make Binoy Barman explore the universe

At first glance it appears to be a work of poetry or fiction. But as one flips through the pages it becomes clear, nay, it is a book of science, on cosmology. Then, you might say, the title "Alo Hately Chaliyachhey Andharer Jatri" (Travelers of darkness moving with light in hand) is misleading. Yes, misleading, artistically and poetically. The words in the title have been picked up from a popular song of Tagore: "Tumi Ki Keboli Chhahi, Shudhu Patey Likha...." The writer Abhijit Roy recounts the tale of title discovery in prelude. Having finished writing the manuscript, when he was hunting for a title, "The Demon-Haunted World", by Carl Sagan, caught his attention on some idle noon. Its subtitle, "Science as a Cradle in the Dark", rang in his heart with some unknown musical tunes. He searched for similar meaningfully melodious expressions in Bangla when Tagore's song struck his mind. And he got his title a satisfying one, I suppose.

Is there any intrinsic relationship between the universe and music? Is there any undercurrent of tunes always flowing through the heart of nature? Maybe. The poets and musicians in deep meditation can feel that unheard rhythm and beat and transfer them to their own heart. They present those in new composition to the people on earth and soothe their mind. They are blessed. Recent science claims that the universe consists of ten dimensions. We only know four of them length, breadth, height and time, the fourth one being discovered by Albert Einstein. But we are yet to know anything about other dimensions. Scientists predict that the six other dimensions are hidden (in curled or twisted condition) at the most basic sub-atomic level. We cannot see them, feel them and even think of them. Those can only be proved theoretically, with mathematics. The theory we are here talking about is called "String Theory". It postulates the most basic particle as some infinitesimally tiny string. A string like that of musical instrument a violin or guitar, or in the Bengali context, say, 'ektara', 'dotara', 'setar' or 'tanpura'? Do they create any symphony? You cannot hear them with human ears. The strings are always swinging and vibrating in different modes, expressing themselves through energy and matter. The String Theory is still in its developing stage; it is said to be a future scientific theory, accidentally discovered by present-day scientists.



**Alo Hately Chaliyachhey Andharer Jatri**  
Abhijit Roy  
Ankur Prakashani

"Alo Hately Chaliyachhey Andharer Jatri" presents a rich array of scientific essays on cosmology in Bangla. The book describes the gradual development of cosmological science, from the classical period to modern times. It details the contributions of the great scientists who have dramatically changed our understanding of the universe and our existence in it. The scientists, all jewels Kepler, Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, Einstein,

Hawking a constellation of dazzling stars in the night sky. It must be remembered that some sub-continental scientists have also secured their position in the constellation Meghnad Saha ('Saha Thermal Ionisation Theory' is named after him), Satyen Bose ('Boson'), Chandrasekhar ('Chandrasekhar Limit'), CV Raman ('Raman Effect') and Abdus Salam (famous for 'Electro-Weak Force'). The writer rightly terms them as travellers in heaven, who take out darkness with their light of knowledge. They deserve tribute in music.

The book is divided into two broad sections and into a total of fourteen chapters. The chapters are equated with phases. The first section, the main body of the book, comprises seven phases, which discuss the development of cosmological theories in chronological order and assess the contributions of great scientists. The second section holds appendices, divided into seven phases, incorporating supplementary discussions on topics discussed in the first section. The first section centres around such topics as Newton's gravitational law, Galileo's sun-centred solar system, Einstein's relativity theory, big bang and ever expanding universe, mysterious matter and force and future of the universe, string theory, and universe and God. All have been explained duly, as easily as possible, carefully avoiding technical language. The language is plain but full of wit. The writer entertains readers with his good sense of humour a rare quality for a science writer indeed. Science becomes interesting rather than boring with his pen. Let us consider what he says about Newton's discovery of gravitation after being hit by an apple in the head while the legendary scientist was sitting under a tree. The arguments presented by the writer force us to believe that the story of the falling apple on Newton's head was fabricated. It was his extraordinary genius and continuous contemplation with science

that made him discover the natural law of gravitation, probably the most important astronomical discovery in entire science history. Abhijit laments why the discovery was not made by any intelligent person on our land. Do fruits not fall from trees on anybody's head here? Yes, they do. But imagine the picture of a falling jackfruit, our national fruit, on anybody's head. What will happen? The person dies and the theory is lost!

The book has an explicit agenda of eradicating superstition from society. With creating awareness of science, it encourages readers to shun illogical beliefs and accept scientific explanations. The agenda ultimately goes against certain propositions of religion. For example, religions in general preach the idea of an earth-centric solar system and universe. But science has proved that the earth is not the centre of the solar system and universe; it is just a planet in the sky at any corner. Science has made it clear that the sun is the centre of the solar system while nine (the number was reduced to eight after Pluto was cancelled as a planet recently) planets are moving around it. Our dear earth is one of the planets of the solar system. Science had to lock horns with religion for its claims over the centuries. As religious scriptures were consistent with the theories of Aristotle and Ptolemy, the Church and other religious institutions accepted their theories in defence of their naive suppositions. Copernicus first challenged the theories of Aristotle and Ptolemy and suggested with scientific evidence, that the earth moves around the sun and not vice versa. In the struggle to establish the truth, many scientists had to suffer pains. Giordano Bruno was burnt alive and Galileo Galilei was humiliated by the Church. The path of science has not been a bed of roses. Throughout history, science has had to fight the excesses of religion defeat the false ideas with scientific truth at the cost of blood and life.

How big is this universe? There are

about forty thousand crore stars in the galaxy in which our solar system is situated. We call our galaxy the Milky Way. There are about one hundred crore galaxies in our universe. Scientists argue that there might be many other similar or dissimilar universes beyond the circumference of our own and known universe. We on earth just feel helpless when we ponder the vastness (or limitlessness) of the universe (or universes). Are we alone in the floating vastness? Scientists argue that there might be life elsewhere, human beings, like or unlike us. The quest for life on other planets has just begun. Missions go to the moon, Mars, Jupiter and beyond. One wonders what will happen when we meet human-like beings somewhere else. Will they be friendly or hostile? Will they help us to solve the problems we face on earth or jeopardise our existence? How will religious beliefs be impacted? Will people still believe in God? We may look forward to the future for answers.

The book is a reliable guide to cosmological and partially astrophysical facts. The scientific accounts are accompanied by necessary pictures and diagrams. In Bangla science publications are really rare. "Alo Hately Chaliyachhey Andharer Jatri" should count as a gem in the realm of popular science. The book will prove useful for science students as well as general readers with a scientific bent of mind.

Dr Binoy Barman is Assistant Professor at Bangladesh University and a writer.

### Open House

On the second anniversary of its founding, writers. ink will observe open house today, 18 August 2007.  
**Time:** 3:00 PM to 6:00 PM  
**Venue:** Concord Tower, Suite 803, 113 Kazi Nazrul Islam Avenue, Dhaka 1000.

# Tracks that redefined lives

Syed Badrul Ahsan admires an unusual work

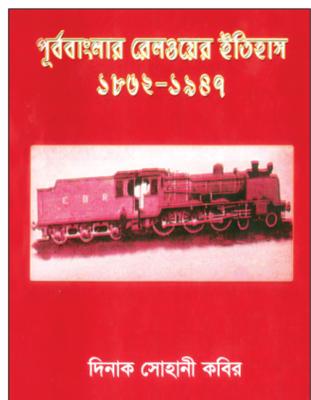
THE subject is unusual, if not exactly unfamiliar. Dinak Shohani Kabir demonstrates through this work that history is often a good deal more than an enumeration of politics and its ramifications. Indeed, history, or at least the modern part of it, is necessarily a question of all the progress that has been made in life and the society of which it is a consequential part. And progress, not just in the Indian subcontinent but elsewhere around the world, has come on wheels, and literally at that. That is what Kabir reminds the reader in *Purbo Banglar Railway'r Itishash*. Of course, in the era when railways came to redefine life in India, there was no political entity known as East, or eastern, Bengal in that recognised sense of politics. Which is when the reader's curiosity about Kabir's choice of subject gets to be aroused a trifle more than necessary.

To be sure, the book is essentially the dissertation that Dinak Shohani Kabir prepared for her doctoral work. As a book, it has turned out to be a fine instance of historical research, to a point where people interested in the story of railways in this part of the world will consider it productive reference material. In preparing the work, Kabir acknowledges the assistance she came by from earlier works on the development of the railways, in pre-partition India and then in Pakistan. But then she moves on to create a canvas for herself, to sift the material before her and draw out of it a composite, quite self-sustaining story of how railways happened to change the course of life for the masses of eastern Bengal. It is an extensive area she covers, particularly through the chronology she provides of railways development. It was in 1853 (and remember that only four years down the line a great mutiny was to rock the British colonial power to its foundations) that trains began their journey in India. And by 1910 Indian railways had expanded to a point where they could legitimately claim to be the fourth largest railway system in the world. In her presentation of Indian railway history, Kabir goes into that other difficult job of relating the stories behind the creation of such government organisations as the Public Works Department (in 1854), which was entrusted with the responsibility of maintaining the railways. And then things moved on, to 1866, when a railway branch under a deputy secretary was created to supervise the railways, leading eventually to the establishment of a full-fledged railway division in 1905 (again a year that saw Bengal being partitioned for the first time in its history).

One hardly needs mentioning the difficult social and economic conditions in which eastern Bengal, one of the poorer regions of India, conducted life for itself. Movement, on the individual as well as commercial scale, relied fundamentally on rivers. Boats, slow and therefore time-consuming, were the principal means of transport even after railways entered the overall Indian social scene. But such a picture was to change, rather dramatically, once railways made their entry into the region. It is a truth reflected in the production and transportation of goods. One can here raise the question of jute, which made rapid advances in production and sale once the railway system took hold. It was in 1862 that railways made their first entry into eastern Bengal, a fact noted by the writer in the title of the book. It was a simple, limited track range that connected Kushtia with Calcutta. It was all a rudimentary affair, though, and not until 1885 would railways in

eastern Bengal attain commercial importance. Stretching from 1862 to 1947, when eastern Bengal became part of the state of Pakistan, railways underwent an expansion that was noteworthy for the transformation it caused in social living. It was to be a revolutionary achievement for a region that before the advent of British rule had hardly any roads worth the name in the modern sense of the meaning, as a 1908 issue of the *Imperial Gazetteer* would note. In 1915, a report would note further that the railways had altered the life of the peasant, to a point where it was no longer dominated by individuals such as the village shopkeeper but was instead remoulded in a way that allowed the peasant to come in direct contact with the world outside his village. This he did by taking advantage of the railways to transport his goods to various markets in the region.

There are men the writer does not pass



**Purbo Banglar Railway'r Itishash**  
1862-1947  
Dinak Shohani Kabir  
Academic Press & Publishers Library, Dhaka

over in her narration of the railways story. She reminds readers that a pivotal role in the development of the railways system in India was played by Lord Dalhousie, whose period as governor general extended from 1848 to 1856. In fact, the modernisation of the Indian transport system was a job undertaken by his administration, a social factor that others were to build on in future.

The railways in eastern Bengal, as Kabir notes, took a new dimension altogether when on 4 January 1885 direct railway links were established between Dhaka and Narayanganj. In the same year, on 1 August, rail services were extended up to Mymensingh. This localised system came to be officially known as Dhaka State Railway.

Dinak Shohani Kabir's work is as extensive as it is gripping. And it is gripping because of the social aspects of Bengal's history that she brings into a telling of the tale. It is a work that demands a decent, conspicuous place for itself on the shelf.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs,