

Images of a vibrant, timeless heritage Farida Shaikh plunges into history through a remarkable work

THE book is the outcome of the author's Ph.D dissertation, a study on Islamic art and archaeology in the Department of Islamic History and Culture, Dhaka University. It is an empirical treatise on the history and monuments of Sonargaon.

In 1996, the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh published a monograph titled 'Sonargaon-Parnam', giving details on Sonargaon, about 24 square miles in area, 27 km south-east of Dhaka, spread on both sides of the Dhaka-Chittagong highway and bounded on all sides by the old Brahmaputra, Sitalakhya, Meghna and Dhaleswari. Note that the Bara Bhuiyas defied Mughal suzerainty from Katrabo in Sonargaon.

The book comprises nine chapters, with a total of five maps on ancient Bengal, Sonargaon, Khalifatabad past and present. Ground plans and elevations of mosques are provided in 25 figures. There are photographs of 27 mosques and 17 monuments.

Ancient Sonargaon, meaning golden village, was one of the three principalities, an *iqlim* of Bangala during the rule of Sultan Ilyas Shah in 1342. It was one of three administrative units or *iqlims* of Bengal Sultanate, the other two being Lakhnauti and Satgaon. Its synonymous name is *Suvarnagrama*. *Suvar* means principality, and *Nigama* is a commercial centre. Sonargaon comprised Vanga and the coastal regions of Vikrampur, Faridpur and southern Bengal. The name Sonargaon came to be used during the Sena period in the 12th century. Abu Tawwama in 1300 established here a centre for Islamic theology. Later, in 1345, the Chinese traveller Ma Huan was amazed to see the fine variety of cotton manufactured in Sonargaon, then a walled city. Today Sonargaon, by the banks of the river Buriganga, is an upazila under Narayanganj district of Dhaka division.

An identification of Sonargaon under different names is detailed in Chapter 1. Sonargaon for over a century was ruled by the Ilyas Shahi dynasty. The west of Dhaka was known as Mubarakabad in 1338, probably after Sultan Fakhruddin Mubarak Shah. Afterwards Sultan Ilyas took the title of Shah-i-Bangala, uniting Varendra, Vanga and Radha; his son Sikandar Shah named the *iqlim* Mu'zamabad.

Sonargaon was no more the official name except when used in coins by later rulers. It was made a mint town by Sultan Ghiyasuddin Azam Shah, who ruled for 20 years from Pandua until defeated by Raja Ganesha. His general and Wazir Khan al Azam Khan Jahan also fled Pandua and took shelter in Arsa Shah-i-Nau, present-day Bagerhat. Also known as Ulugh Khan Jahan, he was a great builder of monuments, tanks and highways.

Chapter 2 covers early references to the history of Sonargaon. In 1204 Ikhtiyaruddin Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji controlled Nadia in Bengal. Bahram Khan was the governor of Sonargaon. Ghiyasuddin Bahadur, born a rebel, was appointed deputy governor and, invested with increased powers, took possession of Lakhnauti. This period of rule ended in 1338.

Usually the period 1338-1348 is considered a time of political turmoil. Haji Ilyas proclaimed independence in 1342. Fakhruddin extended his power east of Chandpur and Chittagong, then known as Sadkawan, and built many mosques there. He ruled from 1338-1349, after which Ikhtiyaruddin Ghazi Shah became the ruler of Sonargaon.

Previously Bengal was known as Lakhnauti or Gaur. In 1352 Shamsud-Din Ilyas Shah conquered Sonargaon and consolidated his rule in Lakhnauti, Satgaon and Sonargaon. The Delhi Sultan was unsuccessful in his campaign to defeat Ilyas Shah, who then came to be known as Sultan-i-Bangala. In 1359 Sikandar Shah, known as Sultanul Muazzam, was the ruler of Pandua. He built the Adina mosque and the tomb at Sagar Dighi.

Sonargaon during the Sultanate period and Isa Khan's is covered in chapter 3. Fakhruddin ruled for eleven years, and in 1338 his son Ikhtiyaruddin Ghazi

Shah became the ruler, followed by Shamsud-Din who conquered Sonargaon by defeating the Mughals in 1352 and later was given the title of Sultan-i-Bangala.

Chapter 4 describes the architectural background of the Muslim monuments of Sonargaon. Present-day Bangladesh constitutes the major part of old Bengal. Sonargaon belongs to this deltaic region where the changing course of the rivers

Central Asia and local craftsmen. It was in 1338 under the independent Sultans that a definite style emerged during the period of Fakhruddin Mubarak Shah. The advent of the Muslims, mostly Khalji and Turks of Central Asia, in the 13th century in Sonargaon is recognised as the beginning of the second phase of archaeology.

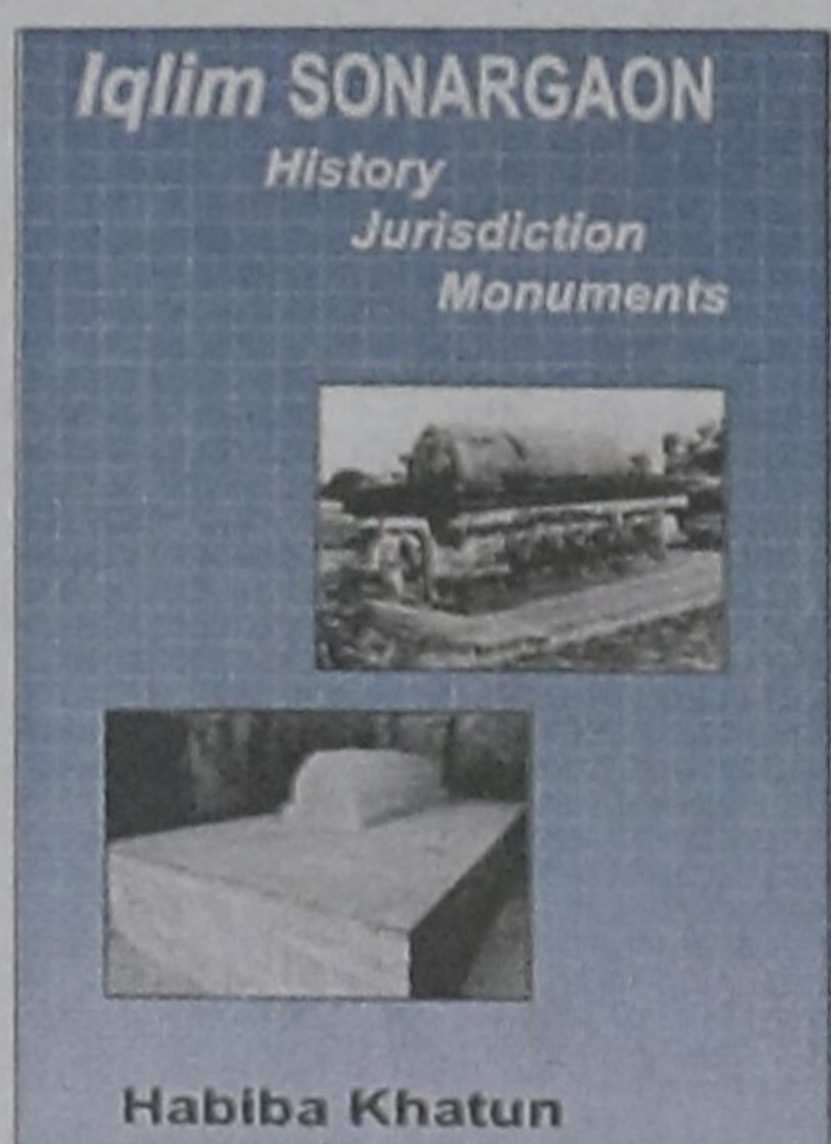
Selected buildings, mosques, tombs, and idgahs, described in chapter 5, form the core of the book. Details are provided on 24 single tomb mosques, and 3 single tomb square mosques with corridors, 20 multi-tombs, 17 tombs, and 1 idgah.

Masjidur Mosque, Khulna, is a nine tomb square mosque at Amadi village on the banks of the Kobadak and protected by ditches on three sides. This location is believed to have been a treasury house; but as the position is on the border of Sonargaon territory it is also believed to have been an outpost of the legendary general Bura Khan and Fateh Khan who guarded this turbulent frontier. It is similar to the nine tomb mosque at Bagerhat probably built by Khan Jahan in the mid 15th century.

On the south eastern part of the Sonargaon territory, today's Bagerhat (formerly Khalifabad), stands the Shah Gumbaz Masjid, the largest surviving monument of its kind built by Khan Jahan. The *chauchala* style and decoration date the mosque between 1440 and 1459, built over a period of ten to fifteen years.

Khan Jahan also erected the mosque of Mymensingh in 1452, and repaired Churhatta mosque of Dhaka in 1459. The graves of Khan Jahan and Ali Muhammad Tahir, originally a Brahmin Thakur, within the same compound are a possible explanation for local people calling it *Khanjali majar*, Khanji + Ali, situated on the elevated northern bank of the extensive *Thakur Dighi*.

Katrabo is covered in Chapter 6. Today's Sonargaon is an upazila comprising eleven unions. The ancient city was much more extensive and Katrabo on the banks of the Sitalakhya, the first



Iqlim Sonargaon
History Jurisdiction Monuments
Habiba Khatun
Academic Press & Publishers Library

has resulted in the loss of many settlements and monuments.

Climate and geography have shaped the architecture of the region. Bricks have been the chief building materials made out of the soft clay collected from the deposit of the alluvium on the bank of the rivers. The typical architectural style is derived from a bamboo framework, the curvilinear form, described by Ferguson as the most elegant of modern inventions. It was a blend of workmanship involving

police force and community policing, a high-level non-partisan citizens forum for parliamentary democracy and development, etcetera.

The book under discussion may be termed as a treatise on political and administrative reforms. It is a most timely work with special relevance to contemporary Bangladesh in view of the fact that the country is now passing through an era of reforms under a caretaker government. The long-standing demand for a separation of the judiciary from the executive was effected on 1 November 2007. Moves for an independent secretariat for the Election Commission are underway. Provisions for registration of political parties are being made by the Election Commission. The government is also actively considering the institution of an independent Human Rights Commission. Since the author has written the book from an 'outsider perspective', as he says, all his reform proposals may not be practical in our context and reality. However, many among them deserve our consideration.

Having said this, it is to be noted that like many other works the book is not without flaws. On the production side, many faults, including innumerable spelling mistakes and editorial oversight, are evident. The book suffers from genuine errors too. Parliamentary system was re-introduced in 1991 and NOT in 1990, as the author suggests in Bangladesh in the Mirror. The first parliamentary elections in independent Bangladesh were

The turbid waters in which a society wallows Harun-or-Rashid recommends a new work on Bangladesh

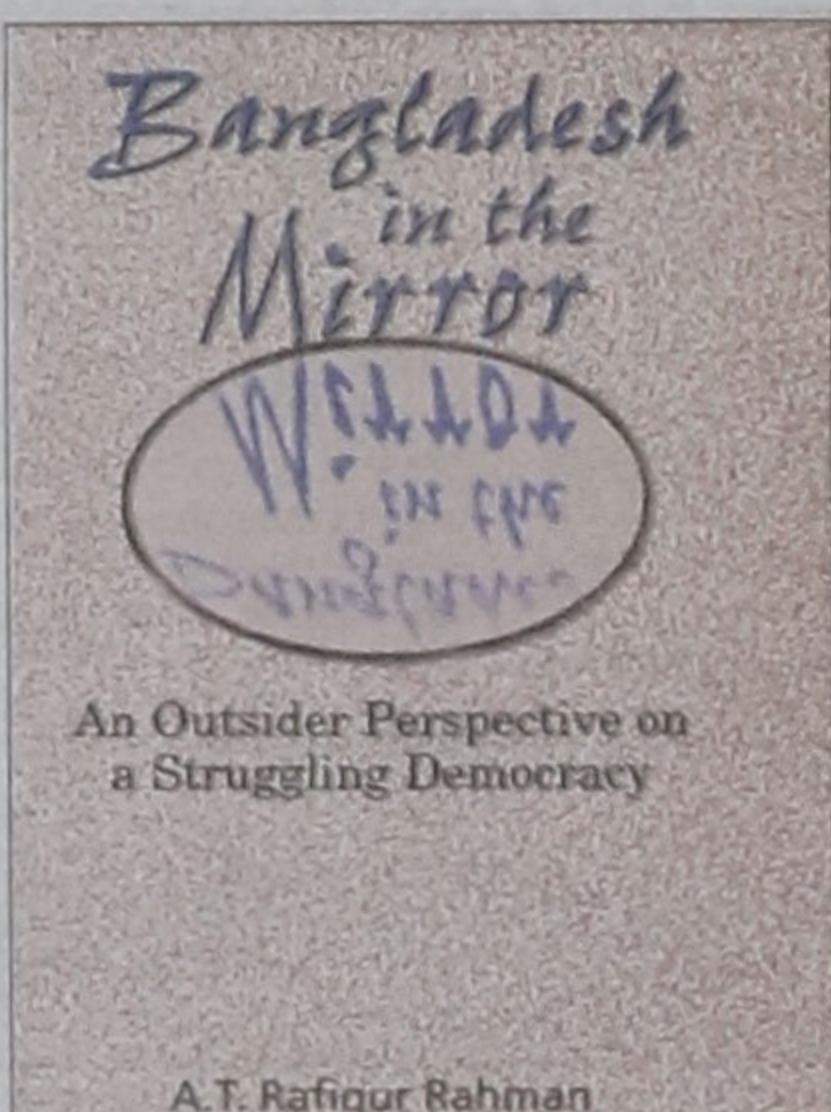
THIRTY six years ago Bangladesh started its journey as a nation-state with great promise of a common national identity, democracy, social and economic justice, and religious non-discrimination or secularism. Soon the high ideals of the War of Liberation were vitiated by the seizure of state power by counter-revolutionary forces. The country went under military rule for 15 years following the coup d'etat of August 1975. It experienced changes of the government system a number of times: multi-party parliamentary democracy (1972-1974) to one-party presidential system (1975); military rule (1975-1990); again, multi-party parliamentary system (1991 to date). Democratic institutions, values, traditions, practices and procedures can hardly grow in such an unstable situation. The re-introduction of the multi-party parliamentary system in 1991 did not improve the overall situation much. For five consecutive years, both under the BNP and Awami League government, Bangladesh topped the Transparency International list as the most corrupt country in the world. Elections scheduled to be held in January 2007 could not take place because of disagreement between the two major power contending parties around the composition of the caretaker government, Election Commission and necessary electoral reforms. The conflict between the two spilled on to the streets, creating a situation of serious national concern and prompting the government to declare a

state of emergency that led the army into coming to the forefront and playing an influential role through backing the civilian-led caretaker government. Weak institutional basis, lack of consensus, absence of an effective system of local governance, a fragile electoral system, rampant corruption, street politics taking precedence over Parliament, boycott of Parliament by the opposition, continued political role of student organisations as fronts for national political parties, increased politicisation of professionals and other sections of people along party lines, and rise of Islamic terrorism (note Jamiatul Mujaheddin Bangladesh or JMB) are salient features of Bangladesh's politics.

Mainly based on newspaper sources (The Daily Star), Professor A.T. Rafiqur Rahman, a Bangladeshi expatriate in the USA, in his reflective work, Bangladesh in the Mirror: An Outsider Perspective on a Struggling Democracy (2006), attempts to scan the problems of Bangladesh's politics and governance in search of a cure. Spread over 10 chapters and an epilogue, the book makes a number of recommendations as remedial measures, which include: emphasis on institutional capacity building, consensus on fundamental issues of governance and administration, government of national unity at least for one term, i.e. five years, limiting the size of ministries, reduction of the period of absence for MPs from the present 90 days to 15 days before they lose their seats, registration of political

parties and declaration of assets, a fully autonomous Election Commission, separation of the judiciary from the executive, autonomous local government system, an independent Human Rights

Commission, de-linking students and teachers' politics from national/party politics, uniform curricula for all streams of education, professionalism in the



Bangladesh in the Mirror
An Outsider Perspective on a Struggling Democracy
The University Press Limited

largest administrative building in the world; he leaves through the waterway while watching on the shore a gigantic stone-carving that is to uplift Romanian nationalism.

From 'Danube to Dnieper', Palin visits Hungary and Ukraine. Certainly, the imperial sculptures and beauty of cities are the pride and joy of Hungary; but the 'House of Terror' is the scar of history left behind, as it 'graphically records the worst horrors of the communist period.' But Hungarian prairies soothe Palin from the shock as he bikes along and works with the cowboys on the vast prairie. In Ukraine, at any rate, people seem to be reconciled with history. Lisa Mikova justified the non-removal of Lenin's statue in her home city of Yalta with the wise words, 'You can't tear a page out of history.'

'Baltic Summer' comes with Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Russia. Palin travels from Tallinn in the north to Lithuania and then sails on to the Baltic from Kaliningrad. Tallinn may be flourishing with arts, but leech treatment still survives here and Palin is sure to undergo the treatment! In Latvia, he visits one of the most secretive Communist places, the astronomical telescope. He asks his guide, Juris, about the success of its surveillance.

[Juris goes] 'Well, they knew about the death of the Pakistan President Zia-ul-Haq in an air crash six hours...'

[Palin exclaims] 'Before it happened?'

[Juris retorts] 'No... no... six hours before the rest of the world knew about it.'

The 'Baltic Summer' ends on the coast as a huge structure rises among the pines: 'An entrance 100 feet wide and 50 feet high leads into a 200-foot long net which funnels down to a line of cages, where birds are held for research purposes. Nevertheless, in Poland, Palin meets with the legendary politician Lech Walesa

held in 1973 and not in 1972. This kind of mistake is repeated in respect of the 1954, 1991 and 1996 elections (pages 136, 139, 205). It is difficult to understand how the actual year of the founding of the Indian National Congress (1885) escapes the author's attention. He thinks it is 1888 (page 171)! Furthermore, the bomb blasts incident that occurred at Awami League Chief Sheikh Hasina's public rally in Dhaka, killing as many as 24 people, including the prominent Awami League politician Ivy Rahman, was on 21 August 2004 and not in September (page 99).

However, the weaknesses as mentioned do not at all deflate the importance of the work. Anyone interested in Bangladesh studies can see its politics and governance truly mirrored in it. Besides, general readers, students and teachers of government and politics will find the book very useful. This is especially mandatory for those, especially policymakers who stand for political and administrative reforms in Bangladesh. This is a work of love and concern for his motherland on the part of the author, who has been living abroad for about four decades. Our unreserved appreciations go out to him for writing such a valuable book. One certainly recommends the book to a wide readership.

Dr. Harun-or-Rashid, Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Dhaka, is at present in Dhaka Central Jail in connection with the campus incidents of August last year.

Travels through old history and new landscapes Rehnuma Sazzad is cheered by a work of sophistication and wit

THE blurb of New Europe could not have introduced the book better. It is classic Palin in action, Palin the writer that is. I would assume that Palin is well-known as an actor-member Monty Python's exciting comedy, Life of Brian? In Britain, however, Palin is acclaimed also as a TV presenter. His travel documentaries for the BBC ('Around the World in 80 Days', 'Pole to Pole', 'Himalaya', to name a few) have been great favourites. In fact, New Europe is based on his travels for the BBC to the East European countries, newly freed from Cold Wars and Iron Curtains. No need to mention that like the other ones, this documentary ended triumphantly; to be specific, the last episode created a record of at least a million viewers. Palin the writer is no less entertaining.

Palin sets out to discover a Europe filled with optimism through the newly found freedom. What he sketches through the expedition is not only politics and economics; he brings out also the life of the lands through the histories, sights, sounds, arts, cultures, music, sculptures, dramas, fashions and so on in short, life as lived by the Eastern Europeans now. Reading Palin is like feeling the vibrant Eastern European life; you can relate to so much of the experiences described.

As I said, Palin wanted to discover his continent, with something of Tagore's spirit: 'dekha hoi nai chokhkhu mella'. He admits: 'I thought I knew my own continent, but I realised that almost half of it had been closed to me, by politics and ideology, for most of my life. The closer I looked at the eastern half of Europe the more I felt that it had been misrepresented, or even ignored during this time, lumped together in a great blur called Eastern Europe.' So his voyage

takes place to lift the 'blur'; as he goes from one unknown border to another, he realises the attractions and mysteries of places and discovers an overpowering hope pervading the Eastern countries for a brighter future, more open way of life and much better unity in Europe.

The first leg of his journey called 'War and Peace' covered Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia, Serbia, and Albania. Palin aptly begins the tour from the peaceful Alps: '... I'm here 8,000 feet up in the Julian Alps, looking optimistically east, waiting for the cloud to lift so that I can see what the new Europe looks like'. The cloud does move and he uncovers not only the rocks and boulders, but also the snowfield slopes, an exceptionally beautiful lake in the middle of which rises a piece of land with a church on it that looks like a ferry on the move. Croatia, however, is full of fun as he observes the largest omelette being made, believe it or not, with full-scale ceremony! In Bosnia, Palin faces the land-mine fields and other signs of the recent war. And guess what? He interviews a visionary, who claims to have been regularly visited by the Virgin Mary for 25 years! There. Did I not say that you could relate to some of the events?

In Albania, though, Palin meets up with a mayor who does 'politics with colours'. Edi Rama, the mayor of Tirana, who was voted 'World Mayor of the Year' in 2004, gets the buildings in the town decorated with shades of colour. Maybe it is time Dhaka imported the idea for its skyline.

The second phase of Palin's journey is 'Eastern Delight' that touches on Macedonia, Bulgaria and Turkey. Palin pays visits to some of the most remarkable churches of the early Christian period and listens to delightful music on Sofia's streets. Then he spends days revealing Turkey's heritage. You can feel the weight of time in Turkey more than any other Eastern European countries, it seems to

me. But Palin's departure from Turkey is stylish, if not Turkish: he leaves the country in a balloon while viewing 'this uniquely weird landscape, highlighted by a blanket of freshly fallen snow'.

The 'Wild East' includes Moldova, Trans-Dniester, Romania and Serbia. Palin travels from Trans-Dniester, a breakaway state from the Republic of Moldova, to the valleys and gardens of

Romania. He joins 80 lumberjacks as they board a wood-fired steam train, discovers the power of local artistry, and finally ends up at Bran Castle in Transylvania, the ancestral home of Vlad the Impaler, who is a national hero allegedly turned into Bram Stoker's Dracula! Not just the Dracula, Palin picks up Ceausescu's 'Unification Boulevard' and the second



New Europe
Michael Palin
Weidenfeld & Nicolson

largest administrative building in the world; he leaves through the waterway while watching on the shore a gigantic stone-carving that is to uplift Romanian nationalism.

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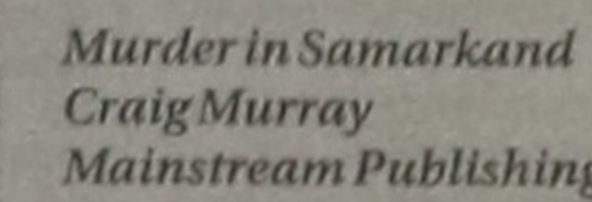
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At a glance



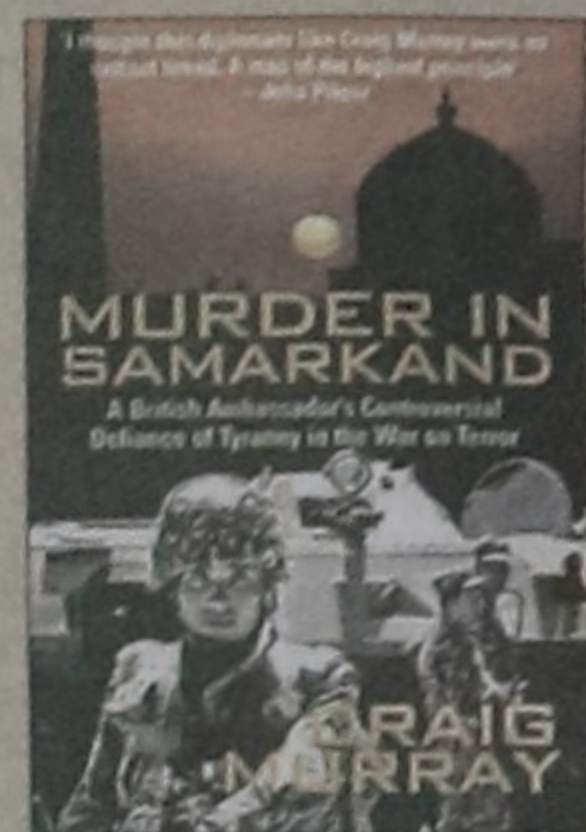
The Mughal Throne
The Saga of India's Great Emperors
Abraham Eraly
Phoenix

A well-researched, thoroughly readable book on the Mughals. The sheer gripping power of the work is all. For those interested in studies of a remarkable period in the history of India, Eraly comes forth with a book that will leave them wondering at all the minute details he puts in here.



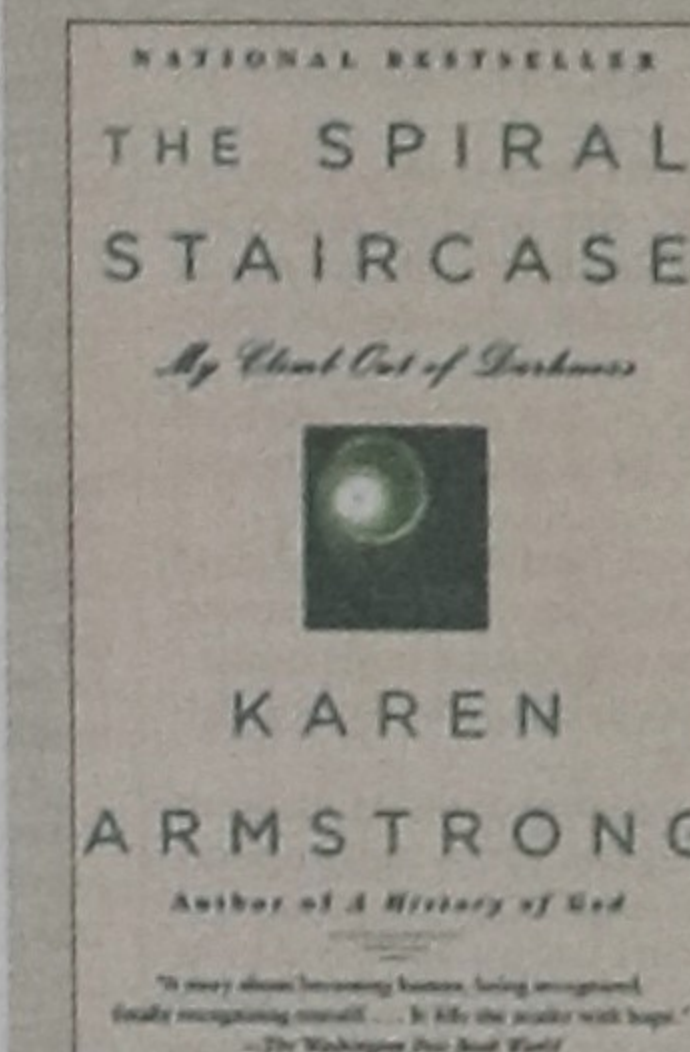
Murder in Samarkand
Craig Murray
Mainstream Publishing

The outspoken former British ambassador to Uzbekistan presents his side of the argument here. At loggerheads with the Karimov regime in Tashkent over its human rights abuses, Murray left no opportunity go by without making the president wince in discomfort. Dismissed from service and divorced, Murray lives a new life these days.



The Spiral Staircase
Karen Armstrong
Harper Perennial

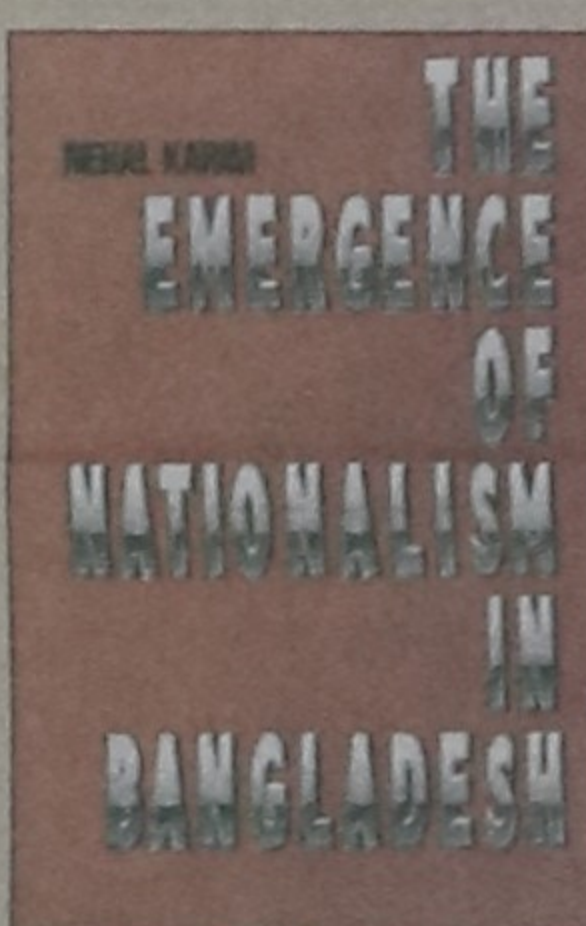
A superbly written, perfectly readable memoir from one of the foremost writers on religion. Armstrong takes readers through all the lanes and by-lanes of a life she has lived. She explains why the nunnery did not suit her and why reflecting on the world's faiths turned out to be so liberating for her.



The Emergence of Nationalism in Bangladesh
Nehal Karim
Adhuna Prakashan

The Emergence of Nationalism in Bangladesh explores the growth of nationalism in our country. It informs us in detail about the forces and factors leading to this growth. The book is a significant contribution in the field of sociology.

Dr. Karim has a good prose and readers will enjoy reading about the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent nation.



A paean to a global body Takir Hossain throws light on a novel work

United Nations is a collection of three prose poems that will give the readers a real taste of modern, that is, modernist poetry. The work is a sharp evaluation and focuses on the past, present and future of the United Nations. After a close perusal of Sinha MA Sayeed's works, one does not find much of an uncomplicated task tracing the exact shadow of the poet's mind. It is quite clear that he is a modernist in a complete sense. His poetic style is undoubtedly very distinctive, individualised and enlightening. In the book, Sayeed has tried to concentrate on the present and past images of the United Nations. He shows up a vision as to what the image of the United Nations can mean for us all. The UN is an international organisation whose avowed aim is to facilitate cooperation in international law, international security, economic development, social progress and human rights issues.

The goals of the United Nations are thus to uphold international peace and security, safeguard human rights, provide a mechanism for the operation of international law, promote social and economic progress, improve living standards, world health, education, address refugee concerns and fight disease. It provides countries with an opportunity to balance global interdependence and national interests when dealing with international problems.

Sinha MA Sayeed has segmented his book into three parts. The first relates the beginning stage of the United Nations and its preliminary activities worldwide. It began functioning with certain commitments and duties before it. Its primary aim is to save the world from any perilous situation. Our dream is to see a world where all children go to school, where all children can go to sleep well fed, where all children are healthy, where no children are infected by HIV, nobody is going to hit any child where children can play, sing and run free. Here is a remarkable stanza from part one, where readers can find the writer's gratitude to the world body:

O United Nations! A place of harmony and symphony/Of debates and speeches/Of logic and emotion/Of cooperation and determination/Of peaceful reconciliation and resolution/Accept my heartfelt greetings

Sayeed is very strong, honest and truthful in his convictions. He writes that which he believes. Of course, for that very reason he cannot help but be

very frustrated with current global conditions. Sayeed depicts the true picture of the United Nations as it appears before us in the second part of his work. We have lots of complaints against the UN and its recent activities. In the past few years, the UN's failure in upholding human rights and other matters of concern to people worldwide has been glaring. As the following canto notes:

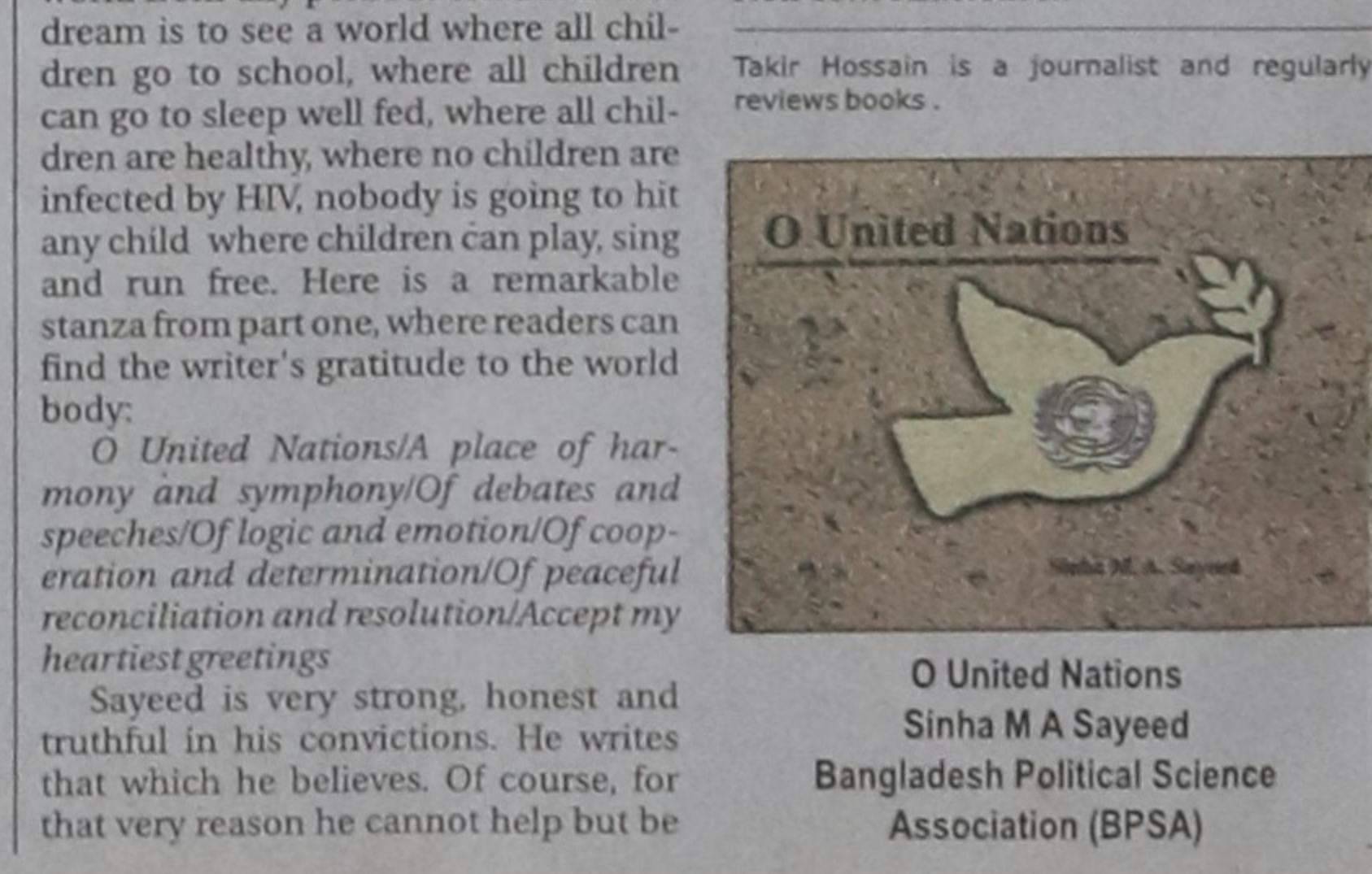
O United Nations/Allegations against you/Are not less strong, less voiced/Disregard, dismay and frustrations/Are not unexpressed, unsounded either

Sinha MA Sayeed is a dreamer and a visionary. He wishes to see a world where there is freedom from war, famine, crime, drug trafficking and, in fact, the entire gamut of unlawful activities. In the book, he expresses the feelings of the community who are deprived of their fundamental rights. The book is a mirror of disadvantaged people in the world. In the third part of the book, Sayeed presents his case in a novel way. The UN appears to us almost in a halo: in the future the UN will have no allegations levelled at it and none will arise to question its neutrality. The UN will run on its own knowledge, power and wisdom. Sayeed approaches the present UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon thus:

O Ban Ki-moon/It is a challenge to you/To run this august organization/Not being subservient to the will of any power and position/Please bear in mind for all the time/What you told the reporters on 1 January 2007/The day of your entrance into the towering landmark building/Housing UN headquarters on New York's East River.

Takir Hossain is a journalist and regularly reviews books.

O United Nations
Sinha MA Sayeed
Bangladesh Political Science Association (BPSA)



Rehnuma Sazzad will begin a Ph.D programme in English literature at Warwick University this year.