

# A poetic soul nourished by geography

## K. Rezaur Rahman is enchanted by a kaleidoscopic offering

**K**HONDAKAR Ashraf Hossain is perhaps the finest voice on the literary horizon of Bangladesh, particularly in the field of poetic activity, at the present time. He has made his mark on the literary scene as a Bengali poet and has published several volumes of Bengali poems. *On Behula's Raft* is his first collection of English poems written on a kaleidoscopic variety of themes. Although the poems are written in English, Ashraf Hossain does not claim to be an English poet. His soul, as he says in the preface to this volume, is nourished and nurtured by the alluvial soil of Bangladesh the lush green countryside with clusters of boats sailing on the river, hosts of plants and flowers dancing in the breeze, the twittering of birds in the sky have always been a source of inspiration for his poetic creativity.

Ashraf Hossain's poetry is suffused with his deep feeling for his motherland, its myths and legends, its political and social changes. The title poem does not offer any traditional interpretation of the Behula myth. On the contrary, Behula symbolises the poet's motherland and the poem grows out of his patriotic zeal and national feeling for the land and its people. Behula stands for Bangladesh on whose raft the poet floats with his soaring imagination and emotional responses to events and historical changes. Although the poet is aware of the struggle of life, of death and denigration, the poem ends with implied optimism to stand up against all opposing forces to herald the dawn of a better future for the people of this land.

In spite of his social and political awareness, Ashraf Hossain has traversed the grounds of existential philosophy in conceiving human life as fragile yet undying, as self-destructive yet eternal. In the first poem of the volume, 'Man', he defines Man in terms that take us

beyond even the Renaissance glorification of the species: "None can contain Man - /Neither Nature nor the horizon-kissing robes of God./ neither the river nor the motherland." The poem ends with a stunning assertion: "I love Man because one day/ he will roast himself in his own fire." Hossain has reaffirmed the claim of humanity over divine ordination in another poem titled 'Earth'. God said, "We have given thee this earth as bribe." Men replied, "We've given you that sky, rent-free.../ That blue sky arranged in fold after fold,/ the sun the moon and the planets of gold,/ And angels, those sentinels of immortal light./ The archers of rain and clouds, and limitless powers--/We salute you *babu*, but this humble earth is ours."

Ashraf Hossain's love poems are characterised by stark realism rather than by romantic euphoria. 'Delirium' is a love poem that does not deal with unrequited love but a fantasy of unrequited love as the beloved goes beyond human possession. "A journey from sight to a point/ beyond all sights, not to Cithaera. A crow perches on the mast.../ A bristling *koi* fish crawls through my lacerated veins;/ A hibiscus of love tumbles down/ from the beatings of your heart." The image 'hibiscus of love' suggests that love is tender and grows steadily like a plant. But the poem does not end with romantic persuasion of love, rather it creates a sense of dejection as the beloved vanishes like an invisible creature: "Dangling your legs on the sides of the thermometer, / you fly away, O witch! to far-off Cithaera!"

'The Woodpecker' is a confessional poem, which expresses Ashraf Hossain's commitment to the teaching profession he has inherited from his family tradition. He sticks to this profession as a member of the third generation and has trodden this path for thirty years like a

woodpecker searching food for the sustenance of his soul. Ashraf Hossain's passion of life is to become a poet as he has stated in the same poem: "Poetry is soul's food." But the irony inherent in a teacher's life is that most often what he gets in return is a sense of futility - a fruitless pecking on the dead twigs leading to even the damage of the brain:



On Behula's Raft  
SELECTED POEMS  
Khondakar Ashraf Hossain

On Behula's Raft: Selected Poems  
Khondakar Ashraf Hossain  
Writers Ink, Dhaka.

"Many take the crest on my head to be a crown of glory--/ In reality that's the clogged blood, the cerebral hemorrhage--/ Not the plume on a hero's helmet!"

'Noorjahan' is an extraordinary poem centred on the condition of women in a male-dominated and bigoted society. The poem reveals Ashraf Hossain's intense social awareness and insight into the sad plight of a working class girl

who toils hard for her survival. She is deprived of all joys of life and helplessly drifts on the sea of sorrow and pain. The poet uses a refrain of two lines: "Water is boiling on the stove./ What is there inside the water?" He then provides his answers. In the course of this Q & A, the poet at one point recounts the general condition of Bangladeshi women: "Water is boiling on the stove./ A woman's heart, her sari./ What do you do with the sari?/ It makes a good burial cloth, you know!/ One who has nothing, a sari is her world, her afterworld./ Wrap her body in a four-yard long sari-- that'll be her best, her night's rest, her winter's warmth." The poem ends with the vision of a time when vast multitudes of working class women will rise from the abyss of poverty and deprivation like the legendary "ababeel" birds to protest against social inequality and persecution. Ashraf Hossain has made deft use of the Koranic myth of King Abrahah and his elephant hordes, which was destroyed by the stone-pelting "ababeels".

'The Ballad of a Gravedigger's Daughter' is another fine poem, which powerfully conveys a sense of suffering and tragic pathos. The poem, written in four-line stanzas with rhyme, testifies to Ashraf Hossain's artistic skill in handling the ballad form and in creating a terrible sense of loneliness and tragedy of life. While the gravedigger digs graves, his daughter in his lonely hut excavates another kind of grave with her clandestine lover.

In 'Women and Witchcraft,' written in excellent lyrical flair, the poet has focused his vision on the superstition of rural life in the countryside. A snake-bitten woman is lying in the village courtyard, dying or already dead. The crowd is waiting with heart throbbing suspense while a snake charmer chants mantras with the increasing speed of his

voice, desperately trying to bring her back to life. In a playful tone the poet draws a spectacle of superstition, which is an integral part of rural life patterns. Apart from these narrative poems, Hossain has written many pure lyrics, some of them based on the natural scenery of Bangladesh. His evocation of the visual scene of the playful wind and rain on the vast paddy fields is spellbinding. Furthermore, he sees the rural scene through the eyes of a man who knows about western dance forms like tango or flamenco. The following is a description of the dance of the cloud on the waters of the marshes: "The cloud figure-skates/ on the swaying *aman* sheaves./ Touching the boats' prow/ on the dark waters of the *beel* / the turbulent cloud hoofs up a flamenco swirl/ long hair/ floating in a frenzied glee."

Ashraf Hossain's poetry abounds with quotable quotes. Often his first lines take on the look of aphorisms or wise sayings. They are both deep in meaning and original in conception. A few examples: "Life is a half-trained tiger, he has only learnt how to howl." "Sorrow is a guitar that cuts the maestro's finger/ just to test the sharpness of its strings." "Your children are the mileposts to your grave--/ Footprints of the traveller snatched away by a tiger..."

The poetry is soaked with profound love for the land, its enchanting landscape and masses. Hossain's language is lucid; his imagery is innovative and suggestive. His understanding of the human condition makes him a serious poet. The present collection containing thirty-five poems will certainly be able to receive the appreciation of the most discerning of readers.

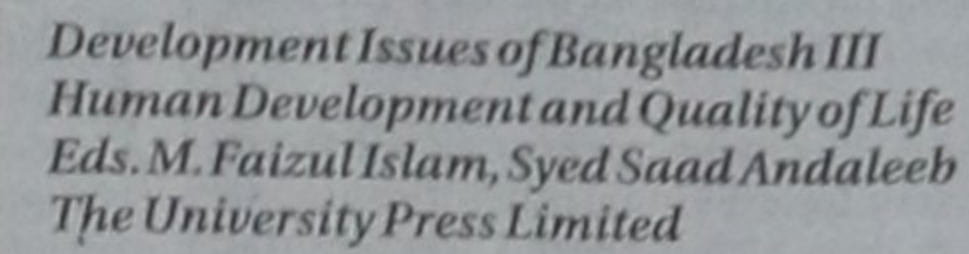
Dr. K. Rezaur Rahman has retired as Professor, Department of English, University of Dhaka.

### AT A GLANCE



Fault Lines  
Stories of 1971  
Eds. Niaz Zaman, Asif Farrukhi  
The University Press Limited

An invaluable collection of short stories based on the 1971 Bangladesh War, this work is simply an eye opener. For history buffs all across the South Asian subcontinent, a new and positive understanding of a tumultuous period in the region is what these stories promise. Each story is a gripping read.



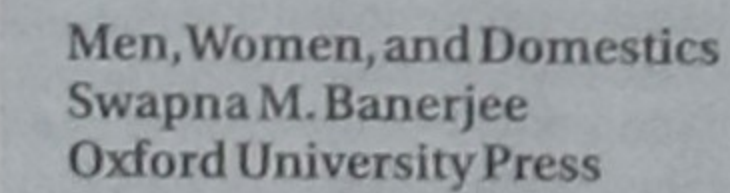
Development Issues of Bangladesh III  
Human Development and Quality of Life  
Eds. M. Faizul Islam, Syed Saad Andaleeb  
The University Press Limited

The title of the book makes things obvious. Development, now no more a matter of hard, dry statistics, has today embraced wider concepts. Hence the emphasis on human development, with the underlying focus on an improvement of the quality of life. The editors, both academics abroad, have done a good job of preparing a rich anthology.



Explorations in Connected History  
Mughals and Franks  
Sanjay Subrahmanyam  
Oxford University Press

Here is a historical connection that can only leave readers amazed, perhaps even asking for more. Beginning with the rule of the Mughals, the narrative goes down all the way to a recapitulation of the history, vis-a-vis colonization, of the Dutch, the Portuguese, the French, the English and the Persians. A thoroughly well-researched work.



Men, Women, and Domestic  
Swarna M. Banerjee  
Oxford University Press

This is a work Bengalis on both sides of the political divide can relate to, for it speaks of a common phenomenon. Domestic violence has been part of bhadralok households for as long as anyone can recall. The varied ways in which individuals from lower down the social scale have influenced life is the core of the tale here.

Source: The University Press Limited, Dhaka

# History taken with a pinch of salt

## Nazma Yeasmeen Haque enjoys an intriguing tale of the 1971 war

**T**HE title of the novel is a most fascinating one, particularly to a reader who is a Bengali in spirit. The title sends out vibrations of musical elements to one's images. It is a family saga based on stories and events that actually had happened over a long period of time dating back roughly to 1950 and ending sometime in early 1971. The locale is the then East Pakistan where the father, an ICS officer, was posted in various places both small and relatively big, raising a family of six children along with his hardy and well-educated wife. Also part of the family was Namibibi who was looked upon as a much dependable person, particularly by the children as they grew up.

*Bengal Raag* is written by the two youngest children of the family, who happened to be twins, much later while both of them were involved in their own professions. The entire novel has been written with much enthusiasm primarily because it is all about myriad events that in fact take place in the authors' own family involving all the members against the backdrop of some significant episodes of the history of the country in terms of socio-political turmoil. Recalling episodes that took place in one's childhood and during school years mainly and recasting them in an order of chronology infused with full verve is not that easy a task to produce after the lapse of a long time. It is like living one's childhood and pre-adolescence years once in their actuality and then reliving them for the second time as one ventures to record them. As one reads the book, one feels one is hearing a long story told by some master storyteller. Although the

book jacket says that there is a blend of fiction and real life in the story, it is hard to separate them out because of the liveliness in presentation and an ever easy flow of narrative all the way. Disbelief even partly as to the veracity of the story, therefore, does not creep in. As one passes from one episode to another, one is awed by the very fine details of events crisscrossing the novels as if in keeping with its topography where innumerable rivers and rivulets slither through. A reader gets immersed in the contents and feels oneself a part of the family.

Unlike most novels and plays, *Bengal Raag* does not present a particular character for its protagonist. Every character occupies a position of importance in relation to occurrences both in and out of the family. Much cohesiveness and family bonding is reflected from the interactions of the members that are strikingly varied; and however small the happenings, all get the thorough attention of the narrators. The whole book is absolutely saturated with words, words and words that become eloquent as one reads it.

Descriptions of places, people living there, their beliefs, customs and occupations all are seen with an anthropologist's discerning eyes, making things come alive to bear witness to history, geography and their interdisciplinary roles over the years in moulding the lives of people. For instance, when the family goes on a travel spree to places like Bandarban, Raozan, Rangamatia and Kaptai, its members so charmed by the distinctiveness that is so pronounced among the people belonging to various

tribes that the authors engage separate chapters on each. Seen through the eyes of young children, images stay on, glowing. There is also mention of the then chief of the Chakmas, Raja Tridiv Roy, who got so alienated from his subjects that he eventually needed to flee to Pakistan.

There is much hilarity ingrained in the novel, lightening up often the grim



Bengal Raag  
Durdana Soomro and Ghazala Hameed  
Writers Ink

and sombre episodes and refreshing a reader's mind leading him or her to searching for further turns in the tale. A magnetic touch is perceived. One such relates to General Ayub Khan's military

coup in 1958. One can see changes not only in the political area but also in cleaning up roads, disposing of garbage, whitewashing of government buildings and in the starched uniforms of policemen as also in their smart gear. Ayub Khan's presence becomes so all pervasive that the authors as young children think that he might as well come down to inspect the tidiness of their bedrooms and check if they have eaten their turnips. They do not realise that their two elder brothers have simply been joking.

Another instance of hilarity that perhaps climaxes all others is the worry of one of the twins who, having been impressed by Nehru's utterance, 'At the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awaken to freedom,' wonders why Jinnah could not deliver a speech like that. Although Jinnah speaks well and also with a lawyer's logic, she thinks his clipped British accent is difficult to understand. Thus once at a public meeting, record the authors, when Jinnah ended his speech with 'Pakistan Zindabad,' many people think that he in fact has said, 'Pakistan is in the bag!'

In spite of the lilting music coursing through the novel, *Bengal Raag* has more often than not gone off tune. Although the family lived in East Pakistan for a rather long period of time and also built a house in Dacca, yet the place could never be its home and it was perpetually in search of roots. Its members thus lived half a life in the then East Pakistan and never felt a sense of belonging in a province that was soon to be a country. The myth of religious commonality falls apart in such cases. Having gone to school, besides also

spending a year in college, the twins remained absolutely ignorant about the writer of the song, 'Jodi tor dak shune keu na ashe tobe ekla chalo re', and thought that it was one of Nazrul's revolutionary songs where there was "a clear invitation to the Bengalis to go their own way." Almost total alienation from a society amidst which one lives only physically can cause such a dangerous level of insularity. It also leads a reader to a state of discomfiture when one of the twins, while trying to sketch a map of East Pakistan in the air, closes her eyes and imagines a dog with its muzzle and four legs. It is a crude analogy despite the fact that East Pakistan still is part of their dear Pakistan! At one stage, while living in West Pakistan, the family feels uneasy in relating to Aynee because she is married to a Bengalee and has settled in East Pakistan. It, therefore, will not trust her version, made during her visit to the family in West Pakistan, of the atrocities committed by the West Pakistani soldiers at the behest of their fierce anti-Bengali commanders.

It is intriguing why the co-authors of the novel employ the term 'Bengal' most of the time in place of 'East Pakistan'. Last but not least is their depiction of Bangladesh's war of independence as a civil war. Unfortunately, most Pakistanis as well as some people in Bangladesh subscribe to this skewed notion. *Bengal Raag*, though a captivating novel, is to be taken with a pinch of salt, at least in relation to some of its contents.

Dr. Nazma Yeasmeen Haque, a history buff, is Principal, Radiant International School, Dhaka.

# The general in his own eyes

## Ekram Kabir finds the memoir of a dictator amusing

**M**ILITARY governments or army-driven governments usually erupt in poorer countries. They even try to rule in countries that are at break-even point vis-a-vis prosperity. They do not have a chance in countries like the United Kingdom, the United States or even Saudi Arabia -- nations that have already become prosperous and where the 'poverty' jargon does not work any longer for the ruling class.

This is exactly the reason why Pervez Musharraf's *In the Line of Fire* is full of words such as 'democracy' and 'poverty'. Once one has read through the book, the fact does not escape one's notice that Musharraf wants to make the whole world believe that whatever he has done has been done for Pakistan. He has wanted to build a nation that was, he says, left in all sorts of trouble by his predecessors in power.

In this memoir, Musharraf talks about Pakistan, Islam, Al Qaeda and the threat of terrorism and especially in relation to Pakistan's position in that war. Readers are also told how his country was unwittingly drawn into this war, and how he had no choice but to cooperate.

The book begins with glimpses from his childhood, the years spent in Turkey where his father served in the Pakistan embassy, and his youth at the Pakistan Military Academy. From the academy to Army House (the home of Pakistan's army chief) to being head of state has been a journey was filled with dangers. Readers are taken to that evening in 1999, the night of the counter-coup, as he calls it, when as the army chief, he was denied permission on the orders of the then prime minister Nawaz Sharif to land his aircraft in Karachi; and how by a counter-

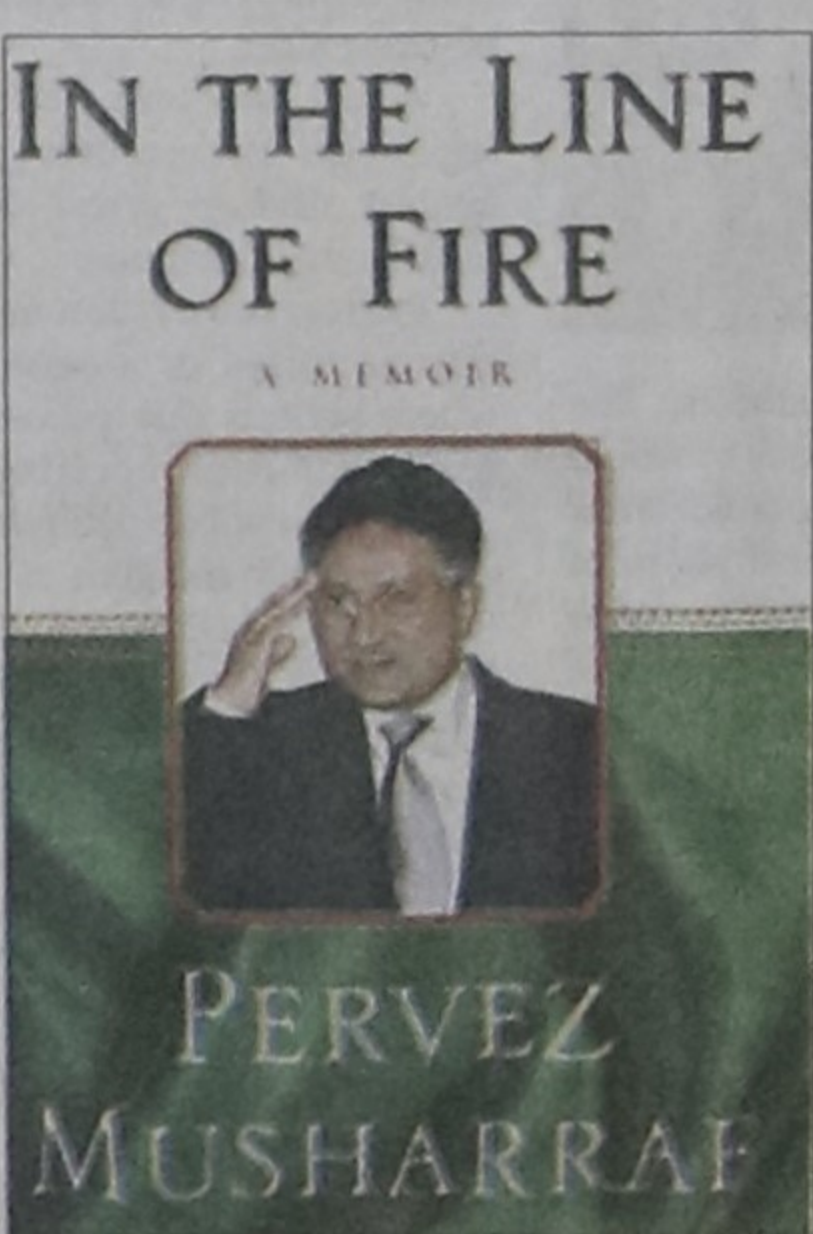
coup he and his associates captured power and deposed Sharif and his government.

The next few chapters deal with the issue of rebuilding the economy. He is extremely critical of the appeasement of the religious right in Pakistan and of two of Pakistan's former leaders, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and General Zia-ul-Haq, for their appeasement and kowtowing to the religious fundamentalists. He says about Bhutto: "By the time his regime ended, I had come to the conclusion that Bhutto was the worst thing that had ever happened to Pakistan. I still maintain that he did more damage to the country than anyone else, damage from which we have still not fully recovered. Among other things he was the first to try to appease the religious right. He banned liquor and gambling and declared Friday a holiday instead of Sunday. This was hypocrisy at its peak, because everyone knew that he did not believe in any one of these actions."

At a later stage Musharraf speaks thus about Zia: "President Zia, in the 1980s, completed what Bhutto had started in the dying phase of his regime -- the total appeasement of the religious lobby. Zia found it convenient to align himself with the religious right and create a supportive constituency for himself. He started overemphasizing and overparticipating in religious rituals to show his alignment with the religious lobby. Even music and entertainment became officially taboo, whereas I am told that in private he personally enjoyed good semiclassical music."

Readers will likely wonder what may be written about Musharraf himself when, down the line, another Pakistani

head of state or army chief chooses to write another book such as his. Musharraf also talks about Osama bin Laden and Mullah Omar a lot. In fact, his book goes quite deep into how the Taliban in Afghanistan ran their activities. There is a confession about how Pakistan contributed to Taliban activities when he says: "We helped to create the Mujahidin, fired them with religious zeal in seminaries, armed them, paid them, fed them, and sent them to a jihad against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. We did not stop to think how we would divert them to pro-



In the line of fire a memoir  
Pervez Musharraf  
Free Press

ductive life after the jihad was won. This mistake cost Afghanistan and Pakistan more dearly than any other country. Neither did the United States realise what a rich, educated person like Osama bin Laden might later do with the organisation that we all had enabled him to establish."

Musharraf's book helps the reader to understand how the war on terror was in the making even before 9/11. He is extremely critical about the US as far as Afghanistan's development is concerned and particularly when the Soviets left the country. He says the US did not even consider the rebuilding and development of Afghanistan after the Soviets departed. America, Musharraf says, simply abandoned Afghanistan to its fate, ignoring the fact that a wretchedly poor and unstable country, armed to the teeth with the most sophisticated weapons and torn apart by warlords, could become an ideal haven for terrorists.

In the *Line of Fire* is also full of personal incidents. There are stories of his love for a Bengali girl, his arranged marriage to his wife, Seeba, their long courtship, and the birth of his children.

But Musharraf does not tell all when he talks about the political developments of 1970 and 1971. He possibly intentionally hides many historical facts that, if written, would further tarnish his and his country's image. Talking about Bangladesh's independence war, he asserts that it was an Indian conspiracy. Like him, most Pakistanis still subscribe to this idea. But the question is: was the March 25 military crackdown on the innocent people of Bangladesh an Indian conspiracy? Did India cause the crackdown that ignited a full-scale Bengali

liberation war? A Bengali reader would certainly be infuriated when he reads this part of the book. The general conceals these facts. He does not say how many million lives the Pakistani military had to take before it surrendered. He totally forgets about the terror the military caused among the people of Bangladesh. Certainly, neither the freedom fighters nor the Indians had killed all those innocent people. It was the army that the general served.

Again, talking about how Bangladesh's independence war ended, he says: "A cease-fire was declared on December 17, 1971, and Pakistan was cut in half." Musharraf does not say Pakistan's soldiers 'surrendered' and 'Bangladesh was independent.' Rather he says 'Pakistan was cut in half.'

Musharraf's portrayal of Bangladesh's liberation war shows that it will take a long time to reduce the mental gap between Bangladesh and Pakistan.

Except for one or two instances of wrong use of the English language, the language of the book is lucid. Unlike many South Asian writers, Musharraf has a free flow in telling his stories. However, when the book was published, suspicions arose in Pakistan of ghost writing involved in the work. In Pakistan, such suspicions also arose in the 1960s about Ayub Khan's autobiography *Friends Not Masters*. However, *In the Line of Fire* is a widely-read book. It has attracted huge media attention across the world. And unlike Ayub Khan's book, it will remain good reference material for the future.

Ekram Kabir is a journalist and regular book reviewer.

# A leader's story

## Muhammad Zamir recommends a Bangabandhu anthology

**T**HERE have been, since 15 August 1975, several attempts by different authors to write a meaningful biography of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Unfortunately, they have been either fragmentary or superficial. In most cases, the treatment of the subject and his era were also not comprehensive.

It is the absence of such a biography that led to an open discussion during the Annual General Meeting of the Bangla Academy in 1992. It was generally agreed that there was a need for definitive biographies not only of Bangabandhu but also of Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani. Concern was expressed that the historical contributions of these political stalwarts might otherwise fade away from public memory or become subjects of controversy owing to an absence of proper records. It was then decided that Bangla Academy should undertake the task of research and the eventual publication of the two desired biographies.

The task was set about with great seriousness and many volunteers started to collect and sift through copies of old photographs, records of Bangabandhu's statements (delivered on different occasions in the Pakistani period and also during his tenure as head of government in Bangladesh) and confidential records pertaining to his political career. This massive task was undertaken consistent with the premise that there would be no distortion of history or partisan subjectivity. Editing of the first draft started from May 2000.

There are six sections in these two volumes. They cover not only Bangabandhu's life but also his gradual evolution as a politician set against the contemporary social, economic, political and religious background. Section One deals with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's childhood in the context of British India, his family background and his association with the anti-colonial independence movement that eventually led to the emergence of Pakistan in 1947. Section Two analyses the mental approach of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman towards emerging issues like the language movement, his gradual rise as an important political leader (within the format of the Jugto Front) and the significant role that he played between 1955 and 1965. In this context, the authors have highlighted the discrimination that was taking place within the governance structure in Pakistan and the inequitable treatment being meted out to the then East Pakistan. This section concludes with references to Bangabandhu having reached unquestioned primacy (as a result of his persistent political struggles) within the then East Pakistani political arena by 1969.

Section Three focuses on Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's role leading up to the Pakistan general elections in 1970, his critical post-election leadership during the non-cooperation movement and his subsequent arrest by the Pakistani authorities in March 1971. Section Four deals with Bangabandhu's life during his interment and concludes with his eventual return to independent Bangladesh in January 1972. Section Five covers the important role played by Bangabandhu till August 1975 and analyses his political philosophy and his efforts to create order, discipline and good governance amidst

the chaos of a war-torn country saddled with devastation and more than ten million refugees.

Section Six has tried to highlight the singular aspects in Bangabandhu's character that guided his approach to the resolution of issues, domestic as well as international. It will be important to remember here that the first few years after 1972 were particularly difficult given the fact that Bangladesh had to overcome many hurdles related to its recognition as an independent country and also the difficulties that it had to face in achieving its rightful place in the international multilateral arena.

What makes the two volumes a worthwhile collection is not only the valuable narrative but also the inclusion towards the end of each volume of reprints of many letters that Bangabandhu wrote to his family members and to his colleagues. There are also reprints of many of his significant speeches (on important national issues) that he delivered in the last thirty years of his life. They provide a remarkable insight into the man. There are also many pages of rare photographs that underline his simplicity and his commitment towards the people of Bangladesh.

This is an important publication and



Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman  
Jibon o Rajniti  
Bangla Academy

all those who have been associated with this venture deserve special thanks. It was a complex task that required planning and careful and objective sifting of records. One must, in this context, felicitate the eminent editorial committee responsible for completing this onerous exercise and headed by Monem Sarker and also record one's gratitude to the late SAMS Kibria for having lent his active support. That made this endeavour possible.

It makes sense to suggest that the Bangla Academy consider publishing these two important volumes in the form of easy-to-carry CDs so that they can reach a wider audience among our expatriate Bangladeshis. It will then probably be cheaper and more affordable.

Muhammad Zamir, a columnist, is a former diplomat and secretary, government of Bangladesh.