

Love and the impediments it runs into

Mohsena Reza Shopna mulls over a touching tale of feeling and despair

THE first reaction reading through the pages of *The Crooked Neem Tree* is one of unhappiness at not reading it twenty years back. The appeal would have been tenfold. Nevertheless I felt twenty years younger and wanted to guzzle the entire book in one day.

It is a moving portrayal of a sheltered young woman's life in the early 1960s. Written in 1971 and published a decade later, it narrates the story of a young Punjabi, Seema, growing up in East Pakistan. She gradually becomes aware of social injustice and personal betrayals. She falls in love with Tanvir, a young Bihari. When Tanvir breaks off this relationship she gets engaged to Qamar, a Punjabi cousin. Learning that Qamar is responsible for a friend's happiness, she ends the engagement and turns to Khalid, a Bengali student she meets at the university. However, she never stops loving Tanvir.

In a politically charged atmosphere we find that 'Urdu-Wallahs', despite half a century or more of staying here, do not learn Bangla. The differences which separate the characters in love are also race and culture, years of prosperity vs. ages of poverty. All the characters are in one way or another in search of roots and at one point we cannot but pity the non-Bengalis. Tanvir says, "I have no right to ask you to share my rootless life; wherever we go in Pakistan, we shall be Mohajirs, refugees, and outsiders." Nasreen is not accepted because she is a non-Bengali and is ultimately wedded to an aged non-Bengali. The underlying theme is a tussle between the haves and the have-nots. Tanvir rejects Seema on the ground that she is the daughter of a bureaucrat and cannot ultimately cope with poverty. Though Seema states that position and money are not everything, Tanvir insists, "Without it there is nothing, one becomes desperate, loses all one's finest qualities, and forgets everything only to get a little money to sustain oneself."

Niaz Zaman takes a dig at the CSPs maybe to voice the opinion of many more of her time. When Seema asks Khalid to study for the CSS examination he retaliates by pointing out that only a few CSPs think of the teeming millions. The very person to criticise the nose-in-the-air attitude of the CSP, once "made in the C.S.P academy", will be shocked at the idea of spending his evening on the pavements of Jinnah Avenue or in Casbah. Often he might even change his wife because of his recent high market value!

To bring life to the story, the writer takes us back to those good old days when we used to have rag days. Visit the USIS and study at the British Council, go to Nanking, Chow Chin Chow and have baby ice cream. But despite all these mundane affairs the whole story revolves round Seema's intense love for Tanvir and Khalid's for Seema. Khalid always fears losing Seema just when he has found her and Seema regrets losing a friend. "There were times we fought and argued but these had been between friends." She has given too much of herself in her love for Tanvir and "one cannot shut off love as one shuts off a tap."

Every line reminds us of the author's proximity with the new generation. Her portrayal of racial prejudices is amazing. Through the proposal and rejection of mixed marriages she has very successfully depicted this disparity. There is no dearth of funny notes. The conversation between Seema and Khalid is simply hilarious. Khalid tries his utmost to convince her of his love, but Seema is adamant and snubs him: "Arguments do not convince a girl."

"What does? Physical force? I think the cavemen were right when they clubbed the women they were interested in and dragged them off by their hair to their caves."

Everyday language is in use, easy diction makes it a tangle piece to chew. Zaman's skill in the use of imagery with which she describes Seema's forlorn

state is remarkable. Seema writes letters to Tanvir, tears them into small bits and scatters them out the window, watching them float softly past the crooked neem tree like little falling paper flakes. "My love bore flowers as bitter as the Neem tree", she says.

The book is rather a research on human nature and relationships; some isolated lines are proof enough. "Human beings are by nature very adaptable and women more so." "Some people

India with no land, money or backing, she would only hinder rather than help her son's career."

A vivid description of traditional marriage is also brought in for young readers. The truth in her description comes up in the lines when she says girls look pretty on their wedding day but their fear and nervousness prevent their being truly beautiful; on her *walima* a mixture of shyness and fulfillment makes the plainest bride a thing of beauty. In fact, every line in the book relates to our every day life, making it one of the most interesting and relaxing books to read amongst all those mind drilling books of today.

A marriage like Nasreen's sets a girl wondering. She has become a woman not gently with love but brutally. We expect that somewhere there must be our ideal companion, our soulmate whom we have only to meet once and know forever that we have found what we have sought. But life does not work out that way. Sleeping Beauty waits in vain for her Prince Charming. Snow White remains locked up in her glass coffin, the prince never comes. Sleeping Beauty chooses a substitute but, physically aroused, her innermost being is never awakened and the pretty young girl deteriorates into the slovenly matron shouting at servants and children alike or else into the butterfly which flits from lover to lover never knowing true love with any. What philosophy of life! As a continuation we can bring the soliloquy of Seema into consideration. Khalid has starved her of love. With Khalid she is friendly. "What did it matter, all marriages are not built on love, a lasting union can be based on deep friendship, understanding of intellectual and emotional needs."

Niaz Zaman defends men too. Not all men are philanderers. A man can also remember his true love. Sometimes it is women who refuse to marry their lovers, preferring wealth and security to the uncertainties of love with an impeccable lover. She embellishes her story with inter-



The Crooked Neem Tree
Niaz Zaman
Writers Ink

ple are not psychologically prepared to get married because they see love as spiritual and platonic and cannot bear to think of the physical closeness because it sullies the purity."

Our social values of the time are reflected in the marriage episodes of Seema's friend Nasreen. "Any girl who was an easy conquest was unworthy of marriage" is Rasheed's mother's comment. She might be pretty but what could she bring with her? A refugee from

West and the falling of the West and Arab states in the region. The crushing details, facts and figures about the major events in the Gulf in the 80s and 90s are graphically presented through the most reliable descriptions. And you know they are reliable because Fisk is absolutely insistent on getting to the bottom of the horrific events at any cost.

'The Girl and the Child and Love' takes a detour into the story of an extremist who threw away everything his life, the girl he loved and the child that they were waiting for. Fisk analyses the deep desperation behind this but concludes that a rational mind cannot justify such an act under any circumstances. He then details the extreme situations that create extremists. He hopelessly witnesses human sufferings, violations of the Geneva Convention and the 'bloodbath' over and over again. 'Anything to Wipe Out a Devil...' gives you the grim details of the Algerian Revolution and its aftermath. As the Iraq crisis intensifies, the chapters entitled 'Planet Damnation', 'Betrayal', 'The Land of Graves', 'The Plague', form a monumental archive of the crisis that captures the 'infinite sadness' of the events. Whereas 'Now Thrive the Armourers...' presents unpleasant facts about weapon industries. 'Why' is a chapter that links the 'human cost' of the conflicts with 9/11 extremism.

The book is not, however, full of facts analysis. Fisk is a dazzling reporter who does not fail to add dramatic and personal touches to his reportage. Even to Kings, He comes... is an absorbing chapter where he combines the death of his mother with that of powerful Arab monarchs. An abundant black humour also adds to the readability of his reports. At his mother's funeral, he laments how the West should have engaged in inventing medicines to save life rather than the fiesta of rampage and killing. As the reactor responds to this

with a prayer, Fisk comments: "Unless there is a Heavenly Post Office which redirects packages of anger to our presidents and prime ministers, there wasn't much point in bothering the Almighty."

Nevertheless, Fisk grows our towards the end of the book. In the chapters, 'The Die is Cast', 'Atomic Dog, Annihilator...' and 'Into the Wilderness', he fails to find any hope in the midst of cluster bombs, explosions and destructions of invaluable information, books and artefacts.

Never, in all my dreams of destruction, could I have imagined the day I would enter the Iraqi National Archaeological Museum to find its treasures defiled... The Iraqis did it. They did it to their own history, physically destroying the evidence of their own nation's thousands of years of civilisation.

Fisk, therefore, does not end the book in hope. He cannot do so after describing all those gory events in Lebanon, Syria, Israel, Iraq, Palestine and so forth. '(Our) tragedy lies always in our past, that we have to live with our ancestors' folly and suffer for it...' unless we pay heed to the lessons of history for sure. In any case, the fact that Fisk has spoken out against power politics and the failure of history is an act of great hope for us; because the better we know the truth the stronger we are supposed to be in resisting the deceitful power games. Fisk could be provocative in revealing unpalatable facts through first-hand interviews, accounts and experiences. And of course he has been criticised for his obsession with details (hence the size); but his unflinching efforts to uphold tolerance, decency and rule of law in the midst of the hellish chaos in the Middle East is extraordinarily stunning. His book is an absolute treasure.

Rehnuma Sazzad is researching post-colonial literature in the United Kingdom.

Words that do not end in hope

Rehnuma Sazzad acknowledges the realities of an ancient conflict

A thoroughly researched book of about 13 hundred pages, with 200 pages of bibliography included at the end, is a challenge in itself. Besides, the author is not presenting any pulp fiction here; he is chronicling the last 30 years' warfare in Middle-Eastern countries. So why would you be interested in the incessant reportage of killing, massacre and tragedy? I think the name 'Robert Fisk' should be reason enough. Through the publication of translated Fisk articles in *Prothom Alo*, I would imagine that the Bangladeshi audience is familiar with the most astounding journalist of our time. In fact, the book cover includes a great two-liner about him from *The Financial Times*: 'One of the outstanding reporters of this generation. As a war correspondent he is unrivalled.' Indeed, he is. Fisk has lived in the Middle East for almost three decades as a reporter of *The Times* and *The Independent* and won numerous prestigious journalism awards. He is superbly committed to telling the truth which has cost him a lot throughout his career.

Interestingly enough, the ironic title of the book comes from the inscription of the medal that his father received for his heroism during the First World War, which was called 'The Great War for Civilisation'. Fisk bitterly shows how every war is subtitled, so to speak, in this way: every war is fought citing a noble cause and justified in the name of our civilisation. Fisk is no Homer to imply that a war is the deadliest opposite to this. He sees the gory reality day in and day out by being part of various countries and cultures, streets, cities and villages, military headquarters/camps, hospitals full of severely wounded civilians and the lives of people whether or not they are soldiers, citizens or leaders. As a war correspondent, he makes every attempt to condemn the power-hungry rulers who defend the merciless killing

in the name of 'civilisation'. Fisk is on a crusade of his own in this book to unmask the brutal powers that have been the cause of injustice in the Middle East in the last hundred years that his book covers.

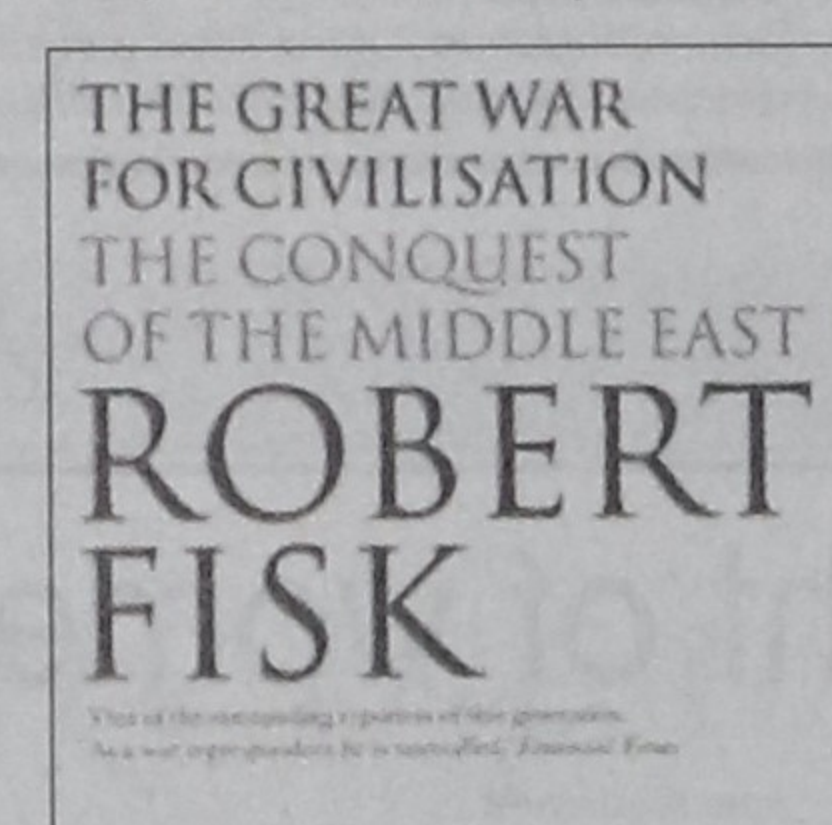
Fisk's reporting becomes a canvas that illustrates the historical repetitions of phenomena like ethnic cleansing. Much to the shame of humanity, propaganda is at work portraying events as 'tragic' but not genocides after all. Fisk describes how the Armenian genocide should have been regarded as 'The First Holocaust'; but the world is not even allowed to recognise this let alone raise its voice in condemning the inhuman crime. In the chapter 'Fifty Thousand Miles from Palestine', Fisk shows how politics equals irremediable exile for Palestinians. He quotes from *Macbeth* at the beginning of this chapter:

And be these juggling fiends no more believ'd/That palter with us in a double sense/That keeps the word of promise to our ear/And break it to our hope.

There we have it. Fisk records not only the pain and suffering of the Palestinians but also the examples of rational and compassionate people on both sides. However, he argues that the politics of the region being similar to the *Macbethian* witches' empty promises, its quagmire continues. At any rate, I cannot help pointing out here that like this chapter, Fisk's quotations at the beginning of each one foreshadows the content, which is fascinating from a stylistic point of view.

Let us take a look at the details of some of the chapters to gain a better idea of his reportage. The book kicks off with a startling interview with Laden in the 1990s. Intriguingly, Fisk makes the best use of the interview to demystify the 'wanted' man; he tries to fathom the source of his extremism. It is an effective opening chapter as one gets a feeling from it about the entire book as a ques-

tioning project. The second chapter takes us back to the 1980s, the days of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Fisk's marvellous descriptions link the Afghan problem back to its very source, namely colonialism. The next chapter, 'The Choirs of Kandahar', chronicles the increasing presence of the West in the country on the one hand and, on the other, the rise of the 'mujahedin'. The



The Great War for Civilisation: The Conquest of the Middle East
Robert Fisk
Fourth Estate

next moment, 'The Carpet-Weavers', focuses on the land of tapestries. It is a brilliantly written and extraordinarily courageous chapter offering one an invaluable insight into the Iranian Revolution and of course the power politics of the West related to it.

From the fifth chapter, 'The Path to War', onwards, Fisk's truth-telling gathers a tremendous momentum. He goes on detailing the Iran-Iraq war and its gruesome history, the making of a dangerous dictator and his most abominable crimes under the auspices of the

with a prayer, Fisk comments: "Unless there is a Heavenly Post Office which redirects packages of anger to our presidents and prime ministers, there wasn't much point in bothering the Almighty."

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Words from the nation's conscience keeper

A work reminds Enayetullah Khan of the caretaker engineer

'CARETAKER government' is a term that is inextricably linked to the political sphere of Bangladesh. And today, so many years into several periods of democratic governments, it still holds true, an unavoidable situation through which the country can go from one government to another without messy political confrontations and of course dirty manipulation of the elections.

It may sound sad, but despite all the rhetoric about political processes and the necessity of democracy, political gurus of all parties have been proved to be susceptible to ways that do not conform to ethical practices of politics. That is the truth, unvarnished and pure.

The fact that we need a caretaker government from time to time to set the country on a right course became a political imperative and this concept was conceived and delivered in the law chambers of Barrister Ishtiaq and Associates at Cosmos Centre in Malibagh. Funny, when people are engaged in heated political argument and when their words 'spew foam in passion, they forget that our problem is

in the absence of the thing called fair play. When a party comes to power, it becomes addicted to it and therefore wants to cling on to it for life. In the process, the principles of serving a nation become the casualty.

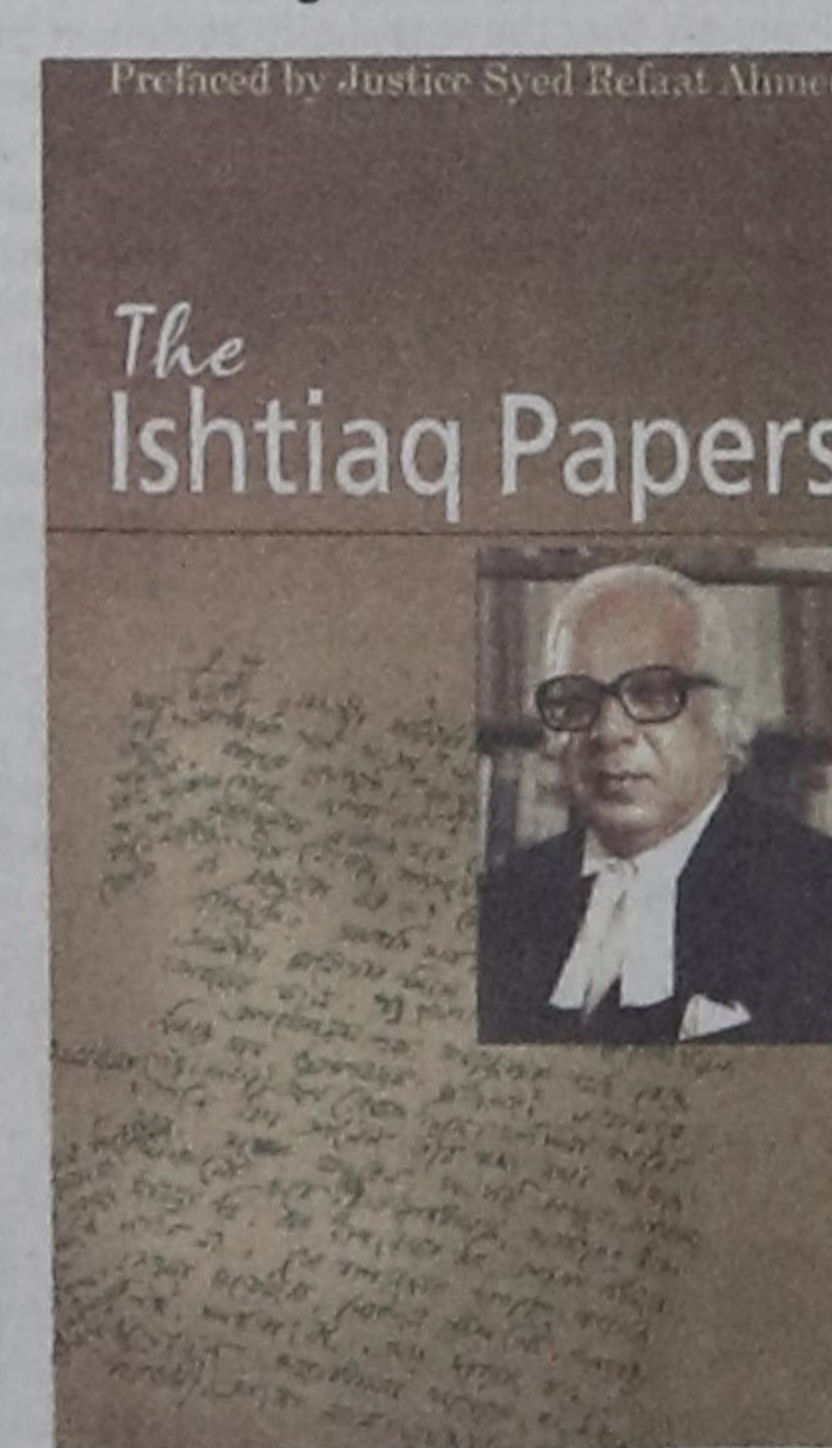
The Ishtiaq Papers, an apt name one must say, is an account by the late Syed Ishtiaq Ahmed about the process in 1996 that led to the 13th amendment to the constitution of Bangladesh incorporating the concept of the non-party caretaker government to ensure a smooth transition of power during elections. Ishtiaq Ahmed does not need any introduction because all his life he managed to keep himself above the pettiness of power play which continues to vitiate our politics. In fact, back in 1990, when General Ershad was stepping down from the presidency in the face of a mass upsurge, this scribbler was sent to the eminent lawyer with the proposal that he take over as president of the country. Syed Ishtiaq Ahmed smiled and made a witty comment: "I will decline but someday you must write this".

A noted diplomat called him the

'conscience keeper' of the nation and so we can take *The Ishtiaq Papers* to be an objective account of the events that eventually led to the formation of a successful caretaker government and the holding of a proper and fair election.

The book reads like a thriller because unless one reads it, the main incident that sparked off a confrontation between the ruling BNP at the time and the Awami League opposition will remain unknown. It may be hard to believe, but a parliamentary argument related to the Hebron massacre of 53 Palestinians by a Jewish extremist group started it all. The boycotts began when a ruling party member made an off hand comment and that eventually snowballed into an intractable political fiasco.

The idea of the caretaker government took shape with people like Ishtiaq Ahmed trying to find an amicable solution to the political impasse; and after a lot of efforts that became a reality. But history is often distorted, especially in Bangladesh, because perspectives are hardly free of political bias. Therefore, this book works splendidly as an accu-



The Ishtiaq Papers
The University Press Limited

rate historical account of what happened then. Often the inherent frustration of the writer is about our lack of political will to do plain old good for the country.

In the detailed descriptions of the political wrangling of that period, time and again the author refers to the helplessness of the general people of the country who are the veins of democracy.

The Ishtiaq Papers have a special relevance in our lives because once again we are under caretaker rule brought in to save the country from disintegrating into civil war. Interestingly, when we juxtapose the account of the book alongside the events that took place on the streets of Dhaka before January 11 2007, we not only realise the necessity of the present authorities being there but also acknowledge the repulsive side of our political infrastructure. It is a book that has come out at the right time and one that has to be in your collection. After all, it is a dispassionate account of what our politics is really about.

Enayetullah Khan is Chief Editor, UNB and Editor, Dhaka Courier.

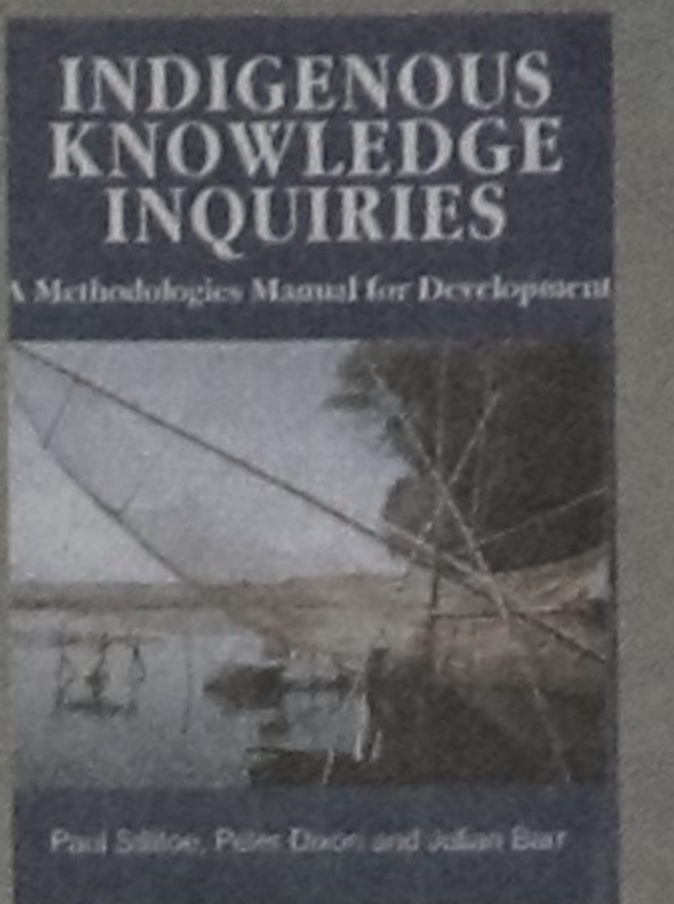
AT A GLANCE



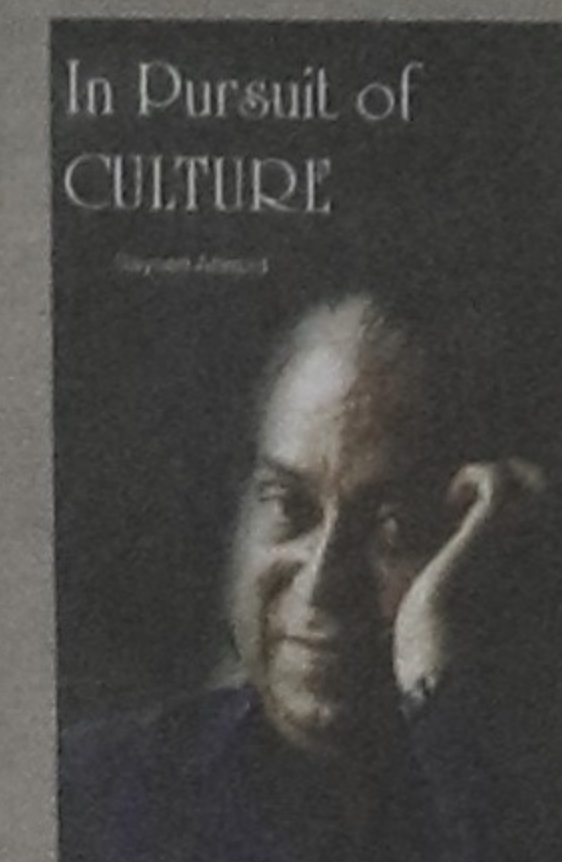
Paris, A Homage
Raana Haider
Taara Press India

Raana Haider's forays into travel literature take fresh new meaning in this work. Paris, the city that has been a symbol of intellectual activity for generations together, comes alive yet once more in this riveting account. Haider's language is superb; and so is her eye for detail. The book is unmitigated delight.

Indigenous Knowledge Inquiries
Paul Sillitoe, Peter Dixon, Julian Barr
The University Press Limited



For those engaged in development activities, this should be a good point of reference. It offers a whole range of approaches from how to design and manage a research project to how to build projects on a long-term basis. A variety of topics are covered in the work, those that will draw the attention of prospective as well as already involved researchers.



In Pursuit of Culture
Sayeed Ahmed
Printercraft Publication

Sayeed Ahmed has been a proponent of the varied cultural patterns Bangladesh is home to for years. His analyses of heritage, through lectures at home and abroad, have been honest portrayals of the historical background of the country. This work explores part of that canvas, in the form of articles detailing Ahmed's travels abroad.

Selected Poems of Al Mahmud
Trans. Zakeria Shirazi
Rhythm Prokashona Shongstha

Selected Poems of Al Mahmud

Al Mahmud happens to occupy a high niche in Bengali poetry. His themes and imagery have consistently served as food for new thought for literature enthusiasts. In this translation, Zakeria Shirazi, a journalist hugely committed to the pursuit of literary aesthetics, takes readers on a pleasant ride through Al Mahmud country.

A roof over the head

Rahad Abir appreciates an unusual research work

TO have sound knowledge of an ethnic group's culture, customs and manners one needs to know about the region the group inhabits, indeed the state of its housing and habitation. How a community lives, what its economic conditions and psychological state are can well be comprehended through studies of its housing technology and beautification.

Traditional Housing Technology of the Barind Tract is a research work by Syed Arman Hossain which made its appearance at this year's Ekushey Book Fair.

The main objective of the research is to document the traditional housing technology of the Barind tract. The study encompasses the traditional environmental knowledge of the people, the socio-economic features and their impact, the extent of eco-adaptiveness and cost-effectiveness, beliefs and rituals associated with house construction and house warming and other relevant factors. For purposes of the research the writer has selected three villages and their housing technology. The three villages are Saraigachi, Mamudpur and Tetulia Mathbari in Porsha upazila of Naogaon district.

Recognising the need for a systematic documentation of indigenous knowledge practices, this book deals with the housing technologies of traditional rural Muslims as well as the ethnic people such as Santals, Mundas and Oraons inhabiting the Barind tract of Bangladesh. It shows how their worldview and cultural understanding influence their housing practices, which are very sustainable. As revealed by the investigation, their environmental knowledge, rational assessment of socio-cultural needs, sense of economy, resource management practices, family relations and community behaviour find expressions in their housing choices. Drawing on the perspective of architectural anthropology, the book throws light on the traditional technology used by the Barind people for building houses. The approach indicates their potential when it comes to enriching the concept of sustainable development.

In order to collect the varied information and data relating to the preparation of the manuscript, the writer had to engage in extensive field work, and get closely acquainted with the people of the



Traditional Housing Technology of the Barind Tract
Syed Arman Hossain
Oitijhya

villages in question.

The writer, in a recent interview with a newspaper, was emphatic in his expression of gratitude: "I got much help from the local inhabitants. The majority Muslims and also Santals, Oraon and Munda people were very genial, enthusiastic and responsive in providing me with information and data. I was pleased to see their simplicity." But the research is not free from limitations. The writer acknowledges some unavoidable circumstances having limited the scope for data collection. For instance, communication facilities in the area were not very good; it was difficult to enter a Muslim house as people considered it somewhat offensive to their traditional *purdah* custom; and then there were the rainy conditions in the months of June and July. In spite of these limitations, the writer has tried to conduct his research in the best possible way.

It can be said in the end that not only keen readers and students of anthropology but also students of architecture, interested readers among ethnic people and development workers will find the work a healthy point of reference.

Rahad Abir is a journalist.