

Adding new substance to historical discourse
Syed Badrul Ahsan finds the enlightening in two works on a politician

NURJAHAN Murshid was one of the more articulate political beings in Bangladesh. There was a suavity about her, a readiness and an ability to be part of the wider world around her.

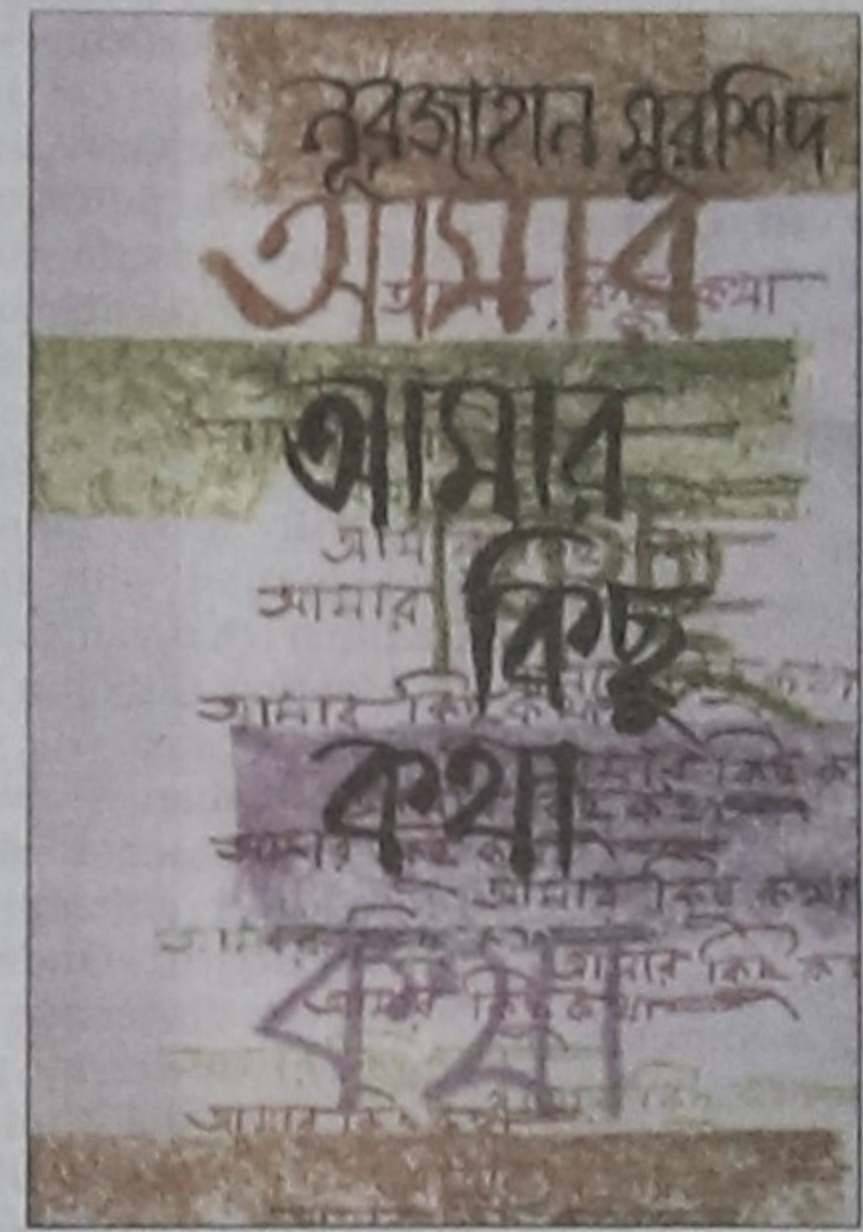


Nurjahan Murshid
Sharok Grantha
Eds. Anisuzzaman, Kamal Hossain, Sardar Fazlul Karim, Serajul Islam Choudhury, Selina Hossain Anyaprokash

all those stalwarts who had just set out on a mission to lead Bengalis into political sunshine.

In a bigger sense, though, Nurjahan Murshid, in that defining year when the Jugto Front unseated the Pakistan establishment through its rout of the Muslim League at the provincial elections, was part of a generation of politicians beginning to come of age.

cians --- Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Tajuddin Ahmed, Syed Nazrul Islam, et al --- who increasingly began to reflect the shape of things to come.



Amar Kichhu Kotha
Nurjahan Murshid
Anyaprokash

popularise the points throughout what still used to be Pakistan's eastern province. The Six Points were a metaphor for Bengali demands within the state of Pakistan.

The uncertainty came to an end with the formation of the government-in-exile in Mujibnagar in April 1971. Nurjahan Murshid, having made her way out of enemy-infested Dhaka, saw a new role thrust upon her.

Amar Kichhu Kotha is an offering from Nurjahan Murshid that takes the reader back to a world of possibilities eventually hurled to the ground with brute force.

had always held dear. In 1979, she spoke on Bangabandhu at a conference in London. Her poignant reflections on the rise and fall of her journal Edesh-Ekal are fundamentally a commentary on the perils faced by intellectually-oriented journalism in Bangladesh.

Democracy and development are the perspectives offered --- and covered --- in this insightful volume. It is not just South Asia but the continent as a whole that is brought under the microscope.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star.

AT A GLANCE

Dhaka Troimashik
Dhaka Smriti Shonkhya
Dhaka Heritage
Tel: 0181 918 1816



A truly enlightening issue, especially when celebrations are about to get underway around the 400th anniversary of Dhaka. The many articles in the journal reflect the memories of those who have been part of the city as it has moved on from being a provincial backwater to a modern, albeit confused capital of a free country.

Lost Innocence, Stolen Childhoods
Therese Blanchet
The University Press Ltd
Tel: 9565441, 9565444

This happens to be a book about children who unfortunately do not enjoy the state of being children. Their childhood goes missing and one fine morning they wake up knowing that the world does not look upon them as children at all.

Breaking the Barrier
Ed. Mohiuddin Ahmad, Cho Hee-yeon
DaSMI, Nabadhara
Tel: 8113769



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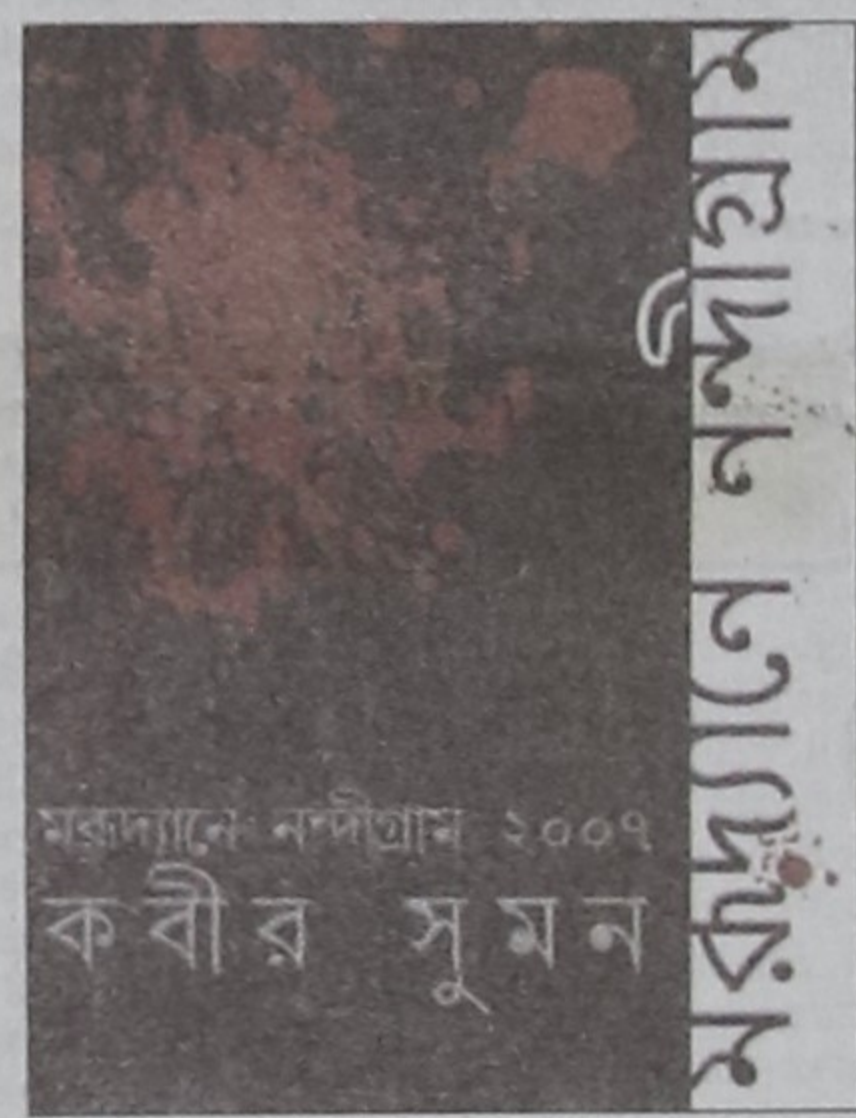
Democracy, Governance and Security Reforms
Bangladesh Context
Ed. Mufleh R. Osmany
Shaheen Afroze
Academic Press and Publishers Library
Tel: 8125394

A work on the many problems that Bangladesh has lately been confronted with, it attempts an answer to many of those issues. The issue of democracy, based as it is on the concept of governance and topped by matters of security, is deftly handled.

A demonic manifestation of political power
Nazma Yeasmeen Haque is moved by an account of state brutality

Something may or may not be beautiful but it certainly is powerful when it speaks the truth. With a clear and loud voice of conscience, it transforms itself into a most reliable and, therefore, a valid document mirror imaging atrocities most barbaric and nefarious.

Although this particular problem has not yet been resolved completely, yet perhaps by an apparent sense of success, the government went on applying the same policy in Nandigram a year after, which was sometime in late 2006. The whole



Marudyaney Nandigram 2007
Kabir Sumon
Bikalpo Publishers, Kolkata

plan and procedure for implementing it backfired. People in rural Nandigram would not simply acquiesce, as a result of which a mass uprising and all-out resistance took place. It was a sequel to police brutalities,

atrocities and macabre tactics at the dictat of the ruling party. There was a demonic manifestation of political power; the rulers mutated into oppressors and became the perpetrators of the most brutal kind. Killing, arson, looting, rape, intimidation and similar other tactics had a free reign at the hands of the police force with the blessings of the Marxists.

Marudyaney Nandigram is a poignant tale of human misery. The writer's knowing it as an eyewitness has rendered the language spirited, as if it is impregnated with fire, a fire that can consume all ills by reducing them to cold ashes.

40 small size pages) describes him as someone who is radioactive.

This reviewer had an opportunity of talking with the writer of this book while the following points emerged. The majority of Nandigram's population are Muslims, the rest being Dalits. This gives a communal tinge to the whole incident from the government's side, but its reverse is seen in the unity of Hindus and Muslims in protecting the latter's right to their property.

The writer has not put down his pen once he has reported on such a gory incident. Indeed, he has leavened the whole account with much laconic humour, transforming parts of it into a satire. One such example relates to hearing about the death toll at Nandigram caused by police brutalities.

Kabir Sumon wears multiple feathers in his cap, shining brightly in near every sphere --- as a composer, lyricist, singer, novelist, columnist, and broadcaster. But the quality that describes him best is most probably his concern for the underdog, across the globe.

Kabir Sumon cannot just accept that rehabilitation and/or compensation, for that matter, can be a remedial measure for the great sense of loss and grief for these simple folk who have lived in Nandigram for generations.

Dr. Nazma Yeasmeen Haque is principal, Radiant International School.

Moustache half burnt but still twirled

Farida Shaikh spots Zia ul-Haq rising, ghost-like, in a tale

ON August 17, 1988, a plane carrying President Zia ul-Haq, American ambassador Arnold Raphel, US Brig. General Herbert Wasson, and 28 Pakistani military officers crashed. Nearly twenty years after this catastrophic event, Mohammed Hanif presents a military satire.

minutes after it was confirmed, and there was a wave of relief across Pakistan.

The book starts with a sad joke about 'these bloody squadron leaders... without any squadron to lead.' Medals are like fruit salad, given to a person because he is there, for hard labour, like tree planting week and 'ahajmedal too.'

Hanif's work is an excellent military satire; much of it is narrated in typical armed forces lingo that makes vivid the regimented academy and mess life of the officers. Central to the novel is the country's defense establishment and more than a decade-long period of autocratic rule that resembled medievalism 'prompting young Muslim men to join the jihad in Afghanistan.'

General Zia confined himself to Army House, fearing to shift to President's House. Obsession with assassination ruled the twilight period of the military dictator's life. The book captures the period, June 1988, accurately, with hyperbolic military discipline. After eleven years in power he is convinced that someone is planning to kill him.

On 15 June General Zia paused while reading the Quran, his index finger hesitated on the verse 21:87 --- And remember Zia-nus, when he departed in wrath: he imagined that We had no power over him! But he cried through the depth of darkness: 'There is no god but thou: glory to thee: I was indeed wrong!'

burnt but still twirled' also noticed a copy of the Quran intact, opened on the same surah.

Throughout the book Hanif is clear in blaming General Zia for the Islamisation of Pakistan's society and armed forces. He uses the case of a woman called



A Case of Exploding Mangoes
Mohammed Hanif
Random House India

Zainab, to mock sharia law. General Zia picks up the clipping of the New York Times with the heading, Blind justice in the land of the pure.

Zainab has been accused of fornicating and must be stoned to death. General Zia would call the ninety-year-old Qadiri

Mecca when confronted by legal dilemma.

But the truth is that Zainab is a blind woman who has been brutally raped by four men. To turn from accused into victim, she must either visually identify her attackers or find four Muslim male witnesses of sound mind to testify to her innocence.

Hanif refers to the founder of Pakistan, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, who he says never performed the haj, while General Zia awarded medals to serving officers who undertook the journey. The famous slogan, 'Faith, Unity, Discipline,' appeared meaningless, and too secular, close to being heretical. The founder had civilians in mind and not the armed forces. To replace the motto befitting the soldier's mission, Zia thought of Allah and jihad.

'Before General Zia, yes, we were a struggling democracy but a fairly secular state... There were problems before him, but nobody thought that bringing in religious laws would be the solution. They were imposed on Pakistan and we are still struggling with the bizarre laws.'

The list of suspects included fellow generals, CIA, ISI, torture and deplorable cell conditions, RAW and under officer Shigri who wanted to avenge the death of his father, a colonel who was General Zia's chosen man to run operations with the mujahideen against the Soviets in Afghanistan. Also the geopolitics of that period gained new heights with the presence of Osama bin Laden at a July 4 party hosted by the US ambassador in Islamabad.

The publishers make quite a pitch about homosexuality, especially the

relationship that the main protagonist Shigri shares with fellow cadet Obaid-ullah, called Baby O. Same-sex relationships are common in every system, and Hanif overlooks the 'naivety' of the publishers using this for a sales pitch.

'It just happens. That a friendship that is born out of being thrown into situations away from families. There is only one person you can completely share everything with and rely on. Most boys do go through that phase at some point of time at military academies, madrassas or boarding schools.' That explains the homosexuality in the PAF officers' living quarters.

Of the three publications of the work, the European edition cover has been the most creative, with the dynamite sticking out of the mango and an overfed crow perched on the fruit. The Indian edition has the face of the dead general. A very limited number of copies of this edition were available during June-July in Dhaka. More than being a military episode, the book is a hilarious and humorous narrative on the claustrophobic social conditions that defined the decade long autocratic Zia rule.

Hanif is a brilliant writer with an unusual ability to see small details, and make sense of all he hears.

(This writing is in memory of my husband, Late Wing Commander A.M.M. Enayetullah, GDF, who introduced T-33 for jet conversion flying at the Pakistan Air Force Academy, Risalpur, in 1962-63).

Farida Shaikh is a critic and closely involved with The Reading Circle.

Silent, tortured soul
Z.A.M. Khairuzzaman wallows in some poetry

THE book contains 43 selected poems of Poet Al Mahmud, one of the leading poets in the country. The poems included in the selection are taken from ten books of poetry published over a period of 32 years.

In an introduction, Zakeria Shirazi said for the last forty years or so Al Mahmud's place as one of the leading poets in the country is unassailable. He is a modernist with a perennial appeal because, his admirers say, he has his roots firmly grounded in the soil. Al Mahmud is an heir to the rich literary tradition as well as the heroic struggle to establish the rights of the Bengali language.

Al Mahmud strove to rediscover the racial and cultural identity of pristine Bengal as rooted in history and tradition.

In 'Reaction,' one of the poems, Al Mahmud says,

I am an exile from a twilight zone
where every live tree was non-responsive.

In 'Destination,' another poem, the inwardly exiled, solitary and tortured soul of the modernist, begins its day in a state of listlessness and tedium, or what may be called Baudelaire's ennui. Where will the poet go? He seeks company, thinks of friends with whom he could share the joy of writing a new poem. He badly needs spiritual support. After roaming the impersonal city, he fails to find a friend and instead confronts a padlock hanging over all his destinations. The beleaguered soul finally remembers the sufferings of Christ while being crucified.

The profound tedium that Baudelaire celebrates is tellingly represented in Al Mahmud's 'The dragging days in the woods' where in the forest recesses nothing happens.

In 'The shame of returning' the poet has returned to his village, to his mother's loving embrace. Return to the village does not imply any nostalgic craving for the pastoral past. He celebrates his native surroundings not in the style and idiom of the pastoral poets of yore but with his assiduously crafted technique and blend of the modernist philosophy. In the poem, the poet has missed the train to the city. Was it the train to urbanisation, industrialisation, modernisation? But modernism makes him city-conscious as well. In fact, he is an exile from both city and village.

In 'Solace,' the city pavement is scorched by the daylong sun and darkness is like a defiled harlot that invites him to walk into her bordir. In 'Route map,' Al Mahmud's destination is the city, the port. After a tortuous journey 'you look south/slightly to the south of the sun/At the foot of the mountain/at sea level you will find/ the illuminated line of the port./ and the bustle/and the wide welcoming embrace.' In Al Mahmud's 'Reaction'

Selected Poems of Al Mahmud

Translated from the Bengali with an Introduction by Zakeria Shirazi

Selected Poems of Al Mahmud
Translation Zakeria Shirazi
Rhythm Prokashona Sangstha

the country victoriously and published a daily newspaper titled Gonokontha. As the newspaper held anti-establishment views, he was arrested and the newspaper was proscribed. In 1975 after release from prison he joined as assistant director of the Research and Publication Department of the Bangladesh Shipakala Academy. In 1993, he retired as director of the department. He has to his credit more than 30 books, including, besides books of poetry, short stories, novels and essays. He has edited a number of journals and periodicals. He is a recipient of a number of awards, including the state award Ekushey Podok.

Z.A.M. Khairuzzaman is a working journalist at The Daily Star.